Review of Theater in a Crowded Fire by Lee Gilmore

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At one level this book is an ethnographic study of an arts festival held each summer in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, but at another it asks some fundamental questions about the nature of religion and ritual as western society proceeds through the 21st century. Burning Man started as a small gathering of friends in 1986, moved to Black Rock in 1990 and has continued to develop in that location as an annual gathering of community for many thousands over the past two decades. In that time it has established an agreed framework for ritualized behavior which includes ad hoc and creative appropriation of religious and cultural symbols. A central ritual to each year’s festival is the symbolic burning of a large sculpture of a person. In 2002, as this figure collapsed in flames, a man shouted ‘Theater! Theater!’ and this juxtaposition of the warning about shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded theater is taken up by Gilmore as the title for her volume. It represents the participative and playful re-application of metaphor which is at the heart of Burning Man.

The author provides ‘thick descriptions’ of the event and over five chapters seeks to explore: (1) the history and constituent elements of Burning Man; (2) participants’ own evocations of spirituality and religion; (3) the festival’s rites and rituals; (4) how this event serves as a transformative pilgrimage serving multiple purposes; (5) the ways in which Burning Man interacts with the media and the ways in which the media depicts the festival. The final chapter (6) draws together Gilmore’s arguments and examines what wider significance Burning Man might have for a contemporary understanding of religion and ritual. The author initially (and with some hesitation) attended Burning Man in 1996, and has not only continued to be a participant but also served on the festival’s media team. As a researcher she does a good job in allowing the reflections of other organizers and participants to come through whilst at the same time identifying her own voice in the narrative.

In her account of this festival, Gilmore provides a helpful analysis of the deeply ambiguous spaces that religion and spirituality presently occupy in Western culture. Burning Man has a steadfastly secular basis but expressions of spirituality abound.
Participants disagree fundamentally over whether there is anything ‘religious’ about the event and whilst many reject traditional religious doctrine they still employ the symbolic capital of faith in artistic expressions of sensemaking. Thus, she argues: ‘In enacting ritual without dogma, Burning Man provides spaces to ritualize a spirituality that is conceptually positioned as distinct from religion, thus calling into question both popular and scholarly understanding of what constitutes religion, spirituality, and ritual in the first place. Yet even while Burners [participants at Burning Man] tend to locate these understandings in opposition to those held to be endemic to default culture, a limitless host of religious themes, cultural symbols, and even ritual theories are evoked, performed, and played with as participants negotiate and frame their experiences with this event’ (pp 101-2). In other words, ‘Burning Man is at once sacred, secular, and neither’ (p 154).

As Gilmore reflects upon her project at the end of the DVD accompanying this book, she observes: ‘Burning Man renders the constructedness of religion, of spirituality, of culture transparent. It makes clear to individual participants how mutable these categories are; how much we are constantly creating and re-recreating culture, creating and re-creating religion’ (Gilmore 2010: DVD). In this, the festival reflects the ways in which many people embedded within Western culture continue to employ religion and tropes of faith whilst maintaining a distance and even antipathy to religious institutions. Although she does not use the term ‘vicarious religion’ (as found in the work of Charles Taylor and Grace Davie, for example) Gilmore’s work directly relates to this contested idea. Symbols of faith are appropriated in a community that, in religious terms, is focused on belonging without believing (to invert Davie’s oft-used term). Theater in a Crowded Fire is a valuable piece of original research for anyone interested in the nature of Western, religious belief in the early 21st century.

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