

Johanna Sumiala. *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. 141 pages. \$35.95.

Johanna Sumiala demonstrates the powerful connections between ritual, media, and death in this work, *Media and Ritual*. She introduces the reader to the interpretation of media and culture through media anthropology. Using this discipline, Sumiala discusses the role of ritual in the construction of community mediated through various forms of media. The book is divided into two primary sections. The first section reviews key concepts in ritual theory, setting up the rest of the book. In this section she introduces ritual as “cultural practice carried out in relation to, via and through the media” (9). By approaching the interfacing of ritual and media in this manner, Sumiala offers an expansive analysis of the power of media in creating and carrying symbolic meaning which in turn constructs and/or reinforces community. The second section unpacks the function of mediatized ritual, focusing the discussion on rituals occurring immediately after a death.

This text introduces a plethora of concepts in order to make a significant argument illustrating the power of media in meaning making. Though the content is dense, the interplay of communication theory and ritual theory is a fascinating discussion drawing conclusions around an area of life that clergy deal with on a regular basis, death. Sumiala uses stories of death, ranging from the death of world celebrities (Princess Diana, Michael Jackson, and Whitney Houston), the death of world leaders (Muammar Gaddafi and Osama Bin Laden), and tragic deaths gaining national or global attention (police murders, bus accident, school shootings) to examine the rituals in media that shape the mourning practices of a virtual as well as actual community. In this discussion, she examines the power and use of images to create a desired reaction. She ascribes to media the role of power broker in defining as well as utilizing symbols that communicate goodness or the lack thereof.

Several of Sumiala’s points connect with the preacher’s task. Most striking is the section on “Confession” and “Witness” (69-73). Here she makes the case for media being the entity that calls for and identifies the confession revealing “the truth” of a particular situation (70). The function of media witnessing is to tell the story from the vantage point of one who was there. The media representative (news anchor) constructs a reality that is projected from the scene, ascribing guilt, innocence, suspicion, and meaning to the event and persons involved. She points to “factual entertainment programming,” that is, the world of television talk shows, as well as the explosion of reality shows as major contributors to the production of confession and witnessing. In addition, the many contexts of social media also contribute to confession and witness as media sources such as Facebook and YouTube allow a more varied input into the stream of meaning making. Interestingly, this does not dilute the syndicated media’s power but rather, reinscribes its message.

Another point of connection relates directly to the media’s role in mourning rituals. According to Sumiala, media exercises the power to “frame the meaning of different ritual activities, (managing) public factors and key emotions related to these rituals” (100). This discussion grounds the power of the media in connecting the public with a constructed understanding of the sacred. The media makers are the key players in this experience. As I took in her argument, I began to see the news anchors and correspondence as carrying pastoral authority in the realm of national or global community. It is their constant presence while waiting for further breaking news that draws the media watcher into the community of grief and

response. They become not only the ones who share the news. They are the ones who interpret the symbols and rituals surrounding the death.

Sumiala makes the reader aware of the rooted influence media holds in ritual life. She demonstrates how this influence is formative as mediatized rituals create shared experience that in-turn creates communities. What I find most striking in this discussion of ritual performance is the evidence of this power. Those who seek to communicate the gospel thereby cultivating faith-based clusters focused on missional living need to do more than use media in their methods. We must also become more cognizant of what media does, especially as it creates sacred space through mediatized ritual. If, as Sumiala espouses, media is rudimentary to creating meaning, her text is a helpful guide to understanding this principle of the post-modern era.

Carol A. Cook Moore, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC