Ritual studies, a growing field of research in religious studies, is concerned with a wide range of phenomena: traditional religious rites, new ritualisations both within and outside religions, political ceremonies, and the like. The common denominator of the research should be the concept of ritual, but as everybody who has been reading or working on ritual knows, there is no definition that is common to different fields of research. This raises a question: what makes ritual studies a coherent whole, in which different conceptions of ritual, research methods and research objects coexist fruitfully? Surprisingly, the theory developed in ritual studies does not feature prominently; often it is implicit, sometimes fuzzy. And there is a reason for this: in its first decades ritual studies was marked by attempts to get away from an overly conceptualised way of research and do justice to rituals and contexts in which the research takes place.

But now, a few decades later, the theoretical debate is resuming. Of course the first question that needs to be asked is what kind of theory should be developed. One place where this issue has been hotly debated since 2000 is the University of Heidelberg in Germany. In the Sonderforschungsbereich Ritualdynamik a large group of scholars from many different disciplines conduct research on different topics related to ritual. There is research on the South Asian context, but also on Islam, new internet rituals, freemasonry rituals, et cetera. One of the group’s concerns is ritual theory. As the scholars participating in the group represent different research traditions, the aforementioned questions (Is there a need for theory? What kind of theory?) are very much in the limelight. The group’s interdisciplinary dialogue has resulted in a wide variety of publications. Some of the volumes produced by its members, former members or partners deal explicitly with ritual theory. Here we briefly discuss three of these volumes: one on ritual theory (1), an annotated bibliography of works on the same topic (2), and lastly, a volume on ritual failure (3).

(1) The first volume is a collection of essays called Theorizing rituals, edited by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg. In this bulky book different authors from the Heidelberg group and other prominent authors like Ronald Grimes, Catherine Bell and Harvey Whitehouse write on specific topics relating to ritual theory. The idea of theory formulated by the editors implies an open process of theorising, resulting in theoretical insights that are “open and not conceptually fixed”, as the editors put it. These theories differ from the ‘grand’ theories of the past, as they never pretend to be overarching. Instead they offer possibilities for analysing real rituals in the field that probably always need more than just one interpretive theory. The first part of the volume deals with methodological and meta-theoretical issues, such as the definition of ritual and conceptual alternatives to ritual (which some scholars favour). The second part revisits classical topics. Here new insights are offered by established authors writing on topics that have been important for the study of ritual from its inception, for
example ritual and myth, and ritual and society. The third part offers a number of
theoretical approaches representing a research trend. Examples are cognitive science
and performance studies. The last part deals with a number of paradigmatic concepts
(e.g. agency, efficacy, emotion) that are frequently used in the different fields of ritual
studies. In these four parts the editors have achieved impressive results, amounting to
a ‘who’s who’ for ritual studies by finding the world’s finest scholars for each topic.
Second, they offer one of the few theoretical collections broad enough to serve as a
shared theoretical resource for diverse scholars of ritual. The only disadvantage of the
book might be its complexity arising from the number of essays and the great variety
they represent. Hence to some readers it may be more of an encyclopaedia of ritual
theory, but nevertheless very valuable.

(2) The second volume reviewed here, closely connected with the first, is also edited
by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek and Michael Stausberg. It is an annotated bibliography of
works on the same topic — Theorizing rituals — covering the period 1966 to 2005.
The editors of this impressive survey of the literature stress the importance of relying
on theories already developed and even tested if one wants to take theorising rituals
seriously as an important enterprise. This is not obvious in ritual theory, as they point
out: there are a few standard authors like Emile Durkheim, Arnold van Gennep and
Victor Turner, but much of the theory developed today does not really engage with the
insights of earlier authors, especially the more recent ones. This volume is not meant
to direct the possible theoretical discussion but to provide a foundation for such dis-
cussion. The authors try to present the sources in as unbiased a manner as possible.
The sources selected meet two criteria: they are mainly theoretical and they mainly
focus on ritual. The first part of the bibliography presents primary sources. This con-
tains the biggest number of titles (442). The second part consists of secondary sources
(82) about theories and theorists. The third part consists of lexicon articles that have
influenced the theoretical debate (96), the fourth part of readers (8), and the last part
of bibliographies (5). The volume provides an excellent adjunct to the debates reflected
in the first volume. The authors’ overview is well chosen and it is especially praisewor-
thy that the notes on the different works are sufficiently detailed to afford a proper
outline for anybody in search of sources on ritual theory.

(3) The third volume differs from the first two. Under the editorship of Ute Huesken,
a number of authors present research pertaining to a theoretically interesting topic:
ritual failure. The difference from the first two volumes is that it reports on case studies
that enhance both understanding of and theorising about the topic. This does not
mean that there are no theoretical investigations. The introduction by Edward Schief-
felin and the conclusion by Ute Huesken provide an overall perspective, sustained by
the concrete material offered by members of the Heidelberg research group in the
essays. The essays are presented in sections, clarifying different possible meanings of
the concept of ritual failure. The first part deals with mistakes, procedural errors and
incorrect performance. The examples illustrate cases where ritual definitely does go
wrong. It raises an interesting question: what does this do to the ritual? Is it still effec-
tive? Is the ritual completed? The second part describes preventive measures developed
by ritual traditions. Many traditions and groups have invented a kind of quality con-
trol to guarantee that ritual will not go wrong. The third part, called “Contingencies
and emergency”, describes cases of unexpected events which are not attributable to the
performers but which can sometimes even be interpreted as a kind of intervention (God
acting in unexpected ways in the ritual). The last part, about the discursive production