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The Burning Saints: Cognition and Culture in the Fire-walking Rituals of the Anastenaria (Religion, Cognition and Culture)

Dimitris Xygalatas

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The Anastenaria are Orthodox Christians in Northern Greece who observe a unique annual ritual cycle focused on two festivals, dedicated to Saint Constantine and Saint Helen. The festivals involve processions, music, dancing, animal sacrifices, and culminate in an electrifying fire-walking ritual. Carrying the sacred icons of the saints, participants dance over hot coals as the saint moves them. 'The Burning Saints' presents an analysis of these rituals and the psychology behind them. Based on long-term fieldwork, 'The Burning Saints' traces the historical development and sociocultural context of the Greek fire-walking rituals. As a cognitive ethnography, the book aims to identify the social, psychological and neurobiological factors which may be involved and to explore the role of emotional and physiological arousal in the performance of such ritual. A study of participation, experience and meaning, 'The Burning Saints' presents a highly original analysis of how mental processes can shape social and religious behaviour.

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