

## Book Reviews

**A READER IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION** edited by Michael Lambek, *Blackwell, Oxford, 2002, Pp. x + 620 £19.99, pbk.*

We might agree that the Virgin of Guadalupe (even when analysed as a national symbol), animal classification as found in the Book of Leviticus, witchcraft beliefs among the Etero of New Guinea (even if understood as standardised collective nightmares), notions of fate among the Tallensi of northern Ghana, spirit possession among women in the northern Sudan, tape-recorded Islamic sermons in Cairo, and 'ecological' versions of ethical discourses among diaspora Jains in Toronto, all qualify as fit topics for an anthropology of religion. But what about the aesthetics and epistemology of Javanese shadow theatre, the trickster figure among the Winnebago, the poetics of transgression in the celebration of Carnival, Polynesian carving and tattooing, the meaning of wage labour and capital to Colombian plantation workers, the 'colonisation of consciousness' among the Tswana of southern Africa (even if the colonisation was carried out by Christian missionaries), or state rationality in ancient China? All these subjects (and more) are represented in this collection whose aim is to bring together, in the words on the back cover, 'some of the most significant classic and contemporary writings within the anthropology of religion.'

The back cover immediately goes on to acknowledge that some of the readings do not fall into the category of 'religion' in a straightforward sense, at least not when understood according to categories stemming from Western thought and language; and it argues that the very challenges to categories that reify religion, and the linkage of religion to broader issues of culture and politics, have themselves constituted a major contribution of anthropology to the study of religion. Readers who are nonplussed by this argument, seeing that it is itself saturated with concerns and categories that are characteristically Western, should simply keep in mind that the wobbles, in anthropological discussions, between the categories of 'religion', 'ideology' and 'culture' led some anthropologists (in the days before the popularity of 'discourse') to recommend a category called 'cosmology' – a recommendation reflected in the titles of some of the pieces selected here. In addition, the general, section and chapter

introductions are very helpful in providing orientation to the reader not quite sure why the subject being tackled is 'religion'.

Debates about definitions are also featured: Talal Asad's anti-essentialist 'genealogical' rejoinder to Clifford Geertz's classic 1966 'interpretivist' definition (included) – Asad argues that the very attempt to define religion is located within historical 'discursive processes' to do with the cultural construction of religion in early modern Europe. Asad's account is based on the transmutations of medieval Christianity, and he argues that Geertz's definition is compromised by the assumptions of privatised Christianity; but for Malcolm Ruel, some of the compromising assumptions of the anthropology of religion stem from distinct Christian notions of what 'belief' is, as they developed in the early centuries of Christianity.

The way the book is organised is unusual when compared with many books introducing the anthropology of religion. It is not organised around comparative treatments of substantive topics; say, witchcraft, rites of passage, myth, and shamanism. Nor is it organised around comparative treatments of theoretical approaches to, say, the 'primitive rationality' debate, or 'embodiment'. Instead, it is organised around *poiesis* ('the composition of religious worlds') and *praxis* ('religious action'). Each forms a major section of the book: *poiesis* covering the logic of signs and symbols, function and interpretation, moral inversion, and the conceptualisation of the cosmos; *praxis*, the nature of ritual, 'what it does', and religion and personal experience. Two other shorter sections treat of 'the context of understanding and debate' and 'historical dynamics'.

While this distinctive organisation can be partly attributed to the fact that the book is a reader, not an introductory monograph, it is also to be explained by an editorial decision concerning the kind of human agent involved in religious matters: not a rational chooser between values, or a cosmic auditor, or even a cultural constructor, if that term implies an individual or a group largely in control of values; but an explorer and creator of values in a dramatic world that escapes full control. In this sense the reader is probably representative of the majority opinion among anthropologists, and so, just about, might be its hermeneutic bias.

Inevitably, there is scope to lament what has not been included. There is nothing that suggests the intellectual return of evolutionism, and very little about the world religions. Both omissions can be excused, and besides there is the guide for further reading. Less excusable is the virtual absence of structuralist and post-structuralist analyses, and complete absence of that important category of ritual, liturgy (although the bibliography does mention the major treatment of the subject by C. Humphrey and J. Laidlaw). Surely there was a place for Jack Goody's exploration of the cognitive features of agnostic or of iconoclastic thought, but he is under-represented

even in the bibliography. Despite the gripes, however, if I had to point to one book that illustrates for a sophisticated reader what the anthropology of religion is, I would point to this one.

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**RE-ORDERING NATURE: THEOLOGY, SOCIETY AND THE NEW GENETICS** edited by Celia Deane-Drummond, Bronislaw Szerszynski (with Robin Grove-White), *Continuum: T&T Clark, London, 2003, Pp. xiv + 368, £17.99 pbk.*

**GOD'S BOOK OF WORKS: THE NATURE AND THEOLOGY OF NATURE (Glasgow Gifford lectures) by R.J. Berry,** *Continuum: T&T Clark, London, 2003, Pp. xvi + 286, £17.99 pbk.*

These are two quite different books covering similar ground, setting out to plough furrows but ending up merely harrowing the ground. The ground is modern-day questioning of the concept of Nature, and the need of a theological answer. The first book takes its origin in a colloquium held at Lancaster in March 2000. Four papers from that colloquium, with responses, constitute Part 1 of the book. The first paper, by the editors, entitled 'Genetically Modified Theology'(!) argues that public concern about GM is more than a surface apprehension about the risks involved that can be soothed away by scientific statistics and thin consequentialist ethics. Rather it runs deep, and is 'religious in nature'. In his reply to this paper Christopher Southgate agrees that there *is* a theological point to be raised (human being's hubris in the face of creation), but thinks the public concern is rather more prosaic: a thick ethical distrust of private profit versus common good. The third paper in part 1 (Michael Banner) criticises the efforts of two ethicists (Bernard Williams and David Wiggins) to re-interpret away the 'religiousness' of public concern by talking of it as a healthy (Promethean) respect for the treacherousness of nature, or a holy dread of the sublime. Banner thinks we must stand firm against such weakening of our Judaeo-Christian tradition, and reaffirm the importance of God's call to a Sabbath rest to temper our technological servility of labour. The part of Michael Reiss's response to this that particularly interests me and which sums up my feeling about the whole book, is his statement that Banner wants to return to building the Temple; whereas 'unlike Ezra and Nehemiah, I am more concerned at how we can worship in Babylon than return to Jerusalem'.

It seems to me that the book tries to jump in one leap up the ladder of science, ethics, religion, theology, revelation. It uses 'theology' as a sort of trump card to shortcut a whole series of good, proper discussions at the scientific, ethical and philosophical level. The editors