

## Book Reviews

**Chee-Kiong Tong:** *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*. London: Routledge, 2004, 194 pp.

This highly readable book introduces readers to a fascinating aspect of Chinese rituals, particularly death rituals in Singapore. The book is thoroughly researched, well written and clearly structured, and contains rich ethnographic data that bring to life (if the reader will pardon the expression) a subject pertinent to every individual. The reader will gain a strong sense of the socio-cultural world that the Singaporean Chinese negotiates, in all its richness and nuances. Where possible the author introduces material from China and other diasporic Chinese contexts as contrast to the Singapore situation, thus enlarging the potential audience of this book and offering interesting comparative insights. The lyrical titling of four of the key chapters in the book (Chapters 3 to 6) is also very nice: 'Temples and graveyards: ancestral rituals', 'Kin and kindred: ancestral rituals', 'Bones and souls: death and inheritance', and 'Flesh and blood: putrescence and the pollution of death'.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first introduces readers to some of the theoretical ideas that inform our understanding of death rituals, including kinship ties, gift exchange and pollution. Readers are introduced to some of the key thinkers and writers in the fields of

Chinese culture and of the sociology and anthropology of religion, from Émile Durkheim and Victor Turner to C. K. Yang, Maurice Freedman and many others. This is a very useful introduction to a large field and is written in an accessible way. Students of religion will learn a great deal from this chapter.

The second chapter focuses on funeral rituals, and reveals how preparation for death begins a few years before a person is on their deathbed. The chapter then takes readers through the daily/nightly rituals at Chinese funerals all the way to burial or cremation, using a single funeral as case study. Most valuable in the chapter is the last section on ritual variations, which highlights how the particular case is subject to a whole range of social variations. Rather than glossing over differences to present a monolithic generalization, the author is sensitive to differences and their implications.

In Chapter three, the author describes the ritual worship of the ancestor conducted at home and in the ancestral hall, as well as the annual rituals performed at graveyards during the *Qing Ming* (tomb clearing) festival. This part serves as a poignant reminder of the relationship between the living and the dead in Chinese culture, the role of memorialism, and the ambiguous and ambivalent relationship between commemoration and worship, a point on which the

author challenges the observations of Maurice Freedman.

The fourth chapter offers an elaboration of the ways in which Chinese death rituals underscore social relations, whether it is in maintaining solidarity in the family for public consumption or in challenging familial relations behind the scenes as tensions and conflicts emerge in the management of death rituals. These negotiations become implicated in questions of filial piety, family continuity and social differentiation. In this respect, the author successfully illustrates the interweaving of public and private accounts as families manage impressions and internal tensions.

In Chapter five, the author draws attention to the ways in which death provides 'an arena for the acceleration of exchange'. He illustrates how this exchange can be between the living and the dead, as well as between the family and the community through the transaction of property, wealth, authority, status and power.

The sixth chapter enters the arena of classic anthropological concern with pollution and purity, and reminds readers of received wisdom about the fear of death as underpinned by a fear of pollution. The chapter corroborates this understanding with detailed ethnographic evidence, elaborating on the ways in which pollution demarcates family from friends, the conception that the polluted family becomes contaminating, and the need for rituals of purification.

In the penultimate chapter, which is also the final empirical chapter, the author departs from the preceding chapters which consider 'normal' deaths by examining unnatural deaths. In many ways, this is the most interesting and illuminating chapter, as the author writes about violent death, immature death, and 'good' and 'bad' death. This aids our understanding of how families reconcile themselves to different 'types' of death, and the rituals used to help come to terms with unexpected deaths.

Finally, the concluding section, aptly titled 'Dangerous blood, refined souls', nicely brings the discussion back from the rich ethnographic detail to larger theoretical and conceptual ideas about death, descent, duty, status, exchange, pollution, kinship, and social relations. The author also successfully reminds readers of the complexities and diversities in as large a concept and phenomenon as 'Chinese' society, and eschews pat generalization. Mindful too of the rapidly modernizing conditions that many Chinese societies confront, the author ends by suggesting future research agendas that take account of the relationship between the sacred and the secular in non-western religious traditions. Altogether, the book is a good read, and will be very useful for the student of Chinese religion and society as well as anthropology.

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**David M. Black (ed.):** *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century: Competitors or Collaborators?* London: Routledge, 2006, 278 pp.

Timely introductions to topical scholarly debates are always useful. The recently published collection, *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century: Competitors or Collaborators?*, belongs to this category. The last two decades have seen a resurgence of psychoanalytic interest in religion. Unlike Freud, many analysts today see religion as a normal, healthy, positive phenomenon.

Edited by David Black and published in the Institute of Psychoanalysis series *The New Library of Psychoanalysis*, this book contains fourteen essays on the subject of religion and psychoanalysis. It is intended to give an overview of the variety of ideas that are now current. The four parts of the book address four substantial issues: the possibility of religious truth; religious stories that carry (or distort) psychological truth; the nature and psychological functioning of religious experiences; and parallels between psychoanalysis and specific religious traditions.

In his introduction, Black, a Fellow of the Institute of Psychoanalysis, a private practitioner and a training analyst, presents a helpful review of psychoanalytic approaches to religion from Freud to the present. He also makes the case that psychoanalysis and religion should learn from each other. In his view, psychoanalytic theories – of internal objects (D. W. Win-

nicott) and unknowable ultimate reality (Wilfred Bion) in particular – can help religion overcome what otherwise would be inescapable contradictions between religious ideas and empirical reality. On the other hand, he says, a knowledge of religion can help psychoanalysts understand the nature of convictions (including their own) that are not based on empirical observation.

Later in the book, other contributors echo Black's agenda. Thus according to Jeffrey Rubin psychoanalysis has suffered because of its neglect of spirituality (although 'spiritual experiences have been present in psychoanalysis since its inception'). The cost has been an alienated, self-centred view of the self. Rubin also calls attention to 'pathologies of the spirit', that can hinder 'healthy spirituality'; these can be diagnosed with the help of psychoanalysis.

After the introduction, the opening chapter may come as something of a surprise: Rachel Blass gives a well-argued critique of the view that a shift is taking place towards a conciliation between psychoanalysis and religion. In her view, this is true of religion in a specific sense of the term only – that is, of religion as 'a kind of self- or relational experience within a realm of illusion', with no claims to truth about the nature of reality. 'Conciliation becomes possible', she writes, 'because, in this non-realist sense of religion, there is no longer room for the concern that religious belief is a distortion of reality'. The question is, does

this kind of religion really exist? Is it conceivable that a religious tradition might make no claim to truth but rather regard its teachings and rituals as illusions?

As Blass points out, Freud himself noted that a *philosopher* might view religion as a kind of fiction accepted as true for its practical significance. But, he continued, no serious believer would accept this – which seems to leave the original controversy between psychoanalysis and religion unresolved. In Blass's view, it would be honest to face this fact and find a place for dialogue elsewhere.

A look at the essays of some of Blass's fellow-contributors seems to support her point. Both Kenneth Wright and Neville Symington make a distinction – in the spirit of the deists, and of Tolstoy – between 'natural religion' and 'revealed religions'. As they see it, it is certainly the former that allows a more sympathetic understanding of religion than was provided by traditional psychoanalytic thinking (although some of the premises of traditional psychoanalysis need revising, too). Overall, there is much focus on traditions of mysticism and negative theology, and Blass's dry remark about 'a kind of westernized Buddhism' is not entirely off the mark.

If Freud did not realize that not all religion is the same, the challenge for contemporary analysts seems to be that no religious tradition should be idealized either. On the other hand, many of the contributors show an apt awareness of the diversity

of religious experience. As Black rightly notes in his introduction, 'primitive' and 'enlightened' ideas and habits co-exist in all religious traditions.

Since religions are neither monolithic nor static, the argument of not being in touch with 'real religion' or 'true believers' is convincing only as far as it goes. In fact, the qualified approval of religion by some analysts is hardly disconnected from contemporary (Western) religious experience. On the contrary: it seems to be related to a general rise of interest in mysticism in its many (Zen Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish Cabbalistic, Christian, Islamic Sufi) forms. This too is a feature of existing, real-life religiosity.

Sometimes the proposed analogies between psychoanalytic and religious traditions actually work quite well. Michael Parsons's account of psychoanalysis and spiritual disciplines of various faiths as comparable processes of internal evolution has genuine insight. Rodney Bomford's observation that mystical writings display the same characteristics as those attributed by Freud to the unconscious is a good one. Stephen Frosh's piece on psychoanalysis and Judaism is erudite, analytical and appropriately cautious about against overinterpretation. Mark Epstein's comparison of Winnicott's concept of unintegration and the Buddhist notion of no-self, and Malcolm Cunningham's work on the Indian philosophy of Vedanta, are perhaps slightly too parallelomaniac to my taste but still make a point.

Another substantial question that permeates the collection has to do with the reductionist nature of psychoanalytic explanations of religious phenomena. To what extent does religious behaviour derive from 'mundane' psychological factors, such as early infantile experience? Can everything about religion be explained this way? In M. Fakhry Davids' words, what is to be 'rendered unto Caesar', and what, if anything, belongs to 'a realm of God'?

Again, the conciliation between the analytic and the religious point of view is found in the traditions of mysticism and negative theology: 'God is "found"', Davids writes, 'at the moment that one accepts that it is possible to see only one's own projections.' This means that the realm of Caesar and the realm of God are inevitably mixed; you can only conceive of the latter within the former. Thus, when Black in his article argues the case for a 'contemplative position' alongside the 'depressive' and 'paranoid-schizoid' positions (as identified by Melanie Klein), he is careful not to see it as transcendent or as giving direct access to some higher reality. Psychoanalytic concepts relate to the phenomenal world only, whereas the world of 'noumena' is to be addressed in the language of faith.

Other instances of tracing religious phenomena back to early childhood experiences include Francis Grier's study of the phenomenon of adoration and Kenneth Wright's essay on preverbal

experience and the intuition of the sacred. According to Grier, religious devotees are 'unconsciously reimmersing themselves in their own unconscious experiences of adoring and being adored by the mother'. These experiences can be vitalising and lead to development – or, if they are over-idealised, they can have detrimental effects. For Wright, the religious quest for redemption stems from an experienced failure of 'maternal containment' in infancy, when the mother's responding to or 'mirroring of' the baby is supposed to provide a form for the baby's amorphous self-experience. That which is for some reason left 'unmirrored' remains formless, nameless and radically excluded – which later contributes to the human existential need of 'being saved'.

Wright makes explicit his appreciation of maternal elements in religious culture. He takes issue with the undue and distorting dominance of patriarchal forms within the Abrahamic religions, and with a similar dominance in psychoanalytic institutions. He is not alone in this. A similar shift from an Oedipal to pre-Oedipal framework in interpretation, in parallel with a move from paternal religious metaphors (centred on law and revealed truth) to maternal ones (focused on a mystic union with the unknowable), characterises other essays in the collection as well, albeit in less explicit form.

Only two authors venture psychoanalytic exegeses of religious stories. Incidentally, they also rep-

resent the most genuinely Freudian approach in this collection. Ronald Britton reads the Book of Job as an image of the emancipation of the ego from the superego. David Millar first examines the Christian story of Christ's birth from the perspective of the Oedipal situation and sibling rivalry, then Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* with a view to the changing role of the superego in governing Scrooge's behaviour and self-experience. In a manner typical of psychoanalytic criticism, both readings are likely to be found interesting by those who share a similar theoretical orientation, while others may consider them less satisfying. In any case, both authors seem appropriately aware of the heuristic nature of their approach, so as not to do violence to the texts they analyse.

On the whole, *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century* is a welcome overview of current psychoanalytic thinking on religion. While a multi-author collection can only be systematic up to a point, the advantage is that the reader gets a truthful picture of the sometimes radically divergent positions. Although the contributors come exclusively from the Anglophone world (a clear majority of them are British), the influence of the British object relations school on current psychoanalytic study of religion is such that a London perspective serves the reader well.

Although most of the articles are quite accessible, it helps if the reader is familiar with the major currents in modern psychoanalytic thought.

For that purpose there are other suitable books available, such as *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* by Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

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**Strenski, Ivan:** *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 358 pp.

**Strenski, Ivan (ed.):** *Thinking about Religion: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, 256 pp.

There are only few important, widely read and somewhat different kinds of books dealing with the history of the study of religion. For example Eric J. Sharpe's *Comparative Religion: A History* emphasises the phenomenological tradition, Samuel Preus's *Explaining Religion* focuses on the naturalistic tradition, while Walter H. Capps's *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* is more of a handbook, with very brief descriptions of scholars. Ivan Strenski's book *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* offers readers a comprehensive survey of attempts by previous scholars at understanding and explaining religion. The other book, with the same main title, is a reader, consisting of extracts from the major theorists and their commentators.

Professor Strenski approaches theories of religion by asking and answering why thinkers thought that they were right. Thus readers can expect not only an analytical but also a historical account of theorists and theories. The book is divided into three parts: the prehistory of the study of religion (including naturalism, deism and biblical criticism), nineteenth-century theorists (Max Müller, Tylor, Robertson Smith, Frazer) and twentieth-century approaches and theorists (phenomenology, Weber, Freud, Malinowski, Durkheim, Eliade). The *Reader* includes more than forty extracts. A typical chapter contains extracts from one or more theorists, followed by commentaries. Some of the commentaries are by contemporaries of the theorist, others by later scholars.

Strenski's main argument is that the scientific study of religion has strong religious roots. This does not mean that a study was motivated by developing religious doctrines or strengthening their role in societies, but that early scholars were interested both in studying religion and in believing. Reason and rationality were not seen as contradictory to human religiosity. Actually, the naturalness of human religiosity and its rationality used to be opposed to the idea that religion was revealed to humans by divine intervention.

To clarify this assertion, Strenski uses a tripartite classification in illuminating theorists' attitudes towards religion: caretakers of religion, critical caretakers of religion, and under-

takers of religion. What is important for the main argument is that many early theorists were critical caretakers of religion, who used historical and analytical methods in order to make religion better and more accurate. By showing the existence and importance of this middle ground between caretakers and undertakers of religion, Strenski highlights his attempt to 'end the contentious divorce between biblical studies and general religious studies by reconciling these two fields to each other' (*Reader*, viii–ix). Although it is worth emphasising the historical connection between biblical studies and religious studies, it is an open debate whether this should lead to a reconciliation between the two. One way in which Strenski tries to close the gap between them is visible in the choices made: what is included, what is excluded, and what kinds of interpretations are offered.

At the end of the book the author expresses his regret that there was no space for Joachim Wach, Karl Marx, Carl G. Jung and others. It is impossible to include everything, but I would expect some kind of explanation of the choices made. I do not want to argue that any one theorist should have been left out, but perhaps certain chapters could have been shortened by omitting some repetition. This would have made it possible to include some discussion of Marx and the Marxist tradition. The author, however, may have made a deliberate choice to distance himself from these; Weber, who is included, is presented 'as an

alternative to Marx rather than as a semi-Marxist himself' (p. 211).

Strenski writes that he has 'tried to disturb the conventional reputation of certain thinkers by showing them in a light in which they are seldom seen' (*Reader*, viii). For example Malinowski, who is not usually understood as a phenomenologist of religion, is shown to embrace some phenomenological virtues. This approach is certainly interesting and accurate, but ultimately it may be unhelpful – and indeed disturbing – at least for those students who really need a basic historical introduction to theories of religion. Moreover, the way how the approach is put into practice is sometimes one-sided. What is one to think of a book that argues, in addition to already mentioned 'phenomenological Malinowski', that Weber had his phenomenological side, and that Durkheim might be considered a 'phenomenologist of religion'? Again, there is no point arguing for example against the close relation between Weber and the phenomenological tradition; but it is unclear whether Strenski means his unconventional approach to demonstrate the prevalence of the phenomenological dimension in the study of religion. In fact, it may turn out to be a symptom of the problematic and perhaps overly general nature of the category of 'phenomenology' itself.

As will by now have become clear, Strenski argues that in the history of thinking about religion science and religion have gone hand

in hand. Thus the study of religion has not emerged simply from an anti-religious or atheist background. This seems to be one way of telling the story of thinking about religion. However, it would be interesting to ask in studies to come how this distinction between science and religion became possible and how it has functioned in western history. In the light of existing studies it seems to be the case that one pre-condition for the emergence of the academic study of religion has been the rise of modern distinctions for instance between public and private, between politics and religion.

By reading these books, students and scholars alike will learn a lot about scholars of religion and their relations to each other. This is supported by the links between chapters. For example in Chapter four Tylor is compared to the previous chapter's Max Müller, while both are further compared to Robertson Smith (Chapter 5) and Frazer (Chapter 6). Thus it would be unfair not to be grateful to Professor Strenski for his accomplishment. However, it is slightly unsatisfying that he does not introduce the scholars primarily through their works. Instead, the focus is on their lives. While I do not consider biographical detail irrelevant to the development of theory, students might be better served by a more detailed introduction to the major scholarly works, including continuities and differences between them, and the materials used in constructing and testing theories.



The last chapter is supposed to offer a conclusion, but the author brings a personal quarrel to it, reintroducing a brief and in my opinion unsophisticated critique of the work of Russell T. McCutcheon. This is a less than elegant ending to an important book, which – despite the reservations presented above – is a major contribution and recommended reading along with the *Reader*.

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**John R. Bowen:** *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 290 pp.

In the contemporary history of France, two years stand out when it comes to the relation between religion and politics. In 1989 three schoolgirls in the small town of Creil were expelled from public school. The reason for their expulsion was their wearing of Islamic headscarves. Even though the girls soon came to an understanding with their teachers and the school administration, this small episode reached far beyond the principal's office: the media, politicians, civil movements, religious affiliations and academics all had something to say. 'The headscarf affair' (*l'affaire du foulard*), as it came to be called, laid the grounds for a public debate focused on the principle of France as a secular republic. In France

this principle, *la laïcité*, stands for a republican interpretation of what a secular society should be. In March 2004 the law prohibiting ostentatious religious symbols came into force, thus strengthening the idea of *laïcité* as a fundamental societal pillar. The law, which was passed with a large majority in the legislative institutions – the National Assembly and the Senate – was preceded by a government-appointed commission assembled in 2003. The Stasi commission, named after the commission's president Bernard Stasi, consisted of twenty scholars, politicians, intellectuals and teachers. Their task was to evaluate the principle of *laïcité* in French society, but, was there an elephant stomping around in the debate leading up to the law?

According to the book *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*, by John Bowen, Professor of Anthropology at Washington University, it is clear that there was an elephant present in the debate, and it was a rather fat one. Bowen contends that although the law of March 2004 was framed to deal with religious symbols in general, it was aimed first and foremost at prohibiting girls from wearing Islamic veils.

Bowen asks how a little piece of cloth on the heads of three schoolgirls could lead to the political and intellectual turmoil it did. The purpose of the book is to explain how the law in 2004 came to be passed, and with such broad support – ranging from politicians to intellectuals as well as the public. The book is

divided into three main parts, each contributing to the final answer. In the first part Bowen gives the reader necessary information about French history. The focal point is *laïcité*: Bowen argues, in contrast to the public version, that rather than keeping the state separate from religion, the concept of *laïcité*, whereby the state is highly involved with the religious sphere, continues a French tradition dating back to the beginning of the second millennium. In the thirteenth century King Philip le Bel established a French church to keep Rome away from state power. By this means Philip also increased his power over the church in France. Today the ruling elite does not worry about Rome but about Islam.

Islam is not a new phenomenon in France, but the fact that many mosques and Islamic organisations have been funded from abroad seems to have caused some concern among politicians. The mosques of today are similar to the churches of nearly a thousand years ago, in that the French ruling elite believes they are channels of foreign influence. One way to keep Islamic foreign influence to a minimum is for the state to fund mosques or educate leaders for them, rather than letting someone else do it. However, since there has not been a unified Islam in France, it has not been clear which mosques or what kind of Islam religious leaders should be trained for. Thus the creation of an Islamic intermediary, the CFCM (*Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*) in 2003 can be regarded as an attempt to cre-

ate a 'French Islam', and one which can be controlled.

In the second part of the book Bowen describes how the headscarf affair was portrayed in the media and how the matter was understood by politicians. Broadly speaking, the restructuring of the global political scene after the Cold War, France's colonial heritage, and a more visible Islam led both politicians and a large part of the media to follow the same equation: headscarf = Islam = terrorism. If the politicians or the media had bothered to ask French girls wearing headscarves why they did so, the equation might have been the following: headscarf = piety or maturity. Of course, voices of this sort only come to public attention or are recognised when they no longer present a direct threat to the prevailing discourse. According to Bowen, Islam and Islamism were seen as threats to the republican idea of *laïcité*, and even more so to the French values of liberty and equality. He argues that these threats were perceived as such insofar as they were considered to weaken unity among French citizens.

The third part of the book consists of chapters on communalism, Islamism and sexism. The discussion of sexism is highly interesting. It shows how feminists, collected around liberal and secular ideas, made it almost impossible to raise a critical voice against the banning of headscarves if one did not want to be seen as anti-feminist. This is undoubtedly an enlightening discussion of the predicaments in-

volved in using liberal feminism as a universal theory of liberation when trying to understand the agency of 'the Other'.

Bowen approaches French society as one inhabited by alien species, almost like an anthropologist studying an indigenous people on an isolated island. This highly suitable anthropological approach, the aim of which is to capture the collective 'habit' of the 'French', permits him to observe from the 'outside'. This certainly makes the book thought-provoking. However, the approach is not without its problems. Bowen, for example, tends to make generalizations about the people inhabiting France. He lets two state officials stand as representatives of the way French people talk about the issues of contemporary social life. To what degree all citizens of France – from the troubled young people in the suburbs to yacht-owners in Cannes – fit this picture is not accounted for. It is as though the political and intellectual elite get to represent the 'French', while young girls wearing headscarves represent an alienated 'Other' – although both are equally 'French'. This may be a misreading of Bowen's categorizations, but I get the feeling that he actually brings into his own analysis many of the problems that he uncovers his study: i.e. that the French society is a highly hierarchical one, where some voices are heard much better than others. Without an explicit discussion of power relations, I find it hard at times to see where the author is heading.

Nonetheless, with an eagerness to speak, Bowen lets his discerning narrative voice take readers on a journey through contemporary France, shaking the very foundation of this society. This is important. The idea of the enlightened and secular European, needed to discipline the religious despot from the south, is far from limited to France.

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