



## Book Reviews

**Éva Pócs (ed.):** *Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2019. 487 pages.

Traditions of belief around the world in both the past and present are a shared field of interest for scholars of religion, historians, folklorists, ethnologists, linguists, literary scholars, and psychologists. The conference of the International Society of the Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) at the University of Pécs, Hungary in 2014 was undoubtedly proof of this. The massive anthology *Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication*, published five years later, is based on the papers given at that conference. The editor of the anthology, Professor Emerita Eva Pócs, the Hungarian ethnologist and folklorist, is widely known and appreciated for her extensive work on folk religion and folk beliefs, as well as her active and broad career as an academic writer. As a cross-section of the twenty-first century folkloristic and anthropological research of religion with its twenty-six authors, this anthology reflects the research field in which Pócs herself has been one of the most remarkable pioneers in Europe.

The aim of this anthology is as fascinating as it is challenging: to outline a more subtle and detailed picture of the ways in which the concepts of body and soul are understood in European cultures. The chapters describe and discuss vari-

ous cultural views on death and the deceased, as well as analysing the ideas of communication between the human and spirit worlds. A central theme is the understanding of pre-Christian beliefs' intertwining with Christian ones which, for their part, are largely derived from Jewish and Greek traditions. Several of the anthology's chapters unwrap these roots and traces of local belief traditions mainly around Europe. Furthermore, as Pócs points out in her own chapter, it is Christian traditions which have actually maintained locally many pre-Christian traditions. The collection also includes presentations on some Central Asian traditions, as well as an overview of certain West African traditions of spiritual process which make interesting points of comparison with European ones.

As Pócs outlines the editing principles of the opus, the volume has been compiled 'without methodological, temporal or geographical limitations'. For the reader this means that the abundance of both material and methodological approaches makes it quite difficult to get a grip on the anthology as a whole. It is also a demanding task to review and evaluate such a collection because of the diverse approaches of the chapters and somewhat inconsistent structure. The authors have been quite free to compile their texts. Clearer and more coherent guidelines for the authors would therefore have been

an advantage, especially because this important work, with its rich content, is certainly considerably more than a collection of conference proceedings. Its greatest contribution is that it provides the reader with numerous detailed analyses of specific themes and phenomena. It thus offers an exciting view of what is going on in the international study of popular religious traditions at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, the space available only allows a few examples to be highlighted.

Most of the chapters deal with historical and/or literal material. Only six focus on contemporary culture or take an ethnographic approach. One of the most rewarding reading experiences for me was Vilmos Tánzos's chapter on the dimensions of the religious worldview in the case of a Moldavian Csángó man. By using the concept of *religious registers*, the author analyses the interlaced elements of popular, magical, and ecclesiastical or 'official' religion, illustrating their constant interaction. His chapter's message is that religious notions derived from different ages, institutions, and cultural influences never quite coalesce into a single unified and exclusive system. Instead, both individuals and communities use religion's suitable elements or activate its different aspects situationally – even opposing ones in relation to transcendence. This reasoning essentially configures the general idea of the entire anthology.

The volume's first two sections are dedicated to various concepts and understandings of the soul and its autonomy outside the human body. The remaining chapters deal with different mythological beings like fairies, werewolves, and vampires, as well as communication with the spirit world. The anthology indicates not only the rich and versatile ways of understanding human existence within folk spirituality and numerous different perceptions of the afterlife, but also the great interest of current academic research in these issues.

Supernatural experiences are an integral part of humanity, and various methods of achieving them, both in ancient times and today, are a permanently current subject of study in folk religion. Mirjam Mencej makes a very enlightening survey of the literature on the techniques of magically interacting with the other realities. Mencej especially discusses the role of circular movement like a 'spinning dance' as a facilitator of altered states of consciousness. She studies it in the context of shamanistic Siberian and Sámi traditions and compares it to the ritual whirling of the dervishes. Ilaria Micheli, for her part, compares the theme of the soul's loss and spirit possession in two different West African traditions. She also discusses the culturally relevant rationality within the relationships between the human and other worlds. These analyses, among several others, focus on the universality of transcendental experiences, their psychological roots,

and the meanings and functions in their respective cultural contexts.

The methodological diversity of the anthology's chapters includes comparison, textual analysis and linguistic etymologies, description, the historical tracing of beliefs and rituals, and the study of narratives and ethnography. For a scholar of religion it is also most illuminating to learn about the oft-covered aspects of research history. Of course, it is a well-known fact that the first collectors of pagan beliefs and rituals were clergymen who had the mission of justifying their Christian agenda. Later, the developments in modern science may have found remarkable inspiration in spiritual traditions. Júlia Gyimesi's chapter on the history of the Budapest School of psychoanalysis offers an interesting perspective on such developments by shedding light on the School's interest in the relationship between occultism and the functions of the human mind's unconsciousness.

Although contemporary culture plays a side role as such in the anthology, the chapters' historical perspectives in many cases shed light on the customs and beliefs that also exist today, despite the fact that their forms and functions may look completely different compared with earlier times. In her preface Pócs raises the 'striking lack of change', referring to the fact that studies of ancient and medieval religions give surprisingly similar results to studies of contemporary anthropology (pp. xv–xvi). This is an interesting observation, which may point the

way to fresh perspectives in the future. The anthology *Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication* continues and in many ways complements the same broad field of study that the earlier anthology *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* (Routledge 2012), edited by Ülo Valk and Marion Bowman, confirmed. Both these anthologies approach the endless cultural variations and idiosyncrasies of lived religion with enlightening case studies.

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**Pål Ketil Botvar, Ann Kristin Gresaker, and Olav Hovdelien (eds):** *Ingen Spøk – en studie av religion og humour*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk, Nordic Open Access Scholarly Publishing 2019, 297 pp.

The anthology *Ingen Spøk – en studie av religion og humour* (*No Joke: A Study of Religion and Humour*) offers a fresh perspective on the role religion plays in society and culture today. The book is edited by Pål Ketil Botvar, Ann Kristin Gresaker, and Olav Hovdelien. It focuses primarily on the Scandinavian context. The background is a joint project ‘Humour and religion – conflict, dialogue and change’ between KIFO, OsloMet, and the University of Agder. The anthology takes as its departure the sociology of religion, media studies, and theories of humour. It is structured through two themes: ‘Religion in humour’ and ‘Humour in religion’. Prior to these sections two chapters establish the publication’s framework.

In the first chapter the sensitive context for the theme is made clear – making fun of religion is connected with terrorist attacks and cartoonists living under police protection. This has placed the question of humour at the centre of the debate about religion in the public sphere. This anthology addresses the question through cases that point to the complexity of religion and humour in our contemporary context. The first chapter also establishes the anthology’s theoretical themes concern-

ing religion, media, and humour. The second introductory chapter presents an analysis of material from a Norwegian national survey of attitudes to humour and religion among the public. The analysis provides an insight into the normative framework of humour and religion in Norway. It indicates that at the same time as a majority across the board is open to humour concerning religion, there is a connection where the more religiously active people are, the less accepting they are of such humour. The analysis of this material is a strong point of the anthology, because it provides an insight into the context of most of the cases presented under the two themes.

Under the ‘Religion in humour’ theme four contributions discuss religion as it is portrayed in comedic genres and contexts. Kai Hanno Schwind analyses British and American comedies, which are part of the media consumption of many Scandinavians. Ann Kristin Gresaker examines jokes about religion, gender, and sex in a men’s magazine, showing how they strengthen stereotypical images of gender and religion. Sofia Sjö discusses the representation of Islam in two Norwegian comedies. She presents the categories of migrant cinema or diaspora cinema as part of a societal reflection on ethnicity, arguing that these movies have a potential to challenge stereotypes. In Pål Repstad’s chapter on representations of pastors of the Norwegian Church, a historical perspective is

presented, linking the development to a general diminishment of authority and a shift to a softer Christianity. Gresaker's and Hovdeliens' contribution analyses the viewpoints of stand-up comedians between the ideals of free speech and the realities of concerns about what to make fun of and whom. These contributions raise an interesting question of when and how religion in humour is a tool for solidifying stereotypes, and when it is a tool for change. As there are no concluding chapters for the sections or the anthology as a whole, these questions are not discussed across the publication.

Under the heading 'Humour in religion' seven contributions discuss humour in specific religious and life view contexts, providing an insight into the norms of humour across majority and minority contexts. The chapter by Bjarte Lee-Helgesen on the use of humour by pastors in the Norwegian Church in relation to death discusses the role of tension relief, and how the humorous portrayal of the deceased by a pastor can create room for a healing laughter. Andreas Häger discusses the difficulty of using humour as a religious organization through an examination of reactions on social media to jokes made by the Swedish church. The use of humour to gain a place in the public discourse is also present in the chapter by Olav Hovdelien in the case of two Catholic religious order brothers. The chapter by Shohaib Sultan on Muslim traditions and contemporary Muslim stand-up comedians provides an

interesting insight into how humour has played a role both in the Western world and Muslim countries, with a focus on popular culture. Gunnar Haaland analyses rules and norms about what to make fun of in the weekly Friday joke in the Oslo Jewish community's newsletter.

In analysing humour in a new age context, Irene Trynes finds a tendency to a more mild and positive humour, and a move away from the more satirical and self-critical segments that were found previously. There is no lack of smiling or laughing people in the images in this context, but it is a happy, mild laughter! A similar dilemma between harsh humour and maintaining a more positive tone is reflected in the chapter by Benjamin Eriksen and Didrik Söderlind on atheist and humanist communities. Whereas there is a tradition of atheists using harsh humour in their criticism of religion, the humanist groups are critical of this from a perspective in which all views of life should be treated respectfully. Across these contributions it is clear that understanding and navigating norms of humour can offer an advantage in both internal and external communication. However, breaking norms provokes strong reactions, and in the modern social media context it is difficult not only for individuals but religious organizations to find the right balance.

The strength of any anthology is that the reader is allowed to move through different cases and contexts following a common theme.

The weakness is that it is difficult to connect the perspectives raised in the various chapters. This anthology provides a good foundation for connecting the material in its first two chapters. Yet there are some questions across the book with which it would have been interesting to reconnect in a closing chapter.

As mentioned, this could have been a discussion of when and why humour becomes a tool for change and at other times seems to lead to a stagnation of stereotypes of religion. Are the differences primarily connected with genre norms or specific religious traditions and their place in society? And what are we seeing across the various contexts concerning religious authority through the lens of humour and religion, both internally and externally? What, for example, is going on with the constant use of Roman Catholic clergy in jokes in a context where there are relatively few Catholics? And what does the stereotype of religious people as lacking in humour tell us about the place of religion in society and culture today?

This all points to a question of norms of humour and religion as part of the Scandinavian context. This is touched on to some degree, but it would have been interesting if there had been a conclusive discussion of the norms of humour in relation to society. An example of such a discussion can be found in a recent Danish publication, *Humoursocialisering* by Lita Lundquist, which explores the national norms of humour and its consequences.

Humour can include or exclude, a well-known fact in the Scandinavian countries too. For example, there is a Danish joke that the shortest book in the world is called 'Norwegian humour'. But as Lundquist concludes in her book, Danes are not as funny as they think they are. And this anthology shows that the Norwegian context has the upper hand when it comes to research into humour and religion. The anthology provides interesting and relevant analyses of cases within a common framework linking theories of humour to theories of contemporary religion. It offers a fresh and interesting perspective on a central aspect of religion today, and I highly recommend it.

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**Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson, and Teemu T. Mantsinen (eds):** *Handbook of Leaving Religion*. Brill, 2020, 358 pp.

Edited by religious scholars Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson, and Teemu T. Mantsinen, the anthology *Handbook of Leaving Religion* is divided into three parts: the first focuses on historical and major debates, covering antiquity and the major world religions in six chapters; the second, consisting of thirteen chapters, on contemporary case studies; the third, consisting of seven chapters covering a variety of disciplines, on theoretical and methodological approaches.

The anthology appears to be framed in line with areas of religious studies interested in secularization theory, given that it begins by introducing Peter Berger's seminal work and later rebuttal of religious decline. In recent years we have seen a marked increase of studies on populations presumed to be 'secularized', such as work on atheist, agnostic, and humanist organizations, as well as quantitative studies on the growing presence of the 'nones', especially in the United States, as well as the breakdown of religiously indifferent majority populations primarily in Europe. The name of the anthology – *Leaving Religion* – implies that the aim is to associate itself with this body of work. However, Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen are quick to specify in their introduction that the

concept of leaving religion – while often associated with irreligiosity, agnosticism, and atheism – 'can very well be about leaving one religion from another' (Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen, 2020, p. 1). That is, in this volume they have aimed to collect historical overviews of world religions, contemporary case studies, and theoretical and methodological aspects on the topic of leaving religion, focusing on various forms of religiosity, as well as on cases of *switching religion* based on the Pew projection that the total number of religious adherents worldwide is unlikely to decline.

This is an interesting approach. It attempts to bridge research on the borderline of studies on avowed irreligiosity – such as studies on new atheism, for example – and borderline cases of unclear allegiances that have previously been studied as the 'fuzzy middle', believing without belonging, diffused spirituality, and banal religiosity, and combines the two from a distinctly religious studies perspective. However, this paves the way to a good deal of conceptual confusion, and the editors do indeed spend a good portion of the introduction trying to nail down the concept of leaving religion, drawing on work from nonreligious and secularity research, as well as cult studies, thus connecting the concept with theories on deconversion and apostasy. Enstedt, Larsson, and Mantsinen conclude that it is difficult to define what 'leaving' entails, arguing that a conversion or 'switch' of religious identity like-

wise entails leaving or a 'shifting' position similar to a deconversion. Their introduction thus highlights how shifting one's religious identity has been associated with significant social costs in certain contexts, and that the social cost of leaving religion has not been a focus of nonreligious and secular studies generally. This volume therefore seeks to contribute to this lack by examining the complex emotions surrounding the adoption or discarding of dietary restrictions connected to particular religious traditions, for example.

This focus on the social cost of deconversion and conversion alike clarifies why it may be fruitful to combine both processes within the concept of 'leaving religion'. The anthology takes a broad approach, encompassing historical debates on topics of conversion, contemporary case studies from a range of traditions, including established institutions like Catholicism, new religious or spiritual practices like Vipassana meditation, asylum seekers leaving Islam for Christianity, and chapters approaching the topic from a range of subfields within religious studies. It will therefore doubtless be a welcome addition to many introductory courses in religious studies. However, while devoting time to conceptualizing exactly what is and should be meant by 'leaving', the editors fail to define exactly what is meant by 'religion', thus skirting a major theoretical debate within religious studies – critical religion studies – which has irrevocably affected the contours of religious stud-

ies and deserves space in a volume used in undergraduate courses, as well as compounding the conceptual argument they make about leaving religion. If leaving religion both encompasses deconversion – which in this case would mean disavowing a religious worldview *in general* – and switching religious traditions, where 'religion' seemingly remains a constant, how is the latter a case of leaving *religion*? As Michael Stausberg points out in his chapter in the volume – 'Leaving Hinduism: Deconversion as Liberation' – leaving religion 'is not the same as *leaving a religion*' (Stausberg, 2020, p. 99).

Regardless of this conceptual confusion, the anthology offers a berth for studies that are topical and important. I am especially thinking of Nora Stene's chapter 'Leaving Islam for Christianity: Asylum Seeker Converts', which explores the effect on the politics surrounding refugees on the individual's faith, and how it relates to the tradition they have left in complex ways that are not necessarily highly critical or outspoken. For researchers from the field of nonreligion and secularity research lured by the title, there are some chapters in the second part of the volume that contribute especially to the emerging field of nonreligious and secular studies, given that it includes traditions that tend to be ignored in the field, which in its focus on outspoken atheism in the US and the UK tend to capture mainly former Christians, or people whose primary cultural reference is Christianity. While various forms of



Christian tradition comprise most of the case studies in this volume, there are some notable exceptions. A striking example is Masoumeh Rahamani's chapter, which focuses on New Zealand disaffiliations from the Vipassana movement, examining what it means to leave a religious movement in the West that is surrounded by a low level of tension with its societal contexts, and indeed benefits from the 'positive sociopolitical discourse surrounding meditation' in contemporary western societies (Rahamani, 2020, p. 131).

The volume's third and final part should be particularly useful for undergraduate teachers introducing the topic of religious studies as an empirical field to their students, while wishing to instil the breadth of methods and theoretical traditions that are available within the field. This includes historical, social geographical, anthropological, psychological, and sociological approaches. Of particular importance in this section is Teemu Taira's chapter 'Media and Communication Approaches to Leaving Religion', because it highlights the role of various forms of media in processes of leaving religion, a focus Taira points out is lacking in research on leaving religion and conversion, and provides the reader with a crash course in mediatization theory.

While the framing of the volume is somewhat inconsistent in that it is unclear if leaving a religion is indeed the same as leaving religion, compounded by the lack of a definition

of religion and engagement with critical religion theory, I would still recommend this book to religious studies scholars looking for a work dealing with the complexities of religious identity in historical and contemporary contexts, who are also interested in a handbook for undergraduate students introducing the available methodological and theoretical approaches within religious studies.

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**Gavin Flood:** *Religion and the Philosophy of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 464 pp.

In recent decades scholars in philosophy, theology, and religious studies have discussed the merits of concepts such as *worldviews* (for example, Ninian Smart) and *views of life* (for example, Anders Jeffner). These concepts aim to offer a more neutral umbrella that covers both religions and various secular counterparts, and their pros and cons have been the subject of lively discussion. Flood's ambitious and demanding book introduces another concept with a similar but perhaps narrower focus, *philosophies of life*. Much like worldviews and views of life, philosophies of life are both descriptive and prescriptive – they portray life in a certain way and offer guidance for how to accomplish a better state. As Flood puts it, philosophies of life have an ambition to 'articulate what life itself is and to develop ways of living that enhance life' (1). That is, they focus explicitly on what we can say about *life* (more than about the universe or God), and this means that where a student of worldviews would naturally take physics as a fundamental dialogue partner, Flood is much more interested in disciplines that particularly focus on life and its development (especially evolutionary biology and cognitive science/neuroscience). Besides these sources, he also charts the philosophies of life of several religious traditions (under the headings 'Indic', 'Chinese', and

'Greek and Abrahamic traditions') and secular Western philosophies. (If I were to add a critical comment here, it is that it would have been interesting to learn more about the various integrative attempts made from within these religious traditions in encounters with contemporary science; that is, how contemporary insights about life are treated within these religious traditions today.)

Such a project is full of hermeneutical challenges: the different scientific and academic disciplines discussed in the book, as well as the different philosophies and religious traditions that are taken up, all rely, explicitly and/or implicitly, on various conceptions of human life, and thus on philosophies of life. Secular philosophies are influenced by both Greek and (primarily) Christian thought, but they have also greatly affected Christian theology and religious studies. Any student will also have descriptive and normative conceptions that together add up to something similar to a philosophy of life, and there is no neutral ground on which to stand to handle such questions. Concerning Flood's approach, this is unavoidable, given that the human being is both the inquirer and object of inquiry, and that to understand ourselves, we need to take into account the histories of ways of understanding ourselves (and human life generally). In line with approaches such as Habermas's and Stevenson's (in *Ten Theories of Human Nature*), Flood suggests that religions typically offer a description of human life as fundamentally flawed

but capable of self-repair (but only with the help of religious insight, practices, and/or powers). However, the kind of self-repair needed and the way to achieve it differs in different religions.

Flood points out that the different Religious-Cosmic Models and their respective philosophies of life that have been developed throughout human history have been questioned by two relative newcomers on the stage: what he calls the Galilean Mathematical Model; and the Kantian-Humanist Model. Both these models suffer, according to Flood, from a one-sidedness and hence a lack of integration: the Galilean-Mathematical Model privileges the third-person perspective; the Kantian-Humanist the first-person perspective. Neither can offer a comprehensive account of life, but each is necessary for an 'integrated approach to human reality'. Hence, Flood seeks to draw on both to deepen our understanding of life, civilization, and religion – and perhaps most importantly, the interplay between the three.

In the first part of the book, Flood draws on various scientific disciplines to explain why human beings form religions that shape and are shaped by civilizations. The explanations he offers are not in terms of some simple causation but of necessary features of human beings as *religious* beings, such as the ability to use language, prosociality, and so on. These necessary features are crucial for understanding how human beings can come to shape religions but cannot – and should not

attempt to – explain religion *away*. He borrows the term 'niche construction' from biology, suggesting that just as organisms in evolution are never passive objects – since they shape the environments in which natural selection occurs – religions, too, can be seen as a kind of niche in which prosocial behaviour and other features are channelled in particular directions. However, he continues, accounts that stop there become reductionist, because they disregard the insights of the Kantian-Humanist Model, and not least how religions *appeal* to human beings; that is, how they offer something to us as the conscious beings, all too aware of our own mortality and shortcomings, that we actually are. Hence, the need for integrative approaches. The niches that religions comprise are loaded with meaning and thus appeal to beings in need of self-repair, but without integration we are left with impoverished evolutionary and cognitive science-based explanations that disregard meaning or with meaning-seeking explanations that devise religions from thin air, or pure thought, so to speak, which in turn offer an impoverished view of religions in all their complexity.

Throughout the book, Flood returns to the ambition to find explanations of religion and the problems with both the reductionist Galilean-Mathematical Model and the overly consciousness-oriented Kantian-Humanist Model. His alternative centres on the concept of 'bio-energy', which is the 'power of life itself coming to articulation through social cognition

that has material or physical effects on the brains and behaviours of social actors' (372). Communication (not least verbal) transforms agents both physically and socially and the meaning-systems with which they live, so we have a range of feedback loops between the different biological and social forces, and the systems of meaning they create. Unless we understand (human) life itself and its dynamics, we will be unable to comprehend phenomena such as religions, phenomena that simultaneously contain their own understandings of life.

In his discussion of different Religious-Cosmic Models, Flood uses the concept of sacrifice as a hermeneutical key, arguing that cathartic and gift-exchange models of sacrifice are too instrumental and overlook its character as a 'refusal of nothingness and death' (95). This refusal in turn takes different forms and helps shape civilizations in different directions, but it is consonant with the ambivalent relationship between religion and civilization that he traces. Religions affirm communal values necessary for the maintenance of civilized life, but – especially after the axial era – also *renounce* those values as obstacles to a more authentic and deeper life. Of course, *what* is renounced and the kind of goals striven for vary between the traditions that Flood discusses, but he traces a similar pattern in each: sacrifice is renunciation of certain goods for the obtaining of other goods considered more durable and worthwhile. This simultaneous upholding

and renouncing of communal values makes religious traditions dynamic elements of the civilizations of which they are formative elements.

Flood's approach to religion as a distinctly human phenomenon because of the kind of beings we are and the interactions in which beings like us typically come to engage also entails the idea that even if organized religions were to disappear, or be significantly weakened as in Europe, 'there is still the need for repair and human fulfilment, the human longing for meaning and place' (389). The form this will take depends on and simultaneously affects the political and social landscape. The New Age turn to 'de-centred and individualistic' forms of authority, for example, 'assume[s] a new kind of political order and perhaps an emergent global community' (392). This brings us back to the interplay between religions and civilizations.

Flood covers a lot of territory in this book and moves between many different disciplines. In times of ever-increasing specialization and often rather heated debates about the relationship between different scientific and academic disciplines' contributions to studies of religion, its broad scope and integrative ambitions to give many perspectives their due are refreshingly unfashionable.

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