Book Reviews

Proinsias Mac Cana: *The Cult of the Sacred Centre: Essays on Celtic Ideology*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2011, 344 pp.

Proinsias Mac Cana (1926–2004) was one of the most important figures of twentieth-century Celtic scholarship, who during his long career in the field made a significant contribution to the understanding of the languages and literatures of various Celtic-speaking peoples. This collection of posthumously published essays reflects Mac Cana's abiding interest in the comparative study of religion, and especially in the conceptions of cultural and ideological unity underlying the mythology and symbolism of different societies. While the focus of the present volume lies on Irish – and to a lesser extent Welsh and Gaulish – material, Mac Cana broadens the scope of his study by setting these traditions against the comparative background of other cultural contexts. The result is a wide-ranging and at times challenging exploration of symbolic parallels and associations from Vedic India to medieval Ireland and modern-day France, which is bound to give food for thought to any interested reader.

The book is thematically arranged into four sections, all of which open up a different analytical perspective on the seemingly paradoxical co-existence of 'cultural cohesion and political particularism' (p. 1) which, in Mac Cana's opinion, inherently defines Irish history in both cultural and ideological terms. Part I, titled 'The Paradox of Irish History', begins by outlining the trends of recent Irish historiography, taking issue in particular with the way in which the terms 'myth' and 'mythology' have been used in a negative or pejorative sense in revisionist scholarship. Mac Cana argues that the perceived incompatibility between myth and history has not only resulted in a misrepresentation of the nature and function of myth, but also impeded the understanding of the ideas with which this concept has most often been associated, namely nationalism and national consciousness. Contrary to the commonly held view that the notions of nationhood only developed in the modern period, Mac Cana sets out to demonstrate that 'a consciousness of Irish nationality' can in fact be traced much further back in history, and that the 'antiquity and endurance' of this shared notion of 'Irishness' should primarily be sought in the indigenous belief system prevailing prior to the coming of Christianity (p. 43).

By framing his discussion in these terms, Mac Cana reiterates the basic argument put forth in many of his previous publications, in which he has repeatedly emphasised the tenacity of pre-Christian oral tradition and the ideological continuity of Irish society after the introduction of Christianity and the advent of literacy. According to Mac Cana,

the process of Christianisation in Ireland did not result in a complete eradication of the previously existing structures of native institutions and modes of thought, but instead brought about a 'remarkable symbiosis' that enabled 'the complementary coexistence of two ideologies, one explicitly Christian, the other originally pagan, within the same community and doubtless in many instances within the same individuals' (p. 48). He writes:

> Despite the inevitable revision, selection, and suppression of elements of the integral pre-Christian tradition during the process of creating the written text within an ecclesiastical ethos there still remains a great deal of material bearing on native institutions and ideology – sacral kingship of course, the Otherworld, cosmic division and the partition of the provinces, origin tales, the function of the druids and *filid*, the body of legal precept and precedent, the social sanction of satire and ritual fasting, and so on – which presupposes the former existence of a complex system of socio-religious doctrine and ritual, the former doubtless propagated to a large extent in the form of exemplary myth as in India (p. 61).

This emphasis laid on the survival of deeply-rooted ideological structures and values stands in striking contrast to much of the scholarship done on medieval Irish history and literature in the past decades, which has tended to highlight the fundamental impact of Christianity on all aspects of early Irish society and culture. Indeed, for those familiar with the general trends of the so-called 'nativist-revisionist' controversy of the twentieth-century Celtic scholarship there is something curiously conservative and arguably even outdated about Mac Cana's approach, especially in view of the notable paucity of references to many of the more recent studies in the footnotes. Yet as far as its careful construction of a cross-cultural context for the analysis of the medieval Irish material is concerned, Mac Cana's work is still often perceptive, and the exemplary manner in which the comparative method is applied to probe the various cosmological, religious, and political dimensions of the evidence can be valuable even for those who might not otherwise be entirely persuaded by all of his interpretations.

The essays in Part II, 'The Sacred Centre in Comparative Traditions', focus on the examination of a number of interrelated themes, all of which pertain to the symbolic and ideological configurations of unity from the viewpoint of schemata reflecting the notions of centre and periphery. The catalogue of cross-cultural comparanda is vast, ranging from the ubiquitous *axis mundi* to the geographical arrangement of sacred sites and structures in India, China and Mesoamerica. What all of these examples serve to elucidate is the underlying logic of the dynamic between the sacred and the profane,

and the ways in which the cosmological and mythological model of the sacred centre has retained its significance in various guises in the spatial, religious, and socio-political ordering of different societies. The pervasive nature of the conceptualisation of the axial centre and its surrounding sub-ordinate entities is discussed at length with reference to examples such as the symbolism of the mandala, the political role of the universal ruler (*chakravartin*) in India, and the five sacred mountains of the Taoist tradition. Although the cross-cultural scope of Mac Cana's examination is overall remarkably broad, his predominant interest in the Indian evidence bears testimony to the resilient notion that the common Indo-European background of India and Ireland implies special ideological affinity between the two areas – a paradigm which still holds currency among many, although by no means all, Celtic scholars. In these essays, however, the analysis of these analogies moves beyond the idea of shared Indo-European heritage, as more comparative evidence is introduced to highlight the potential of the cosmic model to afford an insight into underlying patterns of thought and practice that epitomise the 'inherent tension between the ideal of a transcendent unity and the pragmatic reality of a pluralist, fragmented organisational structure' (p. 103). From this perspective, Mac Cana brings the comparative evidence to bear on the Celtic material by providing an interesting discussion of the practice of pilgrimage and ritual circumambulation (ch. 7), as well as three more narrowly focused case studies on Gaul, Brittany, and Wales (ch. 8–10).

In Part III, Mac Cana returns to the questions of cultural and national unity in the Celtic countries in order to refute the view of 'the chronically fissiparous nature of the Celts and the Irish' (p. 215). By relating the material pertaining to Celtic Gaul to the extant corpus of medieval Irish literature, he seeks to substantiate his main claim that the common assumption of the relatively 'anarchical' character of the religion and mythology of the Celts is not only fundamentally flawed, but also based on the prejudiced notion that the Celtic peoples have always characteristically lacked the capacity for any kind of unity, whether linguistic, cultural, or political. Mac Cana builds his own argument to the contrary on evidence drawn from both mytho-heroic literature and historical sources, with particular emphasis on themes such as the quincuncial arrangement of the provinces of Ireland (ch. 13), the symbolic primacy of Tara as the locus of sacral kingship (ch. 14), bilingualism, law, and onomastics (ch. 15–17). Part IV then brings the volume to a close with two essays, which relate the preceding analysis to more immediate concerns of twentieth-century history by reflecting upon the wider implications the perceived ideological unity to the understanding of Irish national consciousness.

While Mac Cana's take on the wide variety of topics discussed in different parts of the book may not always be entirely new or original, the analysis on a whole provides a lucid and eminently readable synthesis of a complex body of source material. However, due to the sheer amount of comparative examples introduced in the second part of the book in particular, the reader may wonder if all of the accumulated correspondences should carry equal weight in the analysis. Admittedly, Mac Cana is himself duly cautious of the possible pitfalls of universalising claims, which all too often tend to gloss over the inherent problems related to the diversity and heterogeneity of the studied phenomena. Yet the question of whether the various organisational patterns found in India, Africa, China, Mesoamerica and medieval Ireland truly are of the same order persists, leaving the reader at times to ponder upon the feasibility of the interpretative conclusions drawn from these perceived analogies.

In order to avoid misrepresenting other scholars' arguments, Mac Cana has opted for including extensive direct citations from secondary research literature throughout the book. This makes the text appear somewhat fragmented in places, and occasionally also results in a situation where the source has been quoted in the original language without translation. The editors' conscious choice of publishing Mac Cana's work with minimal editorial interference is understandable, although the volume could have benefited from an index and a separate bibliography for ease of reference. As a whole, *The Cult of the Sacred Centre* stands as a remarkable testimony to its author's learning, and his colleagues and family members are to be commended for taking on the task of completing the volume for publication. It is hoped that this book finds the readership it deserves among scholars of religion, historians, as well as Celticists interested in comparative methodology, and succeeds in furthering the discussion and debate on the issues of religion, ideology, and identity – both past and present.

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Michael Pye (ed.): *Listening to Shin Buddhism*. London: Equinox, 2012, 306 + xiii pp.

This text comprises a set of papers originally published in *The Eastern Buddhist* between 1932 and 1986, although most are from the 1960s onwards. It must always be asked with collections such as this whether any useful purpose is served in bringing them together, as they can be, of course, sourced from the original. Certainly, the introduction by Michael Pye, the editorial notes in the essays, and the systematization of certain technical terms brings something which would not be in the original. However, before

answering our question we will consider the essays.

The main aim of the volume is to bring together some encounters of Shin Buddhism with the West, as well as its representation in some important writers of the modern period. The essays chosen for this volume are grouped under five parts. The first is 'Early Interactions' and contains an eclectic collection of pieces looking at vicarious suffering in Buddhism, a piece by C. A. F. Rhys Davis and a response to it, two editorials, and an essay on Japanese culture and Buddhism. It is hard to see what really holds this section together, and overall I found the pieces here amongst the weakest and least interesting in the volume. The second section 'Two Presenters of Shin Buddhism' has two essays by Kaneko Daiei and one by Kanamatsu Kenryo. These aim to give a flavour of how the tradition positioned itself in the encounter with the West. Of these, Kanamatsu's essay 'Goodness and Naturalness' is very worthy of interest. The previous two provide useful, if sometimes rambling and personal, reflections on Shin Buddhism. The third section looks at 'Three Western Responses to Shin Buddhism', and contains Fritz Buri's essay on 'The Concept of Grace in Paul, Shinran and Luther', a much rehearsed issue in encounter, of which this is something of a classic piece. There are also essays by Marco Pallis and Alfred Bloom, the latter especially of some interest. Part Four returns to Japanese figures and is concerned with 'Broadening Perspectives for Shin Buddhism'. Two essays are by Ueda Yoshifumi and the first on 'Freedom and Necessity in Shinran's Concept of Karma' is well worth reading for what it has to say on Shin Buddhist thought. I also found Takeuchi Yoshinori's essays very to the point in relation to the topic of Shin and the Western encounter as he discussed various philosophers and theologians and points of comparison and contrast, especially concerning his meeting with Rudolf Bultmann. The final section 'A Dialogue of Shin Buddhism and Zen Buddhism' is a record of a dialogue between two leading Shin Buddhists, Suzuki Daisetsu and Nishitani Keiji, the moderator, which may well be of interest for those with an interest in Suzuki's thought, and provides some interesting technical points of translation and intercultural encounter.

Overall, while many texts are of interest and valuable, I found the text rather uneven. Certainly, for anyone interested in the historical encounter of Shin Buddhism and the West this is a good collection, and the editorial work will be of use. While anyone pursuing this at length will no doubt need to go further than just these pieces, for most, i.e. those with an interest in Shin Buddhism generally, the encounter of Christian/Western thought and Shin Buddhism, or in some of the particular figures or issues, there will certainly be some stimulating reading here, although, some of the essays may be obscure. Overall, though, I would suggest that this

text, and others in the series too, would be welcome additions to a serious Buddhist studies library.

Some of the essays provide some useful and insightful commentary on the Shin Buddhist tradition, and could usefully be put on reading lists for students as places to go for further information on this tradition – which is not as well documented as it could be in English language resources. Also, no doubt many graduate students and scholars either starting exploring the area, or with tangential interests in it, will find all or some of the essays an accessible way into the important set of resources that *The Eastern Buddhist* represents. As noted, some may find this just a stepping stone to further engagement, but others will no doubt find what they need within its pages. It should also be noted that this volume is part of a larger series (five volumes in total) of articles from *The Eastern Buddhist*.

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Paul Williams & Patrice Ladwig (eds): *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*. Cambridge University Press, 2012, 296 pp.

Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China, edited by Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig, focuses on the final stage of temporal life. This has usually bypassed in standard works on Buddhism, which is strange, as death is not merely a ritual administered to a dead body or a theoretical aspect of ontology, but interaction between the deceased and the survivors. As the reviewed work asserts, death is related to such diverse fields as 'agricultural fertility, human reproduction, political cults and the economy' (p. 1). Thus the present work fills an important gap in our knowledge of Buddhism and its entanglement with matters we perhaps always do not link with it, or death.

The book is divided into an Introduction and eleven other chapters, by twelve scholars, most of them anthropologists or anthropologically-oriented. Its emphasis is on the present day more than history or doctrinal matters, and on traditional, rural cultures rather than urban milieus. As the Preface explains, the work has grown out of the University of Bristol's Centre for Buddhist Studies research project on the Buddhist death rituals in Southeast Asia and China. The Preface also reveals that 'Southeast Asia' here means specifically Laos and Thailand, though the book also has a chapter on Cambodia and two on Burma/Myanmar (both names are used).

The chapters share some common points of reference, such as Robert Hertz's 'Contribution à une etude sur la representation collective de la mort' (1907), or death as a sort of social fact à la Durkheim (only in the chapters on Southeast Asia); the assertion of interplay between Buddhist and local 'spirit cults' (often represented by discus-

sion on ghosts); and the question of transferring merit during the rituals. Geographically speaking, three of the articles deal with China and the rest with the Southeast Asian mainland.

Rita Langer points out that, although there are a variety of handbooks, 'there are no ancient, prescriptive Pāli texts […] outlining how to conduct a Theravāda Buddhist funeral' (p. 22). In spite of that, the funeral traditions are remarkably similar. Langer argues that this is due to the monks, performers of the rites, being what Lévi-Strauss called *bricoleurs*, skilled craftsmen, who, over the centuries, have recognized some parts of the canonical texts (such as the *Abhidhamma*), as indispensable parts of funeral ritual chanting, but also left some room for ordering them and supplementing them with optional other texts, canonical or otherwise. This may be true, but their art of bricolage still requires further investigation: it cannot alone, in my opinion, explain the standardization of particular texts.

Erik Davis addresses the 'power immune to the dangers of death' and the 'conquest and management of death' (p. 61) by Cambodian Buddhist monks. He focuses on the use and recycling of cloth, both as shrouds and in the monks' robes. While the ethnography of these transactions is solid, a few details keep on puzzling me. If we presuppose, as Davis seems to do, that 'pure' monks purify an 'impure' corpse, and matters having been in contact or associated with it, do we not explain the process with a preconceived hypothesis? Davis refers to Mary Douglas's famous dictum of dirt being 'matter out of place', but the problem for me is: Does a socially constructed disorder (out of place) make a matter, or thing, dirty, or polluted? I hold that dirt (and pollution) is something more than a mere social disorder; it does not disappear when order is restored by putting the shroud/robe in the 'right' place.

I do not mean that those arguing that rituals change things (or our conceptions of them) are simply wrong. I just mean that, if the material does not undergo actual changes what changes is not the thing but our comprehension of it. But this leaves us with a problem. If, for example, the monks 'manage' death by making impure matters pure, and if the matter itself does not change, then what actually is pure or impure matter? Is dirt a mere social category? If so, how do social categories compel purity or impurity in something existing independent of them? Should we not think less of the social construction and more of the independent material existence of things?

M. L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati continues the discussion on the ritual use of the monks' robes. Her context is a few Thai manuscripts depicting funeral scenes. She describes the ritual as follows: in Thailand '[i]t is believed that when a monk removes [...] [the shroud covering] the corpse [...] and chants a verse [...], great merit is transferred

to the deceased' (p. 80). Thus, the monk is not managing danger but transferring merit. However, she disputes this interpretation, quoting Rita Langer's *Buddhist Rituals of Death and Rebirth* (2007) to the effect that 'giving of merit [is] [...] rather unspecific and occur[s] in post-funerary and other contexts'. Chirapravati does not explain what to me seems to be an inconsistency. Or perhaps she is referring to different kinds of contexts, I do not know. Instead, she offers a compact study in art history, which, I suggest, would have merited a comparative note with Davis's chapter, particularly relative to the polluting dimensions of the shroud/robe.

Vanina Bouté writes on the role played by 'good' (or 'normal') and 'bad' (accidental or suicide) death in the New Year ceremonies of a Laotian minority, the Phunoy. Usually the former type of death is managed by Buddhist monks, and the latter by local non-Buddhist specialists in 'spirit matters', but in the New Year both kinds of dead 'receive similar offerings to secure their life in the hereafter' (p. 99). Thus, *pace* Robert Redfield, this implies a mixture of the 'great' and 'little' traditions. Bouté continues with a detailed description of the ceremony, followed with a reference to the merit discussion in chapters 3 and 4: 'contrary to Lao Buddhist ceremonies, no one speaks of transferring the merits of the dead. The term [...] "merit" is not used' (p. 111), evidently because the ritual does not involve monks. Instead, the dead 'are expected to bring protection and fertility' (p. 111), which can be seen as a 'process of "Buddhisation" of ancestors', as Bouté puts it (p. 115), enabling the turning of a bad deceased into a good one.

The discussion on the mutual influences between the 'great' and 'little' traditions continues in Ch. 6, where Patrice Ladwig deals with Lao Buddhism. The merit issue is again addressed, together with the topic ghosts, and the monks' role in a festival for the deceased. His points are that monks are mediators between the living Lao laymen and the dead, including the ghosts; that the main mediating matter is food; and that 'the ritual feeding of different kinds of deceased is constitutive for nurturing and protecting the well-being of a community' (p. 121).

Ladwig first discusses the concepts 'ghost' and 'dead', which in Lao cosmology, Buddhist or otherwise, defy any neat categorization. He emphasizes the materiality, in form of food, of the religious transferring of merit. While the case is theoretically strong, I would have expected a more detailed analysis of feeding; now the materiality of 'care for the dead' does not materialize. Of course, this was not even his aim: as Ladwig states, his focus was the various 'ghosts' addressed in rituals.

Ch. 7 returns to 'good' and 'bad' death and the pacification of ghosts, now in a Burmese context. In her ethnographic analysis, Alexandra de Mersan too presupposes connections between religious rituals and social life. She analyzes the contradiction

between the monks' assertion that (in a good death) the deceased is immediately reborn, whereas in practice the funeral rituals proper last for seven days in order to secure the 'progressive expulsion' of the 'immaterial component of a person' (*lippra* in Burmese) from house and village (pp. 144, 154). The question of course is: Why such an elaborated protective ritual, if the deceased is already gone, as the monks claim? And the answer is: In the local understanding of correct social order, changes jeopardize ordered (social) life, which cannot be set to rights without rituals. The 'great' tradition assists the 'little' one here in the form of monks officiating at different rituals to pass merit to the *lippra* to make it completely free (from previous karmic/social bondages).

In the case of a bad death, progressive exclusion is administered by village laymen. Monks are not needed, because in such cases 'there is no *lippra* to treat, as it has already "escaped"' (p. 162), evidently because it has fallen outside the social order. In a good death, it seems, the *lippra* stays, because it has remained within the 'social body'. But what if this analogy is insufficient? What if there is no clear social boundary between good and bad death?

The ethnography of Burmese monks' funerals is the topic of Ch. 8, by François Robinne. He convincingly suggests that a monk's funeral is comparable to a play consisting of three acts, reproducing the three central Buddhist concepts of not-self, suffering and impermanence. The juxtaposition of funeral and theatre is not merely metaphorical. Robinne summarizes at length a local theatrical piece on the death of a monk and the attendance of his sister and brother at various stages of it, pointing out that it too teaches the same lesson of the three conditions of existence. In addition, plays are sometimes performed on the occasion of funerals. Thus the difference (if there is one) between 'real life' and 'theatre', and 'life' and 'death', is blurred, just as in the teaching attributed to the Buddha. I think that Robinne's effort to use theatrical vocabulary to conceptualize, and to show at a conceptual level, the 'ritual staging of death and rebirth' (p. 183) is a helpful way to try to state what escapes all precise wording.

Bernard Formoso discusses bad death in the Chinese context. There, too, bad deaths result in the deceased turning into 'hungry' or 'wandering' ghosts, which occupy a 'core position' in Chinese folk traditions. Written and oral traditions on them have been studied extensively, but the funeral rituals of those dying a bad death have largely been neglected. As in several previous chapters, here too we meet the interplay of Buddhism and local (Chinese) traditions, although now without Buddhist monks.

The 'bad dead' (meaning here both accidental death and corpses found for example on building sites) is handled on the analogy of an orphan having lost his or her family. The purpose of the funeral ritual (here: purification of bones)

is to offer the dead an adoptive family and to secure 'the salvation of the *linghun* […] the spiritual component of the person' (p. 197). Formoso adds that it has also the goal 'to cleanse the environment of the uncontrolled forces [ghosts] which pollute it and to subdue their energy by incorporating them into a holistic [social] order' (p. 198). He goes on to refer to Mary Douglas' 'universal pattern', according to which 'pollution and disorder are co-extensive ideas', and continues by claiming that the 'orphaned bones' are 'anomalous dead and because of this status, they are perceived as possessing power and danger' (pp. 198–9). Certainly, 'orphaned bones' are an anomaly if we presuppose that there is one 'correct' order of the dead; and somehow Buddhism perhaps presupposes this by claiming rebirths on various kinds of hells, of which that of the hungry ghosts is one. But we could equally well argue that bad deaths make up one kind of order. If so, they are not an anomaly, but two concurring orders.

Of course Formoso might reply that because the bones of both kinds of deaths are ultimately treated evenly, and the destiny of their *linghuns* is assumed to be identical, the anomaly is merely apparent, and the purpose of the separate ('anomalous') category of bad death is to make itself unnecessary. But why then have it at all? Or, why call it anomaly? The chapter does not tell whether the Chinese themselves call bad deaths anomalies. If they do, the case needs further investigation.

The three last chapters focus on mainland China. Ingmar Heise presents the transformation of the ghost festival into a Dharma assembly (a recitation ritual) in southeast China. Originally the festival was a Buddhist ritual for the benefit of the deceased; making an offering to the monks on a particular day released ancestors 'from suffering in the three evil paths of rebirth'. It then 'spread out from the monasteries and was transformed into the "Ghost Festival"' (p. 219), and following a turn in Chinese religious policies since the late 1970s, has gradually revived. Heise provides us with the historical background; the next steps could be a detailed presentation of the recent revival and the performing of the ritual in individual temples.

Yik Fai Tam presents a local Buddhist funeral ritual tradition in southeastern China. Here again we deal with the 'adaptation of Buddhist ideas and practices to a particular Asian setting […] through interaction with local religion'. And again we have a ritual 'believed to generate vast amounts of religious merit' benefiting both the deceased and the living members of the host family and the wandering ghosts (pp. 238–9). Perhaps some more comparison, either in Chinese contexts or with previous chapters, would have further clarified both the adaptation and the merit-generating process.

The closing chapter, by Frederick Shih-Chung Chen, investigates

how Buddhists of the Turfan region (Eastern Central China) adopted the use of Confucian and Daoist mortuary documents 'to ensure the smooth processing of the soul of the deceased through the netherworld'. The document is recited by 'Buddhist priests at the beginning of the funeral ceremony and then burned' (pp. 261–2). The chapter title speaks of early medieval and modern documents, but while the former are presented by a detailed textual analysis, the latter are not discussed.

After Chen, the book ends quite abruptly. Although the individual chapters are presented in the Introduction, a few pages tying together the main points would have been helpful. I cannot claim to be competent to make such conclusions, but would like to pick up some themes. One is the material dimension both of death, and of religiosity. Buddhist death consists not merely of a corpse, a funeral pyre, an urn and a place to repose it, but also of 'systems of recall' made up of objects, images, texts and stories. Thus, in a very material sense, the deceased is socially alive. Of course this is not a novel idea, but until recently, the study of the material dimension of 'higher' religions has not been very intensive, compared to the anthropology of religion of 'primitive' ones. However, as several chapters of the book reviewed show, we should not forget the materialist dimension of spirituality in Buddhism, either.

Several chapters imply an intriguing question but do not discuss it further, viz.: What do we mean when we say that someone is dead? In dying, does someone terminate? Or just transform? From a naive 'scientific' perspective these questions may sound absurd: when vital functions dry up, one is dead. But Buddhists, and several others for that matter, do not think so. I do dispute whether or not, after I have stopped breathing, there remains some 'self'; my argument has a different focus: that dying has several visible and tangible consequences with long-lasting emotional and social effects; therefore equalizing death with the disappearance of vital functions largely misses the point. Death is not 'lived' individually, except in the modern western imagination, but socially. In separating people, death means the end of someone, but it would be short-sighted to emphasize merely separation, because death also connects; burial is simultaneously a rebirth which (in material objects and memories, in social ties and practices) revives the deceased in the communal and material life of the survivors.

To sum up, *Buddhist Funeral Cultures* points out what burying rituals informed by Buddhism in Southeast Asia and China have in common, despite the fact that in the former the tradition is Theravāda, and in the latter, Mahāyāna. It restates in Buddhist milieus earlier observations from other contexts that funeral rituals are not so much about death, as about life, regeneration, rebirth and revival. It also suggests

that further discussion is still needed on the Great and Little traditions, by showing that in fact there is no 'great' tradition but various 'little' manifestations of more widely (or Buddhist) and regionally limited (or local) rituals, continually influencing each other. While this idea of various Buddhisms is not new, the implied assertion that Buddhist impermanence penetrates even the totalizing concept 'Buddhism' is worth exploring: perhaps Buddhism (or any other religion for that matter) exists as 'complete' merely at a conceptual level. As Tam suggests, we may well question, for example, whether there is any such thing as a single normative Chinese Buddhist funeral rite.

And what about disputes at, or within, funeral rituals? The book does not say much about these. Only Heise points out that both modern Chinese monks and the Chinese government have been critical of various aspects of funeral rituals. As one monk put it, the task of monks and monasteries is to serve living persons, not to officiate at rituals for the dead. In Southeast Asia we do not hear any critique. Is it non-extant? Or merely left unmentioned?

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James R. Lewis (ed.): *Violence and New Religious Movements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 443 pp.

Violence and New Religious Movements, edited by James R. Lewis, a Religious Studies professor at the University of Tromsø, aims to provide a complete picture of violence related to new religious movements (NRMs). It does this while focussing on both violence of and against NRMs, and in most cases these are interrelated. 22 scholars have contributed to this book, many of whom are established experts in the field.

The volume does not provide an explicit definition of NRMs or of violence. However, after reading the book it becomes clear that NRMs are understood to be new and non-traditional religious groups that may be small or large, centralized or (diffusely) grouped in networks. Also, it limits violence to what is clearly punishable by criminal law, with an emphasis on killing and attempted killing, and on (heavy) repression from the side of the law enforcers. Violence in NRMs is so exceptional, according to the introduction, that the authors believe that we cannot build ready-for-use theories on it. The goal of the first, 'theoretical' part of the book is therefore to denounce 'fearmongering' voices which see all new religious movements as potentially violent.

The main point in the introduction is that although some new religions have features that lead to world-denial attitudes, this does not necessarily produce violent

outcomes. For instance, David G. Bromley concludes that in 130 confrontations between governments and NRMs, only three turned into some kind of violence. Likewise, James T. Richardson believes that hundreds, and perhaps thousands of NRMs, never engage in violence. Moreover, if violence happens in a religious context, this is not reserved to NRMs alone; mainstream religions can also foster violence.

Richardson valuably remarks that religion and violence often go hand in hand. Nevertheless, I find it a missed opportunity to refer primarily to *past* history, when the author talks about the European Crusades and the burning of witches. There are enough examples to be given from many parts of the world showing that mainstream religion can be related to violence also today. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, where I carried out field research between 2005 and 2013, people complain about the (indirect) involvement of some leaders of NRMs, and a handful of their followers, in bloody 'religious riots', which could even escalate into civil war if things really turn out wrong. It would have been useful in this context if the study had taken up this theme of large-scale violence in relation to the more mainstream NRMs.

The missing link in the work – that it is not concerned with deliberate or voluntary religious violence – can be explained by its central and strong thesis that NRMs are in certain cases provoked by their environment. Richardson makes this clear in his introductory chapter, where he highlights the importance of the 'interactional model' for the study of NRM-related violence. This model says that whether a NRM turns violent or not primarily depends on how its environment reacts to it. By adopting this angle, the author points the finger at dominant forces in society – the anti-cult movement, law enforcement (unjustified jailing) and the negative role of the media – putting NRMs in an oppressed, provoked position. In sum, the inter-relational aspect shows how conflicting interests of NRMs and their environment can lead to violence.

The interactional model is applied in most of the chapters in the volume. In the afterword, Lewis insists again on taking this angle seriously, and this can be seen as the book's main message for the reader.

The chapters in Part II consist of cases that exemplify certain aspects of Richardson's interactional model. They mainly explore five mass murders/suicides that occurred in a few NRMs between 1978 and 2000 in Europe, North America, and Africa. The chapters suggest that some of the mass suicides might perhaps not have happened if police or other agents of social control had acted differently. Benjamin E. Zeller, for example, in his chapter on the suicide of the members of the Heaven's Gate in San Diego in the U.S., talks about a 'prototypical movement-ending case of cult violence' (p. 173). The author suggests here a certain predictability that a moment of 'final

violence' can occur as a result of an interaction between a NRM and its environment.

Another theme of the study is that NRMs which generate violence are not always world-denying groups. They might be fully engaged in public social life and have a 'mainstream outlook'. In several chapters of the volume in parts III and IV, it is demonstrated that religious movements which are world-embracing and encourage social engagement can have violent features as much as the ones that seek to isolate their members from public life.

Part IV makes the volume's unpredictability thesis from the introduction explicit, when it talks about movements that are *expected* to become violent, because they are seen as having plans in that direction (for instance, the Nation of Islam in its early phases), but that finally turn out to remain peaceful. Kaarina Aitamurto in her chapter in part III on racist violence among modern Slavic Pagan groups suggests that it can be NRM *members* who choose to be violent, rather than the movements themselves. She makes it clear that NRMs are not different in this respect from mainstream religion. She also suggests that scholars should refrain from assuming that one religion, for instance post-9/11 Islam, is more likely to be engaged in violence than another.

The final part of the book comes back to violence against NRMs. In its first chapter, Richardson and Bryan Edelman exemplify how China has unjustly jailed members of NRMs. The second chapter, by Anson Shupe, examines the case of doubtful deprogramming methods applied on members of dismantled movements.

What I take home from this volume is that external interventions are delicate, and that the interactional model invites us to pay attention not only to patterns between a hostile dominant environment and marginalized NRMs, but also to consider how violence can be the result of a situation where neither of the opposing sides understands how to channel conflicting interests.

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William Arnal, Willi Braun & Russell T. McCutcheon (eds): *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion: Essays in Honor of Donald Wiebe.* London: Equinox, 2012, 243 pp.

Professor Donald Wiebe (b. 1943) has been one of the driving forces in promoting scientific study of religion for many decades. His basic message throughout his academic career has been to keep theology and what he calls 'crypto-theology' out of the scientific study of religion. This Festschrift pays homage to Wiebe's 70th birthday and his ongoing passion for thinking about the discipline and its theoretical anchorages. It consists of a preface and fifteen articles, including one written by Professor Wiebe himself.

The title of the volume derives from Wiebe's article 'The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion', originally published in 1984 and reprinted in this volume. In the article Wiebe argued that the discipline has a 'failure of nerve' when it constantly brings theological and confessional dimensions back into the scholarly and academic study of religion. Wiebe is not opposing theology as such, if it is understood as god-talk taking place in specific institutions, but he sees that as detrimental to the academic credibility of the 'modern research university' and to the development of publicly funded religious studies. The article provides a starting point for each contribution and, therefore, the essays of the volume do not aim at exploring all parts of Wiebe's scholarly work with equal emphasis.

After the preface the volume opens up with a short article by Luther Martin and the reprint of Wiebe's classic text. The next section, titled 'General Failures', points out some continuing problems and neglected areas in the study of religion. 'Specific Failures' focuses on certain subfields in the study of religion, such as scholarship on Islamic origins (Herbert Berg), contemporary Islamic studies (Aaron W. Hughes) and the study of early Christianity (John W. Parrish, Sarah E. Rollens, T. Nicholas Schonhoffer). The volume ends with a short concluding statement by two of the editors, William Arnal and Willi Braun. Even though the volume is organised around 'failures' and it has a common focus on Wiebe's article, the chapters can easily be read separately as independent pieces of scholarly work.

In the Festschrift tradition, this volume provides some anecdotes about the person himself, but the focus of the contributions is predominantly an academic one. As stated in the preface, the contributors share with Wiebe the idea that 'conceptualizing religion as an element of the mundane world of human doings is the first requirement of a public inquiry into the history and function of religion' and that 'this requirement has consistently not been met' (p. vii). However, readers may find it surprising that many of the contributors, while agreeing with these ideas, share little else with Wiebe in how they understand how religion should be studied. The fact that many contributors are his former students from the University of Toronto makes it all the more interesting.

Whilst Wiebe's focus has consistently been on drawing the boundary between theology and scientific study of religion, he has also been critical towards interpretative approaches and what might be called 'postmodern' views. Furthermore, while promoting explanatory approaches, and more recently especially the cognitive approach, he has not given much credit in his published writings to poststructuralist, feminist or Marxist approaches. These have, however, been formative theoretical approaches and anchorages for many of the contributors. Therefore, despite some shared

ideas, there is a strong underlying tension in the volume between Wiebe and many, if not most, other contributors.

A notable exception is Luther Martin, whose recent work has been based on the cognitive study of religion. In this volume, however, his article is a short personal reflection on Wiebe as a friend and colleague. Some contributors criticise some aspects of cognitive study of religion, and others simply distance themselves from Wiebe's preferences (for example, Darlene M. Juschka, Janet Klippenstein and Russell T. McCutcheon). Furthermore, if Wiebe's mission has been framed by drawing a clear boundary between theology and science, the next generation has framed the question differently. Whilst Wiebe's distinction (and mission) is still relevant, the more recent interest lies elsewhere, on the category of 'religion' itself. Many contributors seem to think that the category itself should be an object of critical scrutiny and that its uses should be thoroughly historicised and self-reflective. The distinction is then framed in a new way, and from the point of view of this particular framework some scientific approaches can be seen as almost as problematic as the theological ones. According to this line of thought, the point is not in laying a firm scientific foundation for the study of a standalone object 'religion', as opposed to theological approaches, but to deconstruct the presumed naturalness of the very object itself, as William Arnal and Willi Braun suggest in their short and dense concluding chapter. Perhaps all this reveals that Wiebe, while sometimes seen as a scholar consistently promoting his own view, has always been open for conversation and debate, thus offering a chance for a younger generation to formulate their own ideas. If Wiebe has been a scholar who presses others to consider their standpoint and the identity of religious studies as a discipline, the outcome of that, some chapters in this volume suggest, is scholarly thinking that diverges from Wiebe's own position and redirects some of the questions to a perhaps more radical conclusion.

Another, albeit minor tension in the volume is that many contributors find Wiebe's expression 'failure of nerve' less than successful. For instance, Darlene Juschka writes that

> I do not believe that I would call the refusal of the field to engage seriously a scientific and/or academic methodology a failure of nerve as Wiebe suggests. Instead I would suggest […] that the field itself tends towards conservatism; and linked to this conservatism, or emerging from it, is a traditional definition and engagement with the systems of belief and practice otherwise known as "religion" (p. 51).

Highlighting these tensions is not only something that may surprise readers and distinguish this volume from traditional Festschrifts, but it also emphasises the specific selec-

tion of contributors. The editors do not make any comment on the selection process, but the end product could have been strikingly different if other criteria had been used. For instance, if most authors had been those whose key approach is the cognitive study of religion, it would be hard to imagine tension such as these being so clear in the volume. However, I am happy to confess that the choice of contributors was my main reason for deciding to read the book in the first place, because this makes the volume, particularly its 'General Failures' section, intellectually very inspiring.

The chapters in this volume touch on many interesting issues in the study of religion. Usually Festschrifts have a decent amount of variety, and this volume is no different, but it is rare that reading articles in which scholars complain about the state of the research in the study of religion (or point out 'failures') is so rewarding. Although some of the solutions and suggestion for better practices are not fully developed in these chapters, nonetheless an elaborated framing and identification of some of the problems is good enough.

All the contributors in the volume are North American, and the pressing issues picked up by the authors therefore reflect the scholarly scene of that region. This may be a limitation for readers whose perspective is less influenced by the North American debates. However, there are enough similarities between North America and Europe, for instance, that the reflections, worries and theoretical suggestions here will be largely recognizable for readers outside North America as well.

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