

Book Reviews

Antonius C.G.M. Robben (ed.), *Death, Mourning and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2004, pp. 322, ISBN 1405114711.

In the mode of other Blackwell readers on contemporary topics, this single-volume publication on the three connecting themes of death, mourning and burial constitutes a rich resource of valuable anthropological material for students and teachers across various disciplines of study.

In a helpful introductory chapter titled 'Death and Anthropology', the editor explains that this collection of texts sets out to achieve three aims: 'to provide the readership with a good sense of the foundational texts in the anthropology of death, to delineate enduring research interests, and demonstrate the intellectual depth and breadth of the field in recent decades' (p. 2). As a reader whose primary field is not directly in anthropology but for whom the themes of the book are central, I gained the impression from reading this book that all three aims are well satisfied.

Following a natural logic that moves from the reality of death itself to forms of post-death belief and ritual, the book is organised into six sections with a selection of relevant texts in each: (1) *conceptualisations of death* with five contributions which explore the ways in which death is understood as a social phenomenon; (2) *death and dying* with four contributions which focus on the actual event of death; (3) *uncommon death* with three contributions in which three forms of unnatural death are examined; (4) *grief and mourning* with four contributions which give attention to the culture-specific expressions which come in response to the death of a member of the community; (5) *mortuary rituals* with four contributions which detail funeral practices in various social contexts, and (6) *remembrance and regeneration* with three contributions which concern post-funeral practices through which the dead are remembered or in some way regenerated in the community.

Academic substance and cultural variety are the marks of each section. A short excerpt from Bronislaw Malinowski's *Magic, Science and Religion*, dealing with the way in which, in the Melanesian culture of New Guinea, religion serves to counter the human instinct of the fear of death, commences the first section. Similar themes are pursued in chapters by psychologist-

cum-anthropologist Ernest Becker and then by psychiatrist Robert Lifton and Eric Olson. Historian Philippe Aries offers an interesting account of the historical transitions in the approach to death in Western Europe using four psychological themes. The first section concludes with an early 1970s article from Johannes Fabian ('How Others Die: Reflections on the Anthropology of Death') who appeals to anthropologists to become more relevant to the public debate about death by moving away from an obsession with exotic or culture-specific concerns about death, and taking up an exploration of death in terms of its broader social character.

In the second section on Death and Dying, Ellen Badone explores the place of omens of forthcoming death (these take the forms of bird calls, animal sounds, dreams, visions) among the people of Brittany. Anne Straus's paper sets out her work from the '70s on the particular cultural beliefs and practices in relation to life and death among the Northern Cheyenne American peoples. The community of cattle-herders from Asturias in northern Spain are the focus of Maria Catedra's ethnographic study, beginning with an explanation of three kinds of death (good, bad and tragic) and exploring death as it takes place within the social cycle of the house. A recent study by Margaret Lock comparing definitions of death in North America (where medical progress has forced new definitions of death) and Japan (where traditional views are of death as cultural process) concludes the second section.

While section two deals with the more common cultural forms of death and dying, the third section gives attention via three articles to paranormal or unnatural forms of death. Two articles, on witchcraft (from Evans-Pritchard writing in the 1960s about the Azande peoples of Sudan) and on live burial (from Lienhardt about his work on the religion of the Dinka peoples in southern Sudan), are followed by a third and final article in this section on 'disappearance'. This last chapter is from the book's editor and recounts the response of the Argentinian peoples to the mass disappearances of family and friends carried out under the military regime in the 1970s. It was the peoples' response to such disappearances and their determined need to bury and mourn the dead which, he explains, was a primary cause of the ultimate defeat of the military regime. With the defeat of the military regime, the people could locate, exhume, identify, suitably rebury and mourn their loved ones.

The culture-specific nature of grief and mourning in response to loss of a community member is the theme of part four. Radcliffe-Brown, in his ethnographic work among the peoples of the remote Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, explores the way in which ceremonial customs provide the means for dealing with emotions of grief or happiness, with particular attention given to occasions of weeping. Loring Danforth identifies a surprising affinity in Greece between weddings and funerals, exploring in particular the very same theme of lament which appears in the songs used for each event.

Renato Rosaldo addresses the cultural force of emotions, and in particular the rage which accompanies bereavement and its expression in headhunting among the Ilongots peoples of Luzon in the Philippines. A shanty town in northeast Brazil is the setting for the final text in this section: Nancy Scheper-Hughes' study on infant mortality and the cultural expressions of grief.

The section on Mortuary Rituals begins with an excerpt from Robert Hertz' study of the key elements in the funeral customs of the Dayak peoples in Indonesia. Arnold van Gennep's well-established claim that life is constituted by a series of rites of passage (with its three stages of separation, transition and incorporation) is well illustrated in his text on funerals. Two very different studies concludes this section: the very recent study of the urban funeral industry in Japan by Hikaru Suzuki in which he follows the overall structure of van Gennep's *Rites of Passage*, and the seemingly bazaar funeral practice of cannibalism carried out among the Wari Indians of the western Brazilian rain forest area, as an expression of their grief and mourning.

The concluding section of the book is given to three contrasting texts on remembrance and regeneration. Jonathon Parry explores the approach to life and death among Hindus in India, comparing and contrasting ordinary Hindu households and a community of Aghori ascetics. Sergei Kan describes the key elements of burial and reburial among the Tlingit peoples of North America in the nineteenth century and Katherine Verdery examines the political significance of dead bodies—especially those of political leaders—and considers how a change in socio-political conditions in a country can lead to a redefined significance of dead people in that country.

One of the valuable aspects of this publication, especially for the reader who is not well read in the field of anthropology, is that it includes some of the foundational or classic texts in anthropology studies on death. Thus, in the first section, an excerpt from the 1925 essay by Malinowski on universal attitudes to death sits alongside later studies on similar themes. Evans-Pritchard's study on witchcraft forms part of the section on uncommon death as also does the work of Godfrey Lienhardt on live burials. Robert Hertz' study on the collective representation of death and Arnold van Gennep's work on rites of passage are represented in the section on mortuary rituals. All of these constitute important texts. It is a pity, however, that there is no selection from the writings of Emile Durkheim, especially when Durkheim, according to Robben in his introduction, 'had a lasting influence on the anthropology of death' (p. 9). The fact that Durkheim's study was done among aboriginal peoples of Australia and that this would have been the only contribution from this context, makes the omission all the more regrettable. Apart from Malinowski's early work in New Guinea, there is also no contribution from the whole region of the South Pacific where substantial anthropological studies have been done, in particular by French and Australian anthropologists.

Having said that the actual selection of texts is made, in part, to represent a rich cross-section of cultural contexts. Specialised studies are represented from France, Spain, Greece, North America, South America, Africa, India, Japan, and Philippines, and they cross the social spectrum from remote island communities (as in the study by Radcliffe-Brown of collective forms of grief among the Andaman Islanders in the Bay of Bengal) to busy urban communities (as in the study of the funeral industry in contemporary Japan). Indeed it is the rich diversity of the studies which is one of the striking features of this volume.

For some readers, the strengths of the volume will also come as weaknesses. In seeking to hold together such a rich diversity of contexts and both the old and the new in anthropological studies on death, the volume is inevitably somewhat eclectic and disjointed, providing more of a taste of a topic rather than a substantial meal. It will be the serious student of anthropology who will need to pass on to other material while keeping this volume on the shelf as a useful reference tool.

But from my point of view, the limitations of the publication are secondary. There is in this volume a fascinating array of insightful material across a range of cultural contexts, exposing a diversity of understandings and beliefs about life and death. At a time when my own country of Australia is becoming peopled by an increasing variety of cultural groups and noted for a greater diversity of faiths, this volume comes as a timely publication. Its well ordered structure, the sound scholarly and well-referenced texts and the fact that it deals with a theme of such immediate and universal human significance, makes this publication a valuable reference book for a wide range of readers.

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Eric J. Sharpe, *The Riddle of Sadhu Sundar Singh*. Intercultural Publications, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 244, ISBN 81855760X.

The posthumous publication of Eric J. Sharpe's study of Sadhu Sundar Singh, the charismatic Indian Christian leader who died in 1929 a few months short of his fortieth birthday, should be welcomed by those studying contemporary religious trends. The Sadhu, viewed during his lifetime as 'the Master's Indian Apostle, an Indian Francis of Assisi' (p. 28), seems now chiefly interesting because he embodies certain aspects of the post-1960s syncretic blending of Western and Eastern traditions, and bears a resemblance to New Age notions of the sage, transmitting visions and ecstatic experiences to his appreciative followers. Sharpe first became interested in Sadhu Sundar Singh in 1960, by which time he had been virtually forgotten,

after his phenomenal popularity in the heady years of the 1920s. In this volume Sharpe's musings on Sundar Singh over a period of forty years are gathered into a fascinating study, which is in part a biography, in part a contextualization of the Sadhu's religious ideas, and in part a deconstruction of the romantic and popular reception of the Sadhu by Western Christians.

The title is appropriate in that Sundar Singh remains elusive, a little out of focus, throughout. Sharpe thoroughly exposes the discontinuities between the Sadhu's own accounts of events and the adulatory writings of others such as Rebecca Parker (*Sadhu Sundar Singh: Called of God*, 1918) and Alfred Zahir (*A Lover of the Cross*, 1917). He focuses on the mystical experiences of the Sadhu and their incommensurability with early twentieth-century Evangelical expectations. Sharpe's knowledge of alternative religiosity (Theosophy, Swedenborgianism) is here deployed to unpack certain aspects of Sundar Singh's career that might otherwise appear mysterious. Sharpe is concerned that the reader appreciate Sundar Singh's career without necessarily categorising him as 'genuine' or a 'fraud'; he sympathetically suggests that the Sadhu enhanced his own accounts with images from fiction and made journeys and had experiences that make sense if they are understood as spiritual, and not necessarily *historical*.

The parallel here with Madame Blavatsky's conversations with her Tibetan Ascended Masters does not need to be laboured; Sharpe convincingly paints a picture of a religious *milieu* in which such events were accepted. Chapter 6, provocatively titled 'Apostle or Imposter?' considers negative assessments of Sundar Singh from his own lifetime (e.g. Oskar Pfister's *Die Legende Sundar Singhs*, 1926), and pursues the possibility that there were colonialist and cultural problems with the West's reception of the Sadhu: 'that he had been uprooted from his native soil and placed on exhibition; that he had been more patronized than understood' (p. 135). Sharpe's final assessment of this complex and still mysterious religious figure is sympathetic, yet able to see all the problems and issues. This is a fascinating book, and will be invaluable for scholars studying the vexed field of contemporary religious leaders, who are at once charismatic and flawed, and under constant scrutiny which makes their flaws all the more apparent.

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Robert Barry Leal, *The Environment and Christian Faith: An Introduction to Ecotheology*. St Pauls, Strathfield, 2004, ISBN 1876295783.

Barry Leal has a Ph.D. in theology and established the Earth Ministry in the Uniting Church congregations of Northbridge and Castlecrag in Sydney. He

is currently the Chaplain of Macquarie University. Leal's *The Environment and Christian Faith* is a relatively short and highly accessible introduction to Christian ecotheology, but with a rarely seen Australian focus that is given particular attention in Chapter 5. It is written and formatted with the intent of being suitable for group reading and discussion, featuring a series of questions at the end of each chapter. It is by no means a heavyweight theological tome, and could probably be used by later high-school students as well as being valuable for university students and as a general liturgical resource.

The Foreword outlines the author's intention for the book, namely that he seeks to answer the question: Where does the Christian Church stand on the issue of the global environmental crisis? He covers this topic with a focus on a Christian readership that might be wondering how their faith and their practice of it should perceive and address environmental matters.

From the perspective of my own research interests, the book would have been better oriented to both a Christian and non-Christian readership, as there remains a major gap in the literature in terms of informing the environmentally minded non-Christian community about the developments in Christian ecotheology. Whilst the book would be accessible to such a readership, its Christian orientation may turn off many environmentalists who remain of the view that Christianity has been and remains a major negative influence in Western society's relationship with its environment. Leal's work potentially has much to offer such a readership by demonstrating that whilst it remains predominantly conservative and there is often a large gap between the policy of Church leadership and the views of parishioners, Western Christianity has undergone and continues to experience significant reforms toward a positive relationship with ecological realities, and that there is now a clearly established Christian environmentalism.

The book begins with a background to ecological theology (ecotheology) in general. It briefly addresses some of the debates about how Christians of different traditions might address ecotheology, though such debates are primarily about theological praxis in general, rather than being specific to ecological issues.

Leal is not an apologist for the aspects of Christian theology that appear to be anti-environmental. He tackles those who argue that Christian ecotheology is just a passing fad linked to an attempt to make the Church more socially relevant at a time when popular environmental concern (in some form) is now mainstream. He dismisses such critics as under-informed on both ecological matters and the extent of Christian ecotheological literature. He notes that some within the Church, particularly those of an Evangelical orientation, have conventionally argued that environmental concern is a distraction from the 'core business' of Christianity, which is saving souls. Leal, along with US Evangelical Christian, Jim Wallis (Wallis 2005), points

out that such a view is 'softening' based on a growing realisation that 'our environmental difficulties are not isolated problems but symptoms of a deep-seated malaise related to the very way we regard nature and indeed, to the way we live' (p. 13).

In addressing the nature of Christian ecotheology, Leal covers some key issues such as the philosophical separation and elevation of humanity from its environment, and the role of humanity in relating to its environment (dominion/stewardship/custodianship). He provides clear definitions for relevant terms such as anthropocentrism, and puts forward his view that Western Christianity has been heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and the later Enlightenment thinkers, and that it is not inherently anti-environmental despite substantial arguments that have been made to this effect. He provides information to argue that Western Christianity is environmentally ambiguous due to its having both strongly pro- and anti-environmental aspects.

Chapter 2 is devoted to an interpretation of aspects of the Bible 'with ecological eyes', revealing that how a reader interprets parts of the Bible depends significantly on the reader's prior orientation. Different readers can see variously pro- and anti-environmental messages in the same section of biblical text. This issue is expanded upon in Chapter 3, and Leal provides case examples using Francis of Assisi and Albert Schweitzer.

Chapter 4 provides a valuable overview of recent Christian ecotheological works, providing examples from key writers such as Paul Santmire, Sallie McFague and Norman Habel.

Chapter 5 contains the perhaps most valuable contribution of the book in discussing ecotheology in an Australian context:

Let us first note that in Australia, ecotheology is not widely known as a concept or a current field of endeavour. It is true, as Gideon Goosen points out, that an increasing number of ecotheologically oriented books and articles are appearing in Australia. However, the concept is rarely understood in the community and its mention almost invariably raises eyebrows among churchgoers. In some quarters it is even considered with some suspicion, because of its perceived connections with left-wing fringe groups. It is rarely taught in theological colleges. In Sydney, for example, the only course in ecotheology is offered by United Theological College as a postgraduate unit every second year, while the Catholic Institute of Sydney periodically offers a course in environmental ethics. Nowhere else in Australia does it at present form an integral part of the theological curriculum. (p. 73)

The author apparently sees this situation as due to the dominance of theological conservatism within Australian Christendom, and an associated historical relationship with the Australian environment that dates back to colonial times—namely, one of fear-based conquest and contempt, mixed with profound misunderstanding.

The sixth and final chapter enters a realm that will be familiar to devotees of the work of David Tacey (e.g. Tacey 1995, 2000, 2003). Like Tacey, Leal argues that an Australian ecotheology must draw on the wisdom of Aboriginal people if it is to heal the clearly flawed relationship of the dominant culture to its environment. He notes the positive influence of Aboriginal interpretations of the Bible and how some see this as reconnecting Western Christians with the land-based roots of the Hebrew tradition and through this, reorienting Christianity's relationship with an inspired environment.

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References

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Wallis, J.

- 2005 *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it*, HarperCollins, New York.

Ian Hunter, John Christian Laurensen, and Cary Nederman (eds.), *Heresy in Transition: Transforming Ideas of Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, pp. vii + 205, ISBN 0754654281

This book draws upon a range of medieval and early modern scholars from diverse disciplines to present a history of the transformation of the concept of heresy in a rapidly changing politico-religious world. It traces this transformation from the times of persecution from the late twelfth century to the Early Enlightenment period when religious tolerance took precedence over orthodoxy and heresy was decriminalized. It is neatly divided into two streams, the first giving the point of view of the Church and the civil authorities towards heretical doctrine and the second looking at the works of early modern writers and their promotion of religious diversity and freedom of choice against a backdrop of social, religious and political turmoil.

Paul Antony Hayward offers a valuable study of heresy in English historiography, giving an interesting account of pre-twelfth century divergent beliefs and the rhetoric employed by Bede, William of Malmesbury and other English and Continental churchmen in describing both early Christian and contemporary heretical sects and doctrine up until the fourteenth century. The

intellectual background of the texts is most informative. Sabina Flanagan takes a new approach to the oft-studied Fourth Lateran Council Decrees of 1215, beginning with the idea that the papal concept of heresy as expressed in the resultant decrees was 'mired in ambiguity'. She finds conflicting representations of heretical figures such as Amalric of Bene as 'not so much heretical as mad', suggesting that the Church appeared to be making madness an excuse for heretical actions. While the idea of heresy as disease is not a new concept, this tangential study of madness shows great potential for further work.

Constant J. Mews' contribution studies the works of Otto of Freising and Gerhof of Reichersberg and their differing approaches to the concept of orthodoxy. Mews presents a sometimes confusing array of names in what is otherwise an important contribution to scholastic heresy. Takashi Shogimen's study of William of Ockham suggests that his discourses on the idea of heresy were 'a revolution in the medieval language of heresy'. Ockham saw that while the Canonists discuss heretics, the theologians preferred instead to define heretical beliefs and sought to present both streams of thought in his *Dialogus*. He was also the first to argue that the Church could not determine or define the truth (and therefore heresy) unless it is done evidently or demonstrably, saying that only Scripture and existing doctrine could be rightly regarded as the arbiters of orthodoxy. This is a very interesting and well-argued piece.

Cary J. Nederman's study of the influence of Marsiglio of Padua's works on the writings of Nicole Oresme is a fascinating and in-depth account of a previously unexplored connection and concludes with interesting possibilities for further work in this area, suggesting that the works of Jean Gerson and Christine de Pisan may also be indebted to Marsiglio of Padua's heretical thoughts. An unfortunate contradiction in Thomas A. Fudge's chapter on Aeneas Sylvius and his account of Hussitism in Bohemia, compounded by an unnecessarily flowery hyperbole, detracts a little from his conclusion that Aeneas glorified the heresiarch Jan Zizka. Fudge tends to recount rather than analyse, as well, which leaves the reader entertained but not informed.

No book on heresy would be complete without a reference to the Lollards, but Craig D'Alton's proposal that the Sermon preached by John Colet for the 1510 Convocation of Canterbury was purpose written, not only for the reform of the clergy, but also to promote doctrinal orthodoxy amongst the laity regrettably offers little in the way of proof apart from the suggestion that Archbishop Warham would have wished for it.

The Early German Enlightenment saw diverse streams of doctrinally based writings and Thomas Ahert cleverly traverses the minefield of Enthusiasts vs. Orthodox theologians and finds three distinct and yet interrelated views on the necessity of doctrine for faith.

The last two chapters take more of a linguistic approach to the understanding of heresy, a welcome change from the sometimes overly philosophical nature of some contributions.

This book is grand in its chronological scope, covering both popular and intellectual heresies that range in time from Anglo-Saxon England to nineteenth-century Germany. Not all chapters will be of interest to all scholars but most will find the majority of contributions offer new insights into what has been, until now, a relatively sparse field of study, the changing nature of the perception of heresy from the medieval through to the early modern period. It is to be hoped that some scholars may be inspired by the avenues of further research suggested in some chapters.

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Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. Vanarragon (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, Blackwell, Carlton, 2004, pp. 368, ISBN 0631200436.

This is the first book in Blackwell's 'Contemporary Debates' textbook series. Its aim is 'to feature some of the most important current controversies' in the philosophy of religion, some related to classical theism and some to Christian faith. As a pedagogical aid, each issue is presented in a 'debate' format: affirmative essay, negative essay, reply to negative position, reply to positive position.

The book sub-divides the topics into three parts: (1) Attacks on religious belief—Is evil evidence against belief in God? Does divine hiddenness justify atheism? Does science discredit religion? (2) Arguments for religious belief—Is God's existence the best explanation of the universe? Does religious experience justify religious belief? Is it rational for Christians to believe in the resurrection? (3) Issues within religion—Can only one religion be true? Does God take risks in governing the world? Does God respond to petitionary prayer? Is eternal damnation compatible with the Christian concept of God? Is morality based on God's commands? Should a Christian be a mind-body dualist? Accordingly, parts 1 and 2 are debated between theists and non-theists, and part 3 is debated by religious believers who differ on the implications of their belief.

The book certainly succeeds in its aim of featuring not only important but *contemporary* topics. For example, the reader is exposed to current challenges in epistemology (does experience justify belief?), apologetics (is God's existence the best explanation of the universe?), soteriology (can only one religion be true?) and providence (does God take risks?). Those familiar with the recent offerings of Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology, Williams

Craig's revised Kalam argument, John Hick's universalism and proponents of Open Theism will know only too well the relevancy of these debates.

The list of contributors reads like a 'who's who' of philosophers-of-religion in North America and the UK. The debates are capably waged by experts, who have published significant works—for example, in the debate about God as a risk-taker, William Hasker writes for the affirmative and Paul Helm for the negative; in the debate about the rationality of belief in the resurrection, Stephen T. Davis writes affirmatively and Michael Martin negatively.

Each contributor usually provides a survey of the debate. In doing so, each essay will acknowledge, summarise and interact with many other notable works, both contemporary and non-contemporary. The footnotes alone are a valuable source of references and information.

The contributors will often propose their own fresh perspectives on the debate. It is here that the book moves beyond a mere survey of positions. For example, readers will be able to enjoy Richard Gale's version of a cosmological argument—he argues for 'the existence of a being who, if not the super-deluxe God of traditional Western theism, is at least a close cousin'. Readers will also be able to enjoy fresh terminology such as the 'noseum argument' (Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann's cheeky reference to William L. Rowe's argument that there is no good reason for God permitting evil). No reader can complain that this book is a 'tired' re-serving of old arguments.

If this book has a shortcoming, it is in the way that the issues have been organised into three different parts. Parts 1 and 2 have been cast as debates between theists and non-theists, and part 3 as that among Christian theists. As a result, the questions in parts 1 and 2—for example, Why would a loving, powerful God permit evil? or If there is a God why is he so hidden?—have been handled at only an *abstract* level within the speculative framework of theism. But these questions would require (and get) very different answers if they were answered as a *Christian* theist who could make recourse to the *particular* salvation-historical acts and revelatory events of the Christian triune God. For example, the concept of an incarnation would contribute radically to the discussion.

Another area where this book could be improved would be by including even more contemporary debates. Especially relevant for our postmodern climate would be topics such as hermeneutics (is interpretation possible?), truth (is there objective truth?) and revelation (can God speak?). Such topics would be even more compelling in light of recent works by Nicholas Wolterstorff (*Divine Discourse* [1995]), Kevin J. Vanhoozer (*Is There a Meaning in the Text?* [1998]) and the new applications of speech act theory in both philosophy and theology. Additional topics—though this might be going a bit beyond the realms of philosophy of religion—might include the interplay

between Scripture and Tradition and the complex issue of the canon (what is the epistemic and ontological basis of the canon?).

Nonetheless, this book is an excellent resource for the layperson, student and teacher. It surveys most of the important contemporary debates in philosophy of religion, engages the reader and demonstrates sharp, vigorous and well-presented arguments. Even better, it provides the reader with fresh contributions and perspectives on both sides of the argument from major experts in their field.

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