

Book Reviews

Living Religion: Studies of Religion for Senior Students

Peter Mudge, et. al. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1993/94. pp. ix + 480. ISBN 0582 911958.

This book is designed as a school text to meet the needs of the New South Wales Studies of Religion Syllabus, specifically, but also seeks to offer a resource for other Australian states. To facilitate its use outside New South Wales, the early pages include a correlative chart of other state syllabuses in outline.

Important to this book are the proposed "student outcomes" in relation to learning about religion. As well as being essential to serving the Studies of Religion syllabus, these outcomes are important organising objectives in the text. For most of the book, this approach appears to work well. The worst example, in my opinion, is Chapter Two: "The Origins and Nature of Religion", where the syllabus appears to impose a vast complexity of expectations. It is impossible for a short introductory chapter like this one to deal with such expectations, which are of themselves fraught with difficulty. Should one be required at all to examine "the nature of the religious experience", or "how religion deals with....", when the very nature of the course of study is to introduce the diverse worlds of religious experience? "Religion" is a very difficult subject to discuss "in general". That fact

alone may explain the awkwardness and disjointed nature of Chapter Two.

The requirement to offer "insights into how prehistoric religions have influenced the dimensions of religion" is another contentious expectation. Such an expectation, proposed as a student outcome for Chapter Two, presumes too much about the contribution of archaeology and leads to an oversimplified understanding of "pre-historic" and "oral" cultural traditions. Unfortunately, such views intrude from Chapter Two into the discussion of Australian Aboriginal religion in Chapter Three, where stark distinctions between "oral" and "written" traditions are drawn. These distinctions are very much thrown into question by recent ethnographic and social science research [see, for example, Clifford (1986), Muecke (1992)], as cultures once seen as non-literate reveal the variety of inscription in their reading of the land, their ritual, and their art.

Continuing into Chapter Three, one must acknowledge the positive and respectful treatment of Aboriginal Dreaming. It provides useful and thought-provoking material. More Aboriginal "voices" would be welcome, however, as would more references to emergent Aboriginal theology in the reading list.

On "The Mabo Decision" the text fails to offer even a brief explanation of how

the name Mabo comes to be attached. Moreover, under the same "Mabo" heading, incongruously, there is a brief discussion of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Less important matters than these, in the text, have more detail associated with them. This is disappointing.

Whereas the example of Mabo illustrates the sometimes sketchy, and even confusing, side of *Living Religion*, Chapter Four (on Religious Expression in Australia since 1788) provides examples of the book at its best. In Chapter Four the writing is intriguing and helpful in a way which would arouse genuine curiosity and promote the suggested research tasks.

Chapters Seven and Eight provide the best introduction to Christianity, for this target audience, that I have seen. The proportion of material on Christian faith is substantial and authoritative. Actually, the volume of material on Christianity and Judaism is twice that of the Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism chapters.

Chapters Five and Six (Buddhism) provide succinct explanations of difficult concepts. It is a well organised treatment of the religion. Questions arise, though about the appropriateness of a suggested "Activity" (p. 118) which requires students to classify persons according to their occupation, and then, from this information alone, to decide "which realm do they live in from a Buddhist point of view?" This exercise runs contrary to the portrayal only just previously enunciated: "motivation and intention...are all important in Buddhism" (p. 117).

In reading the discussions of Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism, I am left with the distinct impression that the meaning of suffering is not explored to the same depth as in the Chapters on Judaism and Christianity. That is not to say that

the conceptual basis for such exploration is absent, but there are no compelling concrete examples. Problems therefore arise for the anchoring of these chapters in student experience. For instance, in Chapter Nine (Hinduism) there is no exploration of the way in which Hindu ritual addresses "ultimate questions", nor is there any direct engagement of particular questions, even in the explanation of Karma. If, as the book states, there exist incorrect caricatures of "Hindu fatalism" [sic], surely the text needs to explore them or at least propose a relevant research question or task. The structure of the text is eminently suited to encouraging such tasks.

In discussing the structural virtues of *Living Religion*, its structural vices also become apparent. The presentation of a glossary for each sub-section of the chapters is a great idea. In this way students are presented with the specialist words they need in the context of each topic. However, sometimes a word appears in a glossary for a particular section following frequent use of the term in earlier sections. For other sections, the word or term may appear much earlier than required.

Marginal notes pointing students to further information elsewhere in the book are very practical and necessary with such a large text. Nevertheless, the links between blocks of information and chapters are not always clear. There is a perception of patchiness about the book where complementary materials from the tradition depth study and the cross religion depth study seem to be in need of firmer linking.

Irritation is added to the perception of patchiness by small avoidable errors. Some examples? The timeline on page 20, is signalled on page 19 (which also has a timeline) as appearing on "page 22". In the chapter on Aboriginal belief sys-

tems there are annoying shifts between past and present tense, leaving the reader uncertain as to whether this or that custom or belief has current adherents. The RSL is defined in the text as the "Retired Servicemen's League" [sic]! *Duhkha* is spelt in two different ways on the one page (Buddhism). And discussion of "the next largest group" in Islam precedes mention of "the largest group".

The concluding chapter (Fifteen) on the Interest Study Project provides helpful guidelines which would be very acceptable in any humanities context. The comment that qualitative research is to be used primarily as a "preliminary technique" is somewhat alarming in a religion studies text. Where would religion studies be without highly significant qualitative research? Notwithstanding such a blooper, *Living Religion* is a very useful and practical resource volume for Senior High School students, or for anyone inquiring into religion studies in an introductory manner.

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Doing Theology with Asian Resources. Ten Years in the Formation of Living Theology in Asia.

John C England and Archie C C Lee (eds), Auckland, 1993. (Available from GPO Box 1423, Shatin HONG KONG NT \$US11 incl post)

The purpose of this book is to document the work of the first ten years of "The Programme for Theology and Culture in Asia", that is 1983-1993, to highlight some of the important features of the programme which provides a basis for future work, and to offer the reader some of the results of the three research groups

which have been set up within the programme. It is primarily aimed at Asians, to enable them to do theology within their own cultural context, rather than relying on European cultural interpretations of theology. The papers from the research groups are, according to the editors in their Preface, in "the form of reports of research rather than final theological statements".

The problem for an Australian in reviewing such a book is that in Australia, while we pay lipservice to being part of Asia, we still tend to take for granted the European/North American framework which for so long has assumed itself to be the normal and only framework for doing theology. C S Song sums up the issues which this book creates for Australian theology, when he asks, in relation to North America,

Can those who are devoted to the globalisation of theological education in North America understand such theological developments in the Third World? Do they perceive that what is happening is not just variations of traditional theology? Are they able to appreciate it as viable alternatives to what they have inherited from Europe? And how are they going to bring about a fundamental reorientation in their doing of theology in the light of what they are hearing? How are they to reshape their theological education in such a way that what they have perceived promises a fresh beginning for Christian theology in North America, the continent that has become multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-cultural? Above all, they have realised the imperative of radical change in their theological psyche? (:7)

Doing theology with Asian resources contains some wonderful articles which would benefit any reader. I found C S Song's opening article, "Living theology: birth and rebirth", stimulating and chal-

lenging. For example, he describes the need for and possibilities inherent in new ways of talking about incarnation, which takes seriously Jesus' "re-incarnation" in the lives of his followers, and challenges the abstract way in which incarnation is often treated in European/North American theology:

What Jesus did was to turn John's question concerning who he was to the question about what he was doing for the reign of God. That is what incarnation can also mean. It seems that Jesus was more interested in this kind of incarnation than the theological concept of incarnation. This is a fundamental reorientation with regard to the idea of incarnation the heart of Christian faith and theology. (:18)

He also pays attention to the contribution of Asian women in doing theology, quoting a poem by Stella Faria from *In God's Image*, and commenting on its theme of partnership between women and men, humankind and God and creation: "What a grand theology! And what an exciting invitation to living theology in Asia!" He concludes his article with an affirmation of the need to be on a theological journey, because "Jesus" theology was a living theology".

On the other hand, some of the other articles about the program were informative but not very stimulating, offering information but little reflection or insight. For example, I found myself wondering whether Yeow Choo Lak's history of the administration arrangements for the Program was really necessary. John England indicates the topics of the various workshops and the methodological issues which arouse during those workshops. Rita England discusses the way the Program has been encouraging the development of Asian resource collections in theological libraries in Asia. It is as much

about Asian Christian history as about libraries.

This historic section is followed by the three sets of papers from the research groups. It is at this point that the perspective of the reviewer becomes important: how does one determine whether one is evaluating articles in terms of one's own cultural framework, and how does one take account of the fact that these resources are intended for a different cultural situation?

In assessing the first set of papers, "Doing Theology with Women's History", I will draw on my previous experience of Asian women's theology workshops, which I have been involved in regularly since November 1987, through the Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology (AWRC), WSCF Asia Pacific Region, and my experience as a member of the Editorial Advisory Committee of the journal of Asian Women's Theology, namely *In God's Image*.

I found myself struggling with the paper by Kim Soon Young. It is perhaps best read as a Korean study of "texts of terror" - a recognition of the patriarchal themes in some Korean stories and situations, and some Biblical passages. However, analysis of the patriarchal themes seems to overwhelm whatever "gospel" is being presented. The article is helpful to the extent that it names the reality with which women live, but it does not go far enough - I have found the work of some other Korean women more stimulating and life-giving.

The article by Karen Lebacqz is very useful in any context. It explores the questions involved in interpreting stories, and the difference between truth and facticity, using one woman's stories about her experience of domestic violence as a case

study. She is aware of the need for some controls in interpreting stories, and endorses Runyan's suggested criteria such as:

*... it must be logically sound (that is, conclusions must bear a relation to the evidence and the evidence must be reliable), it must be comprehensive (able to account for a number of puzzling aspects of the case at hand), it must be consistent with the full range of available relevant evidence, and it must cohere with general knowledge about human functioning or about the person in question. (:91. Derived from Runyan, William McKinley, *Life Histories and Psychobiography: explorations in theory and method*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1984, :47)*

She also discusses the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and her case study draws on an understanding of several areas of women's experience. It seemed to me that such criteria would be useful to some Asian women who find that they cannot accept European style theology because it is too intellectual and logical but who also recognise that theology needs some rigour as well as being done from the heart.

Zenaida P Lumba describes the experience of Filipina women, the way culture enables women to be exploited, and provides theological reflection which offers women empowerment by affirming the God whose heart bleeds for the poor and whose presence is with women, sharing their weeping and offering them protection.

Yuko Yuasa explores the spirituality of the Noh drama in Japanese culture. It is an important reminder of the dangers of the religious concept of sacrifice, which can become, as Yuasa points out, a form of "cultural terrorism" far removed from the concept of freely offering oneself for others.

The next set of papers is about "The Spirit's Movement In Asian History". John England provided a useful description of the hidden history of Christianity in Asia, long before the European colonial and missionary era. It is a worthwhile eye-opener in the information it provides, but disappointing in that it is too "factual", with too little reflection on the significance of the events for the people who experienced them.

T V Philip provides a history of the Indian National Movement. This is the best of the history articles in the book. Its theme is the role of religion in Indian social change, and the role of social change in Indian religion. It deals with themes and trends in the history, and offers an interpretation of the significance of the events for the people involved in or affected by them.

At the end of the article, I felt as if I understood much more about India and its struggles for change than I had understood at the beginning. I had acquired more than information. It is a stimulating article, which provides some wonderful quotes from a range of writers.

Simon Rae's article is a disappointment by comparison. It is chronology rather than narrative. It is purely information, with little, if any, theological reflection. When I compare it with other Asian writings, it appears to be too much in the head, and not enough from the heart, and to that extent to be un-Asian, or at least, contrary to the way the Asian women I know think and write about church history. It fails to engage the reader's heart and spirit, because it fails to suggest why the information it contains is necessary or useful for anyone. The article is not contextual in approach: it seems to be about a church imposed from outside, and fails to

link the life of the church and the life of the people.

The final set of research articles is about religions and cultures in Asia. The first article by James Haire is an anthropological study of a belief system found among Moluccan people. As I am not an anthropologist, I can only assess the article in terms of the object of the book: to do theology. The article seems to be very male and very western in its approach. As with some of the historical articles, this article is very dense, giving highly detailed information without indicating its significance for the people whose benefit its purports to describe. It is very cerebral, and appears to see the study as a means to an academic, anthropological end, rather than valuing the engagement with the people, their history and belief system in their own right. As someone who believes that to understand a Biblical passage I need to understand something of the historical, political and social context in which it is written, I find it extraordinary that anyone could think of describing a belief system without having first described the life situation in which those beliefs find their meaning and significance.

By contrast, the article by Archie C C Lee on the theological reading of Chinese creation stories is interesting, focused, clearly articulated, and provides a literary analysis which is deliberately linked to issues in the real world. It moves well beyond Haire's merely intellectual comparison, to find meaningful links between the Biblical text and the Asian context.

Alan Torrance reflects on Maori myths of origin. The brief introduction sharply expresses some important methodological issues, challenging basic as-

sumptions. James Haire would do well to reflect on the significance for his work of some of Torrance's comments about the relationship between life-experience and belief. The disappointing part of this article is the section comparing Maori and Christian belief. Torrance relies on the work of systematic theologians for a Christian view of creation, rather than drawing on the work of Biblical scholars, who, after all, deal more directly with the actual stories which constitute the origins of the Christian faith. It is a pity that the article ends with an incomplete sentence.

In sum, this book contains a small number of very worthwhile articles, and a large number of mediocre or poor articles. It offers some stimulation, but does not measure up to what the editors hope it will be. I found it hard work to read, not because it was Asian and I am western, but because I have had the privilege of being exposed to much more life-giving and stimulating Asian theology and methodology than is available in most of the articles in this book. The difference between this program and my experience may be that I have been exposed to theological programs clearly conceived by and under the control of Asian women such as Sun Ai Lee Park or Yong Ting Jin, whereas one gains the impression that this program is still strongly influenced by western male styles of thinking. This book is a long way short of the delights of reading and reflecting with Chung Hyung Kyung, or Rose Sharon Luiz Demeres, or Virginia Fabella, and other Asian women theologians.

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