

to the creation of the *Critical Edition*, although her book would have been even stronger had she engaged less with dated pre-*Critical Edition* views on the BhG and focused more on a cogent and generous philosophical interpretation of the text.

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Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History. By KELLY BULKELEY. New York and London: New York University Press, 2008. Pp. xi+331. \$23.00 (paper).

"*Humans are a dreaming species*—history and science join together in confirming this simple fact" (211, italics in original). In his ambitious new book, Kelly Bulkeley elegantly responds to Wendy Doniger's call for a "bottom-up" approach to comparative religion, one that draws its strength from the universally shared "facts on the ground" of human existence, such as being born, crying, loving, or dying (*The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* [New York, 1998]). Like these other bodily realities or "facts," dreaming has both physical and meta-physical dimensions in complex relationship and thus has been religiously construed throughout history in myriad ways. Unlike other bodily "facts," however, the physical dimensions of dreaming have tended to elude the lens of scientific research. Dreams offer little to no external manifestation beyond the accounts of the dreaming subject who paradoxically, when rendering them, is in an entirely different state of consciousness than when they were experienced (namely, waking), and thus such accounts may always be charged with distortion or unreliability. In reductionist ways, some schools of neuroscience and psychology have claimed human dreaming as their exclusive province, thus ignoring the central importance of dreaming and dream interpretation in world religions.

A scholar who, unusually, has devoted his career to the study not of one religious tradition or historical period but rather to one phenomenon of great religious importance—the significance of human dreaming—Bulkeley is as fluent in the current state of scientific dream research as he is in the history of religions. He is thus able to provide us with a truly interdisciplinary study of dreaming, bringing this fluency to bear in the pursuit of the book's telos: a cross-cultural phenomenology of ideas about dreaming that is informed not only by religious histories but also by neurophysiology and psychology. For a comparativist adequately to address any "facts on the ground" in an intelligible way, she needs to have such depth and eclectic training. Ironically, she usually does not, because ever-constricting academic specialization sometimes marginalizes the project of comparative religion, thereby making such training unavailable except to brilliant mavericks like Bulkeley, specialists of a different sort, who refuse to be constricted. The result is that the religion scholar of say, rituals of dying, is often ignorant of the "science behind the thing," the subtle physiological processes that are so often closely observed and elaborated on by ritual response, if only one knows what to look for. The same blindness can be true of the material scientist who studies a phenomenon of religious importance and heavy-handedly treats its life in that sphere

(a notorious case in point is Harvard sleep scientist J. Allan Hobson's dismissal of dreams, contra Freud or most of the world's religions, as essentially random and largely incoherent because he has shown how they are the products of a "randomly" firing neural population different from the one that governs waking cognition). Bulkeley, however, has forged his own path, including years of publishing and making public the work of area specialists in multiple branches of the study of dreaming. It is therefore safe to say that very few, if any, could have written this book.

The larger point for our field might be that very few would even have attempted it. This is a commentary on our own unfortunate balkanization of the academic study of religion into particular traditions at the expense of larger categories: it is easier to "control," but the result is the impoverishment of real knowledge. In-depth studies of particular dimensions or histories are published as monographs by academic presses; wide-ranging comparative treatments of religious categories like "initiation" or "trees" tend to be published by trade houses as coffee-table books. This reflects the idiosyncrasy and prejudices of the field, not the intellectual inferiority of comparative studies. Like Philip and Carol Zaleski's bold *Prayer: A History* (New York, 2005), *Dreaming in the World's Religions* demonstrates that global or cross-cultural investigation need not preclude critical analysis.

The book's range is impressive. Bulkeley begins with the scriptural treatment of dreams in Hinduism and moves through Chinese, Buddhist, ancient Near Eastern, classical, Christian, Islamic, African, Oceanian, and Native American dream traditions, including, among many other foci, incubation and other rituals, interpretation manuals, and philosophical responses; he deals as well with the dreams of the dying and the appearances of the dead in dreams, oracular and erotic dreams, dreams as vehicles of prophecy and prognostication, and the varying range of moral valuations and credibility placed on dreams in different religious contexts. Each tradition is introduced by a discussion of a universal aspect of dreaming that has historically been lionized within that particular tradition (e.g., exam anxiety, metacognition, the illusory nature of reality, ancient skepticism toward dreams, existential crisis, and so forth). This is a fruitful approach that creates an underlying coherency to the book whereby its separate studies are linked through an implied matrix of universal experience, however culturally inflected. Although historical data is deployed throughout the book, *Dreaming in the World's Religions* is by no means a "history" in the conventional sense, despite its subtitle; it is much more of a historically informed, phenomenological study. But a true "history" of dreaming could scarcely be linear, as dreams themselves are anything but.

Written in a clear, unencumbered style, the book wears its vast learning lightly. Perhaps most important of all, it escapes the sense of encyclopedic survey that a purely descriptive roundup of information can bring, by strongly featuring a central organizing premise. From the outset, Bulkeley makes the case for "the imagined worlds in dreaming" as "*religious worlds* insofar as they relate to [the characteristics of religions themselves]: encounters with transhuman powers, efforts to heal suffering, practices of human bonding, and violent conflicts with outsiders" (6, italics in original). In a sense echoing E. B. Tylor's identification of dreams as a source of religious thought, but without the latter's belief that "primitive thought" could not distinguish between waking and dreaming states, Bulkeley proposes,

“dreaming is a primary wellspring of religious experience” (6). He bases this on neurophysiology: “The natural rootedness of dreaming in the human brain-mind system makes it a universally available source of precisely those powers that people have historically associated with religion” (6).

Pace currently received “wisdom,” there is nothing in such a thesis that undermines cultural particularity or flattens difference. With this original and provocative book, Bulkeley has shown what the “new” comparative study of religion at its very best can offer. Itself the synthesis of a lifetime of Bulkeley’s own and others’ research, *Dreaming in the World’s Religions* will in turn suggest to students of dreaming in religion further trajectories of investigation. The book dissolves any number of received dichotomies and invites us instead to dwell at the threshold between once-opposed kinds of knowledge.

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