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Book Reviews

John Lamb Lash, *Not in His Image: Gnostic Vision, Sacred Ecology, and the Future of Belief* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2006). xxv + 426 pp., US$35 (cloth), US$20 (paperback).

John Lash has written a very provocative book in *Not in His Image: Gnostic Vision, Sacred Ecology, and the Future of Belief*. Because he refuses as invalid much of modern Gnostic scholarship, Lash attempts instead to deconstruct and then reconstruct virtually all of the history of religion. Methodologically, the author cites his indebtedness to Nietzsche. In the Introduction he states, "I swore to finish what Nietzsche had begun. I vowed to think through and live out his critique of Christianity to the end." In essence then this book has two interrelated goals. The first is the re-imagining of ancient Gnostic practices and beliefs—which apparently were a densely interwoven patchwork of Celtic, Sophianic, Mystery Schools, and nascent Deep Ecology—in order to implement them in the modern world. The second, which is closely related, is the wholesale ruin of what he understands to be western religious traditions (e.g. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). But getting to the goal requires the reader to follow an academically uncertain and oftentimes mystifying path.

Gnosticism is, and has been, a much-disputed term in scholarship. Moreover, the origins of the ritual practices and beliefs of these groups are even more debatable than the actual term itself. For simplicity's sake, however, the Greek term *gnosis* means "knowledge." In the first chapter Lash expands upon and inflates this definition. By channeling the late fourth-century Alexandrian Pagan Hypatia, the author tells us that the *gnostikoi* are "those who understand divine matters, knowing what the gods know," who historically were "polymaths, savants, and prolific writers." This forms the crux of Lash's self-understanding, and is the key to grasping the content and organization of the book.

The work is divided into four major parts, which Lash describes as taking "the form of a sonata of four movements." Part 1 covers Hypatia, the historic roots of Paganism, the conquest of Europe by the Romans, Judeo-Christian conceptions of righteousness, the messianic agenda of these groups, and finally, the "viral" teaching of the apostle Paul, which turned "the schizophrenic mind-set of the Hebrews into a theological ruse, promising God's grace to all those who accepted roles in the victim-perpetrator game." Part 2 focuses on the manuscript discovery at Nag Hammadi, which is "the explosive charge that can blow the institution of the Faith off its foundations, for good and for all." We are also reacquainted with the Mysteries, the concept of coevolution, the myth of the fallen Goddess (i.e. Gaia), and Gnostic cosmology and cosmogony. Part 3, titled "History's Hardest Lesson," features discussions on patriarchy, the scapegoat salvationist ethic of western religions, the reverse consequences of love in the Abrahamic traditions, and a call for a move

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beyond "religion." The final section, Part 4, which this reviewer found to be the campiest section of the book, lays out the means for the reclaiming of a Sophianic vision, which includes a detailed narrative equating extraterrestrials with the Archons of the Nag Hammadi texts—called the "ET/Archon phenomenon."

All in all, Lash has scripted a fascinatingly enjoyable read, and in so doing has laid out his vision for a new cosmic mythology—one that blends, in esoteric ways, historically competing religious traditions and people groups—complete with alien intruders. How viable it will be for thoughtful individuals who do in fact feel the weight of western religious traditions gone awry is another question altogether. From the perspective of contemporary religious scholarship, there is simply too much amiss here to garner any sort of legitimate academic support. However, it would be interesting to know what Nietzsche might have had to say about Lash's efforts, as much of his argument sounds like a seemingly unintended (?) attempt to create a "new" religion, but in the end models little of what Nietzsche himself might have required of an *Übermensch*.

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Lori G. Beaman, ed., *Religion and Canadian Society: Traditions, Transitions, and Innovations* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006). xii + 277 pp., Can$39.95, US$36.95 (paperback).

The value of *Religion and Canadian Society* lies not so much in the specific content of each essay, as much as the reflection put into organizing a multiplicity of methods from the sociology of religion in one package. Beaman, an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University in Montreal, argues persuasively that to understand the sociology of religion in general, and specifically in a Canadian context, one must utilize a range of study methods, from surveys and statistics to life histories to participant observation. The essays collected in this book often draw on one or more of these various methods. On their own they all have flaws, at least according to other methodological perspectives. However, put together the way Beaman does, one is able to see how they work together. This is a very valuable tool for the teaching of sociology of religion.

Beaman divides the book into three sections: Traditions, Transitions, and Innovations. These sections reflect trends in methodology more than trends in religion. As such, in the Traditions section we are presented with samples from some of the Canadian "superstars" of the sociology of religion, such as Reginald W. Bibby and Peter Beyer. The essays in this section attempt to understand the religious landscape of Canada through statistics and surveys along with comparisons within Canada (particularly French and English) and between Canada and the United States. It also addresses the common current in the sociology of religion: the secularization theory.

Section 2—Transitions—looks at some newer developments in the study of religion in Canada from a sociological perspective. Here we have scholars such as William Shaffir, engaged in more in-depth ethnographic work on specific communities, in this case a Hassidic Jewish community near Montreal, Quebec. We also have sociologists concerned with contemporary issues such as domestic violence (Nancy Nason-Clark)

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and technology (William A. Stahl). Of significant interest to the readers of *The Pomegranate* is an essay by Sian Reid on the complications and implications of insider research (previously published in 2001 in *The Pomegranate*). The transitions reflected in this section are motivated by a shift from a more historical and sweeping look at the Canadian religious landscape to a more specific focus on smaller communities as reflective of the Canadian context. We also see in this section a changing sense of the responsibility of the sociologist: How do scholars name themselves in relation to the communities they study? Should scholars be involved in a process of change within the communities they study?

The third and final section of the book is Innovations. Here we have a number of essays on the study of New Religious Movements, as well as questionings of the construction of identity, such as that of veiled Muslim women (Homa Hoodfar) and Aboriginal "spirituality" (Lori G. Beaman). Susan J. Palmer's essay on her personal enjoyment of studying "baby religions" is particularly engaging and entertaining, though she includes an incorrect definition of Asatru as "racialist Druids" (162). The innovations pointed to here, though partially about innovative religions, are more specifically about innovative ways of approaching religion, including moving beyond strictly sociological methods to be more multi-disciplinary. The essays in this section blend feminist theory, postcolonial theory and theology, for example, with sociological questions, allowing for a more complex understanding of religion in Canadian society.

Religion and Canadian Society is a must read for anyone interested in religion in Canada. Even more so, though, it is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the multiple and shifting methodologies of the sociology of religion more generally. Though it lacks investigation of some significant religious communities in a multicultural Canada, such as Sikhs or Buddhists or even Christians beyond Anglo-Saxon or French background, it does include a healthy dose of the study of new religious movements, and points to the existence of a diversity of Canadian religious identities.

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Susan Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (Oxford, New York: Berg Publishers, 2005). xiv+242 pp., US$95.00 (cloth), US$28.95 (paperback).

In *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness*, author Susan Greenwood continues the ambitious work begun in her earlier book *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld*, also published by Berg (2000) and reviewed in *The Pomegranate* 16 (Spring 2001): 40-42. While both books share similarities in approach, in many respects I find this a more satisfying read than *Magic*, one that reflects increased confidence, maturation of thought, and the ongoing development of sophisticated and nuanced theoretical frameworks that enable her to successfully tackle the challenge of writing academically about magic without simply dismissing, ridiculing, or explaining it away as so many other scholars have done.

Methodologically, Greenwood again firmly situates herself within the realms of both participant and scholar, referencing her own direct experiences as well as the more customary observations of and interviews with other participants typical in anthropology. Such ethnographic reflexivity, while more common in some studies of

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folklore and anthropology, is still remarkably suspect when applied to religion, where methodological atheism seems to be the rule, rather than some form of methodological agnosticism, suspension of belief, or phenomenological *epoché*. One of the things that is therefore implicitly, if not explicitly, a part of this text is the challenge to extreme and polarizing dichotomies of insider/outsider that demand the "pure objectivity" of the outsider and the replacement of logical positivism with an academic stance that acknowledges its own positionality in reference to the subject under study.

Understanding "nature religions" as arising in "response to a certain specific loss of relationship with the natural world," Greenwood's principal task in *The Nature of Magic* is to explore how "nature religions" reestablish this relationship through what she terms "magical consciousness," an aspect of consciousness that is "part of nature, natural rather than supernatural, and participatory, rather than individual" (viii). She pursues two interrelated threads: one is the examination of magical consciousness as a "de-centered perception, a natural aspect of mind, that enables an awareness of participation with other phenomena in the cosmos." The other is the examination of what she describes as "inherent paradoxes and contradictions within nature religions," raising the question of whether nature spiritualities are "necessarily ecological in outlook" (viii).

For the purposes of her argument, she divides the vast and complex phenomena of "nature religions" into three very broad and overlapping categories: Paganism, New Age, and Western Shamanism. Admitting that these categories each contain a multitude of worldviews and approaches to nature—which, like magic, is itself a constantly changing, historically contextualized concept—she contends that they all share what she terms "magical consciousness" as a way of re-enchanting the world, a way of rekindling a relationship with differently sacralized views of nature.

Most categories tend to be problematic in some way, concealing as much as they reveal about a topic, and readers are apt to find places of disagreement with Greenwood's inclusion of particular practices within a category, as well as disagreements with the characterizations of particular practices. That being said, she does a serviceable job tracing the underlying historical influences on the concept of "nature"—from esotericism and occultism, to romanticism and environmentalism—that influence current practices within nature religions. Esotericism and occultism supply the connecting framework, romanticism the devotion, and environmentalism the context in which nature religion is claimed to be environmental or ecological (35). Greenwood then provides an engaging cross-section of case studies illustrating the ways in which some practitioners identify and relate with nature and how they locate themselves through "place," "ancestors," and "tradition."

One of the most interesting and rewarding highlights of *The Nature of Magic* is Greenwood's careful and meticulously crafted development of "magical consciousness," begun in the introduction (see especially pp. 5-11) and elaborated in some detail in Chapter 5. Greenwood frames the discussion in the larger context of a conversation about the nature of consciousness and the varying history of "mind." What emerges is a "multiplicity of consciousnesses," a "stream of possibilities that overcomes the Cartesian emphasis on mind" and opens up possibilities for "consciousness as a process that is inclusive of body," as well as other beings in nature, and even perhaps an "intrinsic quality of a wider universe" (5-6). Greenwood carefully avoids the traps of dualism and reification while highlighting a strand of consciousness rooted in direct experience of the interconnectedness of all things in the world.

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Other ways of arriving at something like "magical consciousness" will occur to readers familiar with some aspects of Buddhism (such as Zen or Shingon) or with the development of what I call the *body-in-practice* in *Coming to the Edge of the Circle*. The emphasis on process and experiential praxis leads to what anthropologist Thomas Csordas calls "somatic modes of attention," instrumental in an expanded and participatory awareness that includes the interrelatedness of human and Nature-as-person.

The last two chapters of *The Nature of Magic* raise important questions, but feel a bit rushed—the topics they cover deserve much fuller attention. In the next to last chapter of the book, Greenwood tackles the thorny problem of internal paradox between conflicting and underlying narratives within nature religions: narratives of connectedness and narratives of esotericism. Are nature spiritualities somehow intrinsically ecological? The answers may surprise you. Here her attempts to resolve problems of reconciliation, practitioners with nature as well as academics with practitioners, feels a bit weak and could have benefited from fuller exposition. The last chapter attempts to address issues of nature religions in the "postmodern" urban environment. Again, while it points to some provocative issues, it could just as well have been saved for a future book.

The Nature of Magic is a highly readable, provocative, and imaginative attempt to bring academic coherence and expression—or at least point more clearly—to experiences that are in many ways inexpressible. Its use of scholarship ranging from philosophers to physicists and psychologists to neuroscientists, as well as its extensive bibliography, will ensure a prominent place on bookshelves and in course syllabi for years to come.

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