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Review

The Truth Within: A History of Inwardness in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, by Gavin Flood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xviii + 310 pp. £65.00. ISBN 978-0-19968-456-4 (hardback).

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This book is a thoughtful, learned and ambitious attempt to offer an overview of the way interiority is cultivated in the religious traditions of the subtitle, namely Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. Rather than offering a view that is rooted in conceptions of the self informed by modern individualism, Flood turns to the respective pre-modern religious conceptions of personhood and the scriptural/text based, institutional and community devised guidelines that are drawn upon to inform the practice of what he terms 'inwardness'. These forms of inwardness, instead of offering a means to achieve personal individuation, potentially lead practitioners into an apprehension of the cosmological orientation of these traditions and the ultimate goals of redemption, liberation and enlightenment.

The book is divided into an introductory essay, Part I: History and Text, and Part II: Theory. The introductory essay sketches an overview and includes a brief but nuanced excursion into issues related to the author's phenomenological approach to the subject of inwardness, the distinction between modern versus pre-modern conceptions of the self, and the comparative study of religious phenomena.

Part I: History and Text consists of an enquiry into inwardness in Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The premise of pre-modern and modern conceptions of the self that informs Flood's approach is outlined in the opening section on Christianity where he challenges recent claims that the origins of modern individualism are to be found in European scholasticism of the twelfth century. In contrast, Flood emphasizes the monastics and theologians as engaged in a search for the inner *imago dei* whose existence was uncovered in conformity with, and as a result of, the beliefs and practices enshrined in Christian teaching. The goal of these practices, and the beliefs that inform and frame them, lead the soul closer to the deity 'and the internalization of

the goal of redemption' (p. 42). More specifically, these are unpacked in terms of liturgy, prayer and vision, the latter largely referring to the contemplation of death and the afterlife. The cultivation of inwardness that is a consequence of such practices and the doctrines and prescribed forms that underpin them offer 'a symbolical framework or world view that is a closed system—synchronically hierarchal in structure, and diachronically contained within a Christian narrative of the Fall and Judgement' (p. 66). As classic examples of inwardness as mystical ascent, Flood invokes Bonaventure and Hugh of St Victor, drawing upon a number of texts. This late medieval model of inwardness in the service of redemption, Flood goes on to state, faced the beginning of fragmentation and displacement with the onset of the Reformation. Surviving esoteric pockets can be found in the spiritual subcultures of Hermeticism and the neo-Kabbalistic movement but with few exceptions inwardness as a Christian model of the self, harnessed to redemptive ends, ceased to have the same living presence in the Church. The latter 'porous self' of the pre-modern West 'comes to be replaced by the self of modernity in which subjectivity is stripped of cosmology in favour of a secularized individualism' (p. 101). The rising tide of science and secularism that accompanied it forced traditional religion to retreat from its cosmological world view. Movements such as Romanticism would emerge tinged with a longing for the inner depths and the infinite, to unfold 'into an existential modernism on the one hand, and the negation of inwardness in the postmodern discourse on the other' (p. 101).

In the next section on Hinduism, where Flood seems most at home as a scholar, he admits the vastness of the topic related to the inward self and states his intention to restrict his discussion to the post-Gupta period (after c. 600 CE) where there is abundant material on textual traditions and practice. Picking his way through Hindu sectarian traditions, Flood settles on 'medieval tantric and devotional traditions as they developed not only in Kashmir, but in Nepal and South India, too' (p. 105). He accepts the characterization of the notion of person in South Asian culture as falling into three categories: social group or caste, possession, and reincarnation with the additional significance of ritual status and secular power. Moreover, by the medieval period, under the influence of traditions of devotion fostered by the Bhagavad Gita and other texts, notions of the renunciate seeking liberation from the world through identification with the inner cosmic self have become assimilated into householder traditions and temple-based practice. The emergence of yoga texts that cross sectarian lines reinforces this sense of an inner self, seeking liberation from the world for those more ascetically inclined. Classical sectarian divisions of the followers of Vishnu, Siva and the Goddess became normative with the admixture of Tantrism, emphasizing initiation. Moreover, antinomian forms of Tantrism included 'sexual experience as the reflection of the bliss of liberation and the bliss of the union of Siva and the goddess' (p. 118). According to Flood, under the broad influence of Tantrism across sectarian lines, vision is

also central in the form of 'visual contemplation' with the intent to engage in practices to assimilate the devotee to the deity who is the object of worship. As examples, Flood draws from a number of texts ranging from the Saiva Siddhanta sect to the Pancarata of tantric Vaisnavism and the Trika tradition of Kashmir Saivism. In addition, in a separate chapter, he offers a selection from the writings of Abinavagupta and accompanies this with a dense commentary.

Turning to Buddhism, Flood is faced with the complex issue of the Buddhist conception of no-self. This threatens to spoil his agenda but he steers his selections from Pali and Mahayana sources and commentary into alignment with the notion of inwardness that informs his discussion of the material he provides on Christianity and Hinduism. In particular, he stresses the cosmological orientation and the denial of individualism as a means to highlight a more collective all-embracing unity in nirvana.

Lastly, in Part II: Theory, Flood turns to his more theoretical intentions and provides responses to presumed critiques from post-colonialism to feminism and returns to his project of offering a study in comparative religion. In what follows, he leads his readers through a host of considerations about the comparative enterprise, makes reference to an extensive number of contributions and participants through to the end that the author has clearly in mind, namely the value, even for modern individuals, of considering life from a cosmological perspective as exemplified in the traditions of his preceding chapters. As he puts it in his Epilogue:

> What the kinds of inwardness in Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism share is a hierarchal order of being (even though this hierarchy is sometimes subverted) along with the idea of the human person as sacred. This sacrality of the human person, however, lies not in individualism but in participation in the order of being. The kinds of inwardness I have described are developed over a long period of time, throughout a lifetime in the non-identical repetition of ritual and meditative act, by developing a certain habitus, a certain way of life that aligns the being of the person with forms and forces greater than the self. To view a person as sacred is to view the person as having a life whose meaning is legitimized by, and imbued with, a transcendent order. (p. 271)

This is a work that requires careful study and it is obviously the result of a good deal of time, effort and care taken in its assembly on the part of the author. It not only brings to our attention pre-modern conceptions of the self, but challenges the certainties of contemporary individualism and its roots in relativism and modernity.