
Introduction

Religions, Histories, and Comparisons

Religion and Society is constructed out of themes and variations. While we have a basic grammar of contents, we try to innovate within a recognizable frame. In previous volumes, we have always begun with a portrait of a living scholar. In this volume, however, we are publishing a portrait around an absence as a tribute to J. D. Y. Peel. John Peel was an extraordinary man and scholar—a great thinker on religion—who died in November 2015. His influence, writings, and memory continue to resonate strongly in many fields and networks. Our six memorial portraits give a flavor (to use a suitable culinary metaphor) of Peel’s wide range of interests and friends, all nourished by his generosity and enthusiasm and his ability to live his life through his work and his work through his life.

A theme that emerges strongly from the pieces describing J. D. Y. Peel’s influences and interests is his sophisticated understanding of both history and comparison as objects and tools of scholarly inquiry. This is revealed in his extensive work on the Yoruba and his rigorous reflections on narrative, memory, agency, transmission, and change. Many of these qualities are reflected in a previously unpublished paper by Peel that is appearing in this volume, thanks to the generosity and meticulous editorial work of Richard Fardon and Ramon Sarró. “The Iconoclastic Impulse in Yoruba Culture” explores what is called, in the first sentence, “a counter-cultural stance towards central features of Yoruba culture that has itself become a major component in Yoruba culture.” In Peel’s skillful hands, this becomes a means of discussing not only Yoruba attitudes toward material culture but also ideas of modernity, tradition, historicity, and the challenge of comparing counter-currents of Yoruba culture within and beyond Nigeria. As the journal’s editors, we chose iconoclasm as a topic for the debate section in our 2016 volume, which features two pieces, one by Barry Flood, who is in fact referenced by Fardon and Sarró in their commentary on Peel’s paper.

The first contribution to our articles section, by Jon Bialecki, offers variations on some of the themes raised by J. D. Y. Peel’s piece on iconoclasm and his work more generally. These include nationalism, uses of the past in the present, and the complex workings of temporality in the making and remaking of culture. More subtly, Bialecki’s depiction of the “underdetermined structure” of Christian nationalism in the United States contains a theory of variation and change—an understanding of how recognizable forms of such nationalism can be instantiated anew in very different eras and milieux. In this sense, both Peel’s and Bialecki’s interests also point to Alejandro Martín López and Agustina Altman’s article on notions of the sky among Guaycurú aboriginal groups in the Argentine Chaco. López and Altman very explicitly locate their analysis in the context of the socio-religious changes that have occurred in the area since the eighteenth century.

As Stephan Palmié’s tribute to J. D. Y. Peel indicates, the latter’s work contains some important implications for African-Americanist anthropology and examinations of intersections between New World and African ethnography. In his article in this volume, Sergio González Varela



provides an original analysis of the Afro-Brazilian tradition of capoeira, one that contains an analytical metaphor, memorably termed “foundations in motion,” to help comprehend both the frames and the flexibilities of change. Another of Varela’s themes is whether and how capoeira might be deemed to be a religious practice. This question provides a point of comparison with sociologist and cultural theorist Bülent Diken’s illuminating reflections on the 2014 Turkish film *Winter Sleep*. The film is a dramatic rendering of Anton Chekhov’s short story “The Wife” and an analysis of the possibility or otherwise of symbolic exchange between characters whose lives are geographically proximate but morally and economically distanced. According to Diken, the film asks where, and how, religion is to be found, as forms of morality, conformity, and critique play out in the lives and interactions of the film’s characters. While we cannot know what J. D. Y. Peel would have thought of this article, we do note that Diken’s work invokes quite a few of Peel’s interests: literature, agency, cultural encounter, and the possibilities of optimism in human life.

The special section in this volume presents a comparative anthropology of Buddhism that exemplifies one of the founding aims of this journal: the attempt to encapsulate the state of the most important debates in our field. Patrice Ladwig and Nicolas Sihlé have brought together a wide range of articles on Buddhism that are framed by a very substantial introduction and an afterword by David Gellner. As these several contributors point out, the anthropology of Buddhism contains its own history and approach to comparison that has developed since Gellner wrote an article for the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* in 1990 that sketched the possibilities and scope of the field at the time. In the context of the volume as a whole, it is tempting to see this special section on Buddhism through a familiar metaphor, that of ‘theme and variation’ in the exploration not only of related religious phenomena, but also of attempts by anthropologists to study such phenomena through the evolving craft of our discipline.

Finally, we provide another sketch of the state of our field in the reviews of recently published books, including texts on Buddhism, the making of history, the cultural politics of diasporic religion, and Christians who trace their origins to the West Africa that J. D. Y. Peel knew and documented so well.

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