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AMERICAN RELIGION:
DIASPORA AND SYNCRETISM FROM OLD
WORLD TO NEW

Nation Dance: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean. PATRICK TAYLOR (ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. x + 220 pp. (Paper US\$ 19.95)

Translating Kali's Feast: The Goddess in Indo-Caribbean Ritual and Fiction. STEPHANOS STEPHANIDES with KARNA SINGH. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. xii + 200 pp. (Paper US\$ 19.00)

Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America. ANDRÉ CORTEN & RUTH MARSHALL-FRATANI (eds.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. 270 pp. (Paper US\$ 22.95)

Encyclopedia of African and African-American Religions. STEPHEN D. GLAZIER (ed.). New York: Routledge, 2001. xx + 452 pp. (Cloth US\$ 125.00)

As paradigms and perspectives change within and across academic disciplines, certain motifs remain at the crux of our inquiries. Evident in these four new works on African and New World African and South Asian religions are two motifs that have long defined the Caribbean: the relationship between cultural transformation and cultural continuity, and that between cultural diversity and cultural commonality. In approaching religion from such revisionist sites as poststructuralism, diaspora, hybridity, and creolization, however, the works reviewed here attempt to move toward new and more productive ways of thinking about cultures and histories in the Americas. In the process, other questions arise. Particularly, can what are

essentially redirected language and methodologies in the spirit of postmodern interventions tell us more about local interpretation, experience, and agency among Caribbean, African American, and African peoples than can more traditional approaches? While it is up to individual readers to decide this for themselves, my own feeling is that it is altogether a good thing that these works still echo long-standing conundrums: the Herskovits/Frazier debate over cultural origins, the tensions of assimilation in “plural societies,” and the significance of religion in everyday life. Perhaps one of the most important lessons that research in the Caribbean has for broader arenas of scholarship is that foundational questions are tenacious even in the face of paradigm shifts, yet can always generate new modes of inquiry, defying intellectual closure and neat resolution.

The “Nation Dance,” as editor Patrick Taylor explains in his volume of the same name, is literally an Eastern Caribbean ceremony where people pay their respects to their ancestors, valorizing knowledge of the past to sustain them in the present and future. Similar ceremonies are found throughout the Caribbean region, but in titling his volume *Nation Dance*, Taylor is more interested in the dance as a metaphor for religious experience there where distinct traditions are celebrated in concert and where dancing the nation “is to find oneself immersed in a liminal world where tradition informs contemporary experience and ritual takes on new meaning” (p. 1). Hence the essays in this volume take up the question of what implications religious traditions have for Caribbean modernity. Rather than thinking of Caribbean religions in terms of “syncretism” or “creolization,” which connote the homogenization of difference, a more apt term is “symbiosis,” since it preserves “the dance of difference” (p. 3) that characterizes the region. Slightly reminiscent of the plural society model, in the metaphoric Nation Dance “the dispersed nations dance their separate dances in the same yard” (p. 11). But the idea here is to honor the local diversity that remains within national, regional, and global assimilation, and to promote scholarship that is “dialogical and polyphonic,” not “omniscient” and putatively “objective” (p. 6). The premise of the volume as a whole is that scholarship and religious belief are compatible, and together can produce works that are a “reconciliation” of the two (p. 8).

The volume covers the region’s major geographical and linguistic areas. The chapters are organized in three sections: “Spirituality, Healing, and the Divine,” “Social and Political Contexts of Theology,” and “Reflections on Religion, Identity, and Diaspora.” In the first, authors focus on the experience of religious practice and the connections between belief, sentiment, and voice, particularly with attention to women’s experiences. Employing, for example, such concepts as “intersemiotics” to understand Obeah and Kali in Guyana (Frederick Ivor Case), “rememory” in Caribbean constructions of the Divine (Althea Prince), and feminist interventions in colonial representations

of Afro-Cuban religions (Maria Margarita Castro Flores), five chapters query the epistemological foundations (androcentric, colonial, emic/etic) upon which our understanding of the Caribbean is based. In the second cluster of chapters the discussion becomes historical, looking at the role of biblical theologies in Caribbean religions. Considered are Rastafari “reasoning” and its relationship to the Kebra Nagast (Patrick Taylor), the indigenization of Catholicism and Protestantism in the Caribbean (Arthur Dayfoot; Juanita De Barros), gender and fundamentalism in Barbados (Judith Soares), and the relationship among liberation theology, Protestantism, and Vodou in transforming the Haitian state (Laënnec Hurbon).

The third section highlights two themes that are implicit in all the essays: diaspora and identity. Religion constitutes the most basic source of Caribbean identity, and diaspora functions as a religious trope wherein religious identities have been fluidly made and remade. Thus Barry Chevannes explores the Jamaican yard as a metaphor of home; Abraham H. Khan examines the relationship between identity and personhood in Caribbean Hinduism and Islam; Frank Scherer explores Cuban state policy with reference to Chinese diasporic religious expression there; and Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo, focusing on the Indo-Caribbean, argues for considering diaspora in terms of style rather than in terms of identity.

In *Translating Kali's Feast*, Stephanos Stephanides and Karna Singh, also approaching diaspora as religious trope, aim to “trace Mother Kali’s footsteps as they are marked in the consciousness and memory of her children in Guyana” (p. 10). A creative combination of literary and ethnographic techniques, the book is an interdisciplinary study of the goddess Kali and the spiritual and cultural role of her ritual feast, the Kali puja, in Hindu Guyanese life and culture. Because the root of Kali’s feast involves “the struggle to evoke involuntary memory” (p. 9), the ritual cultivates a counterhegemonic consciousness “through the unconscious, mimetic and imaginative play of the feast” (p. 10).

Stephanides and Singh explicitly wish to resist any “sociologism” that would foreground economic and political life at the expense of religious and aesthetic aspects (p. 167). To this end they explore the fiction of such writers as V.S. Naipaul, R.K. Narayan, and Wilson Harris, and integrate oral histories from Kali devotees, in addition to some ethnographic description and their own reflections. They bring together these apparently disparate sources within the theoretical approach of translation studies. Guided by the work of Walter Benjamin and Talal Asad on the problem of cultural and linguistic translation, they attempt to translate the Kali puja into other genres that will reveal the rich pervasiveness of Kali as a cultural idiom. Because their “discursive course was not intended simply to imitate or represent the viewpoint of Kali devotees, but to re-create a rhetoric that would also participate in the culture’s gradual abrogation and appropriation

of competing cultures or epistemes” (p. 168), it may not come as a surprise that ethnographic revelations are not the most intriguing aspect of this book. Pursuing methodologies of cultural translation, however, is an interesting project, especially in the spirit of problematizing representation, voice, and subjectivity. Stephanides and Singh assert that these concerns have special relevance in the Caribbean because the region’s “‘distinctive’ races and their ‘ethnic’ cultures” (p. 181) create a hybridity that is particularly fertile ground for translation studies. Such peoples – apparently in contrast to other peoples – have long been “living ‘in translation’” (p. 182).

As is sometimes the case with ambitious works, this book tells us more about the current state of interdisciplinary, experimental humanities and social science research than about certain local knowledge (which, in any case, is not its principal aim). While greatest benefit will likely go to readers who already possess some familiarity with the South Asian diaspora, Hinduism, and Caribbean history, anyone interested in Kali worship or in “Madrasi” religion (as it is sometimes called, e.g., p. 10) and its diverse manifestations in the New World will certainly want to take a look at this book.

André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani, who are explicitly interested in local knowledge, tell us that over the past twenty years, Pentecostal movements have burgeoned in Latin America and Africa. Their *Between Babel and Pentecost* is a collection of essays that inquires into the bricolage of diverse elements that constitute Pentecostalism and the new *imaginaire* that its vision of modernity offers to followers who live within contemporary forces of transnationalism (p. 1). Indeed, because, as they see it (p. 1), Pentecostalism contains a dialectic of difference and uniformity that is also central to globalization (as well as to such issues in the study of religion as orthodoxy/heterodoxy, resistance/accommodation, and syncretism), they pose an interesting question. How are local processes of identification with Pentecostalism, which suggest fixed boundaries and community consolidation, shaped within global processes that are characterized by open-ended, transitory, and unbound flows of people, objects, and ideas? The volume’s title, then, recalls the rampant diversity associated with the tower of Babel and the Pentecost’s emphasis on collective coherence.

The contributors are concerned with discovering “the plural nature” of the common, definitive forms of Pentecostalism (for example, being born-again) that, in tandem, form a “patchwork” of hybridity which renders Pentecostalism compatibly transnational (p. 11). The volume seeks to echo this hybridity by offering cross-cultural case studies undertaken by authors from several disciplines. It is divided into three parts: “General,” “The Caribbean and Latin America,” and “Africa.” In the first are five chapters, largely theoretical and historical: Waldo César on the rise of Pentecostalism through a “Social-Historical-Theological Study,” André Droogers and Ruth Marshall-Fratani on Pentecostalism and globalization and local-global con-

nections, respectively, Paul Gifford on African Pentecostal Theology, and André Corten on politics and “transnationalized” religious needs in Latin America. Section II, on the New World, contains case studies of Pentecostal movements in a range of countries: Jamaica (Diane Austin-Brooks), Costa Rica (Jean-Pierre Bastien), Brazil (Ari Pedro Oro and Pablo Seman; Paul Freston), and Haiti in relation to the Caribbean region (Laënnec Hurbon). More case studies follow in the final section on Africa, covering Ghana (Rijk van Dijk), Malawi (Harri Englund), Burkina Faso (Pierre Joseph Laurent), Benin (Cedric Mayrargue), and Brazzaville (Elisabeth Dorier-Apprill).

The editors make the fascinating observation that Pentecostalism in Latin America is still largely a religion embraced by the poor, even as the middle class has recently begun to increase its membership, and in Africa it is an urban phenomenon drawing followers from educated and self-ascribed cosmopolitan sectors of the population. Even in African rural areas Pentecostalism is viewed as an avenue for upward mobility. The editors do not pursue an examination of why these class and regional contrasts might exist, nor is there an overview chapter offering one. Perhaps this is because, as the volume suggests in various ways, the new form of popular transnational culture that Pentecostal movements represent discourages generalization by virtue of the “extreme diversity” of its social composition (p. 20).

With its attention to the details of each case it presents, the evenness of the quality of its chapters, and its careful attempt to grapple in a consistent fashion with current interests in the relationship between local forms and global processes, this volume is a timely and valuable addition to the literature on religious movements, postcolonial Christianity, and the articulation of religious experience with other domains of social life.

In his *Encyclopedia of African and African-American Religions*, editor Stephen Glazier and his contributors combine the best of an encyclopedia format with careful deliberation on what an encyclopedia is capable of offering in content. This volume is a compendium of a wide range of individual entries, yet in sum enables some reconsideration of questions fundamental in the Americas: the influence of the colonial gaze on interpretations of African and African-American religions, the inextricable connection that religion has with other quotidian social and cultural institutions, and debates about African retentions in the New World. Thirty articles specifically address the use of concepts and theories in the study of African and African-American religions. In doing so, they, along with many of the other contributions, raise such related matters as nationalism, Pan-Africanism, immigration, civil rights, proselytization, and conversion. In this way the *Encyclopedia*, like the three other books discussed here, conveys a good deal more about the contours of the pan-African experience than a conventional conception of “religion,” disarticulated from historical, social, and cultural contexts, would be able to do.

In total, the *Encyclopedia* contains one hundred and forty-five articles, written by scholars from thirteen countries in the humanities and social sciences. A sampling of entries includes: "African Zoar United Methodist Church" (started in 1794 outside Philadelphia), "African-derived" religions in the Lesser Antilles," "Kardecism" (where mediums intermediate with the spirit world, originating in nineteenth-century France, later becoming important in Brazil and the Hispanophone Caribbean), "Storefront Churches," and "Sudanese Brotherhoods" (Islamic spiritual organizations in Sudan).

Incorporated in the discussions are selections from primary source materials, ethnographic descriptions, and a wonderful range of photographs and illustrations. This variety, along with coverage that ranges from the most well-known examples (such as Yoruba and Akan religions, Islam, Pentecostalism, Rastafari, Vodou, and Umbanda) to lesser known ones (such as Big Drum, Myalism, Mother Earth, Kumina, and Costa Chica), underscores (as the editor intended) the important point that the global influence of African and African-American religions is growing. This volume is invaluable as a teaching and research reference. In addition to its breadth and creativity of approach, bibliographies accompany each entry, there is a general bibliography and index, and an appendix makes available a list of major contemporary and classic works on African and African-American religions. The *Encyclopedia* is also just simply a very good read.

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