REVIEWS


The volume under review is not as wide-ranging as the title promises. On the contrary, this symposium book concentrates on the religious aspects of the two themes and does so from an Asiatic (East Asian in particular) orientation. Hence, it is not surprising to find various studies on Daoism, Hinduism, Japanese moral development, and the like. A smattering of other cultures appears. The first piece is contributed by Jan Assmann, a leading Egyptologist recognized for his inquiries into religious matters; but this essay is uncharacteristically general by his standards, and footnotes that would have been significant do not appear. Schmidt-Leukel’s section on Christianity has a similar outlook. Entire historical and cultural themes have been omitted from discussion. It is odd, for example, to commence with ancient Egypt yet ignore Mesopotamia and Western Asia: Sumeria, Babylonia, Assyria, the Hittites, even the Hebrews. Perhaps the organizers of the Hermann and Marianne Straniak Stiftung conference (Weingarten, 1999) believed that one of these civilizations would be sufficient for the general interpretation of rebirth, renaissance or renascence, and cultural memory. Nothing could be further from the truth. Centuries have passed since European contact with India and China. Goethe and Schopenhauer are no longer suitable; Rudolf Otto and the brilliant yet practical Sir Henry Maine, trailblazers though they were, are now distant great-grandfathers. The philosophy behind this volume would strike Maurice Halbwach’s ghost as outdated.

The tone of Walter Schweidler’s introduction dismisses two elements from further discussion in the volume: historical roots and intellectual developments which are not connected to societal alterations. It is as if we were to ignore Zoroaster himself and study only his religion! For a deep appreciation of historical development, Norbert Elias, whose works have been so well received in Germany, would have been useful in order to counteract the speculative tendencies of the conferees. For instance, in Schmidt-Leukel’s study on Christian beliefs about physical reincarnation, a deeper historical basis should have been included; at the minimum, Jewish thought ca. 50 B.C.-A.D.100 as well as the Eastern mysteries influencing early Christianity, and preferably, also, the native
REVIEWS

Egyptian outlook, or at least that expressed by the Gnostics.

Equally marring this anthology is the lack of acknowledgement that rebirth, renaissance, even reincarnations have more than philosophical or religious aspects. It is by these means that human beings recreate themselves culturally, as in the great Renaissance itself. Why was art (in its broadest sense) overlooked? There is nothing here about Italy from the Trecento to the Cinquecento. I searched in vain for any detailed analysis of art, architecture and politics. While it may be appropriate, indeed necessary, to emphasize the philosophical backdrop, it is not sufficient. Such an interpretative approach accounts for only a portion of the grand schema of rebirth. For example, how did reincarnation become connected with the mind of Gautama? Can one honestly discuss Empedokles without any reference to Bachelard’s study on Fire?

I feel that these essays should have offered a more humanistic point of view. Civilizations have various reincarnations, historically speaking. Egypt is one good example with its ‘Repeating of Birth’ eras, two of which are documented in the texts. Similarly, history has experienced revolutionary phases: France in 1779, Russia in 1917, Renaissance Italy, the Meiji Restoration, Sassanid Persia, Rome under Augustus. Studies on reincarnation and rebirth, cultural memory and its heritage, can be better served by including those who have lived through the real data. In other words, contemporary non-philosophical perspectives are needed. The brilliance, self-destruction, and rebirth of our species are factors of prime importance that are in need of deep analysis. We are our own reincarnations.

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