
NOTES AND REVIEWS

Book Review: Faith, Doubt and Knowledge in Religious Thinking

Pócs, Éva and Bea Vidacs, eds. 2020. *Faith, Doubt and Knowledge in Religious Thinking*. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó. 409 pages.

The collection of articles, one outcome of the panoramic ERC research grant Vernacular Religion on the Boundary of Eastern and Western Christianity: Continuity, Changes and Interactions, is based on presentations at the Faith and Doubt conference held in 2015 at the Department of European Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Pécs. Apart from the conference the authors took inspiration from a similar collection on the theme of doubt in religious studies, edited by Mathijs Pelkmans, titled *Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies*.

The current volume comprises 19 articles from Hungarian researchers into religion from various disciplines which display a gallery of vernacular expressions of belief packed in doubt, negotiation and contestation. The book is divided into three thematic sections: Antique Doubts; Jews, Christians, Muslims; and Alternatives to Christian Belief, taking the reader to various geographical locations as well as time periods. Some of the articles are elaborated studies conducted within the framework of the research project, while others have remained in the format of conference paper. This variety supports the impression of the volume as looking into the kaleidoscope of how belief is discussed, performed and actualised in various cultural and psychological reproductions in Central Europe and Middle East.

Three keywords – faith, doubt, and knowledge – within the framework of religion serve as an orienting frame for the authors. As modern categories, they seem to reflect the eyes of the contemporary author and reader: Éva Pócs and Bea Vidacs position religion and doubt in the terms of certainty and uncertainty in their foreword. The authors have kept this in focus; how people explain and practice religion is often oriented by expressions of uncertainty.

The authors propose that the popular tendency to psychologise religion as a coping mechanism is inadequate. Anna Judit Tóth points out the lack of Christian categories of belief and transcendence in the Greek classical texts, and thus the simple question “did the ancient Greeks believe in their gods” cannot be answered easily. She compares the functions of miracles and prophecies in Greek cults and in Christianity: in the case of the former the manifestation of the supernatural would, for example, enhance the legitimacy of cultic place and increase its income, whereas events in nature would simply be the natural signs of gods operating in the mundane world. Ildikó Csepregi discusses the narrative functions of doubt in stories of miraculous healing to convince and convert the credulous in pre-Christian Greek inscriptions.

Gábor Klaniczay discusses the role of doubt in bodily manifestations of religion in the form of stigmata from late medieval

to early Modern period saints and other pious people. Doubt has not only a religious potential, but also a potential for the growth of institutional and inquisitorial power over this ecstatic manifestation of devotion. Discussion of the reality of the religious or magical manifestation of supernatural powers is the subject of "Swindlers, Lunatics and 'Losers'" by Péter Tóth, which takes in vernacular practices, performers, jokers and performers of magical tricks during the reign of Joseph II (1741–1790), who strived for a uniform system of enlightened law. Religious variety in the superstitious margins of society at the end of 18th century gives rich data on folk practices and stories in the early literature of medicine and law.

Ágnes Hesz, grounding her discussion on fieldwork material from East Carpathian villages with Hungarian and Romanian residents, focuses on actualisations of belief in the discussions of the otherworld, where uncertainty, doubt, traditions of belief and disbelief together with life situations merge into a constant and changing positioning that contributes to the villager's adherence to rituals. Similar processes emerge in Bea Vidacs's article, in which she analyses discussion of a charismatic catholic Hungarian seer from 2015. Giving "agency to abeyance" and sincerity about religious doubt and sentiment is a powerful rhetorical and psychological tool with which to convey the true message of Christ.

Geographical and religious borderlands perform religious hybridity. The volume focuses rather on vernacular forms of practice as this would be the most accurate way to describe the religious realities both in the centre as well as in cultural and geographical peripheries. In northern Iraq, as analysed by Eszter Spät, pilgrimage, sacred places and interaction with the supernatural accommodate crossovers between religious Others, Muslims, Christians and Yezidis. Ildikó Tamás' analysis of the changed role of the Sámi yoik from that of the marker of a stigmatised group to the key element of

the Sámi revival (which, together with the drum, has also been applied in the Christian context in Finland, Sweden and Norway) could also be considered a sort of religious crossover between different discourses.

Anne-Marie Losonczy contributes to the anthropological analysis of ayahuasca spirituality by analysing it as a performative metatext when dealing with existential doubt about the existence of supernatural beings, identifying cultural translations in the psychologisation of the spirit and the spiritualisation of psycho-emotional states.

In the light of faith and doubt Eva Pócs focuses on the social circumstances, cultural expectations and performative practices that have shaped documentation of *táltos* figures in witch trials in the early Modern period. Pócs describes the roles of healers, witches, money-seers and treasure diggers and how they situate the 'problem of believing' in the middle of multiple traditions of cultural navigation and manipulation of these situations.

Eszter Gyórfy takes a close look at the religious doubt emerging from the immediacy and intimacy of human life experience by focusing on the health of a fieldwork interlocutor in a Transylvanian village in the context of her life-story, economic changes, the possibility of her bewitchment and the efficacy of church rituals. Similar individualised belief complexes are shown in Judit Kis-Halas's article about relationships with angels in the milieu of new spirituality. Her article shows how two of her interviewees dealt with the trauma of losing a close relative and how it changed their set of stories in a global gallery of motifs regarding the versatile roles of angels.

László Koppány Csáji analyses the narratives of adherents to vernacular Prophet dénes's (typography original) and the emergence of his charismatic Christian group in Transylvania. The last article, by Judit Farkas, is about social and personal meaning-making strategies illustrated through ways that Hare Krishna devotees in Hun-

gary move into teaching. She states that the teaching often does not explain experiences, but creates the experiences themselves in narrative, practical and emotional ways.

The substantial, 409-page, volume is important in many ways. Its folkloristic and ethnographic methodology is thought-provoking when it comes to scholarship on the broad categories presented in the title. Even if situated only as an orienting horizon in the writers' and readers' semiotic universe, these categories cannot be deconstructed away from the analyses, rather the contrary. Despite the authors presenting cultural studies of how people make sense of their life situations and belongings using cultural toolkits, religion, ritual and, among others, belief, doubt and religion are important catalysts for cultural reflection and reproduction. Perhaps a more theoretically oriented fore- or afterword would have given the reader some kind of results from this rich gallery of case studies.

The volume presents the international audience with not only knowledge of the Central European religious landscape, but also of the authors present in the volume, and so perhaps the reader would have benefited from some short biographical intro-

ductions. The lists of references include articles and monographs by Hungarian folklorists, ethnologists, historians and scholars of religion, which are available to the international audience, and perhaps this could have been presented explicitly in this important and interesting portfolio of Hungarian researchers into the field of religion.

References

Pelkmans, Mathijs, ed. 2013. *Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Kristel Kivari
University of Tartu