



## The Powers of Evil in Western Religion, Magic and Folk Belief

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Hertz, a young French scholar who was to die tragically, at the age of 33, in World War I. To this seemingly trivial puzzle he gave a far-reaching answer: 'The obligatory differentiation between the sides of the body is a particular case and consequence of the dualism which is inherent in primitive thought.' If 'primitive' be replaced by 'symbolic', the 17 essays gathered in this handbook (together with an introduction and a new translation of Hertz's paper by Rodney Needham) illustrate and develop Hertz's hypothesis. Binary oppositions (between male and female, hot and cool, life and death, order and chaos, etc.), and analogies between such oppositions, are shown to be pervasive forms of human symbolic thought. It is as if whenever such an opposition can easily be set, no culture can resist exploiting its symbolic potential. For instance, the slight imbalance between the right and left sides of the body is not only emphasized and systematized but also made to bear on aspects of social and cultural life where its relevance is wholly contrived. In turn the study of cultural attitudes to lateralization, a topic of little intrinsic import, allows for important insights into the whole cultural scheme.

Most productive are cases where the abstraction from a wide range of cultural data of a dualistic classification leads to apparent paradoxes: that is, where one or more inversions are added to a series of regular oppositions. For instance among the Meru of Kenya where, unsurprisingly, the oppositions right/left, male/female, senior/junior, superior/inferior, etc. stand in a relationship of analogy, it is the left hand (and not as one would have expected the right one) of the Mugwe, a major politico-religious figure, which is considered sacred. This inversion is a crucial indication—not only for the ethnographer but even more so, I should think, for the Meru themselves—of the special status of the Mugwe. He has to be thought of in complementary opposition to the elders, who hold secular power in this society and are typical senior males associated with the right side. The superiority of the Mugwe is axiomatic and his maleness is obvious to all, but his association to the left side underscores the complementary, religious nature of his authority and suggests elements of ambiguity in various aspects, especially sexual ones, of his social identity—a kind of ambiguity which goes well together with symbolic leadership.

The most illuminating papers in this collection, such as those by T.O. Beidelman on the Kaguru, Peter Rigby on the Gogo and James Fox on Roti, follow the inspiration of Needham's seminal paper on the left hand of the Mugwe. They don't stop at establishing the existence of a dualistic classification; they show how this first step in turn allows for the discovery and sometimes the solution of ethnographical paradoxes. All the papers are full of fascinating data, the oldest ones (by La Flesche, Granet, Wieschhoff) are also of historical interest, and the latest (by Brenda Beck on Southern India) adds a futuristic

touch with its apt use of various mathematical methods.

Such a comprehensive collection of papers of high quality, all directed to the same, well-defined topic, shows anthropological research in the field of symbolism at its best. And yet, precisely, here is the rub. Is this the best we can do? Perceptive, ingenious descriptions of so many facts, but only vague and uncertain theoretical conclusions. As Rodney Needham points out in his cogent introduction: 'It is a question to what extent the papers in this volume do actually make discoveries. They certainly demonstrate many advances, both ethnographical and analytical, but ultimately there is still uncertainty about the intrinsic significance of the dual schemes and their constituent principles.' And he adds: 'This is a deeply problematical situation, but not one that is peculiar to the study of symbolism [. . .] It has to do with the variable meanings attached to such abstractions as "fact" and "theory", and with the uncertain relations which are variously held to obtain between these. In such regards the essays presented here can in themselves have no decisive effect, even though they can be claimed to have a special demonstrative value in the consideration of the problem.' I find this claim justified and therefore the book a welcome and important challenge.

*Dan Sperber*

**Richard Cavendish: *The Powers of Evil in Western Religion, Magic and Folk Belief* (Routledge, £5.95).**

This book by the editor of the Purnell partwork *Man, Myth and Magic* is not written for a professional audience of either historians or anthropologists. It will therefore frustrate serious students of the subject. It is arranged in a haphazard way and reads like a series of articles in an 'Encyclopedia of Folklore' under titles such as 'Vampires', 'Hell', 'The Devil'. The commentary is at a naive and banal level and the technique of illustrating a contention by culling examples from the whole of the western world and over the last 2,000 years represents a debased Frazerian approach. Although a balanced view of the folklore beliefs is maintained, there is no awareness of the very considerable anthropological literature on the interpretation of myth, folklore, witchcraft, attitudes to death and so on. The only reference to a recent anthropological theory is an allusion to Douglas' theory of dirt. Anyone who is seriously interested in the topics covered by this book would be far better advised to read the recent works by K.M. Briggs, Norman Cohn and Keith Thomas.

*Alan MacFarlane*

**J. Stillson Judah: *Hare Krishna and the Counter Culture* (John Wiley, £7).**

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is one of the enthusiastic, austere, monastic religious groups to emerge from the American search for authenticity triggered by the social upheavals of the 1960s. This group endeavours to validate itself by tracing its origins back through the works of the

great Bengali poet Chaitanya, to the Rig Veda and the foundations of Vaishnavite Hinduism. Judah attempts to explain how its followers are recruited from the ranks of alienated young American men and women; the gist of his arguments is that the solidarity, singlemindedness, fellowship, devotion and the air of authority of the sect supply a *raison d'être* for those for whom 'straight' and even 'hip' society have lost their charms.

However, the book suffers considerably from Judah's uncritical identification with the aims and world-view of the group he has studied. His narrow perspective of modern American culture, based largely on Charles Reich's and Theodore Roszak's superficial analysis of trends in the 1960s, is inadequate to the task of making revealing insights about the social and ethical structures of his people, and much of the book remains merely a gloss on the publications of the movement itself. I regard Judah's reverence for his subject as commendable, but it could be more subtly and rewardingly expressed than, for example, in his dedication of the book 'to the devotees who have found fulfilment of life in Krishna and to their parents to help them understand'. (Does 'them' refer to the devotees or the parents?)

As source material about ISKCON this book has some merit; it is thoroughly researched. But a social scientist should not let his sympathies confine his powers of comparison.

*Robert Turner*

**Roger Cook: *The Tree of Life: Symbol of the Centre* (Thames & Hudson, Art & Imagination series, £1.85)**

In keeping with the series in which it appears (*Alchemy, Astrology, Magic, The Mystic Spiral, Sacred Dance, Tantra and Tao* are the others), this book is a kind of pre-digested summary of the great world religions, insofar as they relate to tree symbolism. Mr Cook carries out the work of pre-digestion with ease and fluency, and the gear-change (to alter the metaphor) as he slips from Buddhism to the Eddas or from the Upanishads to the Kabbalah is so smoothly managed as to be barely perceptible. If one wonders at whom this beneficent flood of ideas is aimed, the most likely target would seem to be those among the young who have a yearning to espouse all religions simultaneously, provided that they are exotic. (Perhaps significantly, a half-page is given to the rites of Cybele, not in her native Asia, but in Rome.) The manner in which the religions are made to shade into each other is the ultimate in eclecticism. However, whereas at first one has the feeling that the book is moving towards an earth-shaking statement of the unity of the religions, based on the portentous title, by about half-way through the short text (some 18,000 words), this impression recedes and even begins to disintegrate in the final sections, until it seems that *Trees as Metaphors* would be a more appropriate title.

The greater part of the book is taken up with a large and varied collection of more or less relevant illustrations, in large reproductions and copiously