

CSSH NOTES

Joel Robbins. *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004 (xxvii and 383 pp., 10 photos, 2 maps).

A string of important articles over the years has established Joel Robbins at the forefront of the anthropological study of Christianity. Although his long awaited book draws on these earlier publications, it presents a powerful and sustained argument that is far greater than the sum of its parts. It is hard to think of another recent work in the anthropology of Christianity, or even of religion more generally, that displays such a command of local knowledge in tandem with so broad and secure a mastery both of social theory and the history of religious doctrine. Moreover, counter to the particularistic tendency of some cultural anthropology today, this book forthrightly lays the groundwork for further comparative research. It is also an exemplary piece of ethnographic and historical writing. Although the volume is long and well documented, every detail works for the analysis. Robbins writes in language so clear, measured, and intellectually sober that those whose palates have become accustomed to the harsher spices and artificial flavorings so often served up in the name of cultural theory may miss its significance. They should not: this is a monumental book with which all subsequent writers on religious conversion, culture theory, social transformation, and globalization should have to contend.

With this volume, Robbins makes the case for an anthropology of moralities. In this instance, it means taking seriously the religious problems Christians face. Such a goal may seem obvious, but a curious irony has resulted from the emergence of "power" as the master concept in anthropology. When writing of religion, even the most sophisticated writers often fall back on some version of an otherwise discredited functionalism. Religion, under such analyses, is actually doing something else, something presumably more real. Now Robbins does not simply reject utilitarian explanations of religious conversion, for of course there can be worldly advantages to taking on a new faith, religions obviously can serve to rally political identities, or mold people to the requirements of capitalism, state authority, gender hierarchies, and so forth. But he is quite clear about what can and cannot be understood in these terms, and the ways in which different historical contexts can demand different explanatory principles. He points out, for instance, that the instrumentalist motivations that might draw early converts to a new religion may well give way to more conceptual forces in subsequent generations, for whom its truth claims and ethical demands have been formative from the start. Morality is an especially powerful field for social, cultural, and historical

analysis, Robbins asserts, because it is a domain in which people are peculiarly self-conscious about cultural materials, and take an especially active role in shaping them. Above all, an anthropology of moralities recognizes that cultural logics can produce compelling moral problems, and that people's struggles with those problems have real consequences.

At the ethnographic heart of this book is a tiny society undergoing rapid, powerful, and largely self-generated cultural transformation. The Urapmin live in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Although colonial missionaries entered the region in the 1950s, Urapmin were never subject to direct proselytizing by them. But some individuals sought out Christian education, and since the 1970s the entire society has converted to a passionately held form of Pentecostalism. Three-quarters of young adult Urapmin men today have spent time fully engaged in religious study. Urapmin in general put enormous efforts into everything from the probing of their own hearts, to confessions, sermons, sin-removal rites, and exuberant possession events called *Spirit Disko*. Yet they remain convinced that they are sinners. Much of the book is devoted to demonstrating the cultural logic that makes the sense of sin so persuasive and so unshakable.

Robbins argues that the moral problems that convince Urapmin of their sinful state arise from the nature of the transformation they have undergone. They have taken on Christian culture as a whole rather than assimilating bits and pieces to their old culture to create a hybrid. Yet they have not simply replaced one culture with another, since in many respects, their former social and economic lives continue unaltered. The consequence is that Urapmin live with two cultures that exist side by side. The normal demands of social life force them to exert themselves in acts of will. But their version of Christian morality condemns any act of will as sinful. How then can they constitute themselves as moral persons? The abrogation of the old taboo system robbed them of the available means of ethical self-constitution. The technologies of the self that Christianity offers in their place are too otherworldly to make morality really practicable. Robbins writes "the Christian moral system conflicts with the demands of Urapmin social life in such a way as to make its breach inevitable [and] . . . the system in and of itself defines success in such a way as to create the conditions for people's failure to meet its demands" (pp. 247–48). The result is that they see themselves as consumed with desires, jealousies, and envy.

The ethnographic portrait is fully realized, subtle, and three-dimensional. The comparative readings of other studies are generous and productive. Robbins's argument overall is original and convincing. But any book this ambitious cannot help but provoke further questions. First, consider the situation at hand. Urapmin these days are obsessed on a daily basis with their sinfulness, and live "in a constant state of millennial attentiveness, where almost every action is produced with one eye toward its bearing on the actor's project of salvation" (164). When this is combined with a radical condemnation of the simplest acts of will, it

sounds hard to sustain. Indeed, on the evidence of other radical religious groups in Christian history, this is probably a highly unstable situation. At the very least, it seems unlikely that future generations will feel the tug of traditional Urapmin culture in the same self-undermining way that people do today. If their religious fervor persists, perhaps their social life will adapt. Or the fervor may cool.

We certainly cannot ask Robbins to predict the future, but the situation he describes does cast an interesting light on the idea of cultural logic with which he starts. Robbins proposes to treat Christianity as a culture, and I suspect few readers would deny that Christianity is a cultural phenomenon in some sense. But in what sense? Given Christianity's universalistic claims and its global circulation across societies of all kinds, are we justified in treating it as "a culture" on the same plane as others, such as "Urapmin traditional culture"? Robbins's answer, I think, would be that what they have in common is that each is a system with a logic and a defining set of paramount moral values. He portrays a situation in which two cultures are available for the same people without being synthesized. The paradoxical condition within which Urapmin find themselves is therefore the logical product of the practical interaction between distinct moral orders. Robbins makes his case extremely well. The very situation he describes, however, might invite us to ask what is to guarantee that cultures are in fact systems with logics. In the case of Christianity, we might attribute this to a long history of educational institutions, the mediating role of a canon of texts, and activity of regulators authorized to eliminate contradictions. How special is a case like that? If two cultures can be kept in play without being brought into a single coherent order, this suggests that a single society *can* live *without* a single overarching logical system. If this is possible, perhaps even generalizable, then the role of systemic logic in the production of any given cultural order would need to be accounted for, rather than taken as a given. And indeed, a response to these questions seems already implicit in the text. As I have noted, Robbins describes morality as a domain in which people are peculiarly self-conscious about cultural materials and actively work on them. This suggests where we might start to look for the specific conditions of practice under which a total order might, or might not, come to be demanded of culture.

———Webb Keane, University of Michigan

Peter Burke. *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

What is the relationship between language and community in early modern Europe? How is language 'discovered' during this time and what are the tensions and changes in community wrought with and by this discovery? These are the questions that Peter Burke's *Languages and Communities in Early*

Modern Europe asks as he brings much needed attention to the distinctive role of language in both expressing and constituting community and vice versa in the early modern period. Burke's work is structured around five thematic trends embedded in a historical framework: (1) the continued importance of Latin, (2) vernaculars competing for dominance in newly available domains, (3) standardization before 'language policy,' (4) the centripetal force of language mixing, and (5) the centrifugal force of language purism. All of these prefigured the new link between language and nation that developed from the French Revolution onwards. By engaging with the multiple and inter-animated languages and communities of Europe during this time, Burke provides a counterpoint to national(ist) histories, which create a simplified picture of the organic growth of a single language and claim an isomorphic relationship with community as (proto-)nation. Burke focuses on the standardization of vernaculars in tension with increased codification of Latin and a new linguistic purism reacting to an increase in and even celebration of language mixing, and thereby resists subordinating complexity to a historical narrative.

Burke's work provides a necessarily complicated picture of the historical period, countering simplistic notions of the 'decline of Latin' and the 'triumph of the vernaculars.' He also provides a more nuanced analysis of the role of the printing press in the process of standardization and nation-building. To make his case, Burke draws not only on the most often studied languages of Europe, such as English and German, but from a wide variety of European languages, exploring how the 'triumph' of certain 'languages' over others was perceived from multiple points of view. The variety of overlapping communities that Burke incorporates into his analysis is equally refreshing, as he considers religious, bureaucratic, scholarly, and military communities, among others. Although Europe itself is one community whose boundaries are never really crossed or questioned in the analysis, Burke does contrast the linguistic situation in the Ottoman Empire and the impact of colonialism on European languages to situate European languages within global frameworks and show how language and community are defined by external boundary maintenance as well as internal uniformity. Burke's broad overview will be accessible even to those unfamiliar with the period. He draws together a wealth of academic literature and provides copious examples, which are a goldmine for other scholars interested in this area of inquiry, whether historians, anthropologists, or linguists. Although explicit discussion of the link between nation and language is left for the epilogue, Burke engages implicitly with these broader theoretical debates throughout, which makes this historical work compelling and productive for any scholar interested in Europe, nationalism, historical formation of (speech) communities, or what Burke calls the "social history of language."

———Emily Carter, University of Michigan

Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee. *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004 (224 pp. + xi).

This book is a primer on financial globalization, specifically the emergence and operation of a particular set of complicated financial instruments that the authors see as signaling a far-reaching transformation of the domain conventionally referred to as “the economy:” derivatives. While derivatives have sometimes entered into public consciousness due to scandal, crises, and crime, the authors use derivatives as a window into the new everyday operations of global capital and the new normalcy of “systemic risk”—the risk that the entire international financial and banking architecture may implode.

Derivatives are financial assets the value of which is based on another asset or set of assets. The authors’ story is very much one of impacts and emergences: the impact of mathematical formulas for pricing and trading in risk, the emergence of new speculative forms of finance that seemingly elevate circulation over production as the primary source of value creation in the world economy, and the mutual entanglements of new financial forms and new political arrangements that make considerably more complicated the old arguments that globalization erodes state sovereignty or heralds the decline of an old order of things. And yet, at the same time, the authors are quite clear that their tale of the distribution of risk over the entire planet and the enmeshment of us all in these financial webs does indeed represent something radically new or fundamentally different from an earlier capitalism more comfortably analyzed in the terms of economics in its Marxian or neoclassical incarnations. This is a story of the continual subversion of “the very principles of production by which the state produces itself” (p. 177), and not only the economic information flows by which states make decisions but also the very formations of the public sphere on which the liberal imaginary depends.

The book consists of seven chapters, including a very readable layman’s introduction to the financial instruments in question, and nice treatment of the history of global financialization, the institutions through which finance operates, an important chapter on the calculation of risk, and a chapter on the uneven global impact of those calculations. It also has a handy glossary. I appreciated its easy style as well as its theoretical flourishes. If it contains some of the breeziness of the business publications it treats as parts of the culture of finance, it also by doing so has the potential to reach wider readerships as well as reasonably well-informed students. The most important contribution here, to my mind, is the argument about the new public imaginaries set in motion by the circulations the book opens up, and the vivisection of liberal forms of sovereignty that wagers on risk perform.

———Bill Maurer

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