

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Confucian World Observed: A Contemporary Discussion of Confucian Humanism in East Asia* by Weiming Tu, Milan Hejtmanek and Alan Wachman

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## The Journal of Religion

he brings central Christian insights and symbols into creative interaction with the symbols and insights of other traditions. Much of *Behind the Masks of God* is devoted to developing an abstract conception of divinity capable of being specified in Christian, Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist ways. The abstract description (which Neville draws from an imaginative reinterpretation of the *creatio ex nihilo* position) becomes a theoretical vehicle that makes it possible to see how the various symbols for divinity complement, conflict with, or remain unrelated to one another. Similar attempts are made to explore various conceptions of self, sacrifice, and sanctification.

The power of Neville's analysis and the reason his book goes beyond the work of comparativists like Joseph Campbell is his willingness to press the question of truth. He is not interested merely in displaying similarities and differences. He is asking harder questions, the questions that comparativist theologians, historians, and philosophers must ask, if only (until now) in the privacy of their own spiritual reflection. How much of what I see in other traditions is "true?" In what ways will their claims correct my own self-understanding and the self-understanding of my tradition?

In a comment cited on the dust jacket, Gerald Larson acknowledges that this is the kind of book that "intellectual fundamentalists will take pleasure in denouncing." When comparative reflection moves beyond "mere dialogue," beyond the sharing of stories, to the difficult work of normative theological reflection, it is bound to rankle. The task is too daunting for one person to grasp all the details adequately. Neville freely admits that this project must be a collaborative enterprise, one that calls on the wisdom of many. Viewed that way, his volume is as much an invitation as a theological statement. Those who accept the invitation will need chutzpah, a thick skin, and humility. The payoff will be in joining an open theological conversation capable of bringing the insights of a variety of traditions to bear on those that have been cultivated closer to home.

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TU, WEIMING; HEJTMANEK, MILAN; and WACHMAN, ALAN, eds. *The Confucian World Observed: A Contemporary Discussion of Confucian Humanism in East Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992. 143 pp. \$12.95 (paper).

As a summary report on a series of conferences held at the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii, *The Confucian World Observed* does not present an overriding thesis as much as offer glimpses into what some of the top minds in East Asian studies today are thinking about Confucianism as a cultural and scholarly category. To follow along their thematically structured conversations is well worth the time. The participating voices cross disciplinary and geographical boundaries, making their comments pertinent to diverse followers of premodern and modern East Asia.

The discussion is primarily driven by the so-called Weberian question: to what extent can Confucianism be identified as the shared cultural force driving the current modernization and industrialization of East Asian nations? Quite appropriately, a significant portion of the conversations revolves around the problem of defining Confucianism. How can its historical reality be characterized outside of the narrow understanding of it as the texts and teachings of Confucius and his followers? Is it a system of political and state orthodoxy and control, a familial and ritual orthopraxy, an ethical and religious expression? Other significant questions

center on whether or not Confucianism can be defined consistently across the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese experience and, all too briefly, whether or not Confucianism can be made equivalent to East Asian culture and consciousness generally. The text raises this last question, but the actual opinions recorded, as indeed the assumptions that frame the book as a whole, do not really ask the question as much as confirm it. The discussions here might have considerably multiplied their value if they had seriously questioned the normativity of Confucianism as a category in the examination of Chinese and Chinese-influenced societies.

Although the examination of Confucianism as a specifically religious value is only one of many considerations, the very real multivalence of Confucianism as it is currently constructed necessitates the project's multi- and cross-disciplinary approach. On this score, *The Confucian World Observed* can be particularly lauded for its efforts to make sure that most of the relevant disciplinary voices have been included. Its own methodological practice offers a convincing appeal for the growing importance of comparative studies within Asian studies generally.

The title's appropriation of a glamorous but substantial research concern should assure its reception into an array of fields. Economists, political scientists and analysts, and cultural historians are equally bound by the history-in-the-making dynamism of East Asia's rising status on the international scene. The realized value of this book, however, lies in its demonstration of how this area of interest can be productively approached. Its comparative effort coupled with its methodological sensitivity recommends itself as a model for others to follow.

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SCHOLEM, GERSHOM. *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in Kabbalah*. New York: Schocken Books, 1991. 328 pp. \$30.00 (cloth).

This volume contains six essays, originally published in book form as *Von der Mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit* (Zürich, 1962) and in Hebrew translation by Joseph Ben-Shlomo, *Elements of the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (Jerusalem, 1976), written by the eminent scholar of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem. The essays included in this volume, together with five other studies published in the book, *Zur Kabbalah und ihrer Symbolik* (Zürich, 1960), translated into English by Ralph Manheim, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York, 1965), and included in the aforementioned Hebrew translation of Ben-Shlomo, constitute Scholem's lectures delivered before the Eranos Society's annual meeting in Ascona, Switzerland, between 1950 and 1961. Most of these essays were first published as articles in the *Eranos-Jahrbuch* (Zurich, 1934-).

These studies without question represent Scholem the historian of religion at his best. The presentation of this material to a wider audience comprising phenomenologists, psychologists, and historians of religion freed Scholem of the usual concern of tracing historical, philological, and textual connections. Here Scholem is interested in the world of ideas, what one may call the philosophical underpinnings of the mystical and mythical structures that informed the imagination of Jewish mystics through the ages: traditions concerning the attribution of anthropomorphic shape to the deity; the dualism of good and evil in kabbalistic literature; the motif of the *axis mundi*, the righteous pillar of the world, in Jewish mysticism; the feminine element of divinity in Jewish religion, especially as it