

NOVAK, Michael

1976 The sting of Polish jokes. *Newsweek* 12 April 1976: 13.

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DAVIES, GLENYS, editor. *Polytheistic Systems*. The Yearbook of the Traditional Cosmology Society (Volume 5). Edinburgh University Press, 1989. iv+245 pages. ISBN 0-7486-0135-X.

A growing consensus seems to exist that in our world of overspecialization we need more interdisciplinary exchange. It is therefore a welcome event that more and more opportunities are given for people from various disciplines to meet with one another and to discuss themes of common interest from their own particular viewpoints.

The Traditional Cosmology Society—of which the present volume constitutes the fifth yearbook—was founded in 1984 precisely for this purpose: to provide a forum for discussion and to promote interdisciplinary exchange in the study of myth, religion, and cosmology. In line with this policy, the Society's annual Summer Conference in 1988 dealt with "polytheistic systems" and brought together a wide range of participants—students of archaeology, folklore studies, social anthropology, religious studies, literature, and other disciplines—who exchanged views on the phenomenon of polytheism in various cultures and religions of the world. Among the many papers presented at the conference, a few were selected for publication and edited by Glenys Davies, Treasurer of the Society.

After a short Introduction by the editor explaining what the conference and the book are all about, fourteen chapters—of uneven length and structure—open for us a world of deities, ranging from India to Central America, from Classical Greece and Rome to the Celtic and Germanic tradition, to finish with a comparative study of polytheistic forms of life in Japanese Okinawa and Indonesian Bali. To describe in detail this "smorgasbord" of various approaches to the general theme would take too long. Moreover, this is also next to impossible, since most of the contributions are so extremely specialized and detailed that even a lengthy introduction could not possibly do justice to their rich contents. This is, in the eyes of this reviewer, at once both the strength and the weakness of this volume.

On the one hand, it is a vigorous reminder of how in the course of human history polytheistic systems have taken on such a variety of forms that we cannot but admire the genius they manifest and feel compelled to reflect upon the influence they have exerted upon our own contemporary ways of thinking. This point is convincingly expounded in the first chapter by Deirdre Green, "Towards a Reappraisal of Polytheism," who points out how many approaches to polytheism have been based upon ethnocentric and evolutionist assumptions, and vividly illustrated in the chapters that follow and that, each in its own specificity, describe the richness of polytheistic systems wherever in the world, making it impossible for us to dismiss them as mere phantasies of primitive minds.

On the other hand, however, most of the papers in this volume present such detailed analyses of particular manifestations of polytheism that their readability becomes greatly impaired, at least if the reader is not directly familiar with the specific theme dealt with in a specific paper. In other words, interdisciplinary exchange does not

mean only that a common general theme is approached from various perspectives; it also requires that these approaches have the purpose of mutual understanding and cross-fertilization. Such exchange might have occurred at the conference at which the papers were originally presented and, supposedly, discussed among the participants. In this book, however, the reader is left out in the cold and given the impression that many of the authors were only interested in self-gratification or—to put it a little milder—in enjoying the results of their otherwise valuable academic endeavors within the small circle of their own discipline, thereby defeating in this sense the very *raison-d'être* of the conference and of the learned society that sponsored it. If, instead of two short pages of introduction, this book would have concluded with a lengthy overview of the various themes dealt with in the conference and given a summary of the discussions, it would have been “interdisciplinary” in the true sense of the word. In its present form, it leaves much to be desired.

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DUNDES, ALAN. *Folklore Matters*. Knoxville, Tennessee: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989. xii+172 pages. Color plates, index. Hardcover US\$19.50; ISBN 0-87049-608-5.

This book contains eight articles, all of which were written during the last few years. The articles deal with a variety of topics and, combined, offer the reader a sharp insight into the major themes at present under discussion in the field of folkloristics.

In the first article, “Defining Identity through Folklore,” the author examines the way in which various disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and psychology have previously defined the question of personal identity. Following on from this, he proceeds to focus his attention on folklore, in terms of both folktales and other material, and the sense of personal identity that these reflect. Dundes’s conclusion is that folklore offers social scientists an ideal field in which to study and prove the sense of self-identity felt by both individuals and social groups. This article introduces a theme that, to a greater or lesser extent, characterizes all of the articles contained in this book, i.e., the argument that folkloristics is a valuable branch of science, no less important than any other field of study, and of greater worth than many. This statement is made in various ways, depending on the circumstances in each case, but is continually supported by new and significant reasoning.

In his article “The Fabrication of Folklore,” Alan Dundes takes up the question of what Richard M. Dorson, in an essay published in 1950, termed “faklore.” I do not wish to belittle Dorson’s role in bringing about this concept and fighting against it, but cannot restrain myself from pointing out that the concept of “fake tales” (*gervith-jóðsögur*) was already being used to cover a similar phenomenon as far back as 1942, in an article dealing with the collection of folktales and other folklore material (S. J. ÁGÚSTSSON 1942, 428-30).

As examples of faklore, Dundes takes amongst other works Macpherson’s *Ossian*, the Grimm brothers’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, and the *Kalevala*. He gives logical reasons why all of these works might be regarded as faklore. Concerning the Grimms’ Fairy Tales, he admits that it might seem blasphemous to label them in this way, but