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*Celibacy and Religious Traditions*. Edited by CARL OLSON. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. viii, 321 S. ISBN 978-0-19-530631-6. ISBN 978-0-19-530632-3.

As the editor states in his preface, this book “is intended for an educated general readership and for use in college courses; . . . to be a supplement to other texts in introductory courses in various religious traditions. . . ; to introduce students to the role of celibacy, or the lack of it, in various religious traditions” (vii). Although the book clearly exceeds these — rather modest — goals, readers better keep them in mind in order not to be carried away by the many fascinating issues the chapters address. The textbook character of this collected volume does not allow for in-depth studies of all issues, but it provides an excellent survey of celibacy — its role, its forms, as well as arguments for and against it — that opens up many possibilities for research which readers will be eager to pursue further.

After a general introduction, sixteen relatively short chapters (each about twenty pages long, including notes) discuss the role of celibacy — which here broadly refers to a practice of abstaining from sexual relationships for religious reasons — in various religious traditions and cultural contexts. Carl Olson assembled an impressive array of experts, among them a number of noted authorities in the study of asceticism, which brings about high academic quality. The rationale for selecting and defining the respective areas, however, remains obscure. The introduction makes a rather odd distinction by defining three major areas: “Monotheist traditions,” “Eastern religious traditions,” and “Non-Asian indigenous religious traditions.” The first category of “Monotheist traditions” includes a chapter by Willi Braun on celibacy in the Greco-Roman world, which was forced into this category “as a context for the discussion of Western and some monotheistic traditions” (Introduction, p. 9) although its content has no apparent relation to the other chapters in this category. These include one chapter on Judaism by Eliezer Diamond, three on Christianity, and one on Islam by Shazad Bashir. The chapters on Christianity are divided primarily by time period: Glenn Holland writes about the early church, Karen Cheatham about medieval Catholicism in the Latin West, and M. Darrol Bryant about the Reformation and later Protestant movements. The second category, “Eastern religious traditions,” includes two chapters on Hinduism divided along the lines of certain traditions within the religion — a chapter on the Brahmanical tradition by Patrick Olivelle and one on devotionism and Tantra by Carl Olson —; one chapter on Jainism by Paul Dundas; two geographically distinguished chapters on Buddhism — John Powers on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, John Kieschnik on Buddhism in

East Asia —; one chapter on Daoism by Livia Kohn; and one on Shinto by C. Scott Littleton. The third category, “Non-Asian indigenous religious traditions,” includes a chapter on celibacy among the Yoruba by Oyeronke Olajubu; one on Native American Indians by Carl Olson; and one on pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica by Jeanne L. Gillespie.

As a reader of this type of collected volume which center around a theme, one might instinctively — and unrealistically — hope for some sort of comprehensiveness. But given the broad range of traditions and instances already covered in this book it is unfair to demand even more. Still, it seems useful to point out some peculiarities in the selection and arrangement of chapters and areas. Three religious traditions, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism, are examined in more than one chapter, perhaps due to their spread and/or the importance they ascribe to celibacy. There is no reason to assume a hidden Christian bias, but it may be noted that while Hinduism and Buddhism get two chapters each, Christianity gets three (— every other tradition gets one). The chapters examining these religions also illustrate three different ways of approaching religious traditions and thus reveal possible dark spots in the presentation of the respective others. Celibacy in the Christian tradition is presented primarily according to time periods, which ignores regions outside the near-East and Europe/North America as well as traditions other than Catholic and Protestant (for instance, later Orthodox Christianity or ‘heretical’ movements such as the Cathars). Hindu ideas of celibacy, here arranged by internal traditions, could also be examined according to time periods or regions (say, in ancient, medieval, and modern times, or in North and South India, Nepal, and Southeast Asia). Celibacy in Buddhism is presented according to regions, which requires the authors to cover many centuries and to abbreviate discussions of internal diversity.

To be sure, the chosen arrangement is by no means uncommon. It reflects conventional approaches to the respective traditions that have long been established in the history of religious studies: viewing the Christian tradition along the lines of Church History; dividing Hinduism into the orthodox Brahmanical tradition on the one hand, and all other movements on the other; and compartmentalizing Buddhism geographically. Jainism, a religion that strongly emphasizes an ascetic and celibate lifestyle, is granted only one chapter, although one can easily imagine several chapters, divided either by time period, by regional differences, or by internal diversity. Again, this is not uncommon, but it once more reveals the inadequate amount of attention certain religions receive in religious studies, compared to others. Generally, most chapters address historical, but rarely contemporary discussions about celibacy, and modern phenomena such as Eastern traditions in the West or Christianity in

parts of Asia may prove to be interesting areas of research on celibacy as well. Finally, the analytical value of grouping only “non-Asian” cases in the third category (“indigenous religious traditions”) is rather questionable. Given that the volume primarily intends to be a textbook that needs to be useful for many different purposes, the decisions made by the editor may be reasonable, but a clarification of the rationale for the arrangement and an explanation of the criteria for the selection would have been welcomed. In any case, the structure reflects the conventional emphases that have developed in scholarship on religion and thus also reminds us of dark spots that still need attention.

None of these remarks can diminish the quality of the individual chapters. The chapters that discuss religions with strong traditions of celibacy (Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism) all provide excellent and useful surveys of the respective practices, ideas, and discussions. And Carl Olson has to be particularly applauded for including a number of religions that are not exactly known for promoting celibacy: Greek and Roman religion, Judaism, Islam, Daoism, Shinto, and the three “indigenous” cases from Africa, North and Meso-America. By widening the scope to include, for example, the general control of one’s sexuality or to periods of temporary abstinence, the authors demonstrate that a closer look can reveal fascinating insights that enrich the discussion about the celibacy discourse. The book thus provides the reader with a variety of views about celibacy — some fully embracing the practice, some harshly condemning it, and many positions located somewhere in-between — and with a number of religious arguments for or against various forms of sexual control.

The editor leaves it almost entirely to the reader (or the course instructor) how they want to use the book, which has advantages and disadvantages. Surely the advantage is that no complete theory of celibacy is forced on the reader and that readers (students) can explore and interpret the concepts and practices on their own. Olson’s introduction gives a few useful hints at how one could systematize the material, mentioning keywords such as asceticism, purity, pollution, danger, violence, and pain, but he abstains from theorizing celibacy more comprehensively. The disadvantage is that the methodological elephant in the room — comparison — is not addressed. Readers (students) are to make up their minds on how to appropriately compare different cultural and religious contexts all by themselves, which can easily lead them into all kinds of essentialist traps that scholars of religion have cautioned about for decades.

Some more methodological and theoretical suggestions on how to systematize the material might have been helpful, but responsible instructors will be grateful for this excellent (and affordable) resource, not to speak of a general

readership. As a piece of scholarship, the volume can be viewed as a first step toward a comparative study of celibacy. By including traditions that are mostly critical of celibacy, one reaches a more comprehensive and nuanced view of the religious discourse on celibacy which also forms one component of the general discourse on asceticism. The book illustrates how putting an interesting question to experts in various fields can yield fascinating and sometimes unexpected insights and can open up new areas of research.

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