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REVIEW


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When Laurence Moore (1994) alluded to the “commodification of religion” in Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture and Clark Roof (1999), a few years later, identified the varieties of spiritual quest in Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion, surely neither had in mind a Consumer Reports–type guide to help religious or spiritual questers to sort out the available options or even to create a new religion of their own. Yet that is precisely what we have here in Knock Knock’s Convert’s Guide. For those who do not take too sweepingly William James’s (1902/1985) assertion that “there must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious” (p. 39), this cleverly constructed book will prove to be both surprisingly informative and craftily humorous. It is surely serious in the sense that it was exhaustively researched (by a freelance researcher) and carefully designed and written (mainly by Knock Knock founder Jen Bilik) to represent each tradition as accurately as possible within the space limitations of such a guide. But solemn it is not, with occasional wit that is both dry and subtle, to the point that some allusions will be missed by persons not in the know.

Knock Knock (http://www.knockknockstuff.com), founded in 2002, is a boutique publisher and creator of gift and stationery products with a humorous twist. Seeking to combine intelligence, aesthetics, and innovation, Bilik and her creative team of seven embrace a philosophy affirming that, among other tenets, “Smartness is fun,” “Humor makes everything better,” and “Products should be created with care, whether mass produced or handmade.” Their Convert’s Guide is exemplary in each of these respects.

The heart of this book consists of one-page presentations of 99 “religions,” which range from the familiar (Catholicism, Jainism, Mormonism, Unitarian Universalism) through the marginal or obscure (Candambile, Eckankar, Juche, Tenrikyo) to the irreligious (Agnosticism, Atheism, Spiritual But Not Religious). Each tradition is first described in a brief paragraph of phrases that tells something about its origins and its major teachings and practices. Then, side-by-side, its “perks” and “drawbacks” are identified. Under these is a box that, on the left, lists the tradition’s chief activities and, on the right, its basic paraphernalia. A page-long sidebar is headed by a box of “quick ratings,” in the style of Consumer Reports, indicating on a 5-point
scale "conversion difficulty," "time commitment," and "cost," followed by the number of "new friends" one would gain—an estimate of how many persons are associated with the tradition worldwide. Then follow, still in the sidebar, clusters of phrases grouped under "Purpose of Life," "Deities," "Key Texts," "Where," "Afterlife Promises," and Category, the last including, for example, "Abrahamic: Christian," "Esoteric," and "NRM: Islam Oriented."

Consider "Cherokee" as an example. "What Is It?" The answer: "Spiritual beliefs of Native American tribe, based in nature, relationships with animals, and supernatural world. Sacred numbers 4 and 7 infuse rituals and characterize universe. Seven sacred ceremonies mark transitions with dance, song, and fire ceremonies. Strong sense of cosmic justice: good is rewarded and wrongful behavior (disharmony with nature) is punished." Among the perks: "Annual ceremonies provide structure and link to changing of seasons." Among the drawbacks: "Terrifying Raven Mockers; witches steal hearts of sick and dying people, killing them." Activities include "Gathering inner bark from east side of 7 trees for sacred fire" and among the paraphernalia are "Leg rattles for dances." Conversion difficulty is a 5—the maximum—time commitment is a 3, cost a 2, and the number of new friends, 270,000. The purpose of life: "Live harmoniously and justly with nature; maintain balance between human and spirit worlds." Deities include "Many animal, elemental, inanimate, and ancestral spirits." Key texts encompass "Keetoowah Bible, not words on paper but beads and shells woven into 7 wampum belts; various syllabary manuscripts." Where is "Oklahoma, North Carolina." Afterlife promises are "Good or bad afterlife, depending on actions in life and proper funeral rites." And finally, Cherokee's category is "Indigenous: Native American" (p. 54). Not much humor crept into this entry, but it is certainly schematically informative.

Other, usually more familiar traditions more clearly invited the author's dry wit. Among the perks of Catholicism: "Confessing sins wipes slate clean; no limit to clean-slate frequency"; among its drawbacks: "Soul-racking guilt." Among the perks of the Episcopal tradition: "All pluses of Catholicism without the guilt." But there are also drawbacks, including "Squabbling over women and gay clergy polarizes many congregations." If you join Scientology and progress to the highest levels of church hierarchy, "you may have access to Swiss bank accounts," and just by joining you will have Tom Cruise and John Travolta among your new friends. But there are drawbacks: To reach Level VIII "will cost upward of $350,000." Hence cost is a 5 and the paraphernalia include checkbooks and credit cards. Then there is Transcendentalism: Difficulty of conversion is rated a mere 1—but so also is the number of new friends (yourself, presumably, unless you have contact with Emerson or Thoreau). Among its activities are "Promoting social change; fighting injustice, conformity"; among its paraphernalia we find solar panels, cloth grocery bags, and hybrid cars. Getting to experience God in nature is among its perks, but on balance there are no holidays, icons, or afterlife promises.

To make comparisons easier, the 99 characterizations are preceded by a foldout chart listing the 99 options across the top and 10 dimensions down the side, including, in addition to the 3 rated in the summation sidebars—conversion difficulty, time commitment, and cost—sex regulations, dietary restrictions, afterlife quality, traditional (i.e., mainstream and conventional), rate of growth, holidays, and aesthetics. Again the ratings are on a 5-point scale, but here they are also color coded, making it possible to distinguish at a glance the traditions that are most demanding and potentially rewarding from those that are least so. Hasidism is the winner here, with almost all 4's and 5's and hence a streak of red, but Mormonism and the Muslim traditions are close runners-up. Least demanding while also promising the fewest rewards
are—no surprise—agnosticism, atheism, deism, and ethical culture, which thus show hardly any color at all.

On the reverse side of this foldout chart are the symbols of the 70 traditions that consistently use an icon, another potentially relevant difference offered to "first-timers," "those of lapsed faith," "converts," and "searchers," the four well-identified groups to whom this book is explicitly addressed. Prefatory material is designed to help such readers to figure out their own type of religious consumer and to address the following questions: "What purpose does religion serve?" "Are all religions the same?" What will religion give me? "How do I identify what I want from a religion?" A questionnaire follows for self-assessment of one's satisfaction with one's current religion, with a scoring key directing one to "Wait for inspiration, but keep an open mind," "... Start browsing," "Go forth and shop!" or "Leave immediately, whether or not you have a new religious destination."

Should none of the 99 offerings appeal, however, including the populous (25 million) but highly individualistic metaspiritual option, the concluding section of the book gives systematic advice on how to start, maintain, and grow one's own religion. But the reader need not have such a goal in mind to gain from a perusal of these final 30 pages. Offered there, for example, is a list of the diverse motives that have prompted the founding of religious traditions, along with the strengths, weaknesses, and recommended techniques for compensating for motivational shortcomings. But for those who might seriously consider founding their own tradition there is much practical advice, including suggestions for funding, marketing, and selling one's religion. Even with its gentle overlay of humor, this is a serious concluding chapter, underscoring the responsibilities one assumes in taking on such a goal.

Scattered throughout this book, finally, are 16 "spotlights," each dedicated to a particular topic. They range from the "Top Ten Prophets of All Time" and "Mock and Oddball Religions" (e.g., Pastafarianism and its Flying Spaghetti Monster) to "Seeking God Through Drugs," "Get Paid to Pray" (on the prerequisites, duties, and pay of various religious careers), "The Cost of God" (lifetime outlays for 10 traditions, with Scientology and Mormonism at the top and Zen Buddhism and the Temple of the Vampire at the bottom), and "Returning Your Religion," which lists warning signs of an abusive tradition, offers advice on getting out, and carefully distinguishes voluntary exit counseling from coercive deprogramming.

Simple, realistic drawings punctuate the book, often illustrating some ritual practice, and color is used to fine effect throughout, including on a map locating the major traditions. The table of contents gives easy access to each of the traditions, which in any case are ordered alphabetically, and there is also an index of the traditions by category. There is no bibliography, apart from the brief listing of key texts and tradition-associated journals, but one can only imagine how complicated it would be to include a reference list inclusive of the 99 traditions. Further information on any of them, the book points out, is available online with the click of a mouse.

What might a scholar of religion gain from this book? It's an entertaining read, no doubt, but it is also a serious work from which any reader can expect to learn a good deal. The compact summaries are surprisingly suggestive of each tradition, from its metaphysical conceptions to its day-to-day practices. Furthermore, the author has admirably avoided reducing each tradition to a list of "beliefs," a disposition facilitated by the necessary reduction of content to phrases that, expanded into full sentences, would easily tempt one to add "They believe in" and other such misleading qualifiers that outsiders are prone to use. Many scholars of religion will also
note with satisfaction that the author did not succumb to the common temptation to reify "spirituality" and elevate it to an alternate or even superior status to religion (cf. Janis, 2008, a far more personal work with much less subtle humor). Not all insiders will be pleased with the characterizations of their traditions, to be sure, but there is nothing unfair or hostile in these representations, and the thumbnail perspective they offer might even be thought provoking in a constructive way.

For empirical psychologists of religion in particular, the book offers a rich array of suggestions for more inclusive assessment devices. Beyond that, it provides a quick, engaging, and serviceable overview of a great number of religious traditions. We may hope that psychologists who read it will be inspired to take more of that diversity into account, whether as researchers or as clinicians.

The Convert's Guide, in sum, is a brilliant first answer to the question “Who’s There?”

REFERENCES


