



BOOK REVIEW

Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History. Kelly Bulkeley.
New York: New York University Press, 2008.

Dreaming in the World's Religions is a well-written comparative history of the mythopoeic dream ontologies that practitioners from religious traditions throughout the world and human history have so far imagined. Although it may not be the first scholarly effort to draw attention to the religious affiliations of dreaming in human societies (e.g., Roheim 1952; von Grunebaum and Caillois 1966; Shulman and Stroumsa 1999; Lohmann 2007; Tedlock 2008 [1992]), it is the most contextually well-balanced in scope as it explores dreaming in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as in China, Oceania, the Americas, Africa, Greece, and Rome.

The most remarkable quality of this work is its expansive interdisciplinary approach. A religious studies scholar, Bulkeley (19) demonstrates keen aptitude in his application of history, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology to cross-cultural forms of “prototypical dreams”—i.e., unusually vivid and emotionally charged dreams about dream figures, symbols, and events that are endowed with religious significance. Prototypical dreams, he argues, have contributed in shaping the religious histories of human societies in all times and places.

Bulkeley's primary thesis, that “dreaming is the primal wellspring of religious experience,” (6) echoes the insights of anthropology's founding thinker, E. B. Tylor (1913 [1871] (1):450), who theorized that the panhuman doctrine of the soul originated from reflections early humans made about their dream experiences upon awakening. With their dream ego being engaged in activities in a different time and place throughout the night, speculated Tylor, early humans likely concluded that the dream ego is an alternative self that, though bound to the physical body upon awakening, is capable of departing the body during sleep in order to engage with

supernatural dimensions. Ironically, Bulkeley does not acknowledge Tylor's work, which, given its relevance to his thesis, would have been of great theoretical service to this publication.

Bulkeley deserves praise for his inclusiveness of an exceptionally global range of religious contexts. The accuracy of this comparative history becomes compromised, however, when data from select case studies are used as a representative sample of entire continents. In discussing Australian Aboriginal dream beliefs (234–237), readers are given the impression that all Australian Aboriginal cultures are more or less one culture sharing one creation myth, dream ontology, and language. What gives readers this impression is Bulkeley's use of one cultural group's terminology to represent Aboriginal Australian beliefs writ large without explaining the cultural origins of the terminology in the main text. It is not until readers peer into the endnotes that they discover the cultural origins of the terms used—most of which derive from the Mardu people of Western Australia. Nevertheless, it is problematic to use Mardu terms as though they accurately represent all other Australian Aboriginal cultures.

There also are sections in this book with unnecessary rhetoric. For example, after discussing how dreams influenced the criminal actions of Mollah Omar, a Taliban leader, Bulkeley imagines a world where dreams are condemned because of their tendency to inspire “the mad...and demagogical passions of such people.” He then writes: “it makes no sense to pretend that so radical a change—a people without dreams!—could ever be achieved, short of totalitarian mind control” and “The idea that we could somehow do without the dreaming imagination strikes me as a fundamentally anti-human fantasy, as if the way to save the world was to change people into soulless logic machines” (210–211). These statements would be more appropriate if they were made in response to a scholar who condemned dreams. Because Bulkeley is only refuting a world he himself imagined, readers may find such statements distracting.

There are also a number of historical conjectures that lack supporting citations. In presenting the origins of shamanism in China, for example, Bulkeley explains how bands of *Homo sapiens* migrated from Africa to Asia approximately 50,000 years ago: “Many (perhaps all) of these groups included at least one person who served as a collective dreamer, healer, ritual specialist, and mediator between the living and the dead” (2008:52–53). Without references to supporting evidence, the historical narrative offered by Bulkeley becomes difficult for nonexperts to evaluate and may give academic readers the impression that *Dreaming in the World's Religions* is intended for popular rather than scholarly audiences.

Despite these critiques, Bulkeley has made a number of thoughtful observations that could serve as trajectories for future research. He makes an

interesting suggestion that dream incubation and prototypical dreams may be capable of generating a “dream-mediated placebo effect” (159) that actually accelerates psychophysiological recovery from illness, an assertion that has since been supplemented by Adler (2011), who found that dreams and sleep paralysis experiences have the potential to cause psychophysiological harm, even death, by mediating the nocebo effect. Bulkeley has also identified examples of lucid dreaming in Buddhism (107–109) and Christianity (181, 184), which indicate that metacognition in dreams pre-exists the earliest accounts of lucid dreaming (van Eeden 1913).

Bulkeley (269–279) concludes with a model of prototypical dreaming that proposes four archetypal dream types: sexual, which reflect our evolutionary impulse to reproduce; aggressive, which are subconscious simulations of our flight or fight response; gravitational, which project our universal fear of death and entropy; and mystical, which “express the human capacity to envision a transcendental freedom from the oppressive limitations of gravity, entropy and death” (274). These dream types are said to express “the deepest innate oneiric capacities of our species, the primal templates of this hard wired modality of human mind-brain functioning” (272). The intense “waking impact” of prototypical dreams, he argues, is what makes dreaming such an active influence in the socio-historical processes of human societies. I commend Bulkeley’s effort toward developing a typology for culturally significant dreams, but I found these categories to be somewhat arbitrary in my reading. To be more convincing, they require more justification regarding their applicability to the cases presented in this study.

Bulkeley has, however, succeeded in compiling a broad range of evidence from the world’s religious traditions that illuminates a profound relationship between dreaming and religiosity. *Dreaming in the World’s Religions* is, overall, a useful contribution to the ongoing research into the history making potential of dreams (see also Lattas 2010; Lohmann 2010; Adler 2011).

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