

## REVIEWS

Lawrence E. SULLIVAN, *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1988. 1003 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 0-02-932160-3.

*Icanchu's Drum* is an overwhelming, exhilarating work. As the subtitle reveals, it is a book about South American religions. Equally important, however, it is a book about religion, culture, the human imagination, and the study thereof. With only the slightest of efforts *Icanchu's Drum* may be read, for instance, as a book about Japanese religion. In addition, the 202 pages of notes provide not just a guide to literature on South American religions, but also an overview of many, if not most, of the current topics of debate in the humanities and social sciences.

Sullivan takes the study of South American religions as an occasion for a reappraisal of the study of religion in the West. In many respects, the rise of the modern study of religion is coeval with the Western discovery and colonialization of the New World. Many of the assumptions and categories of the modern study of religion are thus historically rooted in the effort to come to terms with the religions and cultures encountered in the exploration and conquest of the New World.<sup>1</sup> Modern theories of religion, in other words, are not simply a product of the Western imagination and thought; they are, in a sense, a joint (though not necessarily cooperative) product of the encounter and contact, at every conceivable level, of the West with the New World.

Most theories and images of South American religion, however, have served to deny or obscure the history and relationship of encounter by emphasizing the distance and difference between the West and the cultures of South America. Many of the traditional methods and theories brought to bear on South American cultures, in other words, "disclose a yearning to discover how the investigating culture (through its theology, science, social organization, economic system, technology, or art) might transcend 'inferior' expressions of humanity, especially by its power to investigate, theorize, and record history, and to survive in it" (p. 2). While this yearning is clearly evident in earlier, and now largely discredited, notions such as animism and primitive mentality, Sullivan argues that it is still alive in much of contemporary scholarship in the form of a distinction between people who practice (South Americans as objects of study) and those who theorize and reflect.

*Icanchu's Drum* is thus not simply an overview of the religions of South America but also an effort to constructively critique and rework our own categories of understanding, such as symbol, the sacred, culture, social structure, language, imagination, etc. The book thus aims to bring to light, reconstitute, and

<sup>1</sup> For a related discussion of the role of cultural contact and the rise of modern theories of religion, see LONG 1986, pp. 65-96.

consummate on new terms the relation of the West and South America. To do so requires a rejection of the equations of us with "theory" and them with "data." The notion of the imagination, which is perhaps the key concept of the book, serves to redefine the relation of the West and South America. The relationship of theorists and objects of study is replaced by one grounded in a recognition of shared imaginative capacities. In Sullivan's formulation, the religious traditions of Africa, Oceania, South America, and Asia "are equally heirs to human nature and have responded with stunning originality to the emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual capacities of being human" (p. 2).

One of the basic problems that the book confronts, at both the practical and theoretical levels, is the simple and yet daunting one of how to organize a book about an area as religiously, linguistically, ecologically, and culturally diverse and vast as South America. Like the works of Lévi-Strauss, *Icanchu's Drum* plunges the reader into the world of South American religions. One encounters the Cuna of the Colombian Panamanian Isthmus, the Inca and Quecho of the Andes, the Carib and Tupi of the Amazonian basin, African-American communities of the eastern coast, and the Yahgon of Tierra del Fuego. The religious life of South America is not organized, however, in terms of the familiar tribal, linguistic, or geographical categories.

Sullivan chooses rather to present a morphology of the images and symbols of South American religious life.<sup>2</sup> In Sullivan's view, this method of organization not only does justice to the religious nature of the materials but is also more attuned than the more conventional approaches to the "mythic structures within which many South American peoples evaluate their existence in time" (p. 6). The fundamental temporal structures of myth provide the frameworks within which the materials are orchestrated: Cosmogony, Cosmology (Space and Time), Anthropology (The Human Constitution, Human Growth and Creativity, Religious Specialists), and Eschatology (Death and the End of Time).

While these are, of course, time-worn categories familiar to historians of religions, Sullivan's effort to redefine (or perhaps restate) the significance of myth for the study of human culture gives these terms new sense and life: "Myth does not simply denote a species of narrative; literary or oral genres are only symptoms of myth. Myth is not a form of lore but a quality of imaginal existence. Myth is the imagination beholding its own creativity as it relates to creativity in every form. . . . Myth reveals the sacred foundations and religious character of the imagination. Mythic symbols signify the possibility, variety, and meaning of cultural imagery. Myths are paradigmatic expressions of human culture; as significations that reveal the nature of significance, they make effective metastatements about imaginal existence" (p. 22).

This notion of myth and its relation to the imagination also serves to redefine the relation of myth and theory. In the chapter on cosmogony, for instance, there is not only an analysis of South American cosmogonic myths but also a reformulation of the nature and significance of cosmogonic myths for understanding the nature of symbolism, culture, and the human imagination.

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of the notion of morphology see SMITH 1972 and SULLIVAN 1983.

While one is reminded throughout of all that Eliade has written on this topic, everything *seems* new. (This may be as close, of course, as anything ever comes to being new.) Most interestingly, perhaps, Sullivan attempts to derive a theory of the imagination and the symbol from reading South American myth as “metastatements about imaginal existence.” Sullivan’s general statements about myth, symbol, and the imagination seem at times to be but translations of the myths’ own metastatements into the theoretical idiom of the West. To a degree at least, the myths of South America have been transformed from objects of study to seeming partners in the imaginative enterprise of theory.

Taken to its logical conclusions (which seem to demand a move from the logic of rationality to that of the imagination), the method proposed here demands a new style. The book is presented not just as an argument about images and the imagination but also as “an argument of images” (p. 20). In addition to reworking the sense of many of our explicitly theoretical terms, Sullivan also attempts to transform a vast array of common, ordinary words (such as *beginning, appearance, cutting, division, crisis, consumption, clothing, brew, dance, suck, sound, opening, end*, etc.) into a language for talking about religion and the human imagination. This is a mixture of words and images drawn from our everyday life as well as from the myths, rites, and daily life of South America. The book is full of plays on words, and one gradually realizes that the method is to play on words. Chapter subheadings, for instance, are a curious mixture of theoretical language, everyday idioms and phrases, and references to the life of South America: Closing the Creation Account: Withdrawal of Primordial Being; Human Appearance: “Dressing to Kill”; Music and Dance Make Calendars Possible; When Everything Sounds the Same; Destruction: The Need for a Break; Intemperance: Under the Influence of Immoderate Time, etc.

As one reads this interpretation of the religions of South America, one comes to sense that it is not just South Americans who are being interpreted. The theoretical terms and everyday language of the reader are also being subjected to interpretation and redefinition by application to the images and symbols of South American religions. The aim here seems to be not just to bring into view the religious imagination of South America but also to transform the consciousness and awareness of the everyday life of the reader by sensitizing one to the symbolic meanings everyday phrases, metaphors, and gestures do and might carry. This concern is reflected in Sullivan’s notion of the book’s audience. The book is addressed not only to the usual audience of academics but also to journalists, ethicists, jurists, and “especially to creative artists who have discovered that South American religious life is a worthy subject and stimulus for literature, music, drama, visual design, painting, and sculpture” (p. 4).

Though drawing on a wide range of contemporary scholarship, Sullivan is also moving against many contemporary intellectual currents. In many respects this book might be viewed as a response to ELIADE’s call for a new humanism (1961). Many of the same sorts of questions raised about Eliade’s work will be raised about *Ianchu’s Drum*: Does not the book move beyond the bounds of academic discourse through its poetic turn? Are the interpretations generated by a replicable method or the unreplicable work of a virtuoso? Are not the myths and symbols of South America detached from the specificity of

their cultural and historical context at too great a cost? Does the book increase our sense of the reality of South American communities and individuals or does placing them so deeply in the world of myth and imagination finally distance them yet again?<sup>3</sup>

One of the real delights of *Icanchu's Drum* is the way it revivifies questions and issues. The book will generate, however, not just questions and debate. I find it difficult to imagine coming away from this book without a new sense of possibility and a wealth of insights to apply to one's own materials (or daily life, art, etc.), however far from South America they may originate. Students of Japanese religion should consider *Icanchu's Drum* as one of the most important recent books about Japan.

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