

Reviews

The Gut: A Black Atlantic Alimentary Tract. By Elizabeth Pérez. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 75 pages. \$22.00 (Paper).

Elizabeth Pérez, ethnographer and historian of Afro-Diasporic and Latin American religions (University of California, Santa Barbara), is well-known for a book on anthropology of food titled *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, & the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York University Press, 2016). For the readers of this journal, it is important to note that the connection between food preparation and religious behaviors that encode it is an important aspect of the role of symbolic behaviors in human evolution and therefore is of significant interest for religion and science, as well as for the scientific models of human behavior in general. To paraphrase Pérez, work in the kitchen is for the hunger of the gods, it just happens to satiate the hunger of those who do the work. The collection and preparation of food is driven by the symbolic cultural realm, yet it supplies sustenance for the biological. The connection between the brain and the gut, and the way in which symbolic behaviors arise from the embodied experience, is of immense importance to our understanding of culturally postulated and transmitted religious behaviors as well as the way those behaviors interact with our biological functions. For anyone who ever had a “gut feeling” of something or is interested in how recent studies in neurogastroenterology could be understood when informed with religious practices, Pérez’ monograph is a welcome reading.

Pérez builds upon the ethnographic research and a substantial body of academic literature listed in bibliography to present a case study on the role of the gut. The text raises a plethora of issues related to methodology, history, and context of the study of religions. The text is divided into eight parts. In part one, we get the introductory remarks that guide the reader through the rest of the work. The range of metaphors and the insight presented there are both delightful and illuminating. Pérez presents the scope of this study as modest yet the range of it is considerable because of the author’s command of a complex set of intertwined theoretical frameworks. The explicit and implicit critique in this work is extensive, so it can be used as a departure point for future theoretical studies. Parts two and three discuss gut feelings and gut beings, respectively. In Afro-Diasporic religions, gut feelings are understood as something that must be addressed, and perhaps even controlled, through the symbolic framework of gut beings, specific deities, which are subject to ritual and ethnomedical intervention. In part four, Pérez discusses the diffusion of influences as well as uniqueness of experiences that are reflected in religious behaviors. This raises questions related to the problem of comparison in religious studies. Pérez is well-informed and skilled in applying the knowledge of literature on the problem of comparison on the materials covered in this study. Part five questions and critiques earlier literature on ritual practices of African and Afro-Diasporic religions by bringing out its implied assumptions. Parts six and seven add a layer of complexity by examining religious rituals and the role that religious behaviors have in the collective memory. Transmission of accumulated

knowledge of cultures is done through ritualized behaviors followed by stories as to what do they mean. Part eight extends the study into several specific directions that help us prepare and digest the overall relevance of drawing connections between food preparation and ritual practices that transmit cultural knowledge and collective memories.

The monograph is written for experts and those familiar with the archival materials covered, which makes it difficult for nonspecialists to understand. However, because the monograph is in dialogue with the literature on history and methodology of the study of religion, it presents even a casual academic reader with an opportunity to see the scaffolding behind theoretical approaches through examples from participatory observation and a lively engaging discourse that gives rise to deep insights into how cultural transmission takes place and the role that religious behaviors have in that process.

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God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning. By Meghan O’Gieblyn. New York: Doubleday. 2021. 304 pages. \$28.00. (Hardcover). \$18.00. (Paperback).

God, Human, Animal, Machine: Technology, Metaphor, and the Search for Meaning by Meghan O’Gieblyn is not just a scholarly exploration; it is akin to an intimate conversation with a close friend, discussing profound intricacies of our existence. Through its chapters, O’Gieblyn weaves an intriguing narrative that spans theology, technology, and existentialism, captivating readers with her deeply personal and conversational tone.

The text sets the stage with “The Soul of the Machine,” dissecting the metaphorical interpretations of the soul and its historical significance. As the narrative unfolds, a pivotal revelation emerges: even as machines grow to emulate human functions, the intrinsic human quest for meaning remains undeterred. This quest, increasingly, gets concealed beneath layers of technological excellence, consumerism, and the comforts of the modern age.

“God of Technology” resonates deeply, emphasizing the alarming propensity to view technology as a new-age deity. But, much like historical religious narratives that often anthropomorphized God, modernity risks making the same error with technology. Instead of a deity, we now have machines and algorithms as answers to our existential queries. Yet, these too mirror our limitations and paradoxes, indicating that our age-old yearnings merely find new forms of expression.

The parallels O’Gieblyn draws between contemporary scientific principles and their theological roots are both enlightening and provocative. The danger, she cautions, lies in conflating metaphors with reality, leading to potential fanaticism and discord. While religions have borne the brunt of such criticisms, O’Gieblyn unearths how contemporary scientism and digital age ideologies tread a similar path, often blurring the distinction between metaphor and reality.