

**Blanes, Ruy Llera and Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic (eds.). 2017. *Being Godless. Ethnographies of Atheism and Non-Religion*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books. 54 pp. Hb.: 7 \$95.00/£67.00. ISBN: 978178533628.**

*Being Godless. Ethnographies of Atheism and Non-Religion*, edited by Ruy Llera Blanes and Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic, is a contribution to the growing field of the study of religious disengagement. In the introduction, the editors explain that their interest is the ‘experiential quality of being godless,’ and use the latter as a descriptive ethnographic category (p. 4). This is broadly defined as the ‘reluctance of humans to engage with any divinized beings or notions of transcendental agency’ (p. 6), for example ‘partial indifference, unease, ambivalence, reluctance to be drawn in, and attempts at withdrawal from religious traditions’ (p. 3). The editors claim that the various forms of ‘being godless’ is an important empirical reality that anthropologists to some extent have neglected.

Six chapters explore various practices, meanings, and processes of people who disengage from religion and who in different situations express religious disinterest, disbelief, ambivalence, atheism, etc. The ethnographies are drawn from various religious and geographical contexts, including Macedonia, Angola and Taiwan. Each case shows that the ‘thinning out of religion’ is indeed an intricate matter. As such, the chapters support the editors’ call for a more nuanced approach to the complexities of the issue and go beyond the binary logic of ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’ that underlies much of the academic and public debate.

Chapter One, *Ambivalent atheist identities: power and non-religious culture in contemporary Britain* by Lois Lee explores diffuse, implicit, and complicated representations of people who figure as non-religiously affiliated in surveys. These identities, which are socially embedded, are often fluid and uncertain, and ‘ambivalent in the sense that they simultaneously empower and disempower those who hold them’ (p. 34).

Jacob Copeman and Johannes Quack’s chapter on *Godless people and dead bodies* analyses ‘materiality and the morality of atheist materialism’ (p. 40) in the Indian sub-continent from a cross-cultural perspective. Body donation is an ‘exemplary instance of the matter of disbelief’ and a ‘key atheist material artifact’ (p. 44). This interesting case study of body donation among Indian atheist activists explores the many practical, ethical, and ideological complexities at stake. Donation is not only a way of repudiating ‘irrational’ Hindu beliefs about the soul and the afterlife, circumventing costly and ‘harmful’ cremation ceremonies, and in doing so, curtailing the power of the Brahminic class in society, an important issue for local atheists. Body donation is also the ‘atheist gift’, a manifestation of positive, materialist atheism that demonstrates atheists’ morality through their willingness to use their own ‘material’ to help other people. The analysis is both clear and convincing.

Chapter Three takes us to postcolonial Angola, where Blanes and Abel Paxe study atheist political cultures after independence in 1975. In this, we learn about the development of atheism as a political ideology, its relation to nationalism, ethnicity, pan-Africanism and other discourses, and its social aspects. To draw attention to atheism in an African country is refreshing since Africa so often is approached as a continent with a remarkable religious vitality. One key to understanding the development is by charting the biographies and ideological development of the political figures who implemented antireligious policies. Interestingly, many of them had a Methodist background. Even

though the Angolan state for a period pursued militant atheism, atheism is now rarely felt in public discourse, although the authors still find traces in the formulation of nationalist and modernist visions.

In Chapter Four, *Forget Dawkins: Notes toward an ethnography of religious belief and doubt*, Paul-François Tremlett and Fang-Long Shih criticise the binary logic of the New Atheist discourse and its basic premise that religious beliefs represent private, mental or cognitive acts. The main bulk of the article is used to discuss such one-sided, reductionistic understandings of religion. The last part of the chapter presents ethnographic studies from Taiwan and the Philippines, of divination, healing sessions and astral journeys, which show that religious belief, and disbelief, is also about ‘embodied, performed, and socialized patterns’ (p. 93). These crucial observations could be used to nuance contemporary scholarly theories of religion instead of polemicising with Richard Dawkins and other amateurs.

In Chapter Five, *Antagonistic insights*, Sonja Luehrmann examines ‘evolving Soviet atheist critiques of religion and why they matter for anthropology’ (p. 97). A recurrent feature among the Soviet researchers was their ideological commitment to correcting the Durkheimian view that religion by definition fosters social cohesion. She also acknowledges their attention to ethnographic details in their studies.

The last case study, *Confessional anthropology* by Oustinova-Stjepanovic, is a very good read about a Sufi order in Macedonia and its sheikh. The sheikh comes across as part-time religious, expresses religious disinterest and doubt, and is as such a good example of the complexities of partial disengagement from religion. Moreover, as an informant and religious leader, the sheikh puts the field researcher in some uncomfortable situations. This is used to highlight some challenges associated with the use of ‘tactical religiosity’ (p. 116) and participant observation more generally, which sometimes lead to situations that may compromise the researcher’s ethical and personal integrity.

In the afterword, Matthew Engelke points out that the study of ‘being godless’ help us ‘refine and sharpen our analytical tools’ (p. 144) for the understanding of religion and non-religion. This book certainly does. Every chapter shows a sophisticated understanding of religious and non-religious complexities, and the emphasis on the social context and the value of ethnography and fieldwork is important. Some of the discussions occasionally seem a bit obsolete, though, at least to a scholar of religion. For example, the idea that religion is only about private, intellectual beliefs, an idea still held by the New Atheists, was debunked almost a century ago, while the Protestant bias in the category “religion” is well known. The same goes for the discussions of empathy, methodological atheism and questions of whether anthropologists need to “believe” in order to study religious people. The secular study of religion, such as comparative religion or history of religion, which is different from “religious studies” and theology, have a long tradition of debating such issues. More space could, therefore, have been dedicated to the theoretical implications and comparisons of the cases. However, the individual chapters and the introduction all contribute to advancing and nuancing existing theories of “non-religion”, religious disaffiliation, atheism, etc., and is, on the whole rather innovative, and well written.

CECILIE ENDRESEN  
*University of Oslo (Norway)*

**Katić, Mario. 2017. *Smrt u dalmatinskom zaleđu: Mirila od rituala do teatra*. Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak. 280 pp. Hb.: 139.00 kn. ISBN: 9789533551302.**

The book *Death in the Dalmatian Hinterland: Mirila from Ritual to Theatre* offers the results of the author's research spanning several years. These were first shaped in the author's doctoral study, and later in this book. In addition to the introductory and concluding chapters, the book contains five thematic sections. In the introductory chapter, the author defines the basic starting points from which his research departs, while vividly depicting his own journeys (including both physical trips to the field, and his familiarisation with the literature and theoretical frameworks): from his first encounter with *mirila* in the Starigrad region, to the broadening of insights gained and to the space covered as part of the research conducted in the regions of Bukovica and Ravni Kotari. His acquaintance over time with similar practices in other European regions, and the search for and discovery of his own interpretative frameworks are also covered. During all these steps, the author came into contact with numerous collaborators from various professions and institutions, and indirectly, his text demonstrates the importance of collaboration between researchers and institutions. In the introductory section of the book, the author briefly reviews the terminology and explains his decision to name the subject of his research "practices of marking places of rest with the deceased", in so doing, rising above locally marked names given. The author also places his research within the wider framework of the anthropology of death.

In the introductory section, we find the main, guiding thread of the author's research: a dependence on context. On the one hand, "dependence on context", entails – for the author – the influence which various contexts can have on the functions and meanings of practices used to mark places of rest with the deceased. On the other hand, for the author, context entails 'and how researchers and authors of articles, when searching for a particular meaning and function, consciously or unconsciously choose the context in which they will observe a particular phenomenon' (p. 17). In concluding that researchers to date have placed emphasis on the religious-symbolic aspects of *mirila*, Mario Katić wishes to set up his own research differently, permitting that various practices in different localities and in different circumstances lead to the drawing of conclusions about what *mirila* are: a religious-symbolic practice, a part of wider practices of marking places of rest with the deceased, intangible cultural heritage and a tourist attraction, a performing art, and a place of memory. Each of these thematic-analytical entanglements has one of the five sections of the book devoted to it.

In the section, *Mirila as a Religious-Symbolic Practice: Research to Date*, the author gives a precise overview of records and scientific articles on *mirila* up to the present. He reaches for varied published and unpublished materials, which are exhibited chronologically, combining longer and shorter quotes from sources, and his comments. What the materials covered have in common is an orientation towards the religious-symbolic function of *mirila*, which is only one of several relevant contexts according to the author. The sections that follow are dedicated to other contexts.

In the first of them, entitled *Other Forms of This Practice in Europe, and on Terminology: Why Mirila?*, the author problematises the question of terminology and argues why he considers the use of a neutral descriptive name to be more appropriate than the

use of a local name for all forms of this practice. In the chapters that follow, the author widens the geographical reach of his research and deals with certain practices of marking places of rest with the deceased in various European countries, while advocating macro-level research – ideas which are common to diverse practices, and the micro-level – those nested within a historical, political, religious and geographical context, which contributes to the diversity of forms recorded.

The next section, *Mirila from Religious-Symbolic Practice to Intangible Cultural Heritage and Tourist Attraction*, is dedicated to processes of the creation of heritage, i.e. to the consequences of recognising and naming mirila as a cultural good. The author points out certain paradoxes, as he calls them, surrounding the protection of cultural heritage. One especially interesting paradox, which may prove stimulating for further analysis of the concept of intangible cultural heritage, is that ‘*mirila* are protected as intangible cultural heritage in regions where they are dead as such, existing only as tangible, while in places where they exist as intangible heritage as well, they are practically neglected’ (p. 156). The author also problematises the role of tourism, as one factor which altered everyday life, involved in the abandoning of the construction of mirila, yet which is now a factor contributing to their preservation. The author especially casts light on the roles of individuals and institutions in the shaping and promotion of mirila as cultural heritage and as a tourist offering. He illustrates how cultural heritage did not emerge by itself nor from nowhere, but that it is the product of the ideas and activities of specific individuals, politics and institutionalised programmes.

The next section, titled *Mirila from Ritual to Theatre: Mirila as a Performing Art*, offers an analysis of Josip Zanki’s and Bojan Gagić’s artistic project. In order to clarify this aspect of the life of *mirila*, the author discusses a theoretical approach to rituals and the relationship between rituals and theatre, offering a nuanced analysis of the artists’ intentions and of the reactions of the audience – participants in the performance themselves. This includes the author’s reactions.

Finally, the section titled *Mirila as Places of Memory in the Bukovica and Ravni Kotari Regions* is dedicated to a region in which *mirila* continue to be built. In this section, the author problematises materiality and memory, presenting the mutability of practices and their adaption to everyday life, wherein the main causes of changes are identified in traffic infrastructure (building new roads and asphaltting) and the Homeland War.

In the concluding chapter, the author systematically summarises the conclusions drawn, and once again advocates for the study of what takes place during the process of transferring certain practices into a new context.

Mario Katić’s book excels in its strong foundation in field research, archival sources, and available literature. The author’s collected materials are approached in a critical, comparative and contextualised manner. The reader is led in a variety of directions, both geographic and analytic. This enables us to look at practices of marking places of rest with the deceased as religious-symbolic practices, as researchers have to date. Through reading about similar practices in various parts of Europe, this also helps us recognise certain common elements and local specificities. It enables us to see in action what the naming of certain practices as heritage and their inclusion in tourist offerings brings with it.

Furthermore, it permits us to gain insight into how certain practices become an inspiration for the performing arts and lets us think of this particular cultural phenomenon as a place of memory. In moving away from the ingrained and dominant observations to date of the religious-symbolic aspects of *mirila*, the author sketches out new research paths. On the real paths along which he has visited numerous localities, he has met with those who live with *mirila*, with individuals who design tourist and artistic projects, with people who either remember *mirila* or gradually forget them. The other paths concern the author's delving through a multitude of records and thoughts, both his own and others. These range from initial confusion, gradual discovery and orienting himself to, finally, reaching new interpretations. While he carefully draws certain conclusions, the author clearly shows us in this book how research can take us in a number of directions, open numerous questions, and offer us a variety of interpretations if we surrender to it, and if we let culture be what it is, as 'nothing is unchangeable and fixed, that is the only cultural constant' (p. 16).

PETRA KELEMEN  
*University of Zagreb (Croatia)*