H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Chistopher Buck. *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999. xvii + 402 pp. $23.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-4062-9.

Reviewed by Daniel Grolin (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Bahai (July, 2000)

Christopher Buck undertakes in this volume a comparison of two religions, that of the Baha'i Faith and Persian Christianity. Both are religions about which there exists relatively little scholarship. The "experiment," as Buck puts it, is an experiment of phenomenological nature, the contribution "is primarily methodological" (p. 9). As the subtitle suggests the method involves symbols, more precisely "key symbols," through which religious thoughts are expressed.

The model is intended to make a "synchronic comparisons of diachronically unrelated traditions" (p. 10). Those that find such a statement difficult to understand will undoubtedly find the first 35 pages difficult to understand as well. What Buck means by the above statement is that his method takes two contextually (historically) unrelated (religious) traditions and reads them comparatively on key issues. It is important from the outset to be clear that this is the main contribution of this volume, a method in which the two religions, Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith, are part of a case study. There are two parts to Buck's comparison where I understand the first to be Buck's major contribution namely the DREEMS (Doctrinal, Ritual, Ethical, Experiential, Mythic and Social) scheme developed from Ninian Smart's (multi-)dimentional model. This is coupled with a comparison of views of Paradise, which serves as "master symbol of a core religious paradigm". (p.10) The DREEMS model operates at two different levels. First, it deals with " 'key-scenarios' or schemas for enacting cultural behaviors" (p. 15), and second, with "root metaphors" which "serve to orient thought." Each of these "respectively represent ideals of thought and action" (p. 16).

Buck discusses next the rise of "New Comparativism" and some of the criticisms that have been directed towards comparative endeavours. Again this will probably not be of much interest to those who are not students of Science of Religion. Those whose interest is primarily historical may yet benefit from this volume. However, they should be cautioned. Though history is part of the methodological foundation, it is not a means to a historical conclusion. As Buck states, it "makes no attempt to formulate a causal explanation in terms of history, in order to account for similarities and differences between early Syriac Christianity and the Baha'i Faith as symbol systems" (p. 32).

So at the outset of his introductory chapter, "Comparing Paradises," Buck has clearly put forth 1) what he intends to do, 2) how he intends to do it, and 3) what we may expect to learn from it. He also implicitly makes it clear to whom he is writing, for he has made it fairly inaccessible to the popular reader as well as making it only

marginally significant to the historian.

The next four chapters serve to profile the two religions, first a historical profile (enabling a diachronic reading) and then a symbolic profile (for the synchronic reading).

The second chapter is, as mentioned, a profile of Persian Christianity, a section of Christianity that has received very little attention indeed. Buck's presentation is most welcome. It has long been an established but little known fact that "Nestorian Church" is a misnomer. (p. 4) Buck's portrait of Persian Christianity is admirably thorough, mapping theological schism, geographic spread and vernacular. He discusses Aphrahat and Ephrem who were significant actors in the formation of Persian Christianity. The latter's polemics is then used to discover the various factions that were the inventory of fourth century Persian Christian ethos. Marcionites, Bardaisanites, Manichaeism, Arianism, Jews and Chaldeans each formed the canvas upon which Ephrem formulated his position. Within this chapter is an article that Buck published in the Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society. Here Buck presents the historical-political scenery of Persian Christianity giving geographical expansion and linguistic diffusion.

The third chapter, the symbolic profile of Syriac Christianity, is prefaced by a discussion "Syria symbol theory," and deals with the various terms employed to refer to metaphors, symbols and types, which nuances the discussion of the symbolic profile slightly. The profile itself consists of twelve symbols, a key-scenario and a root metaphor for each of the dimensions in the DREEMS model. Buck's choice of symbols is guided by the identification of the symbols mentioned as Ephrem's "favorite" in secondary literature's (p. 96). In my mind this is a sound judgment, since Ephrem was indeed formative for Persian Christianity. However, another option should perhaps be considered. Some of Ephrem's favourite symbols were in use prior to his time. As an example we might look at the Acts of Thomas, which is generally believed to be a Syriac work from the third century, and more specifically the so-called Hymn of the Pearl (Perlenlied, Hennecke-Scheemelcher "Neutestamentliche Apokryphen" p. 303) which was incorporated into it. In this hymn two of Ephrem's favourite symbols appear as central symbols: the Pearl (p. 123) and the Robe Glory (p. 100). The hymn depicts a travelling prince who, prior to his departure, takes off his "glittering robe" so that he may seek out the Pearl which is to be found in Egypt. While in Egypt he forgets his quest and his royal identity because he is given their food to eat. He slumbers, but is reawaken by a letter sent to remind him who he is, it is signed by all the kings and princes of Parthia and the nobles of the East. Having retrieved the Pearl, he returns to be reinvested with his luxuriously adorned robe. As Klijn observes, it is in reality the Robe which is the controlling symbol, for the Pearl is in reality only a means by which the Robe may be attained. ("The Acts of Thomas", p. 276-277) The narrative itself has conspicuous parallels with the salvation myth of Ephrem as outlined by Buck: 1) Primordial Robes of Glory, 2) Disrobed in Disgrace, 3) Christ places Robe in Jordan and 4) Paradise Regained. (p. 101-102)

The purpose of drawing parallels between Ephrem and other early Syriac/Persian works would be to guard against an Ephramic bias. Another issue relates to the classification of the symbols as either key-symbols or root metaphors. If one considers Buck's classification carefully, one will, most of the time, be able to see why one symbol is more appropriately classified as one or the other, but not always. Hence it would have been preferable if he had started the presentation of each symbol with such a clarification.

The fourth chapter is the historical profile of the Baha'i Faith. Selecting Baha'u'llah as the primary historical key-figure of the Baha'i Faith makes of course perfect sense. Like the historical profile of Persian Christianity, the key-figure receives relatively little biographical space, rather the bulk of the profile is devoted to surveying their interaction with their social worlds. While Ephrem interacted primarily with various forms of religious communities, Baha'u'llah interacted primarily with modernity. This interaction is understood then primarily as reflected in Baha'u'llah's legislation in the Kitab-i Aqdas and more specifically as it is proclaimed in the Lawh-i Bisharat. Baha'u'llah's interaction with modernity and former religious practice is understood as one of sacralisation and desacralisation, that is to say making some principles of modernity sacred by making them a part of the divine law, while desacralising former principles by annulling them (p. 146-147). Buck goes through each of the points of the Bisharat explaining how they proclaims a law or laws of the Aqdas and how they respond to modernity (or former religious practices). In general, this chapter is insightful, clear and to the point.

The fifth chapter gives the symbolic profile of the Baha'i Faith. This chapter first appeared as an article in the Journal of Baha'i Studies (8.4/ 1998). In order for it to be intelligible as an article, Buck reintroduces some of

the concepts behind the symbolic profile, and those who found the introduction at the beginning of the volume daunting might benefit from reading this shorter version. The BahÃ¡'Ã profile has an additional sub-dimension, as each of the symbols are treated from 1) a personal, 2) a proclamatory and 3) a global dimension. Each of these instances has a quotation and an analysis. Though this new sub-division makes sense and clarifies the material considerably, Buck does not provide the theoretical background for its introduction.

In the sixth chapter Buck begins the comparative process. Here the four profiles are seen in relation to each other. This is where Buck's four chapters of preparatory work reach their conclusion. The overall conclusions will not be surprising to the attentive reader. Though rather short, in my opinion, this chapter is highly important.

Chapter seven gives a comparison of Paradises. This chapter, though less methodologically rigorous, and less mechanical, are up to Buck's standards of thoroughness. The first part of this chapter was first published in the Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society. The article provides a detailed and reading of Ephrem's exposition on Paradise. Terms such as "soul", "spirit", "body" and "physical" are configured into a great anthropological and soteriological profile.

There is one proposition in the conclusion with which I disagree. Buck refers to a remark made by an Eddesan bishop once when he was showing the portrait of King Abgar to a pilgrim: "That is King Abgar. *Before he saw the Lord,* he believed in him as the true Son of God". (p. 285 italics original) Buck takes this to mean that "between soul sleep and body rising is the conscious spirit enjoying beatific vision." (Ibid.) However the legend of Abgar suggest another meaning. According to a legend recorded in Eusebius in "Ecclesiastical History" (I,XIII) Abgar had heard of Jesus' miraculous powers and had written asking Jesus to come and heal him. Jesus replied in a letter promising to send a disciple after His ascension. When Thaddaeus, a disciple sent by Thomas, came into the presence of Abgar suddenly a great vision appeared to the king "on the face of the apostle" (from the Greek: en too prosoopoo tou apostopou). A later account in Doctrine of Addai speaks of Abgar having been shown a portrait of Jesus. These stories may have no historical content at all, but were significant in the Syriac Church of the fourth century because they aided the orthodox party in its fight against the sectarians by lending it apostolicity.

In the profiling of the Baha'i Paradise, Buck proposes that "unity" represents the core paradigm behind this Paradise. To profile this Paradise, Buck sets out to refine the theme of unity by using the classification scheme developed by Raymond F. Piper (p. 289). The unity paradigm is thus manifest in 23 different "Baha'i teachings" (p. 290). Buck thus proceeds to prove his thesis by linking each of these types of unities to a "Paradise imagery" in the Writings and utterances of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha.. I think Buck does this quite convincingly and rightly concludes that these show "the centrality of Baha'u'llah's unity paradigm in Baha'i teachings, and how such texts employ Paradise imagery as a rhetorical device, to impress upon the reader the importance of unity in its various forms." (p. 311).

The final chapter is devoted to drawing conclusions on the whole project. This is primarily a summary of conclusions reached from the comparisons of the previous chapter. Buck then "anticipates" what sort of objections might be raised to the project. In general, he finds no major objections or weakness which he has not in some way accounted for. The first item is the limits and extent of the comparison. Here it must be granted that Buck has been very careful to balance his profiles making it neither too extensive nor too limited. The second item is the accuracy with which the two religions are profiled. This is to be understood as the interaction between the synchronic and diachronic reading, as well as a consideration of the availability of Syriac and Iranian texts as well as the ethnic identity of the Church.

In turning to the Baha'i Faith he notes that his approach describing the "revelation" of Baha'u'llah as a process of desacralisation and sacralisation, may not "endear" some Baha'is. (p. 319) This may be true, but I would agree with Buck that this misses the point of the approach.

I would like to use this occasion to point out that it may be argued that reading Baha'u'llah as being in a dialectical relationship with His social-historical context is not only important from an academic point of view. We may indeed argue that the very concept of progressive revelation presupposes that Baha'u'llah spoke "in accordance with [our] capacity and understanding, not with [Baha'u'llah's] state and the melody of [His] voice" (Arabic Hidden Words, page 67). Likewise, Muhammad speaks of the Qur'an as having come down in Arabic so that it would be of use to His audience.

I think, however, that the point raises another issue about the nature of the two traditions being analyzed. The one figure (Ephrem) is operating within a tradition arguing for "orthodoxy", while the other is standing out-

side and founding a new "heterodox" tradition. Ephrem may be a saint, but he is not a source of the sacred, Baha'u'llah, on the other hand, is sacred and thus participates Himself in His own system of sacralisation. In other words, there is a difference in the "type" of subject through which the two religious traditions are being studied. With regard to Buck's selection of data, it is interesting that in the case of Ephrem, who is not the founder of Persian Christianity, his "favorite" symbols represent his religion. On the other hand, the Baha'i symbols come from Wendi Momen's selection of entries in her book, "A Basic Baha'i Dictionary", which may not be guided by Baha'u'llah's favorite symbols, but seems rather to be guided by a more general interest in the Baha'i Faith.

On a whole, Christopher Buck's project is a success both as a methodological experiment and as practical comparative effort. As far as I am concerned, Jonathan Z. Smith is correct in praising it as a "superior piece of work" and an extremely "sophisticated exercise in comparison". (p. xiii) As a piece of Baha'i scholarship it remains unparalleled. In terms of academic comparative efforts involving the Baha'i Faith, Buck's book is a pioneering work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-bahai

Citation: Daniel Grolin. Review of Buck, Chistopher, *Paradise and Paradigm: Key Symbols in Persian Christianity and the Baha'i Faith.* H-Bahai, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4325