

First, the assumptions that modernity is unique and that a sharp distinction can be drawn between modern and premodern dominate the text. The student is told that in ancient times the question whether to be religious or not would have been greeted with a sigh and “Anything else would be stupid” (6). At this point I began to wonder about the arguments in world history circles over the uniqueness of the modern world system. The authors specifically mention ancient Rome in silent recognition of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s discussion of *religio* forty years ago, but they fail to include his mention of Roman philosophy as the forerunner of our notion of religion as “a great objective something” (1991 [1963], 22). This sharp distinction between modern and premodern has disturbing origins in the colonial world, and cannot be taken as an incontrovertible fact.

Second, the assumption that religious experience originates from awesome powers of nature, which evoke feelings of fascination and dread, revives Rudolph Otto—surprising in a textbook centered in the postmodern condition. Otto’s theory comes all too close to being treated as a universal fact, “as defining mark of religious experience across cultures” (7) without any acknowledgment of its theological underpinning.

Third, I question the assumption that myths and rituals form a unit in which symbolic stories are reenacted (7). The old Myth and Ritual school emerges as an unnamed voice of authority. And, immediately after a discussion about the shaman (“world’s oldest religious specialist”), with Eliade’s theories insinuated in the discussion, students are told that with the coming of the great world religions a new specialist, the scholar as interpreter, appears, because “all the world’s religions have relied on written records.” This is a curious statement since the world’s oldest scripture, the Vedas, lived for millennia in the memory of their keepers, the scholarly Brahmins.

Factual mistakes are not really the problems here. Rather, if a textbook promises the student a postmodern outlook, then a key practice of postmodern theory should prevail. Students should be brought into the discussion and made aware of the problems in the study of religion as well as the problems of studying religion in the postmodern world.

Another area of concern is that the authors outline four major great cosmic stories of the emerging great religions of the world, which seem to be very much alive, to judge from the accompanying pictures. They condense India into “India and the Myths of Liberation.” After an assertion that, in India, “life was seen through the metaphors of the natural cycles and rhythms of nature,” the student is told that “the goal of religion is to destroy the illusions fostered by our selfish desires, for only when these are mastered can humans be freed from the wheel of death and rebirth (samsara)” (18). Then, “The Middle East and the Myths of History” is contrasted to all else: “The goal is not to escape time by returning to the beginning through myth and ritual, nor rising above time in mystical ecstasy, but of meeting God in time and making a journey with God through time. Time is promising and the future ultimately hopeful” (21). This unacknowledged rehash of Max Weber’s theories does not do justice to an otherwise sophisticated text. Weber’s reading of the religions in India (and China) no longer controls the debates on the influence of religion on the capacity to deal with history. Current political debates view India and China not as world-denying civilizations but as technological powerhouses threatening to overwhelm the West’s own economies.

When I thought about this twenty-five-page excursus through religion, I realized that our textbooks repeat each other in an unconscious meta-narrative of world religions. The same theories appeared almost verbatim in a handy chart “comparing and contrasting the religions of East and West” in *Religion: A Preface* by John F. Wilson (1982). A more telling point comes in the description of postmodernity: “For *World Religions Today*, postmodernism is an era in which ‘Diversity relativizes all stories.’” The text adds one self-reflective point, “In fact, the very creation of textbooks on world religions encourages just such a postmodern awareness of the relativity of all of our stories” (26). Yet the authors ignore the most important injunction of postmodernism: the need for self-reflexivity about the field itself—religious studies, comparative religions, and the history of religions. Postmodernism is more than relativism or even pluralism or even the questioning of science. It begins with a critique of the academic field—deconstruction of the processes of knowledge. If a textbook of this quality and sophistication fails at this key point, where will the student learn about the role of the oft-repeated academic shibboleths that helped to create a sense of the radical distinction—radical difference—between the modern West and so-called premodern cultures (Long 1986, 79-96)?

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CHINESE RELIGIONS IN WORLD RELIGIONS TEXTBOOKS

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Religions of China are routinely given short shrift in world religions textbooks. It would be foolish to expect equity in these matters, but when traditions important to a large percentage of the world’s populations are accorded only a fraction of the pages devoted to that upstart Mediterranean cult—I am speaking, of course, of Christianity—one naturally begins to ask questions. Such books are thicker in their treatment of “the center of the world,” that fertile spiritual navel from which emerged the so-called Abrahamic traditions, and become thinner and thinner as they move toward the “barren” Pacific Rim, where civilization gradually fades away into the amorphous oceans. There one reaches that distant marginal edge where things appear smaller from a distance, like the “Small World” of diminutive foreign peoples in Disneyland—which perhaps not coincidentally was created in the twentieth century at roughly the same time as were

the reified “isms” of many textbooks. It is perhaps not accidental that Disneyland has been a venue for the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. After the meeting, when one leaves the Magic Kingdom, one is still in the Magic Kingdom.¹

Space limitations may not allow textbook authors much room for discussing the significance of the English terms Daoism or Confucianism, or for exploring the problematic history of their construction, both within China and without. However, the underlying issue is whether the authors show a sufficient grasp of the historiographical pitfalls involved, are sufficiently familiar with primary texts in English translation, or are versed in recent secondary historical studies. Many textbooks do not pass the test; some, however, provide concise surveys of important beliefs and practices.

But what is a Chinese tradition? Yin and yang? According to Michael Molloy’s *Experiencing the World’s Religions** and Mary Pat Fisher’s *Living Religions*,* there are primarily two traditions in China: Daoism and Confucianism, which are to one another as yin is to yang. Fisher’s chapter on Chinese religions is titled “Taoism and Confucianism: The Unity of Opposites.” These opposites “like yin and yang . . . interpenetrate and complement each other” (190). Molloy similarly asserts that “Taoism is often thought to emphasize the yin aspects of reality and Confucianism the yang. Together they form a unity of opposites” (211). But using yin and yang as interpretive models for understanding ancient texts where they scarcely, if ever, appear only gives into temptation: the terms are current in American popular culture and students think they are familiar with them. Unfortunately, the yin-yang model is anachronistic, since the terms are rare even in the *Daodejing* and were not particularly important in Chinese thought until the late Warring States era (ca. 403-221 BCE), that is, until long after the compilation of the Confucian *Analects* and most of the other early works both authors cite as manifesting this complementarity. The overuse of yin and yang is a common feature of many world religions texts.²

Carol Anderson points to the disappearance of women in college course books elsewhere in this issue. Essays on Chinese religion are no exception. Although the Chinese term for human being, or *ren*, is not gendered in Chinese, it is still commonly translated as man in works by sinologists and nonspecialists alike. Women rarely appear in essays on Chinese religions in textbooks, and when they do, they often are confined to the fashionable “boxes” at the margins of pages; occasionally they embody 1950s American gender roles or even appear as sexualized Victorian fantasies about the female other. Molloy, for example, understands the relationship between husband and wife (one of the Five Relationships) in early China as follows: “The husband is an authoritative protector,” he claims, “and the wife is a protected homemaker and mother” (232). Mencius spoke of the *distinctions* between husband and wife, but he did not have *Leave it to Beaver* in mind. (Molloy, like many others, attributes the Five Relationships to Confucius rather than *Mencius* 3A.4.) Fisher, on the other hand, discusses the role of women much more fairly. Women’s religiosity is incorporated within the discussion itself instead of being tacked on to its surface, as often happens when authors give a nod to women’s studies as they create a “new” edition.

Women fare poorly in David S. Noss’s *A History of the World’s Religions*.³ Explaining notions of yin and yang, Noss claims that yang is “active, warm, dry, bright, procreative, expansive—characteristics likely to be dominant in males” (257). Yin, by compar-

ison, “is an energy mode in a lower and slower key; it is fertile and breeding, dark, cold, wet, mysterious, secret, the recessive principle—likely to be dominant in females” (257). To Noss, Chinese men were considered of “great worth” and women were “of less account” (257). Women do appear later in Noss’s discussion, however, for bouts of “ritualized sexual congress” in Daoist monasteries in Song times (284). His source for this practice, which recalls lurid nineteenth-century accounts of Indian “Tantra,” is W. P. J. MacClagan’s *Chinese Religious Ideas*, which was published by the Student Christian Movement Press in London in 1926.⁴

Such a hopelessly out-of-date citation is typical of Noss’s bibliography. The first edition of what is now titled *A History of the World’s Religions* appeared in 1949, and the bulk of the current edition’s sources still date to before that year, except for a few that have been added in a section on modern China. What is at heart an early twentieth-century survey of Chinese religions is thus marketed in its eleventh edition to unsuspecting undergraduates, who pay a very high price for what amounts to pre-war scholarship.⁵ A closer look at bibliographies of many recent editions of world religions texts reveals similar problems: despite the outpouring of excellent research and new discoveries in Chinese religions in recent decades, very little of it has reached college textbooks, whose bibliographies are loaded with sources from thirty years ago. Still, an updated bibliography is in itself no reliable indication that the accompanying text has been revised accordingly.

Textbooks cannot be expected to reflect the state of the field, but at least they should not perpetuate stereotypes. Molloy, for example, admirably discusses a number of important concepts, but misperceptions about China common in American popular culture nonetheless emerge. He asserts that modern Asian companies are like one large family and emphasize “togetherness” and “harmony” (233)—despite what is commonly known of Asian sweatshops and the appalling safety record of factories and mines. Whereas the reader is relieved to note that “Confucian virtues do not lead to antlike conformity” (234)—a concession that hints that maybe they just might—she is nonetheless cautioned that in the Confucian tradition “individual uniqueness . . . is expected to be muted” (234). Predictably, this vision of Confucian culture is contrasted with the West, which “values what is different and individualistic” (234).⁶

Similarly, the Confucian notion of sincerity, which Molloy understands as fulfilling social obligations and subduing personal desires that might interfere with that objective, is “virtually the opposite” of its Western counterpart, which is “personal and ‘from the heart,’ free of social control” (237). Molloy has misread notions of self-cultivation and moral autonomy presented in the *Analects* and the *Mencius* and then compares them to modern American ideals, rather than to their less attractive realities. What will American students take away from this? That Chinese people do not act “from the heart”? That they lack individuality? That they have values virtually opposite those of people from the West?

Fisher’s *Living Religions* is not burdened with such stereotypes, and it reflects a much broader and deeper understanding of major texts. She explains problems associated with the word Daoism, and she briefly introduces the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, Han and early medieval traditions, and internal alchemy. Yet there is only so much that can be said in the ten pages of text devoted to Daoism (compared to seventy for Christianity). Terms such as

longevity and immortality are used too loosely and too interchangeably, as in many popular works on Daoism. Longevity is not a particularly Daoist spiritual goal but is a boon sought in many early works such as the *Book of Documents* (a Confucian text) and in medical texts. And although the *Zhuangzi* is discussed under the subheading “Taoism—the way of nature and immortality,” that work is actually more famous for its sympathetic treatment of death. Students will be engaged by the sections on modern fengshui, *taijiquan*, and *qi*, phenomena that have very complex histories and have been badly misrepresented in the popular press. But geomancy and many body-movement practices are not necessarily Daoist. For early teachings on the cultivation of *qi*, one could profitably look to the *Mencius* (2A.2), a Confucian work. The tendency to divide Chinese traditions into camps of yin and yang blurs the complex sharing of ideas common in many early texts.

One problem common to many world religions course books is the blurring of ancient and modern beliefs. Authors would be well advised to provide bold-faced chronological information for a student audience that commonly makes the most casual of distinctions between, for instance, the years 800 BCE, 800 CE, and 1800. Students will not realize that many forms of *taijiquan* or fengshui are of relatively recent date, nor will they necessarily understand that some archaic ritual usages have been extinct for thousands of years—even when an author states as much. This issue is particularly significant for such sensational topics as human sacrifice. One hopes that students who read the “Basic Chinese Religious Concepts” section of Lewis M. Hopfe and Mark R. Woodward’s *Religions of the World** will not think of “human sacrifice as being the supreme offering to the deities” (171) in China today. At any rate, human sacrifice was practiced in high antiquity and even later, but whether it was a supreme offering to deities (who usually preferred beef, pork, or mutton) is another question.

Some textbooks present Chinese traditions in terms of Christian concepts, especially Christian monotheism. Balanced comparisons between Christian and Chinese texts can be pedagogically useful, but depicting Chinese phenomena as Asian manifestations of OT divinities is unfounded. Ninian Smart’s *The World’s Religions* sins grievously in this regard. He claims that the early Chinese notion of heaven was “sometimes treated rather abstractly as Providence, and sometimes more personally as God” (1998, 110-11). The later Chinese notion of *taiji*, or the Great Ultimate, he understands as “a sort of God beyond God” (111; Smart repeatedly misspells *taiji* as *taizhi*). It is not surprising then that Smart devotes far more space to Hong Xiuquan—the nineteenth-century visionary who posed as the younger brother of Jesus—than to any other Chinese figure, even Confucius. Hopfe and Woodward state that in early times “the Chinese became aware of one Supreme God above all other gods or spirits” (169); the Zhou rulers moreover believed that “one Supreme God controlled the destinies of all humankind” (172). Hopfe and Woodward also understand Chinese spiritual beings in terms of good *shen* spirits and evil *gui* spirits. Notions of good and evil were not particularly important in early China, and at any rate good and evil (or, more commonly, “what is not good”) were conceptualized very differently than in the Abrahamic traditions.⁷

Chinese religions are often depicted as lacking something that is purportedly present in Abrahamic religions. Hopfe and Woodward, for example, state that the Zhou almost developed “an

ethical monotheism similar to that enunciated by the Hebrew prophets in the eighth century B.C.E.,” but unfortunately “the emphasis on morality as a means of satisfying the High God remained in the hands of the rulers, and prophets never arose in this period of Chinese history” (173). Similarly, they claim that Daoism “cannot be clearly delineated as a religion with a certain body of doctrines and rituals as can Islam or Christianity” (174), for “indeed, Taoism and Confucianism lack many of the elements common to other religions of the world” (168). (Apparently this lacking was compensated by the introduction of Islam and Christianity into China.) In “Taoism and Confucianism Today,” they claim that prior to 1949 the “native” Chinese religions of Daoism and Confucianism “had for all practical purposes ceased to be influential in Chinese life” (191) and conclude that “the dominant Chinese religions of China prior to 1949 had been imported from outside: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam” (191). One can readily acknowledge the importance of Buddhism, but to assert that the latter two traditions were of similarly great consequence flies in the face of the historical record.

The idea that Daoism “cannot be clearly delineated” is part of a widespread notion that Chinese religions are unclear or confusing—one step away from dismissing them as inscrutable. Hopfe and Woodward state that students may find some aspects of Chinese religions “puzzling” (168) and point to elements that make “the study of Chinese religions difficult for the modern student” (169). Smart opens by baldly stating: “Westerners have often been confused about religion in China” (106). Even the Chinese themselves were apparently confused and naive about their own past. Noss claims that Warring States thinkers “were reconstructing the past with the aid of legend and myth and were undoubtedly not in possession of the true historical facts” (254). Noss himself then discusses Chinese myths completely out of their historical context, not realizing that most date to much later than Warring States times. Suggesting that these accounts were understood literally, and lacking an appreciation of their historiography or complex symbolism, he claims that “In the distant past, but badly jumbled together by the *confusing* accounts, there reigned ten great epochs, totaling two million years (!), groups of human, half-human, and animal-like sovereigns, who often occupied the throne for periods lasting up to eighteen thousand years” (255; italics added). The addition of the exclamation point (Noss’s) suggests the Chinese were so simple-minded that they believed such accounts literally. (One genuinely wonders whether such accounts ever existed in this form). It is little wonder that American students believe there is a Chinese tradition called “Confusionism.” They have been consistently told that China is confusing.

Of course Chinese religions are complex, but they are hardly more complex than belief systems elsewhere. One might ask whether textbook writers depict Abrahamic traditions in such a light. In Smart’s discussion of early Jewish and Christian traditions, we find not confusion but a “*rich interplay* of religious movements, rituals, belief systems, and customs” (246; italics added) that develops into a system that is “universal in scope” (246). Hopfe and Woodward state that “Christianity is the largest religion in the world” (278) and thus contains “a great variety of beliefs and practices,” but those variations share many basic themes (278). Confusion is thus replaced by sharing and commonality.

A text published by the Maryknoll Press actually offers a more sympathetic account of Chinese religions than do “secular” (my

term) course books, whose authors do not reveal (or are not aware of) their theological disposition. The inside cover of *Imagining the Sacred: Soundings in World Religions* by Vernon Ruland, a Jesuit, states that the book is “rooted in a Christian and Maryknoll theological perspective” but attempts to recognize “the multiplicity of basic perspectives concerning the methods and content of interreligious dialogue.” Ruland conceptualizes various traditions as “Ways,” and by using this same term for each chapter—“The Christian Way,” “The Hindu Way,” and so on—tries to create a common vocabulary for exploring their differences and similarities. I do not agree with his combination “Chinese-Japanese Ways,” which collapses Confucian, Daoist, and Shinto traditions in the same brief essay, nor do I subscribe to his polarization of yin and yang. Yet Ruland presents a very thoughtful and respectful discussion of Chinese *religiosity*. Smart’s treatment in *World’s Religions*, by comparison, is a hurried survey of Chinese thought and history, some of which just happens to be religious. This is particularly evident in Smart’s discussion of modern China, which is a summary account of historical events and figures (such as Hong Xiuquan and the Christian Nationalist leader Sun Yat-sen) that is not focused on the history of religions. For Ruland, the Confucian Way is not only *not* confusing but is a “highly sophisticated tradition of moral attitudes and ceremony” (32) recorded in texts that are “multilayered compilations” (33). Daoists are described as “reflective” (32); Confucius performed rituals “faithfully” (32).

Romanization of Chinese terms creates problems for students, since both the older Wade-Giles and modern pinyin systems are currently in use. Textbook writers can readily avail themselves of conversion charts to standardize their romanization or consult such well-known works as De Bary and Bloom’s *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Corporate mega-publishers that produce textbooks should be expected to hire competent copy editors, especially considering the prices charged for so-called revised editions. Some texts are riddled with errors of romanization: in the second edition of Smart’s *World Religions*, for example, over a third of the Chinese terms are incorrect, and some are virtually unrecognizable. Chan Buddhism is consistently referred to as “Qān,” a hybrid phoneme that does not exist in any form of romanization. The term Smart translates as “true gentleman” (a concept that is not gendered in Chinese; one possible translation is “noble person”), or *junzi* in pinyin romanization, is given as “*xunzi* or *hsiün-tzu*” (112), which is the name of a famous thinker of the third century BCE.

A more successful textbook model is *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Religions*, edited by John Bowker, which has a single project editor who has compiled a collection of essays by specialists from different fields. The term *illustrated* in the title of this work initially misled me to believe it was a collection of photographs for a popular audience, but it is a college-level world religions *historical* survey. Xinzhong Yao, a specialist in Confucian traditions, wrote the “Chinese Religions” chapter. I was pleasantly surprised to find the number of pages devoted to Chinese traditions was nearly equivalent to those on Christianity. Yao’s essay is more historically oriented, covers far more periods of time in greater depth, is more densely written, and is much more historiographically nuanced than any of the studies previously mentioned. It surveys many different strands of belief and praxis in China: classical texts and their legacies; local, regional, and state-wide reverence for divinities; interactions between

Chinese traditions and those of neighboring sovereignties; interpretations of Christianity in China; and state-level orthodoxies in premodern and modern times. Students introduced to Chinese religions through this chapter will come away with a sense of the diversity of China’s religious heritage.

Chinese Buddhism is better served in Yao’s text than in most others, and the *Illustrated History* also includes a brief section on Chinese Buddhism by Roger Corless, a Buddhist specialist. One of the problems typical of world religions texts is the absence or brevity of discussions of Buddhism in China. In a survey class where one moves quickly through many cultures in the course of a semester, perhaps fairly little is actually required. On the other hand, one might question whether one has addressed China’s religious traditions adequately if the influence of Buddhist traditions goes unexplored.

The perfect college text does not exist, but some of the works surveyed above do more harm than good. With the aid of online resources such as those touted on the back cover of *Religions of the World*, stereotypes and misinformation can now be spread much more efficiently. The scholarship of the late Lewis M. Hopfe (d. 1992) and John B. Noss (d. 1980, see FN3), now published posthumously in ninth and eleventh editions, respectively, now speaks to us from the grave. Given the great resources available to us in the twenty-first century, it is time for college texts to emerge from the afterlife and come back into the light.

Notes

1. Then of course one wonders at the attention devoted in such books to Japan’s Shinto, a phenomenon explored by Mark MacWilliams in this issue. To an observer more versed in Chinese ritual than Japanese religions, Shinto seems strikingly similar to Tang and Song dynasty Chinese ritual systems. A modern-day Shinto priest might easily be mistaken for a Song emperor’s portrait come to life. In world religions textbooks, Shinto is often accorded space roughly equal to that of the far older Chinese traditions, from which I suspect it is in many ways derived.

2. For translations of passages on yin and yang, see Zhang 2002, 83-94. For a concise discussion of the terms, see my entry “Yin-Yang” in Yao 2003. A longer historical survey of Confucianism may be found in Yao 2000. For articles on more specific topics and thinkers, see the two-volume *Confucian Spirituality* edited by Tu and Tucker 2003-04. For Daoist traditions, see Kohn 2000. The website of the Association for Asian Studies provides links to many reliable academic sources, as does the searchable online database *Bibliography of Asian Studies*.

3. Originally published in 1949 as *Man’s Religions* by the late John B. Noss.

4. For a more accurate account of sexual hygiene practices, see Harper 1998.

5. There are now many titles available on women in Chinese religions. For translations of primary sources, see Wang 2003 and Mann and Cheng 2001. For historical studies, see Hou 1986, Despeux and Kohn 2003, and Raphals 1998; for an essay written for a student and lay audience, see Sommer 2001.

6. To disabuse students of these stereotypes about the purported erasure of the self, one can turn to the *Great Learning*, whose eight steps begin with the cultivation of one’s own person. One can also point to the first line of the *Analects*, which likewise begins with the cultivation—not the effacement—of the self. For translations of these texts, as well as of the *Mencius*, see De Bary and Bloom 1999.

7. For these terms, see my entries “Shan” (good, goodness, or to be good at something) and “E” (evil, disagreeable, to dislike) in Yao 2003. I have discussed ghosts and spirits in Sommer 2003.

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JUDAISM IN WORLD RELIGIONS TEXTBOOKS

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The old model of world religions textbooks, based on Christian theology and emphasizing doctrine, has gradually been replaced with books that include more data on ritual and daily life. In these newer works, one finds Judaism treated according to two basic models: (1) a historical narrative followed by additional small sections on ritual (life-cycle rites, festivals) and current challenges (e.g., Matthews,* Noss,* Molloy,* Segal [in Oxtoby 2001*]); and (2) a thematic treatment with sections on core beliefs, rituals, history, and modern issues (e.g., Hopfe and Woodward,* Fisher,* Schmidt et al.,* Cohn-Sherbok). A few texts alter the first model, with basic beliefs preceding the historical narrative, but still fall into this category, if the bulk of the description is embedded in history. This review will consider the successes and failures of both models for the study of Judaism, noting some particular strengths of existing texts. Then it will take up the wish list of material for a "perfect text."

The Historical Model

Judaism has been called a "religion of history," so it is not surprising that a historical narrative model works well for this tradition. But it seems most effective for descriptions of the development of ancient Israel and the precursors of Judaism and often becomes less effective in the medieval and modern eras. This is probably because information on ancient Israel is based on the Hebrew Bible—a text that is itself a record of history interpreted through Judaism. Thus the treatment of this foundational material is fairly uniform, whether in greater or lesser detail, in both historically and thematically organized textbooks.

Texts following a historical model differ from those offering a thematic treatment by providing a historical context for understanding the beliefs and practices as they develop. So, for example, one learns about the prophetic idea of sin, repentance, and redemption in relation to the decline of the kingdom of Israel. One learns about the synagogue as an alternative to the temple during the Babylonian exile. Even the rituals can be included in this story since most are based on history, like Passover commemorating the Exodus. In this way, the historical model provides a coherent approach to the tradition.

The historical narrative in these texts varies. Matthews, for example, has a character-driven approach and builds stories of Abraham, Moses, and Joshua into the narrative. He also gives equal treatment to believers' and historians' interpretations of the Bible, thereby creating a richer picture of how one might "read" religious history.

The narrative approach does, however, tend to break down when the locus of action shifts away from ancient Israel. After the destruction of the temple, Judaism is no longer confined to a single group or place, nor is its development recorded in a single scripture. At this point, the coherence of the historical model often fails. With the exception of Noss's book, which uses an entirely