

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

September 1, 2016

Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall, eds., *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, Fordham University Press, 2015, 336 pp., \$32.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780823265206.

Despite his lifelong preoccupation with religion, Georges Bataille (1897-1962) “has received so little attention in the field of religious studies” (7) that Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall have rightly decided to publish a collection of essays specifically addressing Bataille’s contributions to the contemporary study of religion. Each of the fifteen contributors brings Bataille’s enormously rich (and unfortunately neglected) theory of religion to bear on “a variety of phenomena not typically taken to be within the purview of religious studies,” including “queer theory, feminist theory, and psychoanalysis [...] anthropology, philosophy, and theology,” not to mention the “political [...] and economic realms” (15-16). While I do not have the space to discuss each contribution separately, they divide into two genres. Most are exercises in “applied philosophy” (of varying quantity and quality). Others, which I will discuss below, present careful reconstructions of some aspect of Bataille’s philosophy. On the whole, these essays do not firmly establish Bataille’s significance for the contemporary study of religion. This is due partly to the fact that they cover too broad a spectrum, and partly to the fact that too many of them unreflectively deploy some of Bataille’s key concepts in the fields enumerated above. Far from establishing Bataille’s significance for the study of religion, most of the contributors simply assume it.

But not all. As Biles points out in his essay—“Does the Acéphale Dream of Headless Sheep?”—Bataille based his theory of religion on Émile Durkheim’s distinction between the sacred and the profane in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. For Bataille, human labor plays a special role in consolidating the profane. Biles writes: “Bataille identifies the realm of instrumental reason and its dedication to work [...] with the sphere of the profane” (220). This characterization of Bataille’s concept of the profane is shared by other contributors in the volume. In “Sovereignty and Cruelty: Self-Affirmation, Self-Dissolution, and the Bataillean Subject,” Stephen S. Bush argues that, for Bataille, the profane covers any “project” defined by “future-oriented, means-end activity” (39). Similarly, in his essay, “Bataille’s Contestation of Interpretive Anthropology and the Sociology of Religion,” Alphonso Lingis defines the profane as “objectives, accomplishments [...] in the sphere of work” (140). All of these characterizations are more or less identical to Bataille’s definition of the profane in *La part maudite*: “Ces rapports se presentent immédiatement comme ceux d’une fin avec utilité.”<sup>1</sup> For Bataille, the sacred can only appear under conditions in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *La part maudite* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 30.

“restricted economy”—i.e., the social system of “future-oriented, means-end activity”—is suspended. As Biles clearly expresses it: “The sacred [...] is characterized by a sense of sovereignty not subordinated to future ends or goals” (220).

The formal category Bataille employs to describe the mode of access proper to the sacred is “sacrifice.” “Sacrifice,” according to Bataille, “n’est autre que la production de choses *sacrées* [...] [qui] sont constituées par une opération de perte.”<sup>2</sup> In sacrifice, the ritual enactment of loss (including human and animal life) elevates the lost object above the profane order of utility. The sacrificial act brings about an ecstatic experience in which the lost object becomes sacralized. As Alphonso Lingis emphasizes: “Bataille found that the mystical experience is unleashed by the apparition of an object that fascinates and absorbs the viewer. It could be anything—a cascade, trees seen in the fog from a car window, a flash of lightning. The ecstatic object has no necessary or meaningful connection with a complex of other objects or with one’s own nature and goals. Ecstatic experience fixes on objects out of reach, things with which one can do nothing” (140). Indeed, as each contributor deftly demonstrates, for Bataille the category of the sacred embraces a broad range of phenomena. His concept of the sacred is not confined to the overtly or conventionally religious, but includes all species of transgressive acts (e.g., eroticism or cruelty). These transgressive acts sever the relation to the profane, resulting in a peculiarly Bataillean concept of “sovereign experience,” i.e., an experience that “does not depend on anything,” and that Bataille characterizes as “the negation of prohibition” (45). “This,” Bush continues, “supposes the negation of the authorities, the existing values which limit the possible. By virtue of the fact that it is negation of other values, other authorities, experience, having a positive existence, becomes itself positively value *and authority*” (45). “This,” he continues, is autonomy in its most extreme form,” and yet, experientially, it is not rigorously distinguishable from “those moments in which the self disregards even its own future, its own ambitions, its own resources” (45). Although one may legitimately wonder about the ethical implications of Bataille’s concept of sovereign experience, which seems to deny the Levinasian emphasis on vulnerability, dependency, and exposure to others, Bataille’s concept of sovereign experience is so radically premised on the “negation of prohibition” that it cannot easily be described as an experience of handing oneself the law. For Bataille, access to the sacred is modeled on the sort of negation one finds in negative or mystical theology, where the mystical union with God is achieved via a negation of everything finite. Jeffrey J. Kripal opens his essay, “The Traumatic Secret: Bataille and the Comparative Erotics of Mystical Literature,” with an epigraph from Meister Eckart: “No creatures can reach God in their capacity of created things, and what is created must be broken for the good to come out. The shell must be broken for the kernel to come out” (153). Bataille perhaps extends this idea far beyond any other figure in the history of theology.

This volume certainly succeeds in establishing that, for Bataille, the word “religion” names more than the doctrinal content of any historical religion; it is a formal category designating heterogeneous modes of access to the sacred (as defined above). This is precisely why his concept of religion is both deeply embedded in the history of religion and yet consistently transgresses the boundaries of the conventionally religious. These modes of transgression are in themselves non-moral, since they include everything from torture and cruelty to forms of eroticism to divine beatitude of the sort envisioned by medieval philosophers and theologians. For example, Bataille does not hesitate to demand of his readers that they identify, not only with the victim of torture, but *also with the executioner*.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 28.

However, as Bush convincingly argues in his essay: “If we view cruel monsters as categorically different from ourselves, and if we view the impulse to violence and cruelty as something that we do not have or that we can easily eradicate [...] we fall prey to a ‘certain form of moral condemnation’ that is in fact ‘escapist denial’” (49). Precisely because it is beyond good and evil, Bataille’s concept of sovereign experience is not a priori reducible to either. The possibility of ethics is here premised on an intimate familiarity with what Kant called “radical evil in human nature,” which, for Kant, functioned as an explanation for why the kingdom of ends—a world in which every agent is as happy as they are moral—cannot be realized in this world. The historical realization of autonomy is deferred in this world by the irreducible pathology of human nature, which resists complete determination by the moral law. However, for Kant, embodying the moral law only requires the exclusion, not the identification with, let alone an imaginative exploration of, evil, or the sources and varieties of evil in human nature. For Bataille, by contrast, “A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of Evil [...],”<sup>3</sup> i.e., knowledge of transgressive acts totally unmotivated by rational calculation or advantage and totally unconstrained by the norms of morality. Thus, in *Literature and Evil*, reflecting on Emily Brontë’s achievement in *Wuthering Heights*, Bataille writes: “*Wuthering Heights* has a certain affinity with Greek tragedy. The subject of the novel is the tragic violation of the law. The tragic author agreed with the law, the transgression of which he described, but he based all emotional impact on communicating the sympathy which he felt for the transgressor. [...] [T]he ban beautifies that to which it prevents access.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Marion Boyars, 2001), ix.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

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Citation Information

Dika, Tarek R., Review of *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*, *SCTIW Review*, September 1, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1200>.

ISSN: 2374-9288