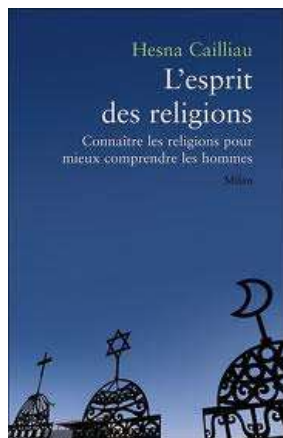


## Hesna Cailliau, *L'esprit des religions : Connaître les religions pour mieux comprendre les hommes*

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Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at [www.diversophy.com](http://www.diversophy.com)



Hesna Cailliau begins this new edition of her book with the familiar quotation of the Romanian philosopher of religion, Mircea Eliade, "No one can understand a culture without understanding the religion that gave birth to it." Religion is sadly "the elephant in the room" (and I am not talking just about fundamentalist rightwing Republicans in the USA). It is the unspoken factor in cultural analysis despite the fact that it is a critical force in politics, social structure and economic philosophy. Cailliau would reinstate the discourse about religion to its role in understanding the roots of cultural values and behaviors and rescue it from the deliberate ignorance of much social and educational policy purporting to create equality and laicity.

The book has three major sections, each of which could have been the subject of a separate tome. The focus is Europe, Europe seen in the light of East Asian religions, in the light of middle Eastern religions specifically Islam and, thirdly, the case of Turkey as a bridge between Europe and the cultures surrounding it. It calls on the rich mix of the religious and cultural factors in the author's own background. Hesna Cailliau is the daughter of a Danish Protestant mother and an Islamic Turkish father. She capped her ecumenicity by marrying a French Catholic.

The book is deliciously written, a homecoming to wholeness, demonstrating the author's familiarity with the subjects and her ability to deliver a rich historical and contemporary commentary on them. When comparing Europe and East Asia Cailliau offers a set of polarities or contrasts derived from religious thinking, which have become part and parcel of how we see the world: linear and cyclic time, philosophy and wisdom, belief and experience, exclusivity and inclusivity, the end and the way, absolute and relative truths, life as combat and life as art. Her further examination highlights the contrast between humanity seen as the measure of everything and seen as one species among many. This gives rise to further polarities between the word and silence, action and interaction, justice and fate, law and custom, individual happiness and social order, the cultivation of thought and the cultivation of emptiness, the logical and analogical, yin and yang. The differences are examined, not for the sake of judging them, or us, but to provide perceptions about ourselves and the directions we have adopted, whether we consider ourselves religious or not. Of course, it is possible to see what ails us when we have overdosed in a particular direction along the lines of these polarities.

As one who has both studied and taught the religions of the world in an academic past, it was relatively easy for me to apprehend the contents and understand many of the expressions found in traditional religious contexts, and therefore to appreciate the incisiveness and distinctions made by the author as she juxtaposed understandings and practices with surefootedness. At a time when the intercultural field seems more and more inclined to cut its moorings with the past, this book is a reminder of the many sea anchors that we have, willy-nilly, sunk into the murky depths of self and world understanding at a level that surpasses our ability to clearly distinguish elements that have made us who we are.

Religion, if it is anything, is a view that helps us hold things together as we try to make sense out of the world and our place in it. While we respect those who engage in attempts to measure and label particularities of the energies in nature, in social systems, in empirical methods that are quantifiable, it is religion that can both encourage and call into question our daily enterprise, our connection to each other and to the incomprehensible. In the Western world a lot of energy and logic go into being right, and yet, as Gestalt pioneer, Mim Polster once remarked to me, "If you need a reason, any one will do." She said this not to disparage the usefulness of reasons, but to call into question the *need* that often drives the search for reasons and so easily tempts us to dissimulate them.

If anything, Cailliau's book teaches us that we can learn from each other's views and approaches to both the ultimate and relative meanings of things. It is true that the author frequently draws lessons or at least perspectives for Europeans by comparison. For example, the author highlights how, contrary to much Asian philosophy, which focuses on ensuring

continuity, we in the West happily accept leaps and fragmentation in our thinking and behavior allowing us to more easily cut ourselves off from our roots. Her comment about this is, "A people that loses its roots, also loses its faith in its future." Now that we as interculturalists have begun to look at and take more seriously the dynamics involved in the social construction of reality, we must raise the question whether our now recognized capacity to make realities for ourselves, when examined, separates us from our roots, or, on the contrary, binds us to something even deeper.

Despite my delight in reading and refreshing my understanding of the juxtaposed core polarities I cited above, it was the second half of the book that fascinated me most. It is in essence an apologia for Islam. It is a corrective perspective that needs to be in place for those of us who do not come from this tradition and have been touched by recent turmoil and immersed in the knee jerk self-justification of the West, still blind to the outcomes of its own colonial enterprise. Simplistic "them – and – us approaches to understanding do not lead us to clarity an understanding, but rather create static biases, stereotypes, and increasingly hard feelings. "All religions are calls to people to adapt themselves to the spirit of the times which are changing and to fresh problems which arise. Life is a festival of change and unforeseeable developments. Those who refuse to participate in this feast, will, like Cinderella's sisters, remain leather shod, and not be able to don the supple fur slippers that could bring them to the dance of life." This part of the book disabuses us of the many negative judgments we are likely to make about Islam as a whole, as we discover the rich diversity that exists in its many branches and peoples and its impressive history, along with the many and diverse cultural values that these offer.

Finally, in the third part of the book, the author takes into account her own origins as she provides an appreciation of Turkey, seated as it is, not only geographically, but culturally on the straights that symbolically divide Europe from Asia. She sets straight the distinctiveness of Turks and Arabs as well as their religious affinities and the ongoing relationship in which Turks embrace Islam on their own terms. Turks possess a sense of freedom and adaptability that is no doubt due to their origins, and to the fact that they have never been colonized.

In sum, an excellent and insightful read, particularly useful for those whose tendency to avoid religious factors in intercultural work has arisen from anxiety about its complexity and its often controversial nature, to say nothing of those whose empirical religion causes them to dismiss any other kind of faith as superstition.