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Reviews

Blue Jade From The Morning Star: An Essay and a Cycle of Poems on Quetzalcoatl. By William Irwin Thompson. West Stockbridge, Massachusetts: The Lindisframe Press, 1983. 72 pp. $6.95 Paper.

Widespread interest in the Templo Mayor excavations underscores the perennial fascination of Europeans and their American descendants with the indigenous religions of Mesoamerica. In February 1978, workmen dug through the streets of Mexico City and into the long-buried wreckage of the Aztec capital Mexico-Tenochtitlan. They uncovered a stone image of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. The stone measured more than 10 feet in diameter and depicted the goddess decapitated and dismembered. Coyolxauhqui had been slain and torn apart by her brother Huitzilopochtli, the sun god. The murder symbolized for the Aztecs the triumph of day over night. Proclaiming Huitzilopochtli the supreme diety and themselves the people of the sun, the Aztecs also believed that the battle between light and dark could have no final outcome. To assure the survival of humanity, Huitzilopochtli had to engage in never-ending combat with his sister, the moon, and her allies, the stars. The Aztecs therefore nourished their champion continually with the blood of thousands of sacrificial victims.

Aztec rites may titillate, bemuse or horrify the curious today. But in the sixteenth century, the Spanish conquistadores and Franciscan and Dominican missionaries were outraged by the practice of human sacrifice. The missionaries considered the indigenous rites a mockery of Christian rituals inspired by Satan. And after the conquistadores and their indigenous allies had succeeded in destroying the Aztec empire, the good fathers initiated a holy crusade on behalf of the Christian God.

Most Indians welcomed the opportunity to foresake the bloodthirsty Huitzilopochtli. Other gods proved difficult to dislodge

from indigenous hearts. The worship of Quetzalcoatl in particular had deep tap roots in Mesoamerica. Beginning at least with the Olmecs, the religion of Quetzalcoatl emerged as a principal motif for creation of high and powerful civilizations. The inhabitants of Teotihuacan and the Toltecs, for example, worshipped Quetzalcoatl as the creator of the world, of man, the one who gave humanity knowledge of agriculture, crafts, trade, the arts. Quetzalcoatl symbolized peace and civilization, a god to be worshipped not by war and human sacrifice, but by love and penance. His prestige proved so great that even the Aztecs were forced to incorporate Quetzalcoatl and the cultural traditions attributed to him (albeit in modified ways) into their society as they changed from nomadic barbarians to empire builders. Later, their Christian conquerors failed to eradicate Quetzalcoatl. Instead, the indigenous peoples incorporated him into their practices of Catholicism.

William Irwin Thompson in part wrote *Blue Jade From The Morning Star* in order to help us understand why indigenous peoples esteemed Quetzalcoatl. His treatment is novel in comparison to other writers. He does not dwell on the Aztec dread of Quetzalcoatl returning from far away to reclaim his kingdom; nor does he emphasize the fortuitous coincidence for the Spanish that they arrived in the very year prophesied for his return. Instead, Thompson attempts to recover the myth of Quetzalcoatl from the disrepute it has acquired by virtue of its association with the Aztecs in popular literature and sensationalist accounts of Mexico's history. He examines the nature and significance of the religious iconography associated with the worship of Quetzalcoatl. This is a difficult task. Among other things, charismatic religious and political leaders throughout the ages took the name Quetzalcoatl. Hence Thompson faced the challenge of sifting through the myths and historical materials to distinguish between beliefs about the god and the exploits of men named after him.

He does so ably. Building upon ideas and methods he developed in an earlier work, *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light*, Thompson explores the significance of the religious iconography of Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent. "The quetzal bird is said," as he points out, "to make its nest only on the top of trees in the full light of the sun. The serpent that has turned into a bird thus has to make its way up the trunk of the tree to move out of the dark into the light" (10). Herein lies the key to understanding the myth of Quetzalcoatl. According to Thompson, this combination

of bird-tree-snake is a universal motif. It has appeared in many cultures across time and place, including the Greeks, in Egypt, and India, and is always embedded within esoteric schools of contemplative practice. Thompson explicates the significance of contemplative practice not only for the individual, but also as the basis for harnessing the energies of the practitioners for the development of high civilization. As he points out, the religion of Quetzalcoatl provided a transcendent ideal, a pattern for civilization to win out over savagery.

Unfortunately for the peoples of Mesoamerica, Quetzalcoatl or civilization failed to win out over Huitzilopochtli or savagery. The attempt, nonetheless, Thompson insists, is important for us to understand because we too live in an age when savagery and civilization are locked in mortal battle. Hence *Blue Jade From The Morning Sun* was also written in part to make the myth of Quetzalcoatl accessible to Americans; the author believes that the feathered serpent is important to comprehending the problems and possibilities of our age. To do so, Thompson turned to poetry as well as to the essay. The second part of the book consists of two sets of poems. The first set follow closely the stories contained in the major primary sources on Quetzalcoatl. The second set are attempts by Thompson to contribute his own vision to the literature on the plumed serpent. Thompson justifies this approach by reminding us that "A scientific history can give us recorded facts, but only poetry can reveal the meaning of history in the universal truth of events. Poetry is the place where *myth* and history meet, the place where the collective narrative is given individual expression. In a myth the ancient prehistory of the soul is recast into the imagery and situations of more recent events" (28). Thompson gives us much to think about.

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The Shaman: Patterns of Siberian and Ojibway Healing. By John A. Grim. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983. 272 pp. $19.95 Cloth.

First, the good things about this book: On page 28, Grim poses the interesting but arrogantly worded hypothesis that a shamanic tradition prepares a community for acceptance of "the higher