

Roussou, Eugenia. *Orthodox Christianity, New Age Spirituality and Vernacular Religion: The Evil Eye in Greece*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 192 pp. Bibliography. ISBN 9781350152793 (hardback, \$120.00); 9781350225398 (paperback, \$39.95); 9781350152809 (ebook, \$35.95); 9781350152816 (Epub and Mobi, \$ 35.95)

Eugenia Roussou's intention is "to demonstrate how contemporary Greek religiosity is characterized by open religious horizons, where a creative amalgamation of Christianity and New Age spirituality takes place at the level of vernacular religious practice" (6). Roussou argues that Greek Orthodoxy has become more "porous" (3) and consequently, despite the opposition of a dwindling proportion of the clergy, more liable to syncretic engagement with a New Age repertoire once uniformly viewed as a diabolical distraction from true faith. Convincingly arguing that Greek religiosity is both immanent and transcendental—icons, for example, represent both the immediacy of grace and the eternal truth of holiness—she shows how this ability to connect the two realms rendered Orthodoxy receptive to new influences once the power relations between clergy and laity had shifted. These external factors include the international commercialization of paraphernalia such as Chinese and Japanese symbols as well as evil eye amulets. This expansion, she suggests, has allowed Greeks to feel increasingly part of a global humanity.

Roussou bases her argument on her ethnographic research, most of which appears to have taken the form of unstructured interviews and some active participation, as healer and healed, in the ritual nexus of the evil eye. She attributes her thin treatment of social context to the more episodic and distanced fieldwork possible in cities, but then undermines that justification with some convincing vignettes in classic anthropological mode and by (wisely) rejecting hard-edged rural-urban distinctions.

At its core her approach rests on a courageous reflexivity that allows her to break new ground in otherwise well-charted territory. In describing her roles as curer and cured and accounting for failures in specific situations, she provides a compelling account of the experiential and social stakes. Her insistence that the evil eye is not exclusively about ocular contact rings true; some of the best passages in the book concern the tactility of the healing ritual and the relief that the touch of a familiar hand offers from the coldly scientific medical establishment. Her analysis of the "good eye" as a benign ocular force operating much like its evil cousin is also novel, and her focus on consumerist influences on the production and merchandising of ritual objects yields some of the book's most expressive moments. While there is some discussion of witchcraft, on the other hand, the dearth of context, coupled with an almost exclusive emphasis on theological questions, makes it difficult to understand whether accusations of casting the evil eye ever served her informants primarily as a strategic social practice (as Vassos Argyrou has argued for Cypriot spells in "Under a Spell: The Strategic Use of Magic in Greek Cypriot Society," *American Ethnologist* 20 [1993]: 256–271).

Roussou's discussion of individual bodily experience—which she discusses in terms of practice, agency (human rather than divine [74]), and performance—comes to life in her descriptions of two-way interactions, some of which are even performed over the telephone. Particularly revealing are her accounts of curing sessions held between socially intimate individuals such as family members; in these sessions, the curer is especially liable to the prodigious yawning that marks the passage of the evil eye's poison from patient to curer. Such intimate insights provide a significant contribution to the study of Greek family relations; detailed accounts of intrafamilial dynamics have rarely featured in previous ethnographic work on Greece except in that of Neni Panourgía (which Roussou cites approvingly). Roussou's reflexivity takes on especially vivid tones in her account of a staged "cure" conducted for primarily experimental purposes on a Japanese friend. This apparently sacrilegious challenge to Greek spirituality provoked massive disturbance in Roussou's mind and body, but allowed her to discover the sometimes dramatic creativity involved in the conduct of the ritual—a focus that represents a notable departure from the more static and prescriptive style of previous analyses. Roussou, a native anthropologist herself, persuasively rejects objectivist arguments against "native anthropology" (18); her analysis largely justifies such a conclusion. Contradictorily, however, her desire for "distance from the field" (15) sits uneasily with her reflexivity and her defense of native anthropology. Such contradictions hint at a still undigested doctoral exercise.

Despite Roussou's admirable efforts to introduce ethnographic comparisons from other parts of the world, an intellectual cosmopolitanism that partially mirrors her topic, readers unversed in Greek ethnology will need guidance to historical nuances that Roussou leaves unexplored. In particular, many higher Orthodox clergy were ill-disposed to the emergent Greek nation-state in the early nineteenth century and viewed with misgiving the folklorists' burnishing of its image as heir to pagan antiquity. Today, seeming to confirm their fears, extreme right-wing nationalists condemn Orthodoxy as a "Jewish" religion and campaign to reinstate the Olympian deities. For many moderate or leftist Greeks, a category that seems to include most of Roussou's informants, both attitudes are equally repugnant. I would have welcomed a clearer articulation of political affiliations in relation to ideas about the evil eye, especially as Roussou does recognize the politics of ecclesiastical disapproval.

Regional variation also largely disappears when Roussou repeatedly pairs the residents of her two field sites, Rethimno (Crete) and Thessaloniki, as if they were indistinguishable from each other. In some sense these two populations are perhaps alike—but Roussou's exoticizing portrayal of Crete (56-57) seems to contradict this. Equally contradictory is her attribution of the increasing clerical embrace of unconventional spiritualism, much of which Greek observers would view as pagan, to the Cretan church's independence of the state church's authority; the Cretan church answers instead to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, which originally opposed the establishment of the Greek nation-state—a development that menaced the Patriarchate's position in the Ottoman Empire and also threatened to entail a pagan revival.

Crete, as Roussou notes, is linguistically distinctive, yet she claims that as a native anthropologist she did not have to master linguistic skills. This unfortunately widespread attitude produces some simplistic linguistics. For example, Roussou attributes standard Greek meaning of “hear” to the common West Cretan usage of the verb *akouo*, which leads her to interpret one phrase as “hearing [i.e., smelling] the garlic” (56-57). *Akouo* is best translated from the dialect as “sensing,” as “hearing” has its own specific verb (*ghriko*) in local usage. Roussou is not thinking in dialect, and this flattens the specificity of the local, reducing the potentiality of her dual regional focus for revealing contrasts.

Some conceptual issues also remain unresolved. Roussou seems to conflate materiality with concreteness, a position that directly contradicts her recognition of the performative force of ritual. She also objects to what she sees as Rodney Needham’s (*Belief, Language, and Experience*, 1972) rejection of the category of belief as a “predominantly Western term” (154). Needham, however, particularly traces the semantics of the English (not generically Western!) term to the Germanic root of “love” (cf. *lieben*), the Hebrew *amen* (witnessing truth), and—most significantly here—the New Testament (*koinē*) Greek term *pistis*; this last term has generated a Greek religious vocabulary (as well as a banking one, as in “credit”). Precisely *because* the modern word is essentially identical to the *koinē* term, contextualized descriptions of how it was actually used are vital for judging Roussou’s use of “belief” as an analytical concept. Does the Greek term mean the same thing cognitively and emotionally as the English word or as its New Testament antecedent? How can we know? The problem of psychological inner states, which has generated a considerable literature since Needham voiced critical concern, remains significant but intractable. Is her opposition to Needham’s dismissal of belief as a “Western” category explained by her stereotypical and politically conservative assertion that Greece “belongs to the West” (155), in which she perhaps unconsciously but precisely echoes the late right-wing former Greek premier and president Konstantinos Karamanlis in his assertion of fealty to the European Union? Such generic declarations enshrine ideologically motivated stereotypes that do not help analysis.

Moreover, the shadow of belief-as-obligation, perceptible in the use of *pisti(s)* as “credit,” raises interesting possibilities that Roussou does not address. Is belief in the evil eye, for example, somehow linked to well-documented concepts of obligation such as might be created by a cure? Would payment—even if it has not yet widely accompanied the commercialization of evil eye paraphernalia that Roussou describes so well—invalidate the cure by removing an essential social bond? Is belief in this sense dependent on a social relationship rather than solely on individual cognition? Her analysis hints at such possibilities but does not explore them.

Some of these intermittently self-contradictory book’s problems are attributable to editorial neglect. Not only are the notes completely missing despite being enumerated in the text; the text itself, despite its virtues, often reads like an unproofed thesis. Repetitions aside, Roussou clearly commands writerly skills necessary to bringing her fieldwork to life, but there are frequent grammatical

errors, recognizably Greek word sequences, and what look like clauses left over from earlier drafts. This intellectually innovative study of an old staple of folklore research deserved more attentive curation by the publisher.

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