both western and nationalist traditions. Yet, such developments in the historiography of non-European societies have had in turn an immense impact on the historiography of western societies. Were it not so, indeed, the quest for autonomous history would be dangerously self-limiting and it is a pity that this handbook has not extended its range to include passages that reveal creative exchanges between western and Indian historians and the contemporary internationalisation of South Asia's historiography.

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The Living and the Dead: Social Dimensions of Death in South Asian Religions. Edited by Liz Wilson. pp. xi, 212. Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 2003.
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The authors of this collection come from different disciplines – anthropology, study of religion, language study, history, musicology – but share an interest in South Asian practice and its textual authorities. Each of the papers is an important contribution to the study of South Asian ideas and practices concerning the dead and society's relations with them. While many of them describe the rites of passage which transfer the recently departed to the world of the dead, and cite the classic studies of Van Gennep and Hertz as well as the later and more specific work of Parry and others, some are concerned with those who made the transition long ago: monks whose relics are contained in *stūpa*s, the martyrs remembered at Muḥarram, bygone heroes at whose shrines healing is sought, or bygone *yogini*s who survive in their *samādhi*s and perpetually smouldering fires.

The first two papers deal in very different ways with suicide as a way of achieving spiritual ends. In "Ashes to Nectar: Death and Regeneration among the *Rasa Siddhas* and *Nāth Siddhas*", David Gordon White examines Sanskrit alchemical texts in which liberation is to be achieved by ingesting mercury, or jumping into vats of boiling mercury and oil, and then finds parallels in the traditions associated with the legendary thirteenth-century yogin Gorakhnāth, finding in "the *haṭha yoga* of the Nāth Siddhas the culmination of the mercury-based alchemy of the earlier Rasa Siddhas". The editor's paper, "Human Torches of Enlightenment: Autocremation and Spontaneous Combustion as Marks of Sanctity in South Asian Buddhism", starts with the Vietnamese Buddhist monks who burnt themselves to death in the 1960s, and looks for the traditions underlying them. These she finds in the multiple meanings of *tapas* as austerity, creative energy and inner power, in *kasina* meditation, in which fire, like other phenomena, is mastered by meditating on a sample of it, and in ideas of control over death, and death as sacrifice. In "When a Wife Dies First: The *Mūsivāyanam* and a Female Brahman Ritualist in Coastal Andhra", David M. Knipe examines the funeral rituals performed in coastal Andhra Pradesh for a wife who dies before her husband. While these coexist with Vedic practices such as the giving of *piṇḍa*s, they have distinctly non-Vedic features: women play a prominent part, as does spirit-possession, and the tradition is handed down by female ritualists. The deceased wife, for whom the ritualist is a surrogate, is transformed into the goddess Gaurī and inhabits her *loka*, even though the *śrāddha*s which follow this ritual presuppose that she is a *preta* waiting to be transferred to the world of the ancestors. In "Return to Tears: Musical Mourning, Emotion and Religious Reform in Two South Asian Minority Communities", Richard K. Wolf presents findings from two fieldwork projects: on the death rituals of the Kotas in the Nilgiris, and on Muḥarram. He sketches the developments in Indian Muslim thought since the eighteenth century that have led Shīʿas to abandon or reduce the performance of music at Muḥarram, especially celebratory music. He also finds that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the repertoire of Kota funeral music has been narrowed and become more uniformly mournful. He tentatively attributes these changes to reform movements. Further, by proposing a gradation of increasingly diverse funerary music, from its general absence in the case of

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brahmins, to the exuberant performances of low castes, he suggests that the prestige of brahmin values may also be at work here. Jonathan Walters, in "Deanimating and Reanimating the Dead in Rural Sri Lanka", describes practices and beliefs in the vicinity of Anurādhapura. He sees an opposition between the Buddhist monk who when officiating at funerals 'deanimates' the dead by asserting the absence of an ātman and cutting their ties with the living, and the necromancer or healer who 'reanimates' them using mantras and practices of Buddhist as well as Tamil origin. In recent decades the healer has succumbed to the spread of modern medicine, Simhala nationalism and the official regulation of funerary practices, while both deanimation and reanimation have been displaced by bureaucracy and a fashion for ostentatiously marked graves. In "The Suppression of Nuns and the Ritual Murder of Their Special Dead in Two Buddhist Monastic Texts", Gregory Schopen interprets some difficult Pāli, Sanskrit and Tibetan texts on the destruction of *stūpa*s, which he regards as ritual murder of the person whose relics the *stūpa* contains. He also makes interesting observations about the historical relation between the *vinaya*s of different Buddhist sects, and about the relations between monks and nuns. Isabelle Nabokov's "A Funeral to Part with the Living: A Tamil Countersorcery Ritual" is an account of rituals in which the healer makes an effigy of the patient, which is treated similarly to the corpse in death rituals. But there is no mourning, no participation by kin, and no incorporation into the world of the dead, and a female patient performs actions whose counterparts in the funeral are only performed by men. In "Dead Healers and Living Identities: Narratives of a Hindu Ghost and a Muslim *Sūfī* in a Shared Village", Peter Gottschalk describes two legendary heroes in Bihar, a *Sūfī* and a brahmin, who interact with the living by providing healing to their suppliants. The narratives in which the authority of each is displayed are distinctively Muslim and Hindu respectively; but the effectiveness of these dead healers, and their contribution to local prestige, are largely independent of religious affinity.

While the editor's introduction draws the different contributions together in an insightful way, there is no attempt to force the material into an overarching theory. Nevertheless, it emerges clearly from all these papers that the dead, at least in South Asia, are members of society whom the living, and those who study them, would be unwise to ignore.

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Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World. By Carl W. Ernst. pp. 244. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
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Intended as a basic introduction to Islam, this book seeks to interrogate some deeply held assumptions about the faith. It offers the reader a sensitive portrayal of the complexity of the phenomenon called 'Islam', stressing the multiple ways in which it has been, and continues to be understood, interpreted and practiced. In this way, it critiques the notion of an 'Islamic monolith' that is so central to both Islamist as well as Islamophobic discourse.

Ernst is at pains to argue the case for what he calls a "non-fundamentalist understanding of Islam" (p. xiii). This, he insists, is crucial for our own times, where 'Islam' and the 'West' or the 'Rest' have increasingly come to be portrayed as inherently opposed to each other. By examining the diverse ways in which key Islamic concepts have been historically understood, he pleads for an empathetic understanding of contemporary religious debates among Muslims, warning against the danger of essentialism. This he sees as crucial to the task of promoting dialogue between Muslims and people of other faiths.

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