

tyranny. Mussolini's aerial circuses advertised the virility of Fascism. . . . Hollywood created celluloid myths to banish the Depression and affirm the New Deal."

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill get the high marks from Brendon, who nonetheless provides a snapshot that both credits and discredits Churchill. As First Lord of the Admiralty before becoming prime minister, Churchill habitually enjoyed long dinners featuring champagne and liqueurs, returned to the office after 10 p.m., and worked until long after midnight. "He has got into the habit of calling conferences of subordinates after 1 a.m.," a *Times* journalist wrote in his diary, "which naturally upsets some of the Admirals, who are men of sound habits. So there is a general atmosphere of strain at the Admiralty, which is all wrong. Yet Winston is such a popular hero & so much *the* war-leader that he cannot be dropped."

Brendon reminds us that instability, not equilibrium, is the global norm, and that faith in the invincibility of democratic capitalism can prove misplaced. We may assure ourselves that the current prosperity will extend to the hereafter, but so did people in 1929. As Brendon cautions, "Today almost invariably misreads tomorrow, sometimes grossly."

Comprehensive as it is, the book has a few unforgivable omissions. Where is Rudy Vallee crooning, in his upper-class accent, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" And why no dancing Fred and Ginger surrounded by luxury, unaffected by the blind man on the corner selling apples and singing "Beall Street Blues"?

—JACOB A. STEIN

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### *THE MARTIAL ARTS OF RENAISSANCE EUROPE.*

By Sydney Anglo. Yale Univ. Press. 384 pp. \$45

Inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault, a generation of scholars have written volumes about the history of the human body as a social construct. For all their labors, though, we still know surprisingly little about how our ancestors

actually used their bodies—the skills that the anthropologist Marcel Mauss called "*techniques du corps*," which range from everyday routines such as styles of walking and sitting to the most challenging surgical procedures. Like ideas, practices have histories. Yet because practices are more often learned through example and apprenticeship than from books, their histories are far more elusive.

Anglo, a historian at the University of Wales who specializes in the ceremonial life of the Renaissance, reconstructs the exacting skills of Europe's martial arts masters. These men were not just the counterparts of today's fencing masters and boxing and wrestling coaches; they were also the progenitors of Green Beret



*The geometric principles of swordfighting were laid out in a treatise by Girard Thibault of Antwerp in 1628.*

and Navy SEALs instructors. From the end of the Middle Ages well into the 17th century, the city streets and country roads of Europe abounded with hotheaded, knife-wielding ruffians and armed brigands. Even among intimates, disagreements over points of honor could escalate into mortal combat.

The insecurity of the world, and the social and cultural aspirations of teachers and pupils alike, had paradoxical consequences. The numerous surviving manuals of European martial arts evoke a gorgeous, stylized world. One wrestling manuscript was illustrated by Albrecht Dürer. Yet masters had to remind their readers that fighting was not merely an aesthetic exercise. Many discouraged the instructional use of rebated (dulled) weapons as an impediment to lifesaving realism.

Anglo organizes his book around styles of fighting. First he introduces the masters and shows how, for all their theory and literary style, their art remained a craft. Books could enrich but not replace hands-on instruction. He considers attempts to create a geometric science of swordsmanship, a movement that created magnificent treatises but was doomed by fencing's demand for spontaneity and deception. The sword was only the most glamorous of the weapons. The masters also taught fighting with staffs, pikes, and axes, as well as more plebeian skills such as wrestling and combat with daggers and knives.

Anglo ranges from exalted theories to the back-breaking, hamstring-cutting side of Renaissance fighting techniques, but we are left wishing to know more about the practitioners themselves. Who would have thought, for example, that the Hapsburgs would entrust

the wrestling instruction of the dukes of Austria to a master named Ott the Jew?

Still, this book is a sumptuous scholarly feast, with delicacies for art historians, bibliophiles, Shakespeare specialists, wrestling fans, Asian martial arts enthusiasts, and graphic designers. Anglo does not shrink from using terms such as *protopoieic* (referring to an object speaking of itself as though a person), but he complements academic rigor with wry humor: Questioning some colleagues' preoccupation with a shift in style from cutting to thrusting, he writes that "by concentrating on the point, they have missed it completely."

Now that the president of the Russian Federation, judo master Vladimir Putin, has published his own manual of arms, body skills may be returning to the world stage. This challenging but lucid study raises the curtain.

—EDWARD TENNER

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

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***THE BOOK OF MIRACLES:  
The Meaning of the Miracle Stories  
in Christianity, Judaism,  
Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam.***

By Kenneth L. Woodward. Simon and Schuster. 429 pp. \$28.

Did that really happen? It's the first question that comes to mind when we hear of a "miracle," a suspension of the normal way the world works, an intrusion of the extraordinary into the everyday. But it's not the question that matters to Woodward, religion editor of *Newsweek*. His subject is not the literal veracity of miracles but their meaning within the traditions of the world's five major religions. "Miracles have the character of signs and wonders," he writes. "As wonders, miracles are always astonishing, but as signs they are never wholly inexplicable."

Woodward's approach to the subject is utterly straightforward. He considers the five religions in turn—the three monotheistic faiths in the first part of the book, the two polytheistic Indian religions in the second—and begins in each case with a compendium of the miraculous deeds of their founding and central figures, such as Moses, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus, Muhammad, Krishna, and the Buddha. He follows the chapters on the foundational miracles

with chapters on the miracles of the great saints, sages, and spiritual masters in each tradition who took up the example of the first masters: "In this way, we can see how miracles themselves become signs of the continuing power and presence of God in this world (for Jews, Christians, and Muslims), of the continuing power of the diverse gods and goddesses (in Hinduism), and of the continuing power of the Dharma, or teachings, of the Buddha and, in some Buddhist traditions, of the enduring presence of the Buddha himself."

The entropy that exempts nothing mortal has had its way with miracles too, and Woodward detects a fundamental change in the contemporary tradition: "Miracles have become detached from the rigors of spiritual attainment and from the discernment taught by all religious traditions. Relocated in the theater of the questing inner self, the modern miracle has become a sign of the God within us all. The idea of a miracle has thus been turned on its head. Where classical miracle stories inspired fear and awe, inducing worship of God and admiration of the saints, modern miracles tend to inspire admiration of the divinity that is the self."

You can't help but admire what Woodward has accomplished in this book. He has fashioned