

Book Reviews

Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations, 3rd edition. Edited by Linda Woodhead, Christopher Patridge, and Hiroko Kawanami. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2016. 598 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-0-415-85881-6.

The third edition of this comprehensive edited volume contains important chapters on the role of religions in the modern world. Framed on either end by detailed analyses of the phenomena known as modernity on the one hand, and secularism on the other, the book's structure in fact cleverly symbolises the common assumption that many Westerners have regarded the role of religion as 'compartmentalised' within the framework of modern secular states. This book demonstrates, quite impressively, that things are not so black and white.

The introduction by two of the editors, Linda Woodhead and Christopher Patridge, defines key topics that are essential to understanding the engagement of religions with the modern world, including the topic of modernity, under which are addressed the subcategories of 'the nation state,' 'colonialism,' 'capitalism and rationalization,' 'subjectivization and consumerism,' 'secularism and secularization,' to name a few (to these are added definitions pertaining to late modernity, such as 'globalization' and 'post-secularism' etc.). This volume can be described as interdisciplinary, since the more ancient religions addressed herein are, firstly, analysed on their own terms (their respective histories and theologies), and, secondly, addressed in regards to their relationship with modernity. In relation to contemporary religions, such as the New Age and New Religious Movements, the disparity between their pasts and modernity is not so evident since many of them are recent in origin. Thematic chapters include: 'Religion, globalization, and migration,' 'Religion and politics,' 'Religion and violence,' 'Religion and gender,' and 'Religion and popular culture,' all of which are topics that are immediately relevant cross-culturally today.

The second chapter on 'How to Study Religion,' by Kim Knott, is particularly important since it sets—though in a very general way—the methodological 'tone' of the volume. It outlines the manner in which religion is studied as an academic discipline, including more traditional approaches such as the theological, textual, historical, and phenomenological ones that dominated in the past. New approaches, focusing "on the way in which class, gender, and power operate to reify certain traditions" (p. 24), as well as feminist and postcolonialist

approaches, are now being used alongside traditional methods and are yielding new insights to the study of religion. Knot avers that this is at the expense of the phenomenological approach, which she describes as “unsuitable, being too disengaged, rationalist, and universalist for understanding contemporary religions and their traditions” (p. 25).

The dismissive approach towards phenomenology—which is, basically, the analysis of the intimate reciprocity between the perceiving subject and the perceived object—in the study of religions is tacitly supposed to elide the interpreter from any vested interest in the object under evaluation. This, in turn, is meant to result in an objective and unbiased analysis of a given religion. The corollary of this marginalisation of phenomenology in the study of religion is, however, an inability to grasp important topics of immediate existential significance for the religion under investigation. This can be discerned in Linda Woodhead’s chapter on ‘Christianity’ in this volume that limits its discussion to some basic tenets of the faith as well as external matters pertaining to the historical developments of the main Christian traditions. Generalising statements such as the following: that by the third century, ‘Catholic’ or ‘Orthodox’ Christianity suppressed other forms of Christianity as it became more powerful (p. 211), need to be qualified by reflections on the disposition or beliefs of the Church more broadly. In other words, simply stating that ‘Catholic’ or ‘Orthodox’ Christianity suppressed other forms of Christianity gives the impression that it did so for external, authoritarian purposes. To an extent this did occur, but in reality the theological systems that were suppressed were seen as having negative existential outcomes insofar as they contradicted what ‘Catholic’ or ‘Orthodox’ Christians believed constituted their experience of Christ since the Church’s beginnings. In bringing together the subject—i.e., the Church—and the object—namely, the Church’s representation of Christ—phenomenology could help make the connection between the existential value of this representation with the growth of the mainstream Christianity that reflected it.

Moreover, the comments on the relationship between the traditional Churches and modernity highlights the recalcitrant nature of the former without saying much about positive movements that arose within these Churches and that fruitfully engaged modernity. In the Orthodox Church, the neo-patristic synthesis—mentioned briefly on page 228—is an example of this, as are the spiritual and intellectual achievements of Romania’s ‘Burning Bush’ group—made up of university professors, scientists, authors, clergy, and monks—as well as the very recent interdisciplinary project ‘Science and Orthodoxy Around the World,’ which is comprised of an international team of scholars; most of whom are from within the Orthodox faith. Outside of Orthodoxy, mention must be made of the literary achievements of the Oxford Inklings (C. S. Lewis in particular), Teilhard de Chardin, and many others.

Helpful devices for both students and scholars are the interspersions of primary sources throughout each chapter, as well as personal reflections by the practitioners of the various faiths. Chapters end with definitions of the key terms and suggested readings. In short, and aside from my above criticisms, this is a meticulously researched volume that invaluablely presents both ancient and modern religious traditions in striking apposition to—and within the context of—modernity. The results are often both surprising and illuminating.

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