

**Religion: Beyond a Concept**, edited by Hent de Vries, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, xvi + 1006 pp., \$35 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8232-2725-9.

This large collection of 43 papers (soft-covered), some original and some reprinted, on religion's past, present and future is the result of collaboration under the aegis of The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, edited by Hent de Vries who holds Professorial positions in Baltimore, Amsterdam and Paris. There are 45 contributors to a work in seven parts: What is Religion?; Religion and Philosophy; Methods of Instruction and Comparison; Emerging Contexts; Religion, Politics and Law; Materiality, Mediatization, Experience; and Spiritual Exercises, Selves, and Beyonds. It is planned as the first of five volumes.

Part I, 'What is Religion', contains Taylor's scoping paper 'The Future of the Religious Past' that underpins the collaboration, asking what future is there for historical and traditional religion. Those tied into exclusive religions such as Christianity and Islam will have no doubt about their personal answer to this in terms of their own faiths, but not in terms of the future of 'religion' as a whole. Other papers come from sociology and anthropology, such as Lambek's 'Provincializing God?', Assmann's 'Translating Gods' and Das's study of contemporary Hindu lives 'If this be Magic'. 'The Christian Invention of Judaism' (Boyarin) uses historical study. Henvieu-Léger's 'Religion as Memory' provides an interesting approach to religious heritage.

Part II, 'Religion and Philosophy', takes a philosophical perspective which begins to expound the term *post-secular*. It is also *post-Holocaust*: Derrida tackles 'Abraham, The Other' interestingly, about Jews more than about Abraham; and Atlan discusses his Jewish boyhood in Vichy Algeria as the moment of his Jewish identity and politicisation, where the word 'Jew' was used and perceived as an insult. Marion links metaphysics with phenomenology, Otten appeals to Nature. Nancy offers 'A Deconstruction of Monotheism'. Adriaanse's 'After Theism' rounds this section off by concluding that although theism as belief in a quasi 'person' is dead, humans need the sense of purpose, solidarity and hope which is the realm of the spiritual. We are subject to a universal and eternal process, an inevitability, a round of life and death, which we can approach with holistic vision. Dreams are God, and at the same time from God; so too is a writer's creativity. We might see in this Paul Tillich's God as *depth*.

Part III, 'Methods of Instruction and Comparison', is of interest to this journal, about teaching and comparing religions. Debray's 'Teaching Religious Facts' has a French background in which religious *instruction* is not permitted. It bemoans popular ignorance about aspects of religious heritage (the example given is of people looking at the virgin and child and saying "Who is that chick?"). Their recommendations include both permeation through history, geography and

literature, and a separate personal education programme (“Structured personal exercises”) which includes education about religion. After two short papers by Bremmer and Molendijk, on the term *secularisation* and the work of Ernst Troeltsch, a paper by Droogers explores the “one-field approach to the study of religion” (p.448), meaning an approach involving scholars and believers together, rather than aiming for scientific distance and objectivity, and approach which rejects the false dichotomy of science/secularisation and religion – what perhaps we used to call the phenomenology of religion.. Entitled ‘As close as the scholar can get’, it makes points not usually made by phenomenologists: that the study of religion is anthropological; and that, from research into play, the scholar can ludically inhabit both his/her own world and the other world of the believer, a “playful attitude [which] reduces the distance between the student of religion and believers” (p.455). Of course researchers still have to balance the various believer perspectives and beliefs with their own understandings in a way that the believer does not. An anthropologist is both *stranger and friend* (Powdermaker, 1966), listening sympathetically as friend, but trying to make sense of it all against the broader body of knowledge as an outsider. This is an interesting tightrope to walk, one which involves both training and experience. A short paper by Drees is most important: ‘Religion in Public Debates: Who Defines and for What Purposes’. His answer is that the public debate is dominated by advocates of strong religion and strong secularism, who use the debate for political purposes. He argues that academic study, whilst recognizing this politicisation, should resist its hegemony and listen to all perspectives, especially those less clearly heard. The moderate secular and moderate religious have much to contribute through dialogue. Finally, Watling explores ecological issues through four faiths and arrives at a set of six principles that all feel important, from which a religious contribution to the ecological debate could be constructed. These have to do generally with valuing the world as creation, and being capable of selfless relational choices.

Part IV, ‘Emerging Contexts’, offers some current historical and social anthropological studies of Christianity in society. Nirenberg traces ideas of love through the Bible and Greek thought, exploring the extent to which this has been a useful religious concept. Spyer explores Christianity in Ambon, Versteeg bases his case on medieval Christianity and charismatic renewal in the Conservative Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

In Part V, ‘Religion, Politics and the Law’, Sullivan asks how we should respond to religious pluralism when there is not only a plethora of faiths, but many other private faith positions. Those with more power and organisation are likely to have the greatest influence and hegemony. The discussion is a constitutional USA analysis. Asad, ‘Reflections on Blasphemy’ offers a modern Muslim perspective on blasphemy law, partly viewing blasphemy as taboo breaking, but asking what if politicised Islam regarded all opposition as blasphemy as a seriously held theological and

political position. Warner asks 'Is Liberalism a religion?', and Cohen discusses social democracy similarly. Weber explores the politics of singularity, that is of 'I' over 'we' and uses, via Derrida, the analogy 'autoimmunity' – that is, community has to protect itself from the protection devices of its members. In other words, it supersedes the politics of the sovereign self.

Part VI, 'Materiality, Mediatization, Experience' covers materiality and fetishism (the worship of objects, Masuzawa), therapeutic electricity (Stolow), cyberspace as transformative (Aupers et al.), religious experience through television, a "sense of possibility" in film, religion within music, religion within art (Meyer, Zito, Largier and van Maas). Alexandrova explores images of death through Christian images.

In Part VII, 'Spiritual Exercises, Selves and Beyonds', Van der Veer defends the term 'spirituality' as in opposition to materialism, and shows its power both in the Hinduism of Vivakananda and Gandhi, and in Kandinski's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911). In both he sees creativity and the creation of possibilities.

"Perhaps even more than in the colonial period, the multiplicity of uses of the notion of spirituality today deserves scholarly attention instead of outright disdain" (p.797).

Aupers & Houtman argue in 'The Sacralization of the self' that the new age religious 'supermarket', quoting Luckman's *Invisible Religion* (1967), has a coherent thread at its core, the belief that the self is somehow sacred and to be fostered.

"What we are witnessing today, in short, is less the disappearance of the sacred than its dramatic relocation from a Christian heaven to the deeper layers of the self" (811).

To some, the 'authentic' self is God or inner spirituality. The authors lament the lack of good research and analysis in sociology on this issue. They also point out the substantial move in business training to spiritual models which emphasis personal authenticity. Halsema's 'Horizontal Transcendence' rejects the idea of God transcendent of humanity (vertical transcendence) for that of the transcendent within humanity (horizontal transcendence). Transcendence is viewed as a reaching out to 'other', enabling 'becoming' to take place. These real relationships are more potent for us than abstract imaginings; this relating encodes what we should mean by God. These relationships help us transcend ourselves. It also encourages self limitation – a recognition that the horizon lies far beyond ourselves. God, then is reinterpreted psychologically, as a transforming catalyst, building our selves up (becoming) and focusing us outwards (transcendence). Carlson ends with an appeal for creativity, openness, playfulness and ambiguity that keeps the future open, interested not in the products of creativity but the creative process itself as a state of mind. It is like allowing a loose rein to the carefree child within us. Pursuing the notion of religion beyond the concept leads both inwards and outwards, to psychology and social relationships, rather than upwards to some divine transcendence. This is a curious journey of

reinterpretation, a hermeneutic that applies traditional religious writings non literally. One wonders if the original religious teachings, which encourage literal acceptance, are not barriers to understanding that get in the way, retained out of sentiment and nostalgia. If we need to speak the language of self authenticity, self understanding, and respect for others, let us say so clearly and unambiguously. To identify high-flown values with a mythic God is unhelpful and unclear.

The title asks what might be real in religion, what lies beyond the typological language? This invites an important discussion about what constitutes religion in this day and age. A phenomenology of religion assumes that there is some knowledge of reality to be had. But is that 'knowledge' reality or delusion? In anthropology, religion is a set of beliefs and rituals that people share. They are likely to be naïve and primitive (I use these terms technically) rather than analytical and philosophical. Going back beyond anthropology and ethnology, classical religion was about myths and rituals, whether in Rome, Greece, or the Middle East (such as Ugarit, Akkad and Sumer). The major world religions have their elements of myth and rituals, myths of revealed scriptures, of sacrifices, of manifestations of God, rituals of communion, marriage, funeral and so on. What 'reality' lies beyond? Or is it merely pre-scientific minds stuck in a rut? Today there is plenty of evidence of myth, in the popular views on matters such as on guardian angels and afterlife, and fortune telling, all unscientific (pre-scientific?) and non-rational. And even apart from formal religious rituals, there are roadside shrines to the dead, mass mourning for departed celebrities, lucky charms and the rest. The big question therefore is whether we can separate a 'real' religious sentiment from a false one, or whether it is all a delusion.

This is a dense and magisterial text, mostly of good quality, which explores what we mean by religion philosophically, anthropologically and psychologically. Religion is something the world has done since the beginning of humanity, and it remains as irrational now as then, and as powerful with the potential to destroy communities and livelihoods. This irrationality is not diminished by education, but has a hold over educated folks. This raises immense questions. Can the world sustain itself if divided by religion? Can different religions, especially exclusivist ones, really respect other religious points of view? Could education be part of a solution to change mindsets, and if so how? Does education have to debunk religious teaching, or are there other ways of pointing to non-literal meaning?

Looking at global conflict and tensions, the world needs a moral sense about human need and rights, and mechanism to control human greed. Emmanuel Levinas makes this point in Part II, linking the urgency of this with the holocaust. From this moral imperative builds a set of positive values, rooted in respect. Individuals need means of relating positively to others, and a sense of contributing to community. People need to be curious about life and its structures, mechanisms

and processes. This curiosity needs to include questions of meaning, purpose and truth, not dogma forced by those with hegemony but honed through open and honest discussion and dialogue. The fundamental question is whether religions can enrich this process, or diminish it.

**References**

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DR STEPHEN BIGGER.