Scott S. Elliott, ed.

*Reinventing Religious Studies: Key Writings in the History of a Discipline*  

Anyone interested in debates that, in the 1960s and 1970s, helped to (re)establish the academic study of religion in U.S. public colleges—given that it had thrived, in a small number of schools, prior to WWI but then died off in most places—will welcome Elliott’s efforts to sift through the archives and select pieces deserving re-publication in “Reinventing Religious Studies.” As the one-time editor for *The Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* (originally known as the Council on the Study of Religion)—a publication established in 1970 and no longer in print but which was itself reinvented in 2009 at Equinox Publishers (in hardcopy and as an online blog)—Elliott has gone through 40 years of the journal’s content to select pieces that exemplify the discussions that were taking place in the 1970s, when the study of religion was still new to the publicly-funded U.S. college campus, as well as pieces published over the intervening years that nicely exemplify trends in the field (such as representations of Islam in post-9-11 scholarship, reflections on teaching religion, and the role of religion in civic life). What makes pieces originally published in *The Bulletin* particularly good windows onto the field’s (re)beginnings and development is that the CSSR (not to be confused with the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion, of course) was an umbrella organization, established in 1969 (and disbanded in 2009), that was created by a wide variety of varying-sized and already-existing professional associations in the study of religion (whether theological or not, such as the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion or the ardently theoretical North American Association for the Study of Religion), in hopes of banding together to provide such things as publications, newsletters, and member services for each other. Although empire-building desires on the part of some led to eventual departures (such as the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) which left together, taking a number of services and publications with them—a marriage that, as is well known, ended in divorce some years later, of course, though the two societies now meet annually together once again), for a forty year period the CSSR provided much of the necessary operating conditions for the field to be established and to thrive—making pithy but substantive pieces first published in a newsletter a useful way into thinking about the field.

The history of the CSSR is recounted in detail in the volume’s newly commissioned opening essay, written by longtime CSSR member Harold Remus. A little history always puts the present in a new light, so reading his essay it
becomes clear that much of what is taken for granted now, at least in the North American field (and, given the AAR’s and SBL’s reach, around the world as well), was begun in the CSSR, such as how the AAR/SBL’s joint venture, Religious Studies News, was invented to play the role The Bulletin had been playing (the latter was suspended for several years to allow the former to establish itself) or how the onetime print version of the AAR/SBL’s now online periodical, Openings, was the successor to the CSSR’s job listing periodical TOIL (undoubtedly an unfortunate acronym to some, standing for Teaching Opportunities Information Listing). Because the CSSR, at its height, had 14 different member societies (much like the International Association for the History of Religions [IAHR], it was a society of societies—20 different ones, over the years, being members in one way or another), with many of their own members and libraries receiving both The Bulletin and then also Religious Studies Review (still in publication and which went to Rice University with the CSSR’s disbanding in 2009), these were among the widest circulating periodicals in the field at that time—suggesting that for those interested in the early shape of the study of religion in the U.S., these ought to be among the places we begin digging.

It is for this reason that, of the 40 pieces included, I find the seven pieces in Elliott’s first section, “Inventing and Reinventing the Field of Religious Studies,” to be of the most value. Written by some of the leading figures at the time, those who were producing studies and books of their own on the public study of religion—e.g., Claude Welch, Ninian Smart, John F. Wilson, and Walter Capps—these pieces make evident that, despite great gains made in the field on many fronts, a variety of nagging theoretical and methodological issues are still to be settled, inasmuch as debates around identity and participation yet remain core controversies in the field—something that is evident in the four essays Elliott also includes which form a back-and-forth between Robert A. Segal and Arvind Sharma concerning the appropriateness of social scientific reduction in the study of religion. But this does not mean that Gary Lease’s “What Are the Humanities and Why Do They Matter” or Tim Jensen’s “The Scholar of Religion as a Culture Critic,” not to mention Jonathan Z. Smith’s “Bible and Religion,” are to be overlooked—this is indeed a rich collection of pieces from the past 40 years.

Although not intended as a textbook, of course, reading over these pieces now, given that not much in the study of religion has changed on some fronts (case in point: I am convinced that much of the work now being done on so-called material and lived religion is simply a rebranded version of old school phenomenology of religion, in which we no longer say that an essence is manifested but, rather, that a meaning is embodied), makes the brief chapters in “Reinventing Religious Studies” surprisingly quite useful in a class, whether