REVIEW SYMPOSIUM


INTRODUCTION: DEALING WITH ATTITUDE AND ABUNDANCE

LORNE L. DAWSON

We may have arrived at a time of stock-taking. Perhaps it is just the turn of the century or the dawning of a new millennium. But it may also be related to the “natural history” of our discipline, as the first full generation of secular scholars of religion are assuming positions of authority and influence in departments of religious studies. The subject of this review symposium, the *Guide to the Study of Religion*, reflects this state of affairs (along with a number of other recent and forthcoming publications, e.g., Idinopulos and Yonan 1996; Taylor 1998; Antes et al. forthcoming). The reviews presented here were first given in a panel discussion of Braun and McCutcheon’s book at the meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR), held at Houston in November 2000.

The *Guide* consists of thirty-one essays, authored by an impressive array of some of the best, established and newer, scholars of religion. In the sheer volume of the material offered and in the consistently high quality of most of the essays, the book presents the determined reader with a daunting abundance of riches. Accordingly, for the purposes of this symposium, the reviewers each chose to limit their remarks to one of the three main sections of the book (following the Prologue, entitled “Religion” by Braun; there is also an Epilogue, entitled “Play” by Sam Gill). Julie Ingersoll concentrated her efforts on the four essays of Part I, entitled “Description”. David Seljak takes up a sampling of the eighteen essays in the large Part II, “Explanation”. Phillip Lucas addresses the seven essays in Part III, “Location”. The analyses offered are brief but pointed, as the reviewers have sought to understand and appreciate the diverse riches of this large volume by placing the essays reviewed in the context of their own
scholarly efforts and their activities as teachers of religious studies. In discussing the essays in Part I, Ingersoll considers the relevance of points made in the first four essays to conflicts over gender issues in studies of American conservative Protestantism. Seljak raises important questions about the adequacy of the explicit and implicit conceptions of rationality undergirding many of the analyses undertaken in the second part of the book, particularly in light of the book's advocacy of a more or less postmodernist agenda in the third part of the book. Lucas perceptively discusses the relevance of the critical issues and insights raised in the last part of the book for scholars involved in the social-scientific study of new religious movements.

As the somewhat unusual titles of each part of the book suggest, the Guide is not organized in the conventional manner of many "handbooks" or "state of the art" reviews of a field. Rather its design is more innovative, in a number of regards. The first thing that readers are likely to note is that each chapter is dedicated to discussion of a single concept, like "Definition", "Comparison", "Experience", "Projection", "Myth", "Culture", and "Postmodernism". The objective is to stimulate the systematic, and somewhat comparative, reconsideration of disciplinary fundamentals, free—-one presumes—of the often needlessly heated terms of debate traditionally invoked in the discipline. To this relatively common fare, however, more exotic selections are added, with chapters dedicated to such concepts as "Interpretation", "Deprivation", "Rationality", "Stratification", "Discourse", and "Ideology". This second innovation expands the repertoire of intellectual concerns associated with the discipline of religious studies to encompass both the established humanistic and more recent social-scientific aspects of the academic study of religion. In doing so the editors are encouraging us to place the concerns of religious studies increasingly in the context of important developments in other fields of study, from philosophy to linguistics and sociology. In every case, however, the discussions remain strictly theoretical and methodological in nature.

A third innovation is somewhat more problematic and sets up a tension in the book that the editors have not fully resolved. As Braun specifies in the Prologue, this collection of essays is delivered with an "attitude", one that is sustained fairly well through all the vagaries of the individual chapters. It is embodied also in the organizational design of the book. With regard to the latter, Braun points out that the book "begins with issues and problems of concept formation and