THE CATEGORY "RELIGION" IN RECENT PUBLICATIONS: A CRITICAL SURVEY

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Review article

"[T]he current debate about the concept of religion is not as innocent as it may seem..." (Jacques Waardenburg: in Desland/Vallée 1992: 226).


What counts as religion and, more importantly, who gets to decide? How useful is this category, given its clearly European and largely Christian-influenced heritage? What is the role of the scholar of religion in attempting to determine a normative definition? And what is at stake in the long-standing debate over whether religion is socio-politically autonomous—in a word, *sui generis*—or simply a scholarly, taxonomic category used for but one aspect of the continuum of human, historical practices? Recently a number of scholars have, if not explicitly, then implicitly, addressed these questions. This critical survey examines some recent contributions to the analysis of the category of “religion” in light of their place in the continuing debate over the usefulness of the category “*sui generis* religion,” and the place of naturalistic theories in the study of religion. Accordingly, these publications ought to be seen as part of a continuing and larger discourse on the importance of just who gets to define, construct, and theorize about “religion.”

1. The lay of the theoretical land: Essences versus taxonomies

Until recently, Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s thirty year old work, *The Meaning and End of Religion,* constituted one of the more notable critiques of the concept “religion” as it is used by scholars. Cantwell Smith’s thesis is by now a familiar one: to examine what he understood to be the externals of religion (what he termed the cumulative tradition) as the sum total of religious experience reifies subjective human experiences by overlooking the more important internal element of personal faith in transcendence. In a nutshell, he advised against taking a part for the whole. Because this process of reification is so deeply entrenched in the modern science of religion, Cantwell Smith recommended that scholars no longer employ “religion” whatsoever. Instead, he maintained that research ought more accurately to reflect this double nature of religious organizations and experiences—namely, their external and observable aspects (tradition, myths, ritual, etc.) and their internal and personal aspects (faith).

Although Cantwell Smith’s work is by no means representative of the major trend in recent history of religions (especially in light of his methodological rule concerning the authority and priority of the emic perspective over against other forms of hermeneutical inquiry), it is important to note that Cantwell Smith, like Eliade and many others, prioritized what they understand to be interior and generally inaccessible personal experiences and religious convictions at the expense of observable, documentable data. (That such hermeneutical scholarship usually yields