
Upon being informed that Methodists were exhorted by women preachers in their open air meetings, Dr. Johnson is said to have remarked: Hearing of women preaching is like seeing dogs walking on their hind legs; one does not ask whether it is done well or not, but wonders that it is done at all. Reading that “the study of religions is a global enterprise” strikes as a novel claim and an excessive one. Religions are notorious for their linkage to hard and durable cultural particularities. (“Languages and religions became the privileged cultural locations in which the controversies of unity and difference were framed.” Jonathan Z. Smith). Moreover the study of religions as pursued in universities is perhaps of all current academic endeavors the one most marked by features peculiar to Western Europe and a history shaped by the dialectic of Church and State. A few lines after the challenging sentence quoted above, the editor advances a more modest affirmation, which is verified by the ten chapters that follow: “scholars of religion are found throughout the world”. The editor provided guidelines to the authors. Each chapter focuses on one of ten geographic areas and faces a different challenge.

Western Europe has a long “scientific” tradition in a variety of languages. The work produced is ancient and large, and frequently set benchmarks for the discipline. The editor exhibits good judgment and gives a rich bibliographic essay. But the section entitled “beyond the disciplinary boundaries” is too short. In France for instance, nearly all the work on Islam, African religions, or native religions in both Americas is done by people who would not identify professionally with “religious studies”. The focus on regional studies is the rule. (See the organization of the Musée Guimet.) Western religious history has taken over where Church history left off and this is done in History departments. The same situation avails in Italy and Spain. The editor assumes too readily a rather full overlap between Religionswissenschaft and what travels in English under the label “study of religion”. This is true only of Northern Europe.

Eastern Europe has a kaleidoscopic variety of languages and authors are usually aware of their own national cultural history. The link between religion and folklore has been explored in contexts where national identities had to struggle. The editor gives a precious bibliography, revealing a wealth of work (on Asian religions since a very early date, for instance) and is sensitive to social factors such as relative isolation and frequent emigration of scholars.

North Africa and West Asia is a hinge. First because the editor gives detailed attention to problems of nomenclature and their ideological implications (Middle East or West Asia?). Then because Muslims traveled, observed and...
wrote what they saw. They also sought information on how to exercise rule over non-Muslim populations eight centuries before Western colonial rulers worried about that. So there is a body of works on religious varieties in Arabic and Persian, languages still alive in the production of knowledge. The a. then surveys the current institutional arrangements for the study of religion in NAWA. He concludes with a reference to the internalization of normative positivist scientific discourse by modernized religious people. The idea that Islam and science go together becomes the basis for alternatives to hermeneutic queries. I regret that the a. does not give bibliographic information on significant current publications.

Sub-Saharan Africa. A “rainbow of religion” is being studied in many places. At the origins, transmission of culture and critical reflection took place in oral forms. It would be a mistake to accept the modern slogan that in pre-colonial Africa “everyone” was religious. Religious studies thrive (relatively) in former British colonies. (The absence is noteworthy in previously French, Belgian and Portuguese colonies.) Parrinder promoted the idea of an “African Traditional Religion”. Most departments of religious studies grew out of theological schools and the conflicts are not sharp between confessional approaches and the non-confessional alternatives. Today work is mainly on African indigenous religions. Insider/outsider problems are complex since men study women’s cults, Africans converted to Christianity or Islam study indigenous cults, and Africans who emigrated return to study local phenomena. A polemic against those who tried to find the Christian God in Africa has raged. The a. alludes to “borrowing” but the vexed problems of acculturation and syncretism are not focused on. There is one allusion to the spread of Pentecostalism but no look at the multitude of new religious movements. The a. refers to the important place religious practice and reflections play in the work of many African creative writers. The same point could be made about novels written in NAWA. There is work to be done here.

South and Southeast Asia. For South Asia (former British India minus Burma), the a. warns us that “religion” hardly exists as a separate discipline and that religion has been studied by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists. The idea that Hinduism and caste provide the synthesis of India led to some political enthusiasms; there was also resistance. The Indological tradition keeps working on the classical texts and anthropologists turn their interests to village life and “low traditions”. The study of Muslims and Christians is often colored by problems of identity and linked to issues of communal violence. It has become apparent that “conversion” has been as an un-criticized concept and that the issues of syncretism and composite culture have been handled with insufficient skill. In Sri Lanka attention was paid to