James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer


The interconnection between religion and science has a long history and a great many aspects. This anthology does not intend, however, to cover the history or the breadth of issues involved concerning this relationship. All the contributions focus on religion in the modern period, and although a large variety of phenomena are addressed, the editors’ ambition is primarily to throw light on how religions appeal to the authority of science. Being a much more limited question, it is nevertheless extremely relevant for the modernization of religion in our time. Certainly, historical and other aspects of the relationship are treated in some contributions, which is natural given the format of this publication. A large and international company of scholars — 33 in all — contributes to the volume. While most of the authors represent religious studies/the history of religion, scholars in anthropology, sociology, history, and philosophy are also represented, creating a truly interdisciplinary collection able to elucidate the complexity of the subject from different disciplinary positions.

The editors are well qualified for producing a collection like this: James R. Lewis has previously published an in-depth study of legitimation processes in religion, i.e., Legitimating New Religions (2003), and co-editor Olav Hammer has analyzed strategies of epistemology also involving science in his book Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age (2001). In their introductory chapter, sketching the common platform of the anthology, the editors point to the truth claims generally accompanying religious propositions, and ask the fundamental question why religious adherents can be confident that their beliefs and predilections are true and not just personal preferences (p. 2). Their answer lists a number of well-known warrant types that support the explicit or implicit arguments attached to religious claims. These are specified as the authority of canonical texts, the authority of charismatic individuals or the traditions connected with such individuals (for instance the hadith collections describing the words and deeds of the prophet Muhammad), personal experience, institutional backing, and finally, science.

As everyone knows religion frequently has good reason to fear science. The prestige, as well as the intellectual and social power of science, makes it an attractive warrant for religious claims, and consequently, many religious adherents argue that there is no conflict between themselves and science and even that their own worldview agrees with science. The editors do not stop with this rather commonplace observation, but maintain that for science to function
as a legitimator of religion, a specific understanding of — or rather approach to — science is necessary. This approach is characterized as **piecemeal**, meaning “science is approached as a religion-like cluster of elements that can be adopted or rejected on a piecemeal basis as needed” (p. 6). This piecemeal, selective attitude is contrasted with a view of science as an “interconnected core,” with established procedures and methods. Ideally, scientists should seriously consider research and theoretical claims that contradict their own views, but religious adherents are under no such obligation and consequently elements that are not in concord with religious claims can simply be ignored or rejected. It is not explained how the cluster of elements are “religion-like,” but apart from that, this observation seems well founded and gives a basic clue to understanding how science becomes integrated in religious constructions of legitimacy. “Selected elements” can be many things, for instance reference to scientific theories or use of technical devices or stylistic features in scientific texts. In his chapter “How Religions Appeal to the Authority of Science,” Lewis gives a detailed overview of legitimation strategies with due reference to Max Weber and many examples of how aspects of science are utilized. Other chapters add further examples. However, a clarification of what is intended when speaking of “science” would have been appropriate in the introductory chapter. For instance, is the use of doctoral titles so common in new religious movements, an appeal to scientific authority or reliance on the credibility of academic institutions? This timely question is raised by Kathinka Frøystad in her chapter “From Analogies to Narrative Entanglement: Involving Scientific Authority in Indian New Age Spirituality” (p. 57).

The common thematic platform for the contributions is thus outlined as consisting of religious argumentation and rhetoric that selectively apply various elements in modern science as a means to legitimate religious claims.

Many different approaches can be subsumed under this umbrella, and the book is indeed a comprehensive work marked by great diversity. Instead of a thematic grouping of contributions, the book is organized according to religious traditions, covering Buddhism and East Asian traditions, South Asian traditions, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Spiritualism and Spiritism, New Age and the occult, alternative archaeologies, and skeptics — the list illustrates how international this type of legitimation strategy now is. Above-mentioned Fløystad, for instance, provides an interesting overview of how anthropologists have interpreted the interface between religion and science. She argues that the concept of **mimesis** (a Greek word meaning imitation) now is the most common analytical tool among anthropologists for describing all kinds of alleged scientific legitimacy in non-scientific contexts (p. 45). In “We Demand Bedrock Knowledge: Modern Satanism between Secularized Esotericism and