

Richard King (ed.), *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. xvii + 664 pp. ISBN 9780231145428 (hbk.).

This volume comprises 56 chapters, authored by 44 contributors (including eight women). In addition to a range of other materials, spread out through the book's 12 parts, we find related sets of chapters

- on individual theoreticians of religion (Bourdieu, Derrida, Eliade, Feuerbach, Foucault, Freud, Hegel, Hume, James, Jung, Marx, Müller, Nietzsche, Otto), on pairs of theoreticians (Geertz and Asad) and on groups of theoreticians (French feminists);
- on bodies of theories (Anglo-American analytical philosophy, structuralism, “post-Marxism,” “classical” ritual theories, feminism, cognitive science, queer theory, phenomenology of religion, contemporary continental philosophy);
- on themes of theoretical discussion (“key theories on myth and religion,” the myth-ritual debate, race and religion);
- on theories emerging from specific disciplines (“classic” comparative theology, contemporary social theory, “classical” anthropological theories, psychology of religion).

The criteria for inclusion of these specimens of theorization, some of which are more useful than others, are not explained in the preface (as there is no real introduction), but there seems to be a certain predilection for “French” thinkers on the part of the editor.

The title of the book is attractive, yet it is also elusive. So is the subtitle. The meaning of the term “methodologies” is unclear to me; is it synonymous with “approaches”? The chapter length is modest. Several chapters are shorter than ten pages; few are longer than fifteen. Accordingly, writing is succinct at times, but tends to be superficial at others. There are no chapter summaries, keywords, recommended readings, general introductions or other features that have become standard for textbooks. But there is an index.

In his endorsement, Russell McCutcheon praises the book as being “state-of-the-art.” I could have agreed with this had the book been published around 2010. For it is around that time, it seems, that chapters stopped being revised. Several chapters acknowledge that fact in endnotes. Throughout its some 620 pages, references to works published post 2009/2011 can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Is that acceptable in the study of religion/s? In many other disciplines it would not be. (Maybe McCutcheon's blurb was written years ago as well?)

I imagine that after a series of unfortunate delays the editor and the publisher were facing a dilemma: should they betray the many authors who have submitted their chapters by shelving the project, or should they betray the readers by publishing a book that is already dated when it comes out? They chose the latter option. Given the caliber of its contributors, several of the chapters are still worth reading, even though they do not necessarily reflect their current thinking on the subject matter. (I will refrain from producing my subjective hit list here.)

The preface begins as follows:

This edited collection seeks to explore the academic study of religion not as the study of a pre-existing and established object but rather as discursive field that produces its object of study in the very process of engaging in the language game of “religion”. In an edited volume of this size, with so many different authors and perspectives to consider, one cannot — indeed *should* not — expect any uniformity of perspective or single position to prevail.

KING 2017: xiii, original emphasis

I am not quite sure how to interpret this. On the one hand there is an appeal to the ethics of editing, which should put a certain restraint on editors. Yet, this is not turned into an asset. Instead of promoting diversity or plurality and inviting debate, King seems to think of this as a limitation, as something that cannot be fully controlled for. The second sentence can be read like an excuse that the agenda as laid out in the first sentence has not been endorsed and shared by certain contributors. This seems indeed to be the case (I name no black sheep here). There is an ambivalence with regard to the string of fifteen chapters on single theoreticians. On the one hand, these theoreticians have their role in producing “religion” as an object of study, and their endeavors can be analyzed in terms of such a reflexive critique. On the other hand, one wonders: is a discussion of these theoreticians of interest only for a reflexive auto-history of “religion,” as producers of our object of study? Or have their claims and theories any relevance for accounting for RELIGION (as some kind of thing out there)? For example, Jeremy Carrette states on Foucault: “His work shows not only how the ‘discipline’ of religion orders and classifies, but how religious traditions are themselves caught inside complex networks of power” (p. 493). I suppose when he speaks of “the ‘discipline’ of religion” Carrette refers to the academic study of religion, but the second part of the sentence takes a step further, to the things themselves. Foucault’s thinking is dealt with not only as an exercise on history of a discursive field, but as a repository of valid claims