
BOOK REVIEW

Stoddard, Brad and Craig Martin (eds) 2017. *Stereotyping Religion: Critiquing Clichés*. London: Bloomsbury. xii + 187pp. ISBN: 978-1-4742-9220-7 £65.00 (hbk); ISBN: 978-1-4742-9219-1 £21.99 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-4742-9222-1 £23.74 (e-pub); ISBN: 978-1-4742-9221-4 £23.74 (e-pdf).

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The study of religion is undergoing a major upheaval. The “world religions paradigm”, the emphasis on “lived” or “vernacular” religion rather than historical textual versions, and the deconstruction of “religion” as a category, are all part of the current methodological agenda. The various contributors to *Stereotyping Religion* address such issues by considering a number of clichés—commonly held maxims about religion—examining their origins and function and, importantly, how the stereotype affects our scholarship, as well as popular culture.

Matt Sheedy (“Religions are intrinsically violent”) not only demolishes this popular claim, but highlights the danger of the opposite extreme which contends that religions are essentially peaceful. Writing on “Religion is a private matter” Robyn Faith Walsh illustrates the ways in which we can focus on private belief rather than public practice—a theme that is taken further by Andie R. Alexander and Russell T. McCutcheon (“I’m spiritual but not religious”). Walsh argues effectively that scholars do not have unmediated access to private beliefs, and hence must focus on social practices. Alexander and McCutcheon’s argument is less clear: after a somewhat tortuous discussion of language acquisition and translation, which is somewhat difficult to follow, they appear to conclude that claims to being non-religiously spiritual only occur within conversations relating to religion, and can only be contextualized with reference to religion, thus demonstrating that they are derivative. However, I think the authors could have made more attempt here to ascertain precisely the kind of feelings that “Spiritual but Not Religious” (SBNR) claimants experience—perhaps a feeling that the universe cannot wholly be explained empirically, a desire to pray or meditate, an interest in spiritual writing, or a belief that life has some more ultimate purpose than material prosperity.

At times, I felt that some contributors slightly overstated their case. Writing on “Religion concerns the transcendent”, Leslie Dorrough Smith rightly debunks the now old-fashioned notion that religion is about “the sacred”, and admonishes Diana Eck and John Esposito for continuing to use the word in their expositions of Hinduism and Islam respectively, asking

whether “the use of such an adjective is a sign that the author, too, takes for granted that the thing in question exudes some sort of transcendent quality?” (p. 63). Yet scholarly writing often legitimately employs *oratio obliqua*—paraphrasing another’s view on their behalf—in preference to using over-cautious qualifiers such as “supposedly” or “purportedly”.

Both Sean McCloud (“Religions are belief systems”) and Steven Ramey (“Religions are mutually exclusive”) effectively highlight the way in which we can compartmentalize religious traditions. McCloud illustrates how this is done by focusing on intellectual movements within traditions, while Ramey highlights the way in which social bureaucracy can funnel individuals into subscribing to one single religion rather than several. This, he believes, is reflected in the way textbooks separate world religions into Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. While these are important observations, however, religious organizations themselves are usually confident about affirming their identity, and assertive about whether their place of worship is Buddhist, Confucian, Sikh or Hindu.

Two chapters address the purpose of studying religion. Discussing the claim that “Learning about religion leads to tolerance”, Tenzan Eaghll insists that religion’s use and function in society is the subject’s proper aim, not achieving interreligious harmony. In a similar vein Jennifer Eyl dismisses the maxim that “Religion makes people moral”, arguing that morality exists outside religion and that religions have different moral codes. In this otherwise competent and persuasive chapter, however, Eyl refers to early Christian theological debates being “reinforced by Christians across the globe on Sundays in the prayer called the Apostle’s [sic] Creed” (p. 48). This is incorrect on a number of fronts: the Apostles’ Creed is not a prayer but a confession of faith; it is the Nicene Creed that is normally used liturgically, not the Apostles’ Creed; and neither makes explicit reference to the Trinity. Perhaps scholars of religion are becoming less acquainted with Christianity as the study of other religions expands.

Rebecca King’s final chapter (“Religion is bullshit”) addresses popular and scholarly ways of dismissing religion, and certainly deserves a place in this anthology, but perhaps less information about bulls, and more critique of Marx and Freud, would have enhanced her discussion.

Despite all these criticisms, or perhaps because of them, I found *Stereotyping Religion* stimulating and provocative. The book should certainly be of interest to those of us who have at times become a victim to these clichés, as well as to those who are new to the study of religion and need to be alerted to them, and Stoddard and Martin have done us a service in drawing these together. Nevertheless, the book should not be swallowed whole. As James Dennis Larusso states when effectively debunking the maxim “Everyone has a faith”: “We need clichés precisely because they allow us to communicate more efficiently and colorfully” (p. 132).

Finally, readers will no doubt have their own pet cliché that is not found in this volume. Mine is “X is not (or X is more than) a religion—it’s a way of life”—frequently stated by well-meaning practitioners who wish to commend their faith, and which finds its way into undergraduate writing. This cliché could have generated discussion about whether scholars tend to examine religions in their ritual and institutionalized rather than vernacular forms. However, no book can be totally comprehensive, and Stoddard and Martin have exercised good editorial judgement, and produced a highly stimulating volume.