
Book Review

HARVEY, G., ed. 2009. *Religions in Focus: New Approaches to Tradition and Contemporary Practices*. London: Equinox. vii + 366pp. ISBN 978 84553 218 5. Pbk. £16.99.

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Religions in Focus is presented as plugging a gap in the market by “providing a foundation for studying what people do when they act or live religiously” (p. vi).

Harvey, the editor, explains the six steps that underpin the text, which should be regarded as the starting point of an approach rather than a fixed and finalized text. A companion website is mentioned, for which the contributory authors will provide additional materials. However, the website is not yet up and running two years after publication. This is a shame as it would provide a way for Harvey’s aim for readers to collaborate and thus “develop the project of keeping religions in focus.”

The text can be purchased electronically chapter by chapter, although at £15 a shot, it would be cheaper to buy the book, as the Introduction would be required to set the context for a specific chapter. This web address provides details for electronic purchase, accessed at <http://www.equinoxpub.com/equinox/books/showbook.asp?bkid=225&keyword=harvey,%20g>

Seventeen religions are presented, in reverse alphabetical order from Zoroastrians to Baha’is. The text brings together religions that are usually classified as world, new, or indigenous, although the text avoids such labels. The authors are specialists in the religion they present, and in keeping with the worldwide focus of the text, are drawn from Africa, Europe, the Far East, the USA and the UK. Authors draw from their local cultures to provide a vignette of religious practice, thus introducing, for example, Muslims in Indonesia, Hindus in South Africa, Shamans in England and Japanese religionists in Japan. Each chapter is approximately 20 pages long, and in that space provides a succinct introduction to and overview of the religion in focus.

The focus in the text is on people rather than religious systems. Thus, chapter titles relate to those who live the religion: Latter-day Saints, rather than the religious tradition, Mormonism. In addition vignettes provide a focus on religious beliefs and practices held by a person or couple within a tradition. This contextualization particularly helps when encountering unfamiliar traditions, as some of the strangeness is dissipated through insights into religion in practice. Rose’s chapter on Zoroastrians/Zarathustris starts the book, and provides an interesting insight into the historical and cultural influences on religious practices. Her vignette runs throughout the chapter, contextualizing all aspects of the faith in light of a Zarathustri couple. This setting of unusual practices in the life of a Californian couple personalizes the account, with their comments explaining the diversity in their own beliefs and practices.

This publication makes two main contributions to fieldwork. First, by way of methodology and secondly, through the provision of a foundation resource.

Methodology. The book is interesting in the ways that it brings “religion into focus” through vignettes. I found chapters which used such snapshots helped to achieve the aim to keep “the lived reality of living religion in view” (p. 3). These vignettes covered a range of approaches, including a focus on individuals (Zarathustris), the family (Latter-day Saints), a bookshop (Christians), and a school (Muslims). These fresh ways of looking at a religious tradition worked well for both familiar traditions, in raising new perspectives as in the Muslim school, or for unfamiliar traditions, in focusing on a family to understand diversity with Japanese religionists. The success of these approaches could be used to help students consider ways to approach religion in the field.

Foundation resource. The chapters provide an insight into the way believers practise their religion in a range of geographical contexts, termed “elsewhere” in the text. The foundation section, the chapter, on a particular religion provides an introduction to people who belong to that community. This resource can be used by lecturers and students in exploring aspects of religious belief and practice. Each chapter is followed with suggestions for further reading, some of which just cite other publications by the author, as for Shamans, whereas others provide a range of suggestions, for example, Japanese religionists.

The chapters could be used to prepare students for fieldwork, helping them to generate questions for fieldwork with people locally to explore how they practise their religion. Also, students could use the foundation section for comparative purposes in an exploration of diaspora developments and challenges, or geographical manifestations of religions. Thus, they could use chapters which focus on religion in its original geographical setting, such as Chinese religionists, as a yardstick against which to measure diaspora changes. Other chapters which focus on religion in a diaspora setting, such as African religionists, could provide a case study against which to compare local manifestations.

The book has a very good index, which can be used to explore an aspect of practice such as marriage across the religions. Additionally, if read alongside the page numbers for a particular chapter, searches can be refined for the religion under consideration.

Full chapter listing: *Zoroastrians* (Jenny Rose), *Sikhs* (Nikky-Gurminder Singh), *Shamans and Animists* (Graham Harvey), *Practitioners of Indigenous Religions in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Afe Adogame), *Pagans* (Sabina Magliocco), *Muslims* (Florian Pohl), *Latter-Day Saints* (Douglas J. Davies), *Koreans' "New" Religious Concerns* (Woo Hairan), *Jews* (K. Hannah Holtschneider), *Japanese Religionists* (Katja Triplett), *Jains* (Jeffrey D. Long), *Indigenous Religionists in North America* (Kenneth Lokensgard), *Hindus* (P. Pratat Kumar), *Christians* (George D. Chryssides), *Chinese Religionists* (Shawn Arthur), *Buddhists* (Eve Mullen), *Baha'is* (Peter Smith).