
Book Review

POSSAMAI, Adam. 2009. *Sociology of Religion for Generations X and Y*. London and Oakville: Equinox. viii + 225 pp. ISBN 978 1 84553 304 5. Pbk. £16.99.

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With this book Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Western Sydney Adam Possamai is doing something quite original: he is specifically addressing a younger audience. It is not about how to study the interactions between generations X and Y and religion sociologically; rather Possamai, one of their own, is introducing these generations to the sociology of religion. Hence the book is accessibly written. Nonetheless, it comprises an impressive marshalling of the sub-discipline of relevance and interest to the specialist as well as student.

As Possamai reminds us, “generation Xers” are characterized as being born between 1965 and 1980 and “Yers” as born between 1981 and 2000. These generations, in the West, are united in never having experienced war, being raised in the “heyday of global consumerism” (p. 2) and more educated than their parents. Some query the wisdom of dividing groups by year of birth, but Possamai argues for the value of grouping together people who have experienced the same broad conditions. In relation to religion, he characterizes generations X and Y, in contrast to previous generations, as interested in asking “what must we do to be loved?” rather than “what must we do to be saved?” The focus is on the here and now, choice and experience, with little religious education.

Individualization, fragmentation and popular culture are *leitmotifs* through the book. Indeed, each chapter opens with an example from popular culture. Chapter 1 commences with a blog discussion about an increase in coverage of religious and spiritual topics in science fiction with the shift from modernity to postmodernity, leading on to a discussion of religious diversity and the politics of definition, which effectively highlights the power and significance of definition.

Possamai defends his choice to present religion and popular culture next, before classical sociological theories of religion, pedagogically as drawing upon the concern and life experiences of generations X and Y. I found the example of Muslim and Christian groups opposing Pokemon as occult and corrupting particularly memorable. Possamai then goes “back” in Chapter 3 to look at religion and modernity through the work of Marx and Engels, Durkheim and Weber, emphasizing the specificity of industrial Europe. In Chapter 4 he follows Grace Davie in viewing the religious circumstances in Europe as specific and atypical rather than the destination of the rest of the world. Rational choice theory is given short shrift and the chapter closes with a discussion of Troeltsch’s writing on mysticism in relation to religion and spirituality.

In Chapters 5 and 6 Possamai proceeds to look at religion and postmodernity, with Chapters 7 to 13 addressing particular religious movements such as Buddhism and Witchcraft in light of theoretical reflections. For example, Chapter 7 deals with “Esotericism, Its

McDonaldisation, and its Re-enchantment Process” and includes valuable observations, such as, Arab texts “became the basis of a return to mythopoeic thought in the Renaissance” (p. 97), which should help students to place contemporary phenomena in their broad, connected historical contexts. Possamai draws on various contemporary Australian examples of (ir)religiosity, adding a fresher view of the West to the usual suspects of the UK and USA.

Each short chapter can stand alone. The lively examples invigorate the subject area, but some complex ideas are not explained, for example, ontology (p. 23), which might make the book more difficult for the “interested but uninformed” Xer or Yer. Quite a lot of background in the sociology of religion seems necessary in places, for example, knowledge of previous debates about spirituality (pp. 62-65), in order to contextualize and find parts of interest. I would have appreciated further elaboration and justification of concepts such as postmodernism and globalization, which are somewhat taken for granted. In the Conclusion there is a tension between the modern ideal of progress with intellectuals duty-bound to tell the truth, and fragmented knowledge in post-modernity meaning intellectuals can only “be mediators in communication between different autonomous groups” (p. 199). Possamai employs the multiple-modernity thesis to resolve this and I think this may be taken as his preferred theoretical standpoint overall (he is certainly no secularization theorist), though he guides the reader through a variety of stances and data.

Possamai’s concluding look at the role of intellectuals in the “real world” is thought provoking. Though the book as a whole focuses more on debates and illustrations than methods, it prompts further questions such as about how to investigate Paganism and the validity of online methodologies. The book is primarily aimed at students, rather than sociologists of religion, but I still found it an enjoyable read and learned a lot. As a “Yer” myself, I could identify with the portrayal of a generation.