
Book Review

BARKER, Eileen, ed. 2008. *The Centrality of Religion in Social Life: Essays in Honour of James A. Beckford*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate. xi + 247 pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-6515-1 (hbk); 978-1-4094-0343-2 (pbk). £55.00 (hbk); £17.99 (pbk).

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This is a *Festschrift* for James Beckford, who retired in 2007 from the Chair of Sociology at the University of Warwick. The chapters were deliberately commissioned to reflect Beckford's research interests during his career, which spanned the Jehovah's Witnesses, new religions in France, and religion in British prisons.

While none of the contributions are the results of new fieldwork, the various essays draw on empirical data, and examine frameworks in which religion, and particularly minority religions, can be understood. The chapters by Jay Demerath, David Martin, and Thomas Luckmann are theoretical: Demerath and Martin discuss issues relating to secularization, while Luckmann examines religion as a response to helplessness. Other authors focus on the social, legal and political backgrounds in which religious minorities reside. James T. Richardson and Jennifer Shoemaker highlight several legal cases in which minority religions have resorted to the European Court of Human Rights. Grace Davie and Jean-Paul Willaime have contributed chapters on religion in France, with specific reference to its policy of *laïcité*. Karel Dobbelaere offers a comparison between secularisation in France and Belgium, and Véronique Altglas provides an analysis of French political and anti-cult reactions to new religions, and how new religious groups have responded. Susumu Shimazono writes about contemporary religion in Japan – another of Beckford's interests.

Some contributors draw on empirical data that have already been amassed by researchers. Dobbelaere uses the findings of the Religious and Moral Pluralism Study (RAMP) – a recent study of Catholics and former Catholics spanning eleven European countries. Drawing on the same study, Eileen Barker, in her chapter “The Church Without and the God Within,” constructs a framework in which traditional religiosity and contemporary spirituality can be contrasted. Meredith McGuire relates sociological theory to empirical studies, offering some pointers for further research on personal beliefs and practices. Enzo Pace examines Sikhism as a “social insertion” western culture, viewing it as an “inner-world mysticism,” a “theo-fraternity” in which the rules of caste are transcended. (This is one contribution with which I would take issue: the article is predominantly literature-based, and a more empirical fieldwork-based study of the Sikhs would reveal that it has its own caste system, despite the teachings of its founder-leader Guru Nanak.) The other specific religious group that is discussed in the *Festschrift* is the Jehovah's Witnesses: David Voas argues, contrary to Stark and Iannaccone's recent empirical research, that the Watch Tower organization is not experiencing phenomenal growth, but now has a declining growth rate.

Other chapters in this volume include a study of Muslim prison chaplaincy by Sophie Gilliat-Ray, who co-authored *Religion in Prison* (1998) with James Beckford. This contribution, based on direct empirical study, not only effectively highlights the development of Muslim spirituality in prisons, but sets out an agenda for future study of this field. Margit Warburg also draws on her own empirical work, as well as those of other researchers, in writing on “Theorising Conversion.” She convincingly argues that one should not necessarily take informants’ accounts of their conversions as authentic descriptions of the past process of their arrival at their chosen faith. Other societal and institutional factors are at work, as well as personal reflection and choice.

The collection is a fitting tribute to James Beckford’s work in the sociology of religion, and – equally importantly – it makes a valuable contribution to the field. It is certainly of interest to all researchers who undertake empirical work in the study of religion.