
Book Review

ARWECK, Elisabeth, and William Keenan, eds. 2006. *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual*. Aldershot: Ashgate. xvi + 242 pp. ISBN: 0-7546-5094-2. £55.00.

As suggested in the foreword, the developing field of the study of the material expressions of religion opens up new avenues of investigation for ethnographers of religion in the areas of architecture, iconography, dance or dress, to explore arenas which formerly had belonged to cognate disciplines (p. xv). These exciting new developments to study religion through the location of the sacred in social life and space occupied during performance are expressed through a number of contributions that feature contemporary intellectual and cultural life through the lens of “material religious expressions and their sociological and anthropological theorizations” (p. 14). As stated in the Introduction each of the contributions deals with the themes of spectacle, representation, performativity and display within the context of questions around pluriform identities and their boundaries, “post-secular” interest in religious renewal and “the return of the sacred,” subsequent debates on de- or re-traditionalization and exploration of symbolic cultures, consumerism, and commodification of religion, especially focusing on an awareness of the significant emergence of global/local networks.

The book’s collection of essays contains interesting case studies under-laid by the theoretical position towards the re-sacralization of western society argued persuasively over the years by David Martin to whom the collection is dedicated. The case studies range from Pentecostal Christianity in South America, popular expressions of Roman Catholic saint veneration in Spain, the redundant sacred spaces of South West Wales, religious dance in Germany and the appropriation of sacredness at Fatima in Portugal. However, although the collection is claimed to represent “multi-cultural, multi-faith dynamics” (p. 14) I was disappointed at the range of contributions exploring non-Christian religion. Although there were two chapters that dealt with pagan witchcraft (8 and 13) and one that explored the transformations that have taken place in the transmigration of Tibetan Buddhism, these three contributions only existed to demonstrate the re-emergence of the sacred in the West rather than as representations of the respective religions in their own right. However, the arrival of Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and the long-standing presence of Judaism, and the plethora of new religious movements originating both locally and from places from all quarters of the globe is also part of the “re-sacralisation” process. Therefore the book only partially fulfils its stated intentions to contribute “range” to an emerging field of study. However, the editors’ intention not to impose a “critical line” to contributions and to allow various “voices” to express themselves does provide a different kind of “range,” albeit to some extent limited by the “Martinian” underlay and the prevalent “fashions” in the sociological study of religion where Western forms of religion have historically dominated.

The Introduction comments that in the present era of Western European society “we are dealing with the putative impact of ‘modernity’ which sought to evacuate culture and society of their historic of material signs and symbols of religious faith” and makes the link with the “hegemonic sway of yore over the sociological imagination” (Keenan, 2003) and the “secularist

paradigm" (Bruce, 2002). All true enough, but perhaps it is also time to recognize the role of post-Reformation religion as well as post-Enlightenment critiques of religion in the process of de-sacralization associated with modernism.

Finally, the book makes an important contribution to notions of "insider" and "outsider" grasps of religious reality. It is certainly true that denizens of social science have not been inclined as a "tribe" to theorize material expressions of religion with an acknowledgement of "grace" (pp. 16–17), rather tending to separate off matters of faith in favour of dwelling upon "real world" embodiments of the material manifestations of religion (p. 9). However, in positing that the religious believer as an "insider" participant-observer is able to perceive a world beyond such constructions and thus able to convey the awakening and transporting roles of material expressions of religion, risks running into old paradigms of "insider/outsider" relationships. The contributions in this collection do acknowledge that the boundaries between appreciation and explication in the domain of the religious material culture are thin, but the positing of privileged insider over the outsider observer is dangerous territory. In my experience of fieldwork in religion, the participant is rarely sufficiently "observer." Participation in the religious blurs the "subject/object" borders that observation insists upon. However, positing observers as neutrally objective creates an artificially maintained subject/object border that cannot exist in the "real world," so precious to the social scientist. I would rather see this dichotomy recognized and problematized, rather than find myself occupying territory in the old etic/emic demarcations.

Arweck's and Keenan's collection makes us, as scholars of religion interested in "real life" religious phenomena, yearn for more collections of such case studies that broaden the "range" in both the variety of religious traditions and the position taken towards issues of sacralization in contemporary western societies. There is so much scope here for further studies and this collection is an important addition to a relatively new field.

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References

- Bruce, Steve. 2002. *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Keenan, William. 2003. "Rediscovering the Theologian in Sociology: Foundation and Possibilities," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 20.1, 19-42. doi:10.1177/0263276403020001919