Book Review


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Method as Identity collects several related chapters, some of which had been produced for public lectures or presentations, while others were composed specifically for this book. They follow a common theme of the relationship between method and identity, and how those in the field of the study of religion need to think about these subjects in a different way from which they have mostly been doing until now.

Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller are both professors of Religious Studies and Africana Studies at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. Driscoll is also a professor of American Studies, while Miller is the director of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at that university. This background, not only in the study of religions, but also in terms of gender and African-American studies, is very relevant here, as the objective of the book is exactly to explore that intersection between the methods utilized in religious studies and questions of identity. As such, these are two very well-positioned authors to explore the theme that the book’s title indicates. It is, however, important to note the American context of much of the book’s content. It is not that the themes explored in the book are not relevant outside the specific context of American academia, as they are very easy to transpose to the practices in other countries and continents, particularly Europe, but we must be aware that most of the examples and authors engaged with in this volume are particularly relevant for the American history of the field in the study of religion.

The book is structured into seven distinct essays, which gradually, but forcefully, build up the case for the volume’s main thesis. Straight from the first chapter, entitled “Method as Identity: The Battle for Identity in the North American Study of Religions”, the stage is set for what will concern the rest of the book. The idea that method, all method, even that which might be seemingly “invisible” or “objective”, is a product of a specific identity, and that which is seen as being the standard or “normal” method simply reflects the normative white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, affluent and mostly male identity, and is as compromised by identity politics as gender or race oriented approaches to the study of religions. The battle
mentioned in the chapter’s title is the battle both to show those who follow “normative” methods that they need to question their method, through the prism of their own identities, but also the battle for other approaches to “method” to be accepted and seen as legitimate in the study of religions and not as being intrinsically inferior. Chapter 2 goes on to criticize further those who claim for themselves the label of “critical” study of religions as unable or unwilling to turn their critical gaze on themselves. Taking a page from Bourdieu, they analyse the “theoretical and methodological tastes” of the dominant methodological stance in the study of religions in order to see how, as in Bourdieu, the taste “classifies the classifier”. This chapter also explores the stance of the so-called “critics” in relation to those they consider to be “caretakers” of religion, a stance which is somewhat patronising, looking at their own colleagues who do not share their method as objects of study rather than as equals.

In Chapter 3 the book takes a more historic turn, which does feel somewhat at variance with the more methodological chapters preceding it, going all the way back to the 1958 Tokyo IAHR Congress and the debates on method that arose there, as well as exploring the career of Charles H. Long as a “father” of African American Study of Religion, as well as someone who might serve as an alternative foundational methodological voice outside the usual White Anglo-Saxon Protestant paradigm. Chapter 4 provides a practical example of the way in which methodology compartmentalizes and creates hierarchical structures among different types of “Study of Religions”. Taking the example of “Black Religious Studies”, the authors ask why the need for the prefix “black” when it is being discussed while European modes of Religionswissenschaft are prefix-less. This is a good example of what normativity in the study of religions means; when the study of religion differs from the normative methodology the field automatically frontloads terms which specify identity and immediately set it apart from the norm as some kind of strange offshoot.

In Chapter 5, the co-constitution of the concepts of religion and race are examined as being interrelated categories arising from the same urge to catalogue, label and archive subjects. The authors go further, defending the idea that race and religion are intimately related, as is their study. It is, for example, not a coincidence that the “lower forms” of religion, such as animism, would correspond to the native religions of what were also considered “lower races” of humans. This correspondence was also a useful tool in the colonial endeavour and justification of the existence of empire. In Chapter 6 some solutions are presented, such as the need for the “normative”, “critical” study of religions to be able to embrace its own identity, instead of pretending to lack any identity. The final chapter is concerned with code-switching, particularly in what concerns African-American identity in the methodological context.

Taken as a whole, this volume is a provocative and interesting diagnosis of a definite problem in the field of study of religion. In fact, the book is excellent at precisely diagnosing the problem, but is more tentative in providing solutions to that problem, even if there are some attempts, particularly in the last two chapters. The work presented in Method as Identity is important; it tells the story, explains and problematizes a deep injustice which is a problem of all of academia, beyond the study of religion. The particular problem with the field of the study of religion, however, and which this volume correctly points out, is the lack of will to confront and deconstruct the normative authorities in the field, something that other areas have been engaging in vigorously, and from which the study of religions should take a page.