

Playful Religion: Challenges for the Study of Religion. Essays by André Droogers, Peter B. Clarke, Grace Davie, Sidney M. Greenfield and Peter Versteeg, edited by Anton van Harskamp, Mirander Klaver, Johan Roeland and Peter Versteeg. Netherlands: Eburon Delft, 2006. ISBN-13: 9789059721043, 172 pp., pb €30.

The contention of the editors of *Playful Religion* is that, contrary to prevailing opinion, religion does not have to be a serious matter: even the most staid expressions of religiosity have their playful aspects. This contention rests on the assumption that human beings have an inherent capacity to “play” with both worldly and transcendent realities. The volume’s Introduction, by van Harskamp, sets the parameters for the enterprise in understanding this “hidden” dimension of religiosity. There is, he insists, a strong anthropological dimension to be observed in the sense that human ability to use symbolic dimensions of cultural life permits the aptitude to be playful which gives, in turn, expressions of classifying reality. Religion is a “privileged” way in which play, as a fundamental human aptitude, can be acted out. However, Harskamp stresses the point that any serious attempt to understand the intrinsic and potential link between playfulness and religiosity highlights the inadequacy of extant methodology. The richness, diversity, and even paradoxes of religion demand innovation in order to come to terms with the play dimension. These matters are further explored in the essays that make up this volume, by four eminent scholars of religion drawn from diverse scholarly backgrounds: André Droogers, Peter B. Clarke, Grace Davie, Sidney M. Greenfield and Peter Versteeg.

The concern with methodological innovation is most forcefully tackled in Versteeg’s contribution which concludes that an understanding of the spirituality of the Charismatic movement, expressed as play, must entail a theoretical construct and, as such, a heuristic concept in the study of religion. Secondly, Versteeg acknowledges that the means by which play refers to religious realities, can vary significantly. It follows that the ways in which play is acted out in the religious context is shaped by the nature of the religion under study, obliging researchers to find diverse ways of coming to terms with playful religion.

Droogers contributes four papers in the enterprise of understanding playful aspects of religion. The first engages with the nature of Pentecostalism, by developing a normalising model of religious experience that even Pentecostals can accept. The model is essentially an attempt to chart a way for social sciences to think dualistically, given that religious experience

may be a “normal” aspect of religious experience. Still in the realm of Pentecostalism, along with Umbanda religion, Droogers’s second contribution focuses on a comparison between these two popular expressions of Brazilian religiosity and their attitude towards pluralism, which historically rests on a dialectical interplay between secular and religious factors. In the third essay, which extends to Pentecostalism in Chile, Droogers explores religious playfulness in the context of Pentecostal religiosity, and the way that it is enthused with variation, paradox and even confusion. His final paper squares up more forcefully to what he refers to as “methodological ludism,” in underscoring the fact that a true understanding of religion is hampered by academic power mechanisms that exclude an exchange of ideas between essentially two different and competing paradigms.

The first of the papers completing the volume is that by Peter Versteeg, which focuses upon religious experience and meaning, especially related to prophecy within the Charismatic movement. In this context play may be recognized as a sign of sacred reality, indeed a “re-enchantment of reality”. Playing, in the charismatic sense, means experimenting and discovering a divine order in reality—the presence of God. Play is intimately related to the continuous contingency of the world of the Spirit. It is a notion of play that must be grasped by researchers of the movement—raising further questions of epistemology and methodology.

This account of playful religion is followed by Clarke’s paper, which also engages with Droogers’ methodological developments through a discussion of Japanese syncretic religion in Brazil. Clark approaches the subject of playfulness in terms of syncretic religiosity. He concludes that certain religions, as in the instance of Messianity and *Seicho no Ie*, welcome all and every other type of religion, while remaining pure and adulterated. Conversely, religions that are strictly inclusive in intent, such as Soka Gakkai, reject syncretism but are aware that the failure to adapt to some elements of it is likely to result in stagnation and inevitable decline. In turn, most processes generating syncretism result from intellectual, cultural, political and economic factors irrespective of praxis, regardless of the theoretical and abstract discourse that a given form of religiosity may express.

The volume ends, or almost ends, perhaps predictably, with the implications for future expressions of religiosity, a task engaged with by Grace Davie. Once more it is a chapter that connects with Droogers’ methodological issues. In essence, Davie develops three themes. First, the changing place of religion and its growing importance in the world order. Secondly,

the paper explores the need for a more imaginative use of data in the social-scientific understanding of religion. Lastly, Davie considers the theoretical sources available to scholars embracing these tasks, and how they may evolve in the early decades of this century. While Davie's contribution, in effect, nicely summarises the earlier chapters, the volume concludes with an interview of Droogers which raises some further pertinent theoretical and methodological issues.

There can be little doubt that *Playful Religion* is an engaging and innovative volume, even if there is something of a preoccupation with Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity. In particular it is impressive in its challenge to treasured methodologies. Nonetheless, I am struck by the paradoxes that are themselves generated by the core themes within. For one thing, it does take itself rather seriously. So, any potential reader who is expecting a playful treatment of playful religion may be disappointed. It follows that one question that emerges (to indulge in a mischievous critique), is to enquire how serious the academic enterprise exploring playful religiosity should attempt to be.

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