

Book Review

John Corrigan (ed.), *Feeling Religion*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 296, ISBN: 978-0-8223-7037-6 (pbk). \$26.95.

The last several decades have seen a rise in academic attention paid to emotion in relation to religion. *Feeling Religion* is a collection of essays that adds to this emerging branch of religious studies by exploring emotion with respect to religion and a variety of religious experiences (to borrow from William James), including the numerous difficulties and challenges inherent in using the theoretical, methodological and linguistic tools of thought and reason to grapple with the realm of religious emotion. In particular, *Feeling Religion* adds to the literature on religion and emotion by drawing on affect theory and embodiment to highlight the role of feeling and the body in relation to the doctrinal, ethical, material, social and experiential dimensions of religion.

The book puts forth the idea that religious emotions—in a wide variety of contexts—is not merely the product of mysterious and ineffable realms of personal transcendence and divine encounter but also a dimension of culture and inter-subjective relational dynamics that collectively shape and change the way emotions are related to religions. According to Sarah M. Ross, in her chapter on Jewish ritual music, ‘emotions are typically defined to consist of three components, namely, a subjective feeling component, a physiological response, and a behavioural or motor response’ (p. 161). The study of religious emotion requires an understanding of all three components, as well as ways these are shared and shaped by social groups within a religious tradition. In his erudite introduction, Corrigan approaches this three-fold understanding of religious emotion when he writes that:

There is an emerging scholarly consensus that emotion in religion (1) is not mysterious; (2) can be studied; (3) is about the body and not the transcendence of the body; (4) is about culture but not only about culture; that (5) the distinction between rational cognition and irrational emotion in religion is unwarranted; that (6) spirituality sometimes has to do with feeling and sometimes does not; and that (7) what we mean by religion is entwined with what we mean by emotion—and vice versa (p. 11).

The ten chapters that follow focus on particular examples to address these seven central claims, and affect theory is effectively used to intertwine these features of religious emotion. The last claim in particular from Corrigan's summary quoted above justifies the publication of this collection, a timely confluence of affect theory, religious studies, psychology, cultural studies, philosophy (particularly ethics and morality), neuroscience and textual analysis. The chapters continually find common ground in the intersection between affect theory, philosophical approaches to human emotion, and foundational texts in the sociology, anthropology and psychology of religion.

As with other scholarly texts comprised of chapters focusing on a wide variety of areas, however, the greatest strength of this book may also be its greatest weakness. The balancing act between breadth and depth is not always entirely successful in the sense that the text may be of limited use to many scholars and researchers whose focus lies beyond the specific topics covered. The introduction provides a solid overview of various scholarly approaches to religion and relates these with affect theory and emotion studies. Each chapter proceeds to address aspects of Corrigan's central claims as they intersect with each author's particular research interests. This is less a criticism than an admission of the nature of such volumes, which retain a sense of cohesion through the use of theoretical considerations such as affect theory and frequent reference to foundational texts in religious studies (namely the work of Émile Durkheim, William James, Mircea Eliade and Clifford Geertz). In fact, threading together such disparate topics as Jewish ritual music, the use of shared sorrow and grief in Bhakti Hinduism and Sh'ia Islam, analysis of emotional representation in documentary films on Christian sects, and Western philosophical and theological discussions of emotion, ultimately serves to highlight the conversations made possible between and among these varied areas of religion. By focusing on how these different topics are brought together through emotion and affect, scholars here engage in a kind of preliminary dialogue, offering pathways toward further interdisciplinary work that cuts across religious traditions and highlights ways that different systems of faith involve and understand distinct yet overlapping senses of emotion and affect.

Because of its wide range of application and the inherent difficulties in ascertaining firm boundaries of its attributes, affect theory presents several challenges to humanities scholarship. One branch of affect theory focuses on pre-linguistic subjective responses which are rapidly filtered into cognitive categories (particularly through language), presenting a considerable challenge to the written form of academic articles and

monographs in relation to affective spaces and the relational networks they enact. In *Feeling Religion* affect is applied to a variety of contexts and, rather than stretch the concept thin, such applications ultimately serve to strengthen the malleability and flexibility of affect theory. The study of religion is a scholarly area rife with affective spaces, places and moments, and the use of affect and emotion is used to thread these otherwise disparate essays together into a relatively coherent whole.

According to M. Gail Hamner in her chapter, '[a]ffect registers an embodied, sensory reaction to the world' (p. 111), highlighting the body and pre-linguistic forms of reaction to the emotional content related to various religious beliefs, rituals, practices and cultural expressions. Emphasis upon the body, relationality, and pre- or non-linguistic forms of experience and symbolic communication strengthens ties between affect, emotion and religious studies and marks more pathways of inquiry. As Corrigan points out, '[w]hen we take emotion seriously, metaphysics looks different, and so do ethics, ritual, religious music and poetry, the environment, popular culture, and the secular' (p. 19). Such wide-ranging implications are explored in this volume, offering a valuable contribution to the widening arena of cross-disciplinary forms of studying religion.

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