Book Review


The purpose of this book is to investigate what theories of religion can tell us about New Age spiritualities, and what the empirical study of New Age spiritualities can tell us about religion. Steven Sutcliffe and Ingvild Gilhus’s edited collection, New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion, argues that the study of New Age spiritualities has been hampered by the frameworks through which religion is defined and studied. New Age spiritualities, they note, challenge existing definitions of religion in so far as they do not immediately appear to hold the characteristics generally required of a religion. New Age spiritualities seem too individualistic, and are too often produced inside non-religious environments and institutions, to be categorised among other religions. Indeed, New Age adherents themselves often define their own spirituality against established religion. Yet Sutcliffe and Gilhus maintain that New Age spiritualities are core, not fringe, forms of religion which must be included in the category ‘religion’ if it is to remain coherent.

The book is divided into three parts; the first section of five chapters provides a theoretical overview of the problem of incorporating New Age spiritualities into the religion paradigm and suggests new approaches which may overcome the Eurocentric bias affecting the study of religion. In their introductory chapter Sutcliffe and Gilhus make two key arguments echoed throughout the volume. One is that religion cannot be reduced to a ‘pure’ (p. 12) state absolutely separate from secular culture; the other is that the proper way to study religion is by looking at the ‘lived’ experiences of adherents (p. 13).

In the first chapter of the volume Sutcliffe suggests that the world religions paradigm has proven unhelpful for the academic study of religion. He suggests that a restricted version of Durkheim’s elementary forms of religion, supplemented by data on New Age spiritualities, would provide a more rounded framework within which religion could be analysed. Gilhus and Liselotte Frisk continue this discussion in the second and third chapters respectively by incorporating the ideas of Jonathan Smith, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge into their theories of religion. In the fifth chapter Ann Taves and Michael Kinseela discuss the claim that New Age Movements (NAMs) are unorganised and oriented towards individuals and not whole societies. Emphasising the communal, organised and historical nature of many NAMs, they demonstrate how secular and religious institutions have shaped contemporary New Age spiritualities.

The second section of the book contains five comparative studies of New Age spiritualities. Of particular interest is Norichika Horie’s chapter, which compares NAMs in Japan, the USA, and the UK. Surveying the data he has acquired, Horie argues in favour of four types of spirituality: folk, established, systematic secular, and imported. New Age spiritualities, according to Horie, are connected to all four types, borrowing aspects from each and hybridising them into new forms of spirituality. Mikael Rothstein’s memorable chapter compares a New Age adherent who imagines herself a dolphin with historical accounts of native Brazilians who felt themselves to be jaguars or macaws. Through his
comparisons Rothstein suggests that though New Age beliefs appear modern, they are merely new forms of old types of religious practice and belief and should be studied as such.

The final section consists of five further chapters which apply theory to localised studies of New Age spiritualities. Two essays discuss the relationship between NAMs and consumer capitalism. Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman’s chapter detailing the use of New Age spirituality in a Dutch business firm, in which they show how New Age spiritualities are created and taught to individuals, admirably demonstrates how NAMs can have a highly organised ideological dimension.

It is slightly disappointing that little mention was made of the international and political dimensions of New Age spiritualities. Too often religion is written about as if it were a phenomenon occurring only within nation-states and without influence on international politics. Though the authors stress that New Age adherents are often involved in or influenced by organised groups with histories and hierarchies, religion in this volume is conceived as something largely divorced from politics and power. Studying religion through the manner in which it is ‘lived’ may help us to get a firmer grasp of the topic, but it is important not to lose sight of the power structures which produce ideas and enforce discipline among adherents.

It is also curious that a book which finds fault in the Eurocentric nature of the study of religion is itself focused on European experiences of religion. Nonetheless, by showing how contemporary definitions of religion are inadequate, this book builds a compelling case in favour of making New Age spiritualities a central focus of the study of religion. It also demonstrates how supposedly individualistic and unorganised New Age practices are always shaped by institutions and social constraints.

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