

**Steven J. Sutcliffe (ed.)**, *Religion: Empirical Studies*. Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, pp. xlii+279, ISBN 100754641589 (hbk). Review doi: 10.1558/arsr.v20i3.369

This is, to quote the sub-sub-title: 'A Collection to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the British Association for the Study of Religions'. It is drawn from occasional papers published by the Association since 1991 and provides a good indicator of the high-quality research conducted by members of the Association. The book is split into two sections. Chapters 1–7 cover 'Category and Method', Chapters 8–15 are empirical case studies. Although predominantly focusing on the UK, one third of the authors are from Europe and Africa.

I found the first half of the book engaging, as many of the chapters deal with an issue I personally find fascinating: methodological agnosticism in Religion Studies. I particularly enjoyed Peter Antes' chapter 'How to Study Religious Experience in the Traditions'. I think there is a lot more to be said about how religious experiences are 'made' through patterns of interpretation (p. 41) and Antes provides a useful introduction to some of the issues. I also found Terence Thomas's 'The Sacred as a Viable Concept in Contemporary Study of Religions' provocative. He suggests that the use of the term 'the sacred' is a subtle form of the theological imperialism drawing parallels with Said's analysis of 'orientalism' (p. 63).

I was slightly disturbed by one of Sutcliffe's statements in his introduction. He suggests that 'theologians and other confessionalists may on occasion be invited to that polymethodic feast mentioned earlier, but in the role of *guests* who, respecting guesthood etiquette, share our meal but neither prepare it, nor plan the menu' (p. xxix). The second half of the sentence suggests, although it is not what the first half says, that it is theological and confessionalist *methodologies* that should not dominate religious studies agendas. I hope Sutcliffe is not arguing that scholars of religious studies have to be confessing atheists or agnostics? I also wondered whether Sutcliffe might be setting up a false dichotomy. Perhaps there is a 'third way' between secularism and belief that incorporates religious beliefs into the religious studies conversation in a more explicit way without belief, or unbelief for that matter, becoming either dominant, or a repressed 'other'?

From this point of view I was particularly pleased to read Brian Bocking's chapter, 'Study of Religions', in which he makes the point that 'methodological agnosticism does not imply personal agnosticism, nor indeed any other type of personal religious belief' (p. 107). Rather, 'In practice, methodological agnosticism must be a practised professional stance, a skill or habit of mind which one develops only through repeated use' (p. 107). Bocking's chapter is insightful and reflective on a number of fronts, particularly his discussion of William James' work. Bocking suggests 'reliable knowledge of an "other" requires essentially a dialogue between presumed equals, rather than the patient investigation of what amounted to a religious "object" by an academic "subject"' (p. 108).

Overall I have sympathy for methodological agnosticism, that is defended as a methodology throughout the book. I agree that the academic study of religion is not the place for proselytizing, or to be dominated by theological agendas, or theological ones for that matter. However, I still think that 'Beyond Phenomenology' (Flood 1999) academic scholars of religion might be more explicit about their faith position, and how this might shape their discussion and analysis. I find the approach of someone like Peter Berger exemplary, who practised methodological agnosticism in his sociology of religion, but also made his own faith commitment explicit, which makes it much easier to assess his work. Similarly, I think Edith Turner's work on taking spiritual experiences seriously presents a profound challenge to those who adhere to methodological agnosticism as if it is unalterable dogma, rather than a useful starting point, and this book clearly demonstrates that it is a very useful starting point.

The second part of the book provides a number of succinct case studies that are equally as engaging as the first half of the book. It includes a chapter by Miranda Aldhouse-Green that provides a detailed history of Celtic Goddesses, and Julia Leslie's chapter that compares the Hindu male ascetic with the asceticism of an Indian widow who refuses sati. Tariq Modood's chapter remains a timely examination of the post-September 11 effects on British multiculturalism and British Muslims. Armin Geertz provides an analysis of the formation of community in the indigenous context of American Hopi Indians.

All the empirical chapters are worthy of a longer reflection, but I will briefly mention Modood's. He argues that British multiculturalism has a secular bias, founded as it is on ethnicity and race, rather than identity. Islam, he contends, tends to be ignored as an identity movement because of its religious roots, with Islam treated as a private belief, rather than an identifiable public interest group that deserves political expression in public discourse. I found this chapter fascinating, as were other chapters, although I am not familiar enough with the specifics it discusses to evaluate his arguments. As I read over this chapter I couldn't but help think of how Modood's ideas might be applied reflexively to the issue of methodological agnosticism in religious studies. It seems to me that methodological agnosticism is often code for methodological atheism, reflecting the 'hegemonic power of secularism' (p. 253) in religious studies reflected in the above quote from Sutcliffe's introduction.

Overall I enjoyed reading the book and found most papers to include useful summaries and insightful analysis. I will certainly list some of the chapters among the suggested readings for my course on contemporary religions. I would recommend it as an addition to the university library. Its price probably precludes personal copies for most scholars.

#### *References*

Flood, Gavin. 1999. *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion*. Cassell, London.

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