Book Review


*Religion and Change in Australia* maps the ways religion, colonization, migration and politics are enmeshed in Australia, both historically and today. In this book, Adam Possamai and David Tittensor advocate for multiple nuanced stories about religion and non-religion in Australian society, as well as multiple theories of religious change. They demonstrate that the study of religion in Australia is integral to understanding contemporary Australian society, its history and its possible futures.

The first chapter sets the scene for understanding the peculiarities of religion in Australia, introducing the legacies of colonization and the White Australia Policy (pp. 1–3); the impact of migration and technology on the practice of multiple religions (pp. 3–6); and twinned values of freedom from and for religion (pp. 3, 9). Readers are reminded that despite religious histories which predate British invasion, Christianity was firmly woven into colonization and that despite decreasing Christian affiliation, threads of this legacy remain as a ‘social memory’ (p. 3).

In chapter 2, the authors re-examine key social theories of religion and demonstrate that there is no single theory or narrative which can completely explain the place of religion in society. Instead, multiple theories, stories and perspectives are necessary. Possamai and Tittensor then move to provide a robust discussion of the historical context which informs contemporary religiosity across Australia.

Chapter 3 focuses on attempts to construct a white Christian nation through the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. In chapter 4, the focus shifts to chart how increased migration from the 1950s onwards is linked to increased religious diversity. Three separate and concurrent trends in religious change which have emerged since World War II and the lifting of the White Australia Policy are outlined: plurality and diversity in religious belief; decline in Christianity; and an increased number of people claiming no religion. The examination of
these themes is deepened in chapter 5, which explores how Australia is simultaneously Christian, post-Christian and non-religious.

Discussion of contemporary Aboriginal religious affiliations and practices is the focus of chapter 6. This discussion is framed with a re-reading of Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Taking ‘a revisionist approach’ Possamai and Tittensor argue that, ‘if its focus had not been so colonialist and Western, the whole approach to the scientific study of religion in the world would have been totally different’ (p. 92). Their discussion of Durkheim is helpful for engaging in efforts to decolonize the study of religion, and should be essential reading. At the same time, it was a shame the revisionist approach presented in this chapter was not matched by more robust dialogue with the work of First Nations scholars.

The authors then explore various complexities, challenges and opportunities within the practices of religion and non-religion. Chapter 7 attends to the ways in which people are not religious, by considering the subcategories of non-belief which are held within the category ‘religious nones’. Just as there are many ways of being religious, it is also the case ‘that to be secular is not singular’ (p. 121). The chapter includes a call for more research on lived experiences of non-belief. Chapter 8 outlines and defines new and alternative spiritualities. New spirituality is framed as ‘commercialized’ and secularized; that is, it is often practiced in a way that is detached from religious origins. It is ‘spirituality lite’ (p. 135). Chapter 9 offers a brief review of literature exploring women’s participation in faith traditions which are read as patriarchal, focusing on Hillsong as a case study.

The final chapters consider how religious practice shapes and is shaped by contemporary society. In chapter 10, the authors consider how media informs public perception of religion, and how religious groups and leaders, particularly Christian, use media to engage new and existing community members. Chapter 11 examines the political uses of religion. A compelling account of the political mobilization of Christianity is provided, demonstrating how Christian ideas circulate through public discourse. The book concludes by considering multiple processes of desecularization, both public and private. The authors return to the concept of religion as shared social memory, stating:

while Australia is at the intersection of four social memories of being Christian, Australian Aboriginal, post-Christian and non-religious, there are attempts to promote one preference over others… this preference for one group over others at the macro level does not make Australia as much of a multifaith or post secular country as one would think. (p. 207)
Religion in Australia is not going away, although the shape, place and practice of religion and spirituality continue to shift.

Throughout, Possamai and Tittensor demonstrate that understanding contemporary Australian society is enriched by the study of religion. This book is an accessible resource for those studying the religions, cultures and histories of Australia. It provides a comprehensive overview of statistical data, historical accounts, contemporary studies and the analytical tools needed to engage in constructive conversation about what it is to be religious and nonreligious in contemporary Australia, and indeed, what it is to be Australian.

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