

Book Review

Scott S. Elliott (ed.), *Reinventing Religious Studies: Key Writings in the History of a Discipline*. Acumen, Durham, UK, 2013, pp. xv + 280, ISBN 978-1-84465-655-4 (hbk), 978-1-84465-656-1 (pbk).

Radical pluralism, 'the cardinal mark of religion in America' (Cherry 1998: 8), was shaken badly when two planes smashed into New York's World Trade Centre. World attention focused on the need for dialogue between faiths, and that required reassessment of the way universities research religious studies, what is taught, and how. Scott S. Elliott chose to describe the process as 'reinvention' rather than reassessment.

For *Reinventing Religious Studies* Elliott selected thirty-nine papers published in the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion's (CSSR) *Bulletin*¹ between 1970 and 2002 to trace the history of the Council and efforts toward reinvention of religious studies. He added one paper commissioned for the book: a history of the CSSR.

Unfortunately the end product has a number of deficiencies, and the introduction serves mainly to explain its limitations and Elliott's disappointment at having to limit the number of papers published. Contradicting the title of the book, he states that 'the collection is concerned only secondarily with celebrating the history and work of the council' and its primary aim 'is to put into wider circulation a treasure trove of articles that are historically significant in their relationship to the reinvention of the field'. He then adds, 'the main focus of the *Bulletin* was never to research in the usual sense' (p. xi).

There is no concluding chapter to draw together the outcomes of the process of reinvention or the impact that the Council had in its endeavour to unify the approaches of universities or colleges of theology to religious studies, and there is little cohesion between the seven parts, or clusters of papers. Readers may find the clusters useful if they wish to pursue a particular aspect of religious study. Part one, with seven papers published between 1970 and 1983, is headed 'Inventing and Reinventing the Field of Religious Studies', and is consistent with the title of the book. Part two (five papers, 1981–90), is 'Method and Theory in Religious Studies'. Part three (six papers, 1970–83) is 'Teaching Religion'. The next three concern women and the Bible (four papers, 1972–99); religion in civic life (nine papers, 1981–2001); religion and identity politics (four papers, all 1997). The final part, 'Islam and 9/11', has four papers (one paper, 1975, and three papers, 2001–2002).

Reassessment of religious studies actually began soon after the end of World War Two. Prompted by the Holocaust and the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) was established in 1949. Aggressive writing by several Catholic scholars then encouraged Pope John XXIII to convene Vatican II, which, from the

1. Founded as the Council on the Study of Religion (CSR) it was renamed the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion (CSSR) in 1984. For ease of reference, only CSSR is used in this review. The Council was dissolved in 2009 and the *Bulletin* is now published by Equinox in affiliation with the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR) as the *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*.

perspective of religious studies, produced two critical but contradictory documents: the very progressive *Nostra Aetate* and the supersessionist and regressive Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (Fry 2012: 301-302). A background statement along these lines would have been helpful.

The limitations of the book's restricted source base is highlighted by the fact that six contributions refer to the work of a Romanian migrant academic, Mircea Eliade, who is regarded as a joint founder of the Chicago School and credited with basically defining the study of religions for much of the second half of the twentieth century—from his arrival in America in 1956 to his death in 1986. Eliade does not appear to have written anything for the *Bulletin* or it surely would have a place in *Reinventing Religious Studies*. Furthermore, given that Elliott says September 11, 2001, 'left all of us...in a state of existential crisis pondering the seismic shifts that had been thrust upon our discipline' (p. x), it is remarkable that the book contains no papers written during the following twelve years to propose changes in the study or teaching of religion, even though there has been active academic and political discussion on the matter. The chapters in Part Seven include reflections by four teachers on classroom reactions on the day, an outline of media coverage and the impact on the American psyche over the following four months, and brief discussion of Christian-Muslim community interaction during that period.

In spite of those shortcomings, and the fact that it is an American case study, with only brief references in some papers to writers or activities beyond the membership of the Council and in Europe (with the exception of one paper dealing with Sweden by a Swedish-American academic), the book can be useful to scholars elsewhere in providing a perspective to changes that have taken place from 1970 to the crisis of 2001—but not later. The more one knows of academic international institutional contact and interaction, the greater the relevance will be. The main value of the book is as a history of the Council, but that is dampened by the fact that the dates of the original publications are not shown either in the contents list or at the heading of each chapter. A reader who wishes to study the papers in chronological sequence must refer to the list of papers acknowledged, which is separate from the bibliography, and add a date against each chapter on the contents pages.

However, taken as a whole, the book does provide insights into several aspects of religious studies: factors that stimulate new approaches to research methodology and teaching practices; confusion about the status of religious studies as a discipline; and crises faced when governments review education funding to accommodate military commitments and economic and industrial structural changes.

Three chapters stand out. Robert Segal's Chapter 10, 'Assessing Social-Scientific Theories of Religion' (1982), showing that matters of paradigms, empiricism, subjectivism, objectivism, adequacy, and falsifiability of theories are fundamental to the development of religious studies, and his 1990 follow-up, 'Fending Off the Social Sciences' (Chapter 13). The other is John A. Miles Jr (Chapter 22), 'The Debut of the Bible as a Pagan Classic' (1976), a masterpiece of literary analysis hypothesizing a definitively post-Jewish and post-Christian era, and proposing a new pedagogy for the Bible to secure its influence as a self-sustaining literary classic if its readership as theology declines.

With Christianity floundering in an era of spiritual renewal these chapters could help all religious studies students.

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References

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- Fry, Ian R. 2012. *Dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims: The Concept of Covenant as Basis*. Practical Theology Research, MCD University of Divinity.