

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

RELIGIOUS STUDIES: A PATH FORWARD

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I write this Foreword while isolated in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Case numbers mount daily in Canada, spiral seemingly uncontrolled in the United States, death tolls continue to rise in Italy and Spain, and conspiracy theories abound. We are pleased to present this issue of *Religious Studies and Theology*, with its contributors from Israel, Iran, Ghana, and across Canada. Research findings indicate spirituality as a significant element in managing unchangeable life circumstances and coping with trauma (Koenig 2019; van der Kolk 2014; Kalsched 2013; Lanius 2010; Kleinman 1980). In the thick of this crisis, with currently no end in sight, Jane Simington contributes a timely article elaborating the clinically significant engagement of religious and spiritual practices to produce measurably effective results in response to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Jews, no strangers to historical trauma, and Jewishness are represented by the non-Jewish writer George Eliot. Eliot translated Spinoza's *Ethics*, and his ideas permeate her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*. The Canadian literary scholar Michael Greenstein's reading of *Daniel Deronda* is expressed in a lyrical language that evokes an ostensibly British Victorian *davening minyan*. Although not socially isolated in the way we are around the world at this moment in time, it evokes thought on global interconnectedness regardless of where one thinks one does, or does not, belong. A second contribution to this issue of *Religious Studies and Theology* that has a Jewish theme is Israeli archeologist Abraham Ofir Shemesh's consideration of the controversial practice of divination. He undertakes an analysis of references to ornithomancy, or bird divination, in the Zohar and in rabbinic midrash composed during the Greco-Roman period in the Levant. Shemesh's midrash concerning the ancient context of the Midian war against the Israelites expands our understanding of perceptions and use of reading bird-based omens in the then ambient cultural context.

Christopher Emory-Moore writes out of his doctoral work in Religious Studies at a Canadian university, exploring two children's meditation manuals that are based on Gelukpa Tibetan Buddhist practices for adult

monastics. The manuals were published in 2011 and 2013, for use in lay North American contexts. As Emory-Moore unpacks his understanding of the conceptualization, and cultivation, of children's capacities for mediation through diasporic Tibetan Buddhist formations, he is confounded by the modernism v. traditionalism dichotomy. He suggests different categories for the theorization of patterns of detraditionalization, noting that William Hutchinson's "adaptationism" provides the strongest explanatory capacity for this type of data.

Two contributions from fields in Islamic Studies complete the suite of articles in this issue of *Religious Studies and Theology*. Iranian philosophers Rahim Dehghan Simakani and Maryam Khoshdel Rohani present work that resonates the centuries-old struggle to integrate religious and scientific understandings of the world. They forthrightly acknowledge the position of the twentieth-century scholar 'Allāma Ṭabāṭabā'ī asserts Islamic doctrine regarding following rational moral concepts (the right) rather than base instinct (the nature). The insight provided by Ṭabāṭabā'ī, problematic from some perspectives, is that moral values and principles are constructed out by human beings suffused with nature. Ṭabāṭabā'ī comes to this conclusion through careful and extended study of Islamic thought as he formulated his theory of natural laws in ethics. After carefully laying out various understandings, Simakani and Rohani detail the arguments Ṭabāṭabā'ī used to defend his position. A second contribution in the area of Islamic Studies is by Ghanaian philosophers Simon Kofi Appiah and Mawuloe Kodah and their reading of *Allah is Not Obligated* (2006; *Allah n'est pas obligé*, 2000), Ahmadou Kourouma's last novel. The story of *Allah is Not Obligated* is narrated in vernacular language through the eyes and voice of Birahima, a ten-year-old child who is conscripted into service as a child-soldier following the death of his mother. Appiah and Kodah comment on links between human exploitation and misuse of religion, articulating a cultural critique of African religiosity that highlights the risks embedded in an unexamined practice of religion and also in an unbalanced academic tradition with regard to it.

The "Reflections from the Field" section of *Religious Studies and Theology* is a forum for the discussion of topics related to the practice of the profession of Religious Studies. It also provides an opportunity for scholars of religion to reflect on the challenges of entering social contexts for the purpose of doing research, determining which knowledge is shared and how, and dealing with research findings that do not support mainstream interpretations of a subject. "Reflections from the Field" explores the interrelated concerns of profession and epistemology – from perspectives of those whose role in society it is to carry out social

science and humanities research in the disciplines of *Religious Studies and Theology*. This issue of *Religious Studies and Theology* includes one reflection from within the academy and one from a religious practitioner. David Atkinson, reaching the end of a decades-long career, much of it spent in the most senior administrative positions, reflects on the importance of the Humanities in public universities. He acknowledges a kind of standoff between the Humanities and other professional, scientific and technical disciplines, commenting that “the most important legacy universities have is [...] the graduates who must help to shape a world in serious need of help.” Resonating with Appiah and Kodah’s textual analysis, Atkinson points to the potential of the disciplinary practices of Religious Studies to offer a model for a path forward – a model for cultivating the ability to reflect on how we act in the world, individually and as collectives. A second reflection is provided by Peter Bush, a teaching elder in a Christian parish in Canada. He writes about his experiences attending several of the annual ceremonies that are held by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba to present the relatively newly created Award for the Advancement of Interreligious Understanding. He reflects on leaving each ceremony with a sense that while the award embodies the intellectual idea honouring a diversity of traditions, the presentation ceremony avoided the inclusion of any religiospiritual component, which marginalized the heart of what it was that nourished the souls of those in the organizations the award sought to acknowledge.

For forty years *Religious Studies and Theology* has maintained a consistent focus on reviewing new books in the fields of Religious Studies and Theology, profiling a diversity of approaches to the study of religion. If you are a writer or a publisher with recent books that you would like to have reviewed, please contact our Book Review Editor, Mark Chapman, at mchapman@tyndale.ca.

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