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A REVIEW OF *RELIGION: BEYOND A CONCEPT*

A Review of *Religion: Beyond a Concept*. Edited and with an introduction by Hent de Vries. Fordham University Press, New York: 2008. xiv + 1006 pp. \$90.00 (hard); \$30.00 (paper). ISBN: 0823227251.

The first in a proposed five volume collection entitled, *The Future of the Religious Past: Elements and Forms for the Twenty-First Century*, this prodigious text offers a wealth of material on the purposefully broad topic of "religion." Composed of some forty-four articles and representing scholars from nine countries, the text seeks to present a forum in which the concept of "religion" is not simply explored but painstakingly dissected so as to reconfigure the discourse concerning this most pervasive of human enterprises. As a result, the text offers not simply a discussion of the concept of "religion" but an in-depth analysis of how we can even begin to talk about the concept of "religion." Is religion simply the manifestation of some deep psychological desire? Is it an anthropological phenomenon that links humanity across time and place? Is it sociological mechanism designed to secure societal structure and promote unity? Is it an historical construct consistently exploited for political gain and now on the verge of being discarded as an antiquated remnant of a superstitious, pre-rational world that we have outgrown? Or, is it a *sui generis* expression of a fundamentally unique quality of humanity that distinguishes us from the rest of creation by linking us to some greater reality in which we in some way share? Questions of this nature underlie both the introduction to the collection of essays provided by Hent de Vries and the entire body of essays themselves.

This interdisciplinary project representing scholars from across the Humanities, including such diverse disciplines as musicology, biophysics, comparative literature, history, and law, is "the fruit of a major international research initiative generously funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research" (xiv). While the text does present scholarship from the United States, Canada, and several northern European countries, the lack of scholarship from Central and South America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and even southern or eastern Europe betrays a certain void that limits the text in terms of its ability to truly present global perspective on the concept of "religion." Nonetheless, the presence of work from such prominent scholars such as Charles Taylor, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Talal Asad, et al., makes this collection an important contribution, not only to the field of Religious Studies but to the discipline of Theology as well. Indeed, such a rigorous examination of the nature, function, and future of religion in our increasingly pluralistic and global community as that presented here offers an invaluable opportunity for theologians (those working in all faith structures) to review the relationship

between the theoretical work they conduct and the actual role “religion” plays within the world today.

At the heart of this text lies the assumption that our (Western) world is in the process of transformation. We now live in a “world whose institutions and publics are increasingly ‘post-secular’ in their outlook” (xiii). According to de Vries, a world once defined in terms of the liberal democratic ideals produced by the Enlightenment project, with its emphasis on the rational and the scientific, has now begun a “process of reenchantment, if not outright remythologization” (xiii). The result of this fundamental presupposition of the text is that the concept of secularism becomes the unacknowledged shadow-theme of the text. Reconceiving (and redefining) secularism and the process of secularization therefore plays a prominent role in the vast majority of the essays in the text, coming under nearly the same type or scrutiny and explication as that of the stated topic.

The introduction to this text by de Vries, weighing in at nearly 100 pages, is an extensive, complex, and often demanding examination of the question, “Why still ‘religion’?” This query, which prompts his lengthy contribution to the text, serves not simply to ask why we are still talking about religion, or even why religion still exists. It is also asking, quite refreshingly, why do we continue to struggle with this concept? What is it about religion that compels us forward in our search for answers that have not already allowed themselves to be revealed? Why do we still want to search for meaning on a path that has often proved more frustrating than illuminating? That has provided us with equal parts comfort, confusion, and conflict? Indeed, de Vries is not nearly as concerned with producing a definition for the concept of “religion” as he is with determining how we can even attempt a definition of this concept. What he offers here, therefore, is a meta-definition of a concept that has proved to be resolutely indefinable. In fact, the inherent assumption of the introduction is the essential indefinability of “religion.” The concept of “religion” itself will always invariably lie beyond our ability to fully grasp, beyond our capacity to conceptualize. This is, in effect, what makes religion such a beguiling facet of human existence. Thus, as de Vries demonstrates, the goal of *Religion: Beyond a Concept* is to move beyond the static categories and categorizations that have limited the study of “religion” to some sort of sociological, political, or historic characteristic of humanity – one that we will eventually outgrow – and attempt to discover how it is that religion has, is, and will continue to play such a vital role in human existence, on both an individual and communal level.

The problem, as de Vries understands it, is that the political, ideological, confessional, and methodological considerations that have governed our traditional understanding of “religion” militate against our ability to carry on a productive conversation about the topic. These traditional efforts have not only proven to be limiting, they have failed to recognize the social and intellectual possibilities opened up both in and through the concept of “religion.” “They are fallible, necessarily incomplete systems of control and intellectual hegemony, ways of world making, coping with finitude, and whistling in the dark” (97).

Too often drawn in oppositional terms, previous efforts to define “religion” have created false dichotomies that allow for easy (and shallow) characterizations that ignore that radical complexity inherent in the concept, not to mention its pervasive and continual role in a Western “secular” world.

The solution to this problem of how we have been defining religion, according to de Vries, is an approach he labels “deep pragmatism” (2). In order to overcome the wealth of approaches that “have proven either methodologically and epistemologically vulnerable or ethically and politically suspect” (79), he recommends a phenomenological method that is informed by a negative metaphysics. Thus, de Vries proposes a “calculated concern with the singular instances of material and spiritual culture in conjunction with a no less resolute – we might say renewed – metaphysical concern with ‘essences’ and ‘ideas’” (79). In other words, de Vries wants to propose a course of study (and discussion) that is oriented toward the experiential (lived) aspect of “religion” but with an unfocused gaze that allows us to see beyond these (shared) experiences to some deeper reality that grounds them. In effect, we should be seeking to describe the economy from which religious experience is produced. In this way, our investigation of the concept of “religion” can become a search for the “promise” of something more elemental that invariably draws us toward a more profound understanding, if never actually allowing for pure cognition. The goal of the approach proposed here by de Vries, therefore, would not be an “answer” to either the question “Why still religion?” or even “What is religion?” Instead, it would facilitate a more productive discussion of and about religion. It would promote a forum where we can better understand the role religion plays in our world, our community(s), and our lives.

The forty-four essays that follow the introduction by de Vries are separated into seven sections that move from more broadly framed investigations of “religion” as a concept, to its intellectual, political, and cultural role within society, to the investigation of more personal, experiential expression of religion. In this way, the text systematically moves away from the larger question of “What is religion?” to the “particular contexts” (xiv) that de Vries claims as the appropriate content for the investigation of “religion” in a “post-secular” world. Some of these sections, as one might suspect, function better than others to organize the material in a way that proves both productive and illuminating. Most especially, Part III: “Methods of Instruction and Comparison,” does well to produce an insightful discussion on the origin and function of the concept of secularization. The range of perspectives and inventive readings of the concept produce a valuable resource for those seeking to move beyond the often misleading use of the term and its pejorative applications. Likewise, Part V: “Religion, Politics, and Law” demonstrates that the relationship between the modern Western democratic government and the institutions of religion must be readdressed. The ambiguous assumptions that underlie the tension between church and state in most Western countries have produced an unnatural antipathy whose remedy could only prove beneficial to the community as a whole. Other sections do not necessarily create such dynamic results, but regardless of the groupings the quality of the essays presented in this volume is

exceptional. All are well written, and most provide a valuable point of entry on a topic essential to the contemporary discussion of “religion” and its function in our world.

In addition to the introduction by de Vries, the ballast to this rather large collection is an essay by Charles Taylor, “The Future of the Religious Past.” At nearly three times the length of the other essays in the text, and given the obvious reference by the title of Taylor’s essay to the title of the series of which this book is the first, it is quite clear that his essay is meant in some way to serve as a point of reference for the others in the volume. As such, it is Taylor’s extensive reading of how our relationship with religion has changed, and how it might yet still, that functions to outline the current transformation of Western attitudes about “religion” implied by de Vries and the text as a whole. Interestingly enough, in a text that seeks in many ways to subvert the metanarratives that neatly place “religion” within the greater story of the Western intellectual enterprise, Taylor fashions his own “grand narrative” of the evolving relationship between the individual, religion, and the state. Taylor freely admits that his “account of the vectors of religious development up to the present” (178) is something very much like a metanarrative, but he is also quick to explain that he “does not share the postmodern aversion to grand narratives” (178) because in reality we all operate within one of our own. The obligation, therefore, is simply to “be clear as we can about the one’s we’re relying on, while being open as possible to objections to and criticisms of it” (178). In effect, what Taylor is able to create is a heuristic device for framing and measuring the discussion in which the other essays of the text participate. Thus, nearly all the remaining essays in the volume respond (intentionally or otherwise) to Taylor, either to supply the missing parts of his narrative or to expose those gaps and fissures so as to create another point of discussion.

While it is not possible to directly address more than a small selection of essays from this substantial volume, at least a few should be noted for their important contribution to the topic at hand. Thomas Carlson’s article, “Religion and the Time of Creation: Placing ‘the Human’ in Techno-scientific and Theological Context,” brings Marion, Levinas, Derrida, and Gregory of Nyssa into dialogue in order to propose the possibility of a “negative anthropology” (828) that might very well facilitate some resolution to the debates on the boundaries of life caused by recent technological and scientific advancements. It is through efforts like this one to bring contemporary and historical theology together in dialogue in order to address modern socio-political issues that this text truly excels. Thus, Talas Asad’s “Reflections on Blasphemy and Secular Criticism” is a thoughtful and important essay on the tension between freedom of speech and acts of presumed blasphemy in modern Western civilization. His argument to understand blasphemy as a form of violence should be required reading for editors of all Western publications.

Also of note is Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman’s essay “The Sacralization of the Self: Relocating the Sacred on the Ruins of Tradition.” Here, Aupers and Houtman examine that “new buzzword in the contemporary religious

landscape" (798): spirituality. By critiquing the "do-it-yourself-religion" (799) that has emerged in the West under the guise of New Age spirituality, the authors carefully diagnose one of the most pervasive forms of religious practice and experience in contemporary Western society. Equally valuable in reflecting the contemporary Western religious experience is Asja Szafraniec's "Inheriting the Wound: Religion and Philosophy in Stanley Cavell." Working from Stanley Cavell's reading of Romanticism, Szafraniec explores the critical connection in Cavell between "'the trace or scar of the departure of God'" and the "discovery of the problem of the other" (369) by the Romantics. Thus, through her reading of Cavell, Szafraniec is able to explore how the process of secularization compels the "other" to bear the weight of God in our world today – a burden that we are all learning to endure.

While the collection of essays provides an extraordinary body of reference regarding the concept of "religion," thus providing an exceptional resource for scholars interested in discussing this concept, the introduction by de Vries is almost too much to handle for those simply attempting to locate how "religion" intersects with their discipline or their own research interests. His rather exhaustive meditation on the possibility of conceptualizing "religion," while extremely valuable to those with extensive background in the metaphysics that grounds contemporary debate concerning ontic logic, it is quite likely too advanced for those simply seeking an introduction to "religion" as an evolving concept. Indeed, de Vries might have been better served to have published his introduction separately, as its own text, while fashioning a more accessible essay for this volume. It would have also been helpful for the introduction to have addressed the concept of secularism in order to clearly illustrate how these two interrelated concepts have influenced and informed each other, both historically and in contemporary discourse. Thus, the presence of this important aspect of the text might have been more clearly framed.

As for the text as a whole, it should not go without mentioning that the perspective presented is definitively Western and predominantly Christian. While there are a small handful of essays that deal directly with non-Christian religions (including a notable offering by Veena Davis on the possibility of Hindu-Christian dialogue, "If This Be Magic...: Excursions into Contemporary Hindu Lives" and a very intriguing historical reading of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity by Daniel Boyarin, "The Christian Invention of Judaism: The Theodosian Empire and the Rabbinic Refusal of Religion") even these contributions cannot escape the presentation of a non-Christian perspective that is not in some way related to the Christian point of view. Inevitably, the result is a missed opportunity to engage a critical human concept from an authentically global perspective. Given the ongoing conflict between the West and Islamic fundamentalism, the exponential growth of Pentecostalism in South America, the genocidal religious struggles that continue to weaken Africa, and the simple fact that the vast majority of humans do not live in Western "Christian" countries but in Asian countries whose populations are decidedly non-Christian, opening the discussion in this text beyond the narrow range of North America and northern Europe might very well have provided an

opportunity to examine the concept of "religion" in a way that could effect discourse on a world-wide level.

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