

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Religion: What it Is, How it Works, and Why it Matters.***

By Christian Smith. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, 296 pages. \*

The sociology of religion is conventionally characterized today as comprised primarily of two competing schools of thought, the old, cultural perspective advanced by Max Weber, and the new, rational choice perspective advanced by Rodney Stark. In this scholarly work, Christian Smith rejects the positivist assumptions underlying both schools, but nevertheless offers a theory of religion that “can embrace and capitalize upon the contributions of both” (254) in a “more complicated and realistic theory” (255) that “takes very seriously causal multiplicity, complexity, interactions, and contingency” (259).

Smith is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, and is arguably the leading Christian sociologist of religion currently, if not simply the leading sociologist of religion currently. In his twenty-five year academic career to date, he has written 20 sociological books, 3 theological books, 35 journal articles, 24 book chapters, and 17 book reviews, as well as administered \$21 million dollars of research grants. He is perhaps best known beyond sociological circles as director of the massive National Study of Youth and Religion (2001-2015). According to his Notre Dame webpage, Smith’s “larger theoretical agenda has been to move personhood, morality, motivated action, culture, and identity to the center of sociological theorizing generally and the sociology of religion specifically. (His) critical realist personalism requires social science to revise its dominant approaches to causation, social ontology, and explanation.” His personal faith journey is described in *How to Go From Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in 95 Difficult Steps* (2011 Cascade Books).

A trilogy of Smith’s previous works serve as foundation and prologue to *Religion*. First, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (2003, Oxford University Press) introduced his theory of personhood and applied it to religion. Then *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (2011, University of Chicago Press) furthered his personalism and introduced his commitment to critical realism. Finally, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (2015, University of Chicago Press) examined the motivations intrinsic to subjective experience and the motivation to realize natural human goods. Smith’s forthcoming work on *Atheist Overreach* (2018) may well serve as epilogue to *Religion*.

True to his form, *Religion* is at times tediously thorough, with extensive strings of descriptors, long lists of points, and an abundance of examples that can seem excessive until the reader realizes that they deepen and broaden the case Smith is making, thereby

strengthening and universalizing it. The book is in many ways similar in appearance to his previous books – footnotes on some pages take up more space than the body of the text – and in some ways different – black and white photos of various religious groups and practices around the world are spread throughout. Research questions for further study occupy ten pages prior to a rather brief index. The “intended readership for this book includes not only academic scholars of religion, but also capable undergraduate and graduate students and the educated reading public” (ix).

Smith’s self-identified theoretical influences are a) substantive definitions of religion that identify what religion is, in contrast to functional definitions that identify what it does, b) the meta-theory or philosophy of science of critical realism that combines ontological realism, epistemic perspectivalism, and judgmental rationality, thereby rejecting ontological anti-realism, epistemological foundationalism, and judgmental relativism, and c) the social theory of personalism which argues that “humans have a particular nature that is defined by our biologically grounded yet emergently real personal being and its features, especially our powers, incapacities, tendencies, and natural goods” (12). He repeatedly cites Martin Riesebrodt’s *The Promise of Salvation* (2010, University of Chicago Press) as the foremost resonance with his own account of religion. And in the best methodological agnosticism of science, he states flatly that “nothing in this book either directly endorses or invalidates the truth claims of any religious tradition.... The social sciences are constitutionally incompetent to make judgments about religion’s metaphysical claims about superhuman powers” (17-18).

Cue Smith’s definition of religion: “a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad” (22). Smith then devotes 20 pages to unpacking his definition, which is nevertheless 26 pages fewer than Clifford Geertz famously took to unpack his in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973, Basic Books). Most notably, and a point that Smith underlines constantly, is that “key to this definition is the dual emphasis on prescribed practices and superhuman powers” (3). Contra Weber, “religion is not most fundamentally a cognitive or existential meaning system. Rather it is essentially a set of practices.... ‘making meaning’ is not the heart of religion” (41).

After differentiating types of religious practices (interventionist, behavior-regulating, discursive), describing the mutual influencing of practices and premises, and detailing the practices of Sunni Islam and American Protestant Evangelicalism as examples, Smith anticipates and refutes the charge that his account of religion is reductionist, either metaphysically, conceptually, or explanatorily. Regarding the latter explanatory reductionism, he notes that such an account of religion “would especially surprise readers who know that I have spent my career criticizing utilitarian-based rational choice theory, ‘materialist’ accounts of human motivation, and exchange-based views of social relationships” (62). (Rodney Stark’s *Why God?*

*Explaining Religious Phenomena* was published only four months before Smith's *Religion*, so Smith does not reference it.) Yet he has self-descriptively moved from the definition of religion he gave in *Moral, Believing Animals*. His definition now "prioritizes practices over beliefs and symbols, it centers on the superhuman instead of the superempirical, it replaces 'orders' with 'powers,' and it shifts the purpose of religion away from moral order toward deliverance and blessings" (75).

According to Smith, the answer to why religion matters lies not in what it is, but rather in what it can do, that is, in its causal capacities to influence how individuals live and how the world operates. He lists 18 powers that religion can generate under the categories of identity, community, meaning, expression and experience, social control, and legitimacy. None of them are unique to religion, and all of them are secondary, derivative, and dependent, like the branches and leaves of a tree relative to its roots and trunk. In another, fully elaborated list, Smith then devotes extra attention to the ways religion impacts the social world beyond the individual: its prescriptive teachings; the social influence of its network ties; its ability to shape cultural context; its social service programs; its ability to generate social capital; its effects on social institutions, even after they have secularized; its secular transpositions of dispositions and practices, such as Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; its formative influence on institutional legal codes; the direct intervention of its authorities; its contribution to "deep culture." To illustrate these points, instead of simply citing Latin American liberation theology that would have been more familiar to North American audiences, Smith provides a fascinating extended example of Engaged Buddhism.

As to how religion works (the second and third questions in the subtitle are addressed in reverse order), Smith proposes a simple mental process: "the human making of causal attributions to superhuman powers" (136). Case studies of miracles, ordinary "religious experiences," and the fundamentalist attribution of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 to "the retributive anger of God for America's contemporary apostasy and sins" (156) beg the question of how religious practitioners interpret and evaluate superhuman causal influence. Distinct perceived outcomes that religious practices were meant to activate include outright success – the superhuman powers deliver what the religious practices hoped to achieve; success reinterpreted – the powers provide a substitute or superior alternative to what was hoped for; presumed satisfaction – nothing notable happens, and that is judged satisfactory; no response – no refutation, no answer, just silence; failure – superhuman powers fail to produce what practitioners expected; and rejection – practitioners are rebuffed by the powers they sought to access. The social psychological literature on attribution theory and cognitive biases is vast, and Smith defines 23 of the latter and their possible religious applications. One twist on religious attributions is the potential of placebo effects, the self-fulfilling outcomes of response expectancies where people's belief that they will feel different leads them to actually feel

different. Its sociological analogue is the Thomas theorem: If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

Beyond the questions in the subtitle, Smith also asks why humans presumably are the only species on earth to be religious in the first place. His answer “lies in humans’ unique possession of a complicated combination of natural capacities and limitations” (5). Humans tend toward a baseline, default level of modest religious practice, unless they are in personal and social contexts of greater misfortune or crisis, in which case “the need for superhuman blessings, protection, deliverance, and abilities to cope are more intensely felt” (200). More boldly, Smith references “a large body of recent research in the cognitive science of religion” about biologically grounded genetic and neurological traits which show that religion is “a natural and fairly effortless way for people to think about and live in the world” (5). People are motivated by their “objective interest in realizing six natural, ‘basic goods’ of human personhood [which realize] their proper natural end (*telos*) of *eudaimonia* (happy flourishing)” (205), goods he elaborated in *To Flourish or Destruct*. “Doing religion” depends on exercising at least 10 specific human capacities that he elaborated in *What is a Person?* “Eliminate any one of them and the practice of religion would not be possible” (209). Thus, contrary to much Western social thought in recent centuries, Smith maintains that religion is not unnatural, irrational, and abnormal. We are *Moral, Believing Animals* whose self-consciousness and self-transcendence drive us beyond ourselves. Indeed, “it may actually be religious unbelievers and secularists who need more sociological explaining than religious practitioners” (233).

Smith therefore concludes, in concert with twenty-first century consensus, that twentieth century secularization theories are incorrect, though not completely wrong or useless. “Properly appropriated, they offer valuable insights into social causal mechanisms that decrease religious belief and practices” (5). Critical realism apprehends the nuance and complexity of how mechanisms such as modernity’s religious pluralism, and a host of others, can either weaken or strengthen religion depending on social conditions. “Exactly which causal mechanisms operate under what social conditions to produce differing religious outcomes we cannot predict according to some general law of social life” (260).

Like the entire sub-discipline of the sociology of religion which examines the human side of religion, the net effect on the reader of Smith’s work is likely to question their (ir)religious practices. They have surely been unmasked, though not debunked. As Smith asserts, social science can only expose religion for what it is, how it works, and why it matters. It cannot verify or falsify religious truth claims. To whatever superhuman powers we give our allegiance and life, we still need an explanation for all the other religions. When those religions have been carefully explained (away?), perhaps we will then be willing to turn the analytic lens back on our own religious practices. The payoff is to separate out the human from the superhuman, the bio-psycho-social-cultural from the truly spiritual, which is a reward of great personal value. Christian Smith is a superb guide to the human side.

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*\* A shorter version of this review appears in Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith, 70, 2.*