

Wilcox, Melissa M. 2013. *Religion in Today's World. Global Issues, Sociological Perspectives (Contemporary Sociological Perspectives Series)*. London, New York: Routledge. 584 pp. Pb.: \$69.95. ISBN: 9780415503877.

Melissa M. Wilcox, Associate Professor at Whitman College in Washington, teaches sociology of religion and conducts research on issues related to gender and sexuality, particularly religious identities within LGBTQ communities. *Religion in Today's World. Global Issues, Sociological Perspectives* in the series *Contemporary Sociological Perspectives* correctly emphasises that religion is an undeniable social and political force in today's world. To a great extent, the selected texts reflect Wilcox's own research interests. The book is a combination of a course reader and a textbook and explores religion's socio-political aspects from a variety of theoretical angles and in different contexts.

The aim is to engage students and general readers by providing them with a set of analytical tools to navigate independently through complex and often controversial socio-religious issues and form their own opinions. To that end, five thematic sections with sub-headlines present different theoretical and empirical readings, mainly with a sociological or anthropological perspective. Each section begins with an essay by Wilcox herself, which pedagogically outlines and summarises basic concepts and problems related to the topic of the section. In addition, each section has a series of questions for use in the classroom. A rich glossary index includes short definitions of the bold-faced key terms from the main text.

The first section, *What is Religion?*, presents some fundamental aspects related to definitions of religion and the study of it, such as the difference between substantive and functional definitions, qualitative and quantitative approaches, Freudian, Durkheimian, evolutionary and social constructivist perspectives, as well as a basic introduction to questions of secularisation, privatisation of religion, and subjectivisation. For beginners, this is probably an informative introduction. In the first reading of the subsection *Defining religion*, however, Talal Asad's important essay on Western, Christian biases in the study of religion does not appear to be a natural second step for those readers without a more solid background in theories of religion and secularisation.

The next subsection, *Imagining Religion's Future*, presents some of the main positions in the contemporary secularisation debate, such as Peter Berger's secularisation thesis from 1967, his renouncement of it three decades later, and Steve Bruce's arguments regarding why Berger 2.0 is wrong. This is followed by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's instructive article on contemporary religious change.

The second section, *Religion and Social Institutions*, the most globally oriented section, is introduced by Wilcox's essay on religion, state, and nation, which among other things outlines the core ideas of Robert Bellah's *Civil Religion in America* and Max Weber's theories of capitalism and Protestantism. However, that does not sufficiently prepare the ground for the following articles related to *Religion, State, and Law* and *Religion and the Nation*, especially since three of them deal with non-Christian Asian contexts.

The third section, *Religion and Social Power*, is wisely divided into *Theorizing Religion and Power* and *Enacting Religion and Power* on gender issues. Wilcox's third

essay, *Religion, Oppression, and Resistance*, is better tailored to the readings than the previous ones and give an instructive overview of the way Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, W. E. B. Du Bois and Bruce Lincoln have analysed the relationship between religion and power.

The fourth section, *Religion and social movements*, distinguishes between religion *in* social movements and religion *as* social movements: a good analytical and pedagogical move. In particular, L. A. Smith and Lori G. Beaman's chapter on Quaker political activism is a sophisticated study of the political expressions of a religious tradition.

The last section, *Religion, Local and Global* covers *Religion, Immigration, and Transnationalism* and 'religion and violence, local and global'. The latter title is not precise since the 'local and global' aspect is hardly thematised. However, a special section on religion and violence which covers both the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, Holocaust trauma and Christianity's role in domestic violence does make sense, although the parts dealing with millenarianism would have enhanced the previous section on *Religion and Social Movements*.

In the table of contents, one or two sentences concisely summarise the points of each reading. These are crystal clear and suited to giving the readers a access to the texts, since some of them might otherwise come across as opaque and inaccessible for beginners, such as Saba Mahmood's *Agency, Gender and Embodiment*. More extensive introductions of this kind at the beginning of each text would have made the connection between case studies, theory and the structure of the book more visible and been particularly useful for new students.

Despite the focus on internal diversity, marginalised voices and minorities, the book does not completely avoid North American parochialism. The overwhelming majority of the more than 30 readings are studies of Western contexts, almost all of them from the USA, while Southeast Asia and Africa are completely absent. To strengthen the theoretical perspectives on global religious tendencies, perspectives from scholars like Peter Beyer, Olivier Roy or Grace Davie would have been pertinent.

Although a more coherent editing would have been desirable, and some of the readings are less interesting, Wilcox's book offers a number of key texts and nuanced in-depth studies and successfully demonstrates the intricate relationship between religion and society. The emphasis on religion's contextual, fluid character enables the readers to acquire a deeper understanding of religion's destructive as well as progressive potential. This is particularly important at a time when public debate about religion is often reduced to essentialist, simplistic arguments, most prominently in the fruitless discussion of whether religion is 'good' or 'bad', whether the Islamic State 'represents Islam' or 'has nothing to do with Islam', and so on, when it is more constructive to ask *how* and *why*. From that perspective, *Religion in Today's World* is a valuable contribution.

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