

Book Review

Martyn Percy, Section Editor

Religion: The Classical Theories. James Thrower. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

This book's overarching question is, 'What is religion?' The book is intended to be a students' guide that will 'sift, sort, and summarise' books on theories of religion that are part of what Thrower calls 'a tidal wave of secondary literature' in the humanities (p. vii). He hopes that the result will be a book that informs the student reader, albeit at second-hand, about what has been previously written. The hope is that the guide will 'lead the student to become better acquainted' with at least some of the leading thinkers for themselves at first hand (p. vii). The book is very good at fulfilling its aims.

Thrower observes that books on religion have formerly tended to focus on sociological and psychological approaches in answer to the question he is seeking to address, and that writers have ignored what philosophers, theologians, and religious believers (are not some religious believers also philosophers and/or theologians?!) think and write about. The book, therefore, looks at a variety of approaches to answer the overarching question Thrower asks, and primarily (but not always) focuses on religions in the Western tradition.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 looks at what religions say about religion. Part 2 looks at explanations that are often hostile to religion from disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Thrower calls these 'naturalistic explanations of religion'. Thrower agrees that the two heuristic categories he identifies in Part 1 and Part 2 are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that some explanations seek to combine the two. The closing chapter very briefly comments on future theorising about religion in the twenty-first century.

As for what 'religion' means, Thrower follows Wittgenstein's approach that words do not have sharp boundaries but 'blurred edges'. He therefore avoids defining what 'religion' is. He also follows Eric Sharpe's view in Understanding Religion, (Duckworth, 1983, p. 47) that a religion includes the firm conviction on the part of believers of the actual existence of a supernatural, supersensory order of being and of the being's interplay with the world.

Regarding a religious explanation of religion, Thrower has in mind transcendental discourse that cannot be reduced to any other form of discourse. On the other hand, a naturalistic explanation of religion, 'rejects, or radically re-interprets, the overt claims of religions, and seeks to reduce religious discourse to the more amenable because, so it is claimed, more empirical discourse of the disciplines of psychology and sociology' (p. 3). (I found this last quotation baffling unless, as reader, I treated the words 'because, so it is claimed, more empirical' as, in effect, bracketed because in apposition to 'more amenable'.)

The last, short chapter could have been more ambitious than it is, while still keeping to the intention of the book to be a student guide. It is little more than a summary than some suggestions for further thought. Most obviously to me, I wonder whether the last chapter could have included material from ‘outside the box’ and critiqued the view that religion presupposes belief in a supersensory order of being. From the assumption, Thrower and Sharpe (and others) have no more than critiqued the category they have identified, but the category may only be part of a more general category that has many other points of confluence with their category. It seems to me that religions (in a broader sense) result from a way of thinking that holds to a conviction that ‘something’ otherwise unprovable but superordinate is true and will always have an effect in human affairs – something that is inexorable, unrelenting – whether or not that ‘something’ is known about or believed in. Those who hold to ‘the laws of the free market’, for example, hold to a religion in the broader sense I have just set out and so evidence many of the same belief traits as those who believe in a supersensory order of being. Perhaps the category of religion is broad enough to include even those who believe an unproven theory to be true. I am therefore suggesting that to limit the idea of religion to those who hold to the existence a *supersensory* being is to miss out on a wide-range of thought that fits comfortably within the ‘blurred edges’ of a Wittgensteinian approach to defining or describing ‘religion’.

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