

Reviews

The New Sciences of Religion: Exploring Spirituality from the Outside In and Bottom Up. By William Grassie. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. In press.

This work presents a reflection on religion in the light of scientific investigations of religion. The author covers many fields of research while at the same time offering proposals for interpreting and evaluating that research. The result is a synoptic view of the breadth of religion-and-science studies that is not available, to my knowledge, in any other comparable work.

The first and longest part of the work presents chapter-long summaries of scientific approaches, beginning with more traditional contributions of sociology, anthropology, and psychology, and proceeding to four new areas of scientific study: economics, evolutionary approaches, neurosciences, and medicine. Throughout this section, the idea of “non-reductive functionalism” is proposed as an interpretive category for dealing with the sciences. The second part presents three chapters, developing in each a distinctive interpretive idea. In turn, the argument deals with (a) historical critical examination of traditional religious narratives (scriptures), in which the idea is “entangled narratives” from many traditions; (b) a synthetic interpretation of science in general that is congenial to the author’s approach to religion, under the rubric of a metaphysics of process, relation, and emergence; concluding with (c) a chapter that formulates two concepts that can undergird the study and interpretation of religion: “God-by-Whatever-Name” and “particularist universalism.”

The author writes near the end of the work: “This book is a kind of apologia, true, but one that seeks to be fair and balanced.” This is an accurate statement of how I perceive the work. It is an apologia for a multilayered proposal: (a) that religion can take seriously a wide range of scientific investigations, (b) that science probes into religion aggressively but nevertheless ends up as a constructive factor, (c) that adherents of religion must not only take science seriously but must also recognize that there are many forms of religion, each of which contains truth, and (d) that an interpretive method can be formulated for negotiating successfully the challenge from the sciences to religious belief and practice. That method consists of the following: a way of understanding scientific research (nonreductive functionalism), a philosophy of science (the metaphysics of process, relation, and emergence), a way of interpreting critical historical studies of religion (entangled narratives), and a way of dealing with religious pluralism (particularist universalism).

It may seem unfair to suggest that Grassie has given too little attention to the cognitive sciences, but in light of the rapidly growing importance of these fields, I found this to be regrettable. It would enhance the discussion to refer more explicitly to such items as appear in *Current Approaches in the Cognitive Science of*

Religion (Pyysiäinen and Anttonen 2002). Some important figures in this field are discussed, somewhat strangely, in my opinion, under the rubric “Pragmatism,” in the chapter titled “Old Sciences of Religion.” This chapter includes an impressive discussion of classical nineteenth- and twentieth-century academic study of religion but does not place the cognitive sciences very helpfully.

A most welcome discussion of historical source criticism occurs in chapter 7 under the rubric “Narratives of Religion.” It is a testimony to Grassie’s originality that he includes this topic. However, he puts it in a largely negative light, thereby failing to convey the helpfulness of this critical method. It is true that historical critical method (HCM) decodes authorship and purposes, as the author states. However, it gives even more attention to the underlying history of the texts, the traditions of which they are composed. We find this conclusion drawn about HCM: “The redaction of the Bible is, thus, an intellectual fraud by contemporary standards. The fraud may have been perpetrated with good intentions or bad, but in no sense should the Bible be taken as an accurate historical chronology or an actual account of ancient Judaism, First Century Palestine, and the history of the early Church. The Bible is as much a political and ideological document as it is a spiritual and philosophical document.” There is truth in this conclusion, to be sure, but as it stands, without nuance, it represents an uncharacteristically (for the author) wooden and unhelpful stance toward the formation of shared narratives.

The significance of this work lies in its breadth, but that breadth invites criticism of details, as I have indicated. Grassie’s breadth of vision vastly outweighs my nitpicking, however. “Religion-and-science” has become a vast realm, involving many sciences and disciplines. In presenting this realm, Grassie has corrected our frequently too-narrow purviews.

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REFERENCE

- Pyysiäinen, Ilkka, and Veikko Anttonen, eds. 2002. *Current Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion*. New York: Continuum.