

## Book Reviews

Nevertheless, the Trollingers quite properly point out that AiG and the museum do not really come clean on the Bible and slavery. The room devoted to racism quotes Acts 17:26, but only the first part about how God “hath made of one blood all nations of men,” leaving out the part where God determined “the bounds of their habitation.” The authors emphasize that those words at the end of the verse were quoted by segregationists more often than any other biblical text, yet they are not on display in the museum, and visitors will have no idea that the Bible was widely used to defend slavery, or that the Bible does not directly condemn it. Indeed (as the authors state), AiG tries hard to distinguish between “slavery under the Mosaic covenant” from the “harsh slavery” imposed on blacks in America, in order not to raise unanswerable questions about their approach to the Bible. It would be far better, if they were more forthright about such things, like the newly opened Museum of the Bible, which I have also seen. There we find, side by side, historically important writings advocating for and against black slavery in the United States, both citing the Bible profusely. That is quite a contrast with the Creation Museum, whose motto is “Prepare to Believe,” not “What Actually Happened.”

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## SOCIAL SCIENCE

**RELIGION: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters** by Christian Smith. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. 296 pages, including notes, references and index. Hardcover; \$35.00. ISBN: 9780691175416.

The sociology of religion is conventionally characterized as composed 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” (p. 254) in a “more complicated and realistic theory” (p. 255) that “takes very seriously causal multiplicity, complexity, interactions, and contingency” (p. 259).

Smith is 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 today. He is perhaps best known beyond sociological circles as director of the massive National Study of Youth and Religion (2001–2015).

A trilogy of Smith’s previous works serves as prologue to *Religion*, whose intended readership “includes

not only academic scholars of religion, but also ... the educated reading public” (p. ix). First, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (2003) introduced his theory of personhood and applied it to religion. *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (2011) 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) examined the motivations intrinsic to subjective experience and to realizing natural human goods. Smith’s forthcoming work on *Atheist Overreach* (2018) may well serve as epilogue to *Religion*.

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 critical realist philosophy of science that combines ontological realism, epistemic perspectivalism, and judgmental rationality; 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” (p. 12). In keeping with the “methodological agnosticism” of science (not “methodological atheism”), 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. (pp. 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” (p. 22). Most notable “is the dual emphasis on prescribed practices and superhuman powers” (p. 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” (p. 41).

Smith anticipates and refutes the charge that his account of religion is reductionistic. Regarding 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 ... and exchange-based views of social relationships” (p. 62). 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” (p. 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 eighteen 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 outlines the ways religion impacts the social world beyond the individual. To illustrate these points, Smith provides a fascinating extended example of Engaged Buddhism.

As to how religion works, Smith proposes a simple mental process: "the human making of causal attributions to superhuman powers" (p. 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" (p. 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 the superhuman powers delivering what was sought, the powers providing a superior alternative to what was sought, the powers remaining nonresponsive and silent, the powers failing to produce what was sought, or the powers rejecting the practitioners who sought them. The social psychological literature on attribution theory and cognitive biases is vast, and Smith defines 23 of the latter and their possible religious applications, including psychological placebo effects and their sociological analogue: 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" (p. 5). 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" (p. 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)" (p. 205), goods he elaborated in *To Flourish or Destruct*.

"Doing religion" depends on exercising at least ten 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" (p. 209). Thus, contrary to much Western social thought in recent centuries, Smith maintains that religion is not unnatural, irra-

tional, 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" (p. 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" (p. 5). Critical realism apprehends the nuance and complexity of how mechanisms such as modernity's religious pluralism 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" (p. 260).

Like the examination of the human side of religion in the sociology of religion generally, the net effect on readers 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, 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, a reward of great personal value. Christian Smith is a superb guide to the human side.

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## TECHNOLOGY

**THE HEART OF THE MACHINE: Our Future in a World of Artificial Intelligence** by Richard Yonck. New York: Arcade, 2017. 328 pages, references, index. Hardcover; \$25.99. ISBN: 9781628727333.

Calling a customer service line where an automated program happily routes us to the appropriate human agent is becoming commonplace. What we may not understand, however, is how these systems are becoming better able to identify and respond not just to the words we say, but to the emotions behind those words. As computers become more and more advanced, it is no surprise that they are becoming more "emotionally intelligent." What is less understood is how these innovations will change us and, ultimately, how they will change humanity.