BOOK REVIEWS


This book builds on the foundation that Christian Smith laid in three of his preceding theoretical works: Moral, Believing Animals (2003), What Is a Person? (2010), and To Flourish or Destruct (2015). Although there were hints and asides related to religion in these three books, this book explicitly applies his theory of critical realist personalism to the topic of religion. At the risk of simplification, realism argues that there are entities that exist independent of our perception of them. Critical realism rejects the idea that reality is merely a human construction, and asserts that with the good scientific investigation it is possible to make judgments about reality. Personalism is a philosophical view that states people have a natural proper end (telos) toward which to live.

The key to this book is Smith’s definition of what religion is, which he believes needs to be distinguished from why people are religious. According to Smith: “Religion is 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) [italics in original]. Since this definition is a mouthful, here are the important elements of the definition. First, religion is primarily about practices, not beliefs. Second, religion exists in part because of the difficulties and contingencies of life. And, third, the core of religion is connecting with superhuman powers, which potentially result in various blessings and deliverance—an idea that he draws from Martin Riesebrodt’s book, The Promise of Salvation and is critical to the theory he develops.

Having defined what religion is, Smith then turns to outline why people are religious, which is a long list. Humans are religious because religion provides community, identity, meaning, ecstasy, aesthetic enjoyment, social control, and emotional energy from worship and collective action. Without these secondary benefits, religion would not exist. But it is equally true that all of these benefits are available in secular culture. Therefore, what distinguishes religion is the connection to superhuman powers, which are not present in a country club or rock concert.

One of the most interesting sections of the book is on the role of religion in producing emotional energy, a concept Smith borrows from Randall Collins. We are emotional energy seekers, drawn to locations where one can get recharged, which is why Smith doubts that religion will go out of business. This idea and others lead Smith to argue that religion is a natural element of what it means to be human. Although he acknowledges theories that religion is a coping mechanism, an opiate, a way of dealing with the contingencies of life, he rejects broad-based secularization theories that humans will outgrow religion, that it is an infantile response to life’s challenges. Yes, religious institutions will change, some will die, there will be winners and losers. But human creativity will develop new religions to replace those that no longer have cultural resonance.
One of the most theoretically rich sections of the book is on the role of attribution for religious people—the way humans ascribe actions to superhuman powers, rationalizing, explaining, and finding connections that make life meaningful. At one level, this chapter might appear to be very functional and even positivistic, explaining away religion. However, Smith makes a strong case that explaining how religion works does not dismiss the potential ontological reality of religion, including the placebo effect of prayer. Indeed, he strongly rejects determinism and theories that attempt to explain with a single theoretical lens all aspects of religious reality.

After wading through the first hundred pages of the book, I decided that the audience for this book is not undergraduates, even very bright ones. The book presupposes too much knowledge of various theorists that Smith is slaying. Also, while I see the value of distinguishing between what religion is and how it works, I’m not sure that such a hard line should be drawn in the lived experience of religious people, although perhaps the distinction is important at a conceptual level. And, finally, I’m not convinced that “superhuman” is the right terminology as the core element of religion. At a personal level, it has very little resonance. Also, I don’t think it fits with many contemporary expressions of Buddhism, liberal Protestantism, or emergent forms of non-fundamentalist religion. On the other hand, I strongly affirm Smith’s theory that humans are moral, believing animals rather than rational, acquisitive, exchanging animals—which is the view of both utilitarianism and rational choice theory.

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Parish and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the American Catholic Church, by TRICIA COLLEEN BRUCE. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 264 pp.; $24.95 (paper).© The Author(s) 2018. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oup.com.

With more than 74 million adherents, the Catholic Church is one of the most culturally diverse institutions in the United States. The U.S. Catholic Church is home to people of different races, ethnicities, and countries of origin, as well as varied liturgical, theological, and political views. In Parish and Place: Making Room for Diversity in the American Catholic Church, sociologist Tricia Colleen Bruce focuses on one unique institutional response to different types of diversity within the U.S. Catholic Church: personal parishes.

Personal parishes are Catholic parishes created to serve specialized groupings of Catholics with specific pastoral needs. Most Catholic parishes are territorial parishes, existing to serve all Catholics residing in their geographic boundaries. However, personal parishes, which comprise about 8% of all U.S. Catholic parishes, exist to serve an explicit need or purpose without regard to geographic boundary. Personal parishes have been established to serve Catholics of different races, ethnicities, and languages (e.g., Hispanic Catholics), Catholics who hold certain liturgical preferences (e.g., the Traditional Latin Mass), and other special purposes (e.g., ministering to tourists). Through Bruce’s study, which utilizes original survey data, in-depth interviews, and participant observation, readers learn about the history of personal parishes in the United States, the groups these parishes serve, how new personal parishes differ from personal parishes of the past, and the factors which influence approval of personal parishes by local bishops. For example, Bruce finds that,