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Thomas A. Idinopulos & Brian C. Wilson (eds.) 1998, *What is Religion?: Origins, Definitions, and Explanations*. Leiden, Boston & Köln: Brill, ix + 180 pp., ISBN 90 04 11022 4 (hb), f120, \$70,75

The editors have ordered the twelve contributions to this volume alphabetically, after the names of the authors. On inspecting the book, I was curious why they presented this collection in an unstructured way. What did they have to hide? Another question rose from their very brief introduction. In just half a page, they state that ‘today, increasingly, professors of religious studies are in a quandary not only how to approach their subject matter, but even as to what is or should be their subject matter’. Do all the papers reflect this sense of disorientation?

On reading them I found that only four did. They were those of Crocket (1-13), Idinopulos (27-42), Wiggins (133-139) and Winquist (163-171). For Crocket, Wiggins and Winquist, a Tillichian type of theology is at the heart of Religious Studies, because ‘every human being is religious, in the sense that everyone possesses an ultimate concern’ (4). Crocket reinterprets disorientation in terms of Kant’s notion of the sublime (10-13) in order to propose that we view disorientation as providing ‘the only real possibility of religious meaning today’ (13). For Winquist, religion is thinking this sublime (166). He pleads that the ‘ontotheological tradition’ be restored in religious studies. We should recognise the ‘protodoxic’ qualities of ordinary life, for fissures in the material reveal that ‘maybe something else is going on other than what we are seeing’ (170). Wiggins asks ‘what on earth is religion?’ He holds that ‘in this Enlightenment-fevered western tradition’, false and inadequate notions of religion have been developed by reducing it to ‘one or another autonomous subjective function of human beings’ (137). For Idinopulos, finally, understanding of religion is confounded, first by the academic study of religions being restricted to what is observable, whereas ‘religion is not exhausted by the observable’ (27). Second, by its emphasis on what religions have in common, whereas it should focus on the exceptional – Israel, Jesus, non-theistic Theravada Buddhism, and Jews for Jesus (28-29, 32). Third, by its abstracting beliefs from their cultural matrices for the sake of systematising them, whereas it should focus on the emotional, unspoken practice of faith of ordinary believers in its full cultural context (30). In his view, the study of religion can also not be reduced to the study of its observable functions, for ‘authentic religious life is so filled with “non-observables” as to defeat any application of the so-called “empirical method”’ (37). Humans have an innate propensity for faith (39). By faith they experience the transcendent and respond it. The key notion of religious studies should, therefore, be faith, not religion, but as structured by a ‘cumulative tradition’. Then religious studies may again be ‘about something more than mere data, just as religion is about something more than itself’ (42).

These four chapters are clearly in the *homo religiosus* tradition. They opt for a Religious Studies which is closely tied to Christian theology. In the arena of North American scholarship in religions, it is under heavy fire and looks like the losing side, an army in disarray.

The other nine, however disparate, display no doubt about the direction in which the study of religions should move. They may be ordered into two groups. One strongly attacks the religious studies of the Tillichian/Eliadean/Cantwell Smith kind. They are three: Lawson (43-49), McCutcheon (51-71), and Segal (107-112). Against Eliade's 'inflationary' (anti-reductionist) theory of religion as an autonomous system that cannot be explained but by itself, Lawson presents his 'deflationary' view derived from cognitive science. He postulates that humans are genetically predisposed to develop religions, because they intuitively know agents and so, in their religious actions, postulate agents of a 'counterintuitive' kind – i.e. different from ordinary agents – as engaged in action by transferring intentionality to them. McCutcheon attacks the 'imperializing scholarship of previous generations' (54). He holds that the category 'religion' 'has no analytic value whatsoever' (56) and should be 're-described' as 'social formation', i.e. as a 'rule-driven system [...] of socio-rhetorical strategies that facilitate the development of enduring social and self identities' (59). In Segal's view, 'the modern study of religion has been [...] a clash between a hermeneutical approach and an epistemological one'. The first is dialogical, safeguards the autonomy of the religious discourse and keeps it from being refuted by, and dissolved into, the discourse of the scholar of religions (109). The second does not 'defer to the adherent' but views his religion as a social-scientific case to be diagnosed and explained, not in terms of itself, but 'as something else' (109, 112).

The other group comprises the remaining five papers by DiCenso (15-25), Merkur (73-89), Paden (91-105), Strenski (113-132), and Wilson (141-162). They seem to occupy a middle ground between the theological and the social-scientific camps. The latter camp has incurred the wrath of Strenski who terms them 'the despisers of Religion' and regards 'the NAASR "gang" [...] a disaster for the study of religion' (118). He directs his anger especially at a 1997 article in MTSR (9/2: 91-110) by Fitzgerald. Paden argues that it is useless to contend over what religion 'essentially' is. One can do only 'aspectival' research into this 'variegated domain of different but related phenomena', each requiring multiple explanations (91-93). He offers his 'religious worlds' approach as one way of 'responsible controlled comparison'. The latter needs to be emancipated 'both from a restrictive revelational model, and from a model that reduces [sacred, superhuman] objects simply to a referent of basic, counterintuitive "belief"' (98). DiCenso takes some of the sting out of Freud's reductive explanations of religion by showing that they also imply that religions foster 'the capacity for self-reflection and other-directed behaviour' (24). Merkur considers phenomenology from Otto to Van der Leeuw 'a secularisation of doing Protestant theology' (77): from 'an act of homage to its god(s)' it has become 'autopsies done on corpses' (78). He defines religion as 'the living of a numinously virtuous life' (82) and accords a central place to religious pedagogy in the academic analysis of religion (83) and to a study of 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic religiosity' in the vein of Allport (84-89). Finally, Wilson proposes a framework of formal categories for doing the history of the definition of religion by distinguishing between several kinds of definitions. The first is between lexical and precisising definitions, and between precisising definitions of the descriptive, or analytic, and explanatory, or synthetic, kinds (143-144). The second is between nominal and real definitions (147-149). The

third is between substantive and functional definitions (149-153). And the fourth is between monothetic and polythetic definitions of religion (154-161). He also provides a brief overview of that history to exemplify it. I find this essay the most stimulating of this collection.

Ordering these essays in this way brings out the transformation of North American scholarship in religions in the last two decades. Those opting for an exclusively hermeneutical approach and its solid integration into Christian theology are dwindling. Those opting for a hard-nosed social-scientific approach are few but vociferous. The majority would seem to opt for a softer Religious Studies, secular in character and including hermeneutics as well as explanation, as well as the study of the Christian religion, but without any privileges. The value of this collection lies primarily in the fact that it documents this process. The study of religions needs to be contextualised as much as the religions it studies. The editors showed failure of nerve in not contextualising these essays.