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Stoddard's "Method today: Redescribing approaches to the study of religion" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Stoddard, B. (2018). *Method today: Redefining approaches to the study of religion*. Bristol, Connecticut: Equinox, 2018. 286 pp. ISBN 9781781795682

According to this volume's thesis, the pursuit of method in religion studies generally is shaped by a desire to have a "non-devotional, non-confessional, non-theological study of religion." The very phrase "study of religion" prompts one to think of applying social science methodology to worldwide religious experiences. This project bloomed historically with the work of men like Max Muller and James Fraser in the 19th Century and continued thereafter through scholars like Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade. Religious studies critically analyzes all religious belief and behavior and forms objective theories which may buttress or debunk the faith of true believers. The goal is not to make Christians, or any religious group, to feel good or bad; but to see religion objectively.

Method Today includes modified versions of papers and responses from the 2015 annual meeting of the NAASR – the North American Association for the Study of Religion. It contains essays from many different faith traditions, including no-faith traditions. For Evangelicals, such an overtly secular scientific approach to religion may require not the literary-critical "willing suspension of disbelief," but almost the suspension of belief itself, in order to stand outside one's own faith system and gaze on religion as an object of study. However, the temptation of standing outside religion is that of critical eisegesis – reading secular ideology into the religion under study. Therefore, the task of the scholarly Christian theologian is to maintain personal faith while examining religious practice and patterns in an objective way.

The text is divided into four sections, but without heading labels, so that it leaves the reader to guess the differences among the volume's divisions. Hence, you cannot tell the "players without a program," but alas, there is no program. Each section seems to have a primary essay followed by response essays by various authors, then culminating once again with a summary response by the first essayist. *Methods Today* seems organized in sections featuring: Comparison, Definition, Explanation, and Interpretation. For instance, in what I am terming the Comparison section, the first essay by Aaron Hughes argues that religious scholars of comparative religion must be a) Sensitive to the historical records; b) versed in linguistic dexterity; c) aware of the limits of comparison even as the scholar engages in it. The second section

on Definition begins with an essay by Naomi Goldenburg which pushes, in her own terms, “the project of deconstruction” in areas like politics, gender, governance and the language of religion studies. The third section on Explanation, featuring an essay by Egil Asprem and Ann Taves, divides religion studies into phenomenological theories of religion (human experience), supernaturalistic causal theories (actual encounters with the divine), and naturalistic causal theories (rationalistic approaches). And finally, the Interpretation section features an article by Kevin Schilbrack dealing with aspects of religion from a psychological perspective – the relationship of behavior and its meaning; human mental states, and causal explanations of religious meaning. Obviously, this is not light reading.

Deep in the weeds and tall grass of religious studies, this text is recommended for graduate programs and seminaries addressing comparative religions.

Reviewer

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