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Book Reviews

***Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters*. By Christian Smith. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. x + 277 pp. $35.00, cloth.**

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In this carefully argued book that has important implications for scholars wishing to explain the relationship between religion and politics, Christian Smith, a prominent sociologist of religion, seeks to provide "a social scientific theory of religion that makes sense of all religions" (2). In so doing, he raises five basic questions related to religion: (1) What is its nature?; (2) What powers does it exercise?; (3) How does it work?; (4) Why are humans religious?; and (5) What is its future? Smith develops and explicates his theory by addressing each of these specific questions in separate chapters, using numerous examples by which to illustrate and substantiate his theoretical contentions. Not only does Smith advance a new theory of religion, but in the Appendix, he couples his theory with a listing of 45 research questions (along with a variety of subquestions related to each of these broader research questions) that derive from the discussion found within each of those five chapters. Finally, though the basis of the book is a conceptual argument, Smith writes his book in a manner that is suitable for a wide audience, including capable undergraduate students and the educated public, by placing the more philosophical and technical discussion within the body of his footnotes.

Smith defines religion as constituting "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 hope of realizing human goods and avoiding things bad" (22). Though his definition may seem less than concise, Smith clearly explains the basis for his choice of words in constructing his definition of religion, and he helpfully delineates how his definition relates to, yet differs from, other prominent

definitions of religion within the social sciences. Notably, Smith's definition of religion moves away from the dominant theme of other theories of religion that have prevailed over much of the last century—namely, that religion constitutes a cultural meaning system.

For Smith, religion is "grounded in human persons pursuing their natural goods amid challenging weaknesses, and responding creatively to try to overcome objective limitations and threats" (210), with religious life emerging "at the deep, underlying fault lines where natural human *capacities* meet and grind against natural human *limitations*" (205). As such, religion is something natural to human life, as it is grounded in "the human constitution and condition." Though human beings are "naturally" religious in particular ways and exhibit certain predispositions to religious practice, they "are not naturally highly religious." Rather, some humans become more religious under particular conditions, e.g. "in personal and social contexts of greater misfortune and crisis" (198). And, Smith argues that the "intensities of religiousness will tend to vary across persons according to differences in their biologically grounded genetic and neurological traits" (202).

According to Smith, religion manifests multiple mechanisms of causal influence, but the means and processes by which it influences people and society are not necessarily distinctive. Nevertheless, such "religious influences can be quite distinctive in terms of *why* they work and sometimes in the *ways* they work" (92). And, what "makes religion work is the human making of causal attribution to superhuman powers" (136).

Smith acknowledges that his theory of religion is shaped by three theoretical influences: (1) a substantive, practice-centered view of religion; (2) the philosophy of critical realism; and (3) the social theory of personalism. And, his adoption of these perspectives has important implications for religion and politics scholars, as it challenges the conventional paradigm by which that study is conducted.

In particular, critical realism "rejects the dominant positivist-empiricist view that causation is about the association of observable events often demonstrated as the statistical correlation of measured variables" (9). Accordingly, causation is not something that is deterministic in nature but rather it is something expressed more in terms of "tendencies" (10, note 14). Nor does Smith accept the differentiation between science and religion in which science supposedly relates to the domain of facts whereas religion's domain is that of values. Instead, Smith argues it would be better to acknowledge that both science and religion deal with facts and with values and then distinguish between the two in other ways (e.g. that "they have qualitatively distinct

interests, questions, and standards of knowledge with regard to sometimes the same objects of study (religion, in our case)" (19, note 33).

Overall, I find Smith's discussion of the nature of religion, how it works, and why it matters to be engaging, illuminating, and generally convincing. Yet, I would also acknowledge that, though Smith provides explanatory material related to the theoretical perspectives that undergird his argument (specifically, the philosophy of critical realism and the social theory of personalism), I would be far better equipped to critique his perspective if I was more familiar with these particular perspectives and some of their competing viewpoints. But, if I do understand Smith correctly, then I think that there may be certain aspects of religious life that his definition of religion does not adequately capture. Here, I am thinking of those instances in religious life when one simply chooses to worship and praise one's "God" simply because of one's understanding of who this "God" is. (e.g. as Creator of the universe). Certainly, it may be the case that this attribution of God being the Creator of the universe is linked to other attributions given to this God (e.g. power and dominion) and that these other attributions have relevance for one's need to overcome personal limitations and to meet the challenges one faces. Yet, even though this may be the case, there are times in which certain acts of worship are simply that—religious acts done without any pretext of "ultimate ends" in mind. But, perhaps this particular contention simply reflects Smith's recognition that, though the effort to understand "the subjective motives of religious people is entirely valid," to do so shifts "attention away from defining *religion* analytically… and toward studying *religiousness* empirically (34–35)."

Faithful Measures: New Methods in the Measurement of Religion. Edited by Roger Finke and Christopher D. Bader. New York: New York University Press, 2017. vii + 399 pp. $99.00 cloth, $35.00 paper.

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Louis Pasteur is oft-quoted as saying that "A science is as mature as its measurement tools" (qtd. in *Transforming Performance Measurement:*