

Reviews

Robert D. BAIRD, ed. *Methodological issues in religious studies*. Chico, California: New Horizons Press, 1975. 129 pp. Hard binding \$10.00, paper binding \$5.50.

On her deathbed Gertrude Stein said, in one version, "Well, what is the answer?" When no reply was forthcoming, she exclaimed, "But what, then, is the problem?"

This book follows Gertrude Stein. It begins by looking for answers. It ends by posing a problem.

The outcome of a three-day symposium on "Methodology and World Religions" held at the University of Iowa School of Religion in April 1974 under the able leadership of Robert Baird, the book is built primarily around the contributions of three persons: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, formerly of Harvard, now at Dalhousie University; Jacob Neusner of Brown University; and Hans H. Penner of Dartmouth. Of these three, Neusner and Penner accept the implicit value-assumption that methodological reflection can serve to guide and sharpen research goals in religious studies. On this basis, each delivers two papers, two sets of "answers."

Neusner's first paper is entitled "The study of religion as the study of tradition in Judaism." It stresses the paradigmatic value of tradition in Judaism, a value that gives tradition "intense contemporaneity." This necessarily entails a continuing involvement between transmitted material and those who appropriate it, and this interaction, Neusner affirms, is an important key to understanding Judaism. "If you want to know about Judaism, you had better ask not about its condition at a given point in its history..., but rather about its dynamics, its continuing processes, its 'progress' through time" (p. 35).

His second paper, "The study of tradition as religion in Judaism," seeks to show how it is that in Judaism learning, argument, intellectual activity can itself be a religious experience.

Erudite, balanced, and humane, Neusner leaves little to criticize. From his two short papers I have learned more about Judaism than from many a hefty tome.

Penner begins with a paper on "Creating a *brahman*: A structural approach to religion." In this paper he does three things: (1) he

describes the Hindu *upanayana* ritual in which a boy is invested with the sacred thread by his religious teacher and thereby enters upon the stage of adult life, (2) he shows that neither essentialism nor functionalism are capable of unlocking the meaning of this rite, and (3) he presents a structuralist analysis that purports to go beyond "surface structure" and get at "deep structure."

Penner's second paper, "The problem of semantics in the study of religion," focuses on the problem of meaning in religion and linguistics. Essentialist and phenomenological approaches to religion, he avers, affirm empirical analysis but locate the meaning of religion in an inaccessible "vertical dimension." Functionalism suggests that function and meaning are identical, that religion is no more than a symbolic representation of society – a thesis Lévi-Strauss has shown to be often diametrically opposed to the facts. In linguistics too, he observes, meaning has often gone begging. Till recently linguists have tended to focus on syntactical rather than semantic problems. This has led to the anomaly of syntactically irreproachable but meaningless constructions like "colorless green ideas sleep furiously." Structuralism, he suggests, is the ray of light in this darkness, for it is beginning to get at systemic transformational rules that generate both syntactic and semantic components. Penner seems to be saying, then, that just as structuralism in linguistic studies is starting to come to grips with the semantic problem, so structuralism as applied in religious studies may help us with the problem of the meaning of religious phenomena.

This is heady stuff. One is left wondering, however, what will come of it. So far, despite the virtuoso performance of Lévi-Strauss, we find more in the way of promise than of accomplishment. Even Penner's structural analysis of the *upanayana* ritual turns out to be, on his own admission, a matter of "surface structure" rather than "deep structure."

The pieces fall into an entirely different pattern when Smith calls into question the legitimacy of concern with methodology. Never one to understate a position, Smith puts it thus: "I feel that methodology is the massive red herring of modern scholarship, the most significant obstacle to intellectual progress, and the chief distraction from rational understanding of the world" (p. 2).

To the extent that Smith's challenge dominates the discussions that follow the several presentations and particularly the panel discussion

near the end, this book centers in an ethical issue. The issue is whether, in the pursuit of religious studies, we should arm ourselves with theories and methodologies and see how far they can be applied, or whether we should simply seek to understand religious phenomena, making use of any and all theories and methods. Smith sees the former alternative as leading to meaningless specialization, depersonalization, and the fragmentation of the university. The latter he sees as leading to comprehensive understanding, respect for personalist values, and a community of scholars joined in rational inquiry.

Whether or not one accepts this statement of the issue, most would agree, I think, that this is indeed a matter of far-reaching importance. One cannot avoid the impression, however, that this ethical issue, despite its significance, came to birth unintended and unexpected. Because Smith put his case so forcefully, it could not be ignored, but nearly all the discussions concerning this matter seem to consist of on-the-spot remarks.

Toward the end of the seminar, Baird, trying to clarify matters and provide a basis for further discussion, distinguishes method from methodology, and methodology from theory and explanation. Reading his essay, I found myself wondering: Suppose these definitions had been advanced at the outset and employed by the various participants as working terms for the symposium. Suppose Penner had been able to produce a structural analysis that satisfied his own stated aims. Wouldn't this have made a more fitting context within which to take up the ethical issue as posed by Smith? And how is it that Neusner's admirable work elicits so little response? Could it be that his research goals and methods escape the mesh of the nets cast by the two protagonists? If so, there is all the more reason for another seminar that will take up where this one left off.

This book is, as suggested above, two books in one. From my perspective it is more important for the questions it poses than for the answers it gives. But whether one is drawn more to the questions or to the answers, it is an informative, thought-provoking book, well worth the investment of money and time.

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