

Book Reviews

Russell T. McCutcheon (ed.) *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, London and New York, Cassell, 1999; paperback; viii, 405; rrp £19.99.

This is the first volume in Cassell's "Controversies in the Study of Religion" series. Students are particularly advantaged by the existence of volumes such as this, which collect seminal articles and book chapters on the insider/ outsider problem. These articles are assembled in groups which explore four scholarly orientations to the particular problem. These orientations are: firstly, the phenomenological and hermeneutic position which advocates scholars entering into the experiences of their subjects, bridging the gulf between subject and object; secondly, "empirically based theories that treat human behaviour as a series of actions and reactions" (p. 4); thirdly, methodological agnosticism, where scholars acknowledge that there is not sufficient information to conclusively settle issues of truth or falsity, and that the exercise of cataloguing is itself valid; and fourthly, the reflexive stance associated with postmodernism, which "addresses the manner in which all observations are inextricably entwined with the self-referential statements of the observer" (p. 9).

Part I explores these issues through a series of "position" essays, of which Horace Miner (1956), "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema", and Alasdair MacIntyre (1964), "Is Understanding Religion Compatible With Believing?", are classics, for vastly different reasons. Miner's satire on the habits of white Americans brilliantly exposes the assumptions of anthropology and its often patronising conclusions, as well as certain peculiar features of the lives of "normal" Western people by whose standards "primitive" cultures are generally judged. MacIntyre's more philosophical meditation on the difficulties inherent in participating in dialogue with people whose fundamental assumptions you do not share still hits hard, despite a growing number of responses to it.

Part II, "The Autonomy of Religious Experience", encompasses works by Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Joachim Wach, among others. The useful introductory essay provides a short "academic lineage" for the ideas contained in this section focusing on Schleiermacher, and the essays by Eliade, Wach and Otto assert the "utter priority of personal religious experience" (p. 69). Rosalind Shaw's "Feminist Anthropology and the Gendering of Religious Studies" questions these essays, arguing that the notion that religion is *sui generis* is designed to protect religion from the scholars who would point out its interrelatedness with factors such as class, race, gender, politics and economics. The final essay in this section, Raymond Firth's "An Anthropological Approach to the Study of Religion" demonstrates this kind of critique, with Firth arguing that the concept of God (and indeed other important religious

concepts) is a human construct, and as such religion may be comparable to many other human cultural products.

Part III, "Reductionism and the Study of Religion", returns to the Enlightenment and charts the course of the "naturalistic" study of religion, from the pre-Enlightenment Francis Bacon, through David Hume and Immanuel Kant (whose 1784 essay, "What is Enlightenment?", is here included). In this section, Robert A. Segal's spirited "In Defense of Reductionism" impresses: Segal attacks Eliade's claim to accept the believer's own terms, exposes the contradictions inherent in the defense of "non-reductionist" approaches to religious phenomena, and actively champions the so-called "reductionism" of anthropology, sociology and the social sciences in general because it is capable of generating non-contradictory scholarly material regarding religion. Segal, and later on Daniel Pals, also discuss the relationship between scholarly approaches selected and the religious beliefs of the researcher in interesting and challenging ways.

Part IV, "Neutrality and Methodological Agnosticism", considers epistemological dilemmas in research and suggests that in some cases it appears that both believers (insiders) and non-believers (outsiders) are making unsubstantiated claims. The collection of articles ranges from Ninian Smart's example of a "neutral" analysis of the Buddhist Three-Body Doctrine, through Peter Donovan's meditation on the multiplicity of meanings and applications that "neutrality" can have in Studies in Religion, and where Peter Byrne (1997) "The Study of Religion: Neutral, Scientific or Neither?" critiques social scientists for presuming that naturalistic explanations are what is needed, arguing that real neutrality means neutrality about preferred types of explanations as well. Don Wiebe (1985) "Does Understanding Religion Require Religious Understanding?" takes up MacIntyre's argument from Part I and concludes that the gulf MacIntyre perceived between believers and non-believers is illusory. This nicely illustrates the fact that although the contributions to the volume are divided into themed sections, there is much dialogue between these sections, and many of the issues segue into each other.

Part V, "Reflexivity and the Role of the Researcher", commences with a brief account of Edward Said's influential 1978 book *Orientalism*, and the way in which the researcher has become the subject in much contemporary scholarship. The selections here are more controversial than in previous sections: anti-postmodernists have decried the use of fictional techniques used in scholarship in disciplines other than Studies in Religion (for example, Keith Windschuttle's cutting critique of Simon Schama in *The Killing of History*). The position essay in this section discusses Karen McCarthy Brown (1991) *Mama Lola*, a study of Vodou in an immigrant Haitian community in New York which uses this fictional technique. The problems are obvious and acknowledged by the editors: "where scholars such as Brown and Doniger work

to make the apparently exotic more familiar, others warn that such efforts can actually be caught up with constructing yet a new dominant, intellectual elite. Simply put, is the other lost in these attempts to rebuild oneself? Is Doniger spinning her own myth or reporting on the various myths she discusses? Is Brown telling us about Vodou practices or merely writing autobiography?" (p. 293) It is interesting to query whether such a dilemma is better or worse than that of non-reductionism/reductionism. It seems as if scholarship in *Studies in Religion*, as it enters the twenty-first century is caught between Scylla and Charybdis.

Part VI, the brief conclusion to this very weighty volume, contains Jonathan Z. Smith's "The Devil and Mr Jones" which considers the mass suicide of the followers of Jim Jones at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 which eloquently argues for the continuation of the quest for intelligibility as the duty of the Academy; and Mark W. Muesse's short piece on the 1997 suicide of thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate. These essays bring the volume up to date in terms of coverage of new religious movements, and they confront the very controversial issue of dying (specifically suiciding) for one's beliefs. The final work in the volume is given to Bruce Lincoln, whose thirteen "Theses on Method" challenge every reader to examine the extent to which they concur with Lincoln, and if they do not, the reasons for their dissent. This volume is of immense importance; it is highly recommended for all scholars and students of religion. Many of the essays included are justifiably regarded as classics, many more are very good, and even the weaker inclusions raise important questions.

Carole Cusack
University of Sydney