

RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE: A HYPER-REAL TREATMENT

Adam Possamai

Brussels: Peter Lang, 2005, 176 pp., \$43.50 (paperback).

Sociologists must now take religion seriously in ways many of us have avoided for decades – relying on the secularist presupposition that secularization would render religion totally irrelevant to the understanding, let alone the explanation, of social life. Possamai provides a rich description of one form that the religious and spiritual is taking in contemporary secular societies. Thus this book speaks to critical discourses about the nature of secular societies, the forms of the religious and spiritual and the emerging social location of religion.

The secularist presupposition and ideology has been strong in Australia and those sociologies deriving from the UK and Europe. Religion was to be replaced and rendered unnecessary by the rational and material. The decline of participation in formerly strong Christian churches seemed to herald the realization of this prediction. But then events occurred that could no longer be seen as mere back-eddies of an otherwise inexorable progress toward the religion-free society and globe – the overthrow of the Shah of Iran, the rise of the Christian right in the United States, the global revitalization of Islam and the flow of Pentecostalism, and then the widening array of violent conflict which is clearly religiously motivated.

But as Fenn (2001) and Martin (2005) point out, secular societies are not characterized by the lack of religion, or even the privatization of religion, but by the movement of the religious and the spiritual out from the containers that formerly controlled them – churches, synagogues, mosques and other formal

organizations. Religion has become a factor in international relations in ways many find hard to understand using old categories of international relations theory (see Thomas, 2005). While these theorists speak with little data or broad sweeping national pictures, Possamai provides rich data carefully interpreted which describes and gives the feel of this ‘religion out of control’, ‘religion beyond the bounds of the state and ecclesiastical frameworks’.

Even as secular societies provide a different context for the religious and the spiritual compared with pre-secular societies, so too do postmodern societies. Possamai argues that the emerging forms of postmodernity have changed the ‘religious landscape of western societies’ (p. 23). Part of this change is the impact of consumerism, which renders the religious a zone of choosing rather than a set of givens. In this choosing the consumer is not so much passive as an active agent, constructing through choices his/her religious and spiritual worlds, and through his/her choosings reproducing those worlds. The image of the religious actor as playing a significant role in the production and reproduction of religious and spiritual life in postmodernity is a critical insight both into the nature of the religious and spiritual life and into the nature of social action in postmodernity. Much of the discussion of consumer societies in late modernity treated choice as predetermined and without consequence. Possamai’s treatment presents a very different image for the social actor in postmodernity.

The focus of this work is on what is often referred to dismissively as New Age religion. This is a classic example of being able to see processes of change more clearly in groups and activities on the margins of society than in the more established core elements. Possamai carefully uses a Frankfurt School interpretation of

Weber to interpret fieldwork data collected on the emergence of New Age religious beliefs and practices in secular postmodern societies. Possamai's insights into these changes will also illuminate many of the changes that are occurring in those groups that used to be able to rejoice hegemonically in referring to themselves as 'mainline' and the emergence of newly vital religious and spiritual life in multi-faith Australia.

I recommend this well written and carefully argued examination of religion and spirituality in postmodernity to all who seek to understand the emerging key sociological themes of the 21st century.

References

- Fenn, R. (2001) *Beyond Idols: The Shape of a Secular Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, D. (2005) *On Secularization: Toward a Revised General Theory*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate.
- Thomas, S. (2005) *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan.

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AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL ATTITUDES, THE FIRST REPORT

Shaun Wilson, Rachel Gibson, David Denemark and Mark Western (eds)

Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005, 281 pp., \$59.95 (paperback).

If you are interested in *what* Australians feel about specific social issues and *how* these views may change over time, then this book is for you. Attitudes to issues, groups, activities, policies and institutions such as the family, work, voluntary associations, political participation, engaged citizens, the welfare state, trust, crime and

justice, economic reform, immigration, multiculturalism, national identity, genetic testing, mass media and globalization are all covered in this report.

Unlike the United States of America, Britain, Europe, Africa and Asia, this is the first survey of its kind in Australia. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) was inaugurated in 2003 to see 'what ordinary Australians feel about major social, economic and political issues of the day' (McAllister, in the Foreword). Key social and political commentators have contributed to this book – Deborah Mitchell, Ian McAllister and Michael Pusey to name just a few.

The AuSSA is a product of the Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University in collaboration with researchers from Australia and overseas (p. 6). It was a mail questionnaire sent to a stratified systematic random sample of 11,380 Australian aged 18 or over, who were selected from the 2002 updated version of the Australian Electoral Commission's Electoral Roll (pp. 6–7). Two versions of the survey were distributed between August and December 2003 where the overall net response rate was 44 percent (p. 7). To view the 2003 questionnaires, see the AuSSA website <http://aussa.anu.edu.au/questionnaires.html> (p. 7).

Survey results are also available through the Australian Social Science Data Archive's data analysis system, NESSTAR at <http://assda.anu.edu.au/analysis.html> (p. 7). Most importantly, it is the official Australian contribution to the world's two leading social surveys: the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) covering 39 countries and the World Values Survey covering around 90 countries (p. 6). The editors believe that in addressing the twin challenges to contribute to public debate and to the social sciences, *Australian Social Attitudes* is a mixture of 'public opinion research, social commentary and "pure" academic research' (p. 2).