

Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, edited by Michele Dillon.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 481 pp. incl. bibl. and index.

Book review by David A. Palmer

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

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Students and scholars looking for an overview of the state of the field of the sociology of religion in America today will be well served by Dillon's *Handbook*, which covers the sub-discipline's main theoretical, methodological, and empirical issues through a collection of balanced, well-written and well-researched chapters by leading scholars of the field in the United States, with token contributions from Israel, Britain, and Canada. Indeed, the book's main weakness is its overly American focus.

Part One, "Religion as a Field of Sociological Knowledge", covers the main theoretical issues in the historical development of the sociology of religion as an academic discipline. Especially relevant is Peter Beyer's essay (chap. 4), which addresses how globalization forces us to reconsider definitions of religion, and proposes a new typology of social forms of religion. Also, Grace Davies' contribution (chap. 5) surveys the historical development of the discipline, and offers a useful summary of the debate between the two paradigms of secularization and rational choice theory, arguing that the former is both a product of, and more consistent with, the European situation, while rational choice theory reflects an American religious landscape which has always been characterized by pluralism and competition between groups.

Contributions to Part Two, "Religion and Social Change", include a concise exposition of the religious economy model by Roger Finke and Rodney Stark; an argument by Philip S. Gorski for taking a deeper historical perspective to overcome the limitations of the secularization hypothesis; and a critical review of the literature on forms of American religious organization from 1930 to 2001, by Patricia M. Y. Chang. In the final essay of this section, Wade Clark Roof proposes an analytic scheme for understanding the relationship between "religion" and "spirituality" and its sociological implications.

Parts Three to Six provide extensive coverage of "Religion and the Life Course", "Religion and Social Identity", "Religion, Political Behavior, and Public Culture", and "Religion and Socioeconomic Inequality". Most noteworthy in my opinion is a piece by Fred Kniss on "Mapping the Moral Order", which attempts to move beyond bipolar

conceptions of the American cultural and religious scene (religious liberalism vs conservatism, the “culture wars”) by proposing a quadrant formed by crossing two axes based on moral authority and moral project, onto which different religious groups and tendencies can be mapped. This model facilitates the comparison of the social and individual orientations of different groups.

My main criticism of the book is its almost parochial focus on the United States. While such an editorial choice is defensible in the name of intellectual and empirical coherence, I wonder if a collection of essays almost exclusively dedicated to, say, India, could ever be published under the broad title *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Dillon’s book is a classic example of a persistent anomaly in the sociology of religion (with the notable exceptions of Durkheim and Weber, and a few others), as in other branches of the social sciences, where studies of non-Western societies are relegated to the marginal status of Area Studies or anthropology, while the normative “disciplinary” work is done primarily by specialists of a single Western society.

Beyond my quibbling over the title, I wonder if it is even possible to focus on a single country in today’s world of global religious networks and organizations, in which, since the Bush jr. presidency and 9-11, religion has become central to the geopolitical reconfiguration of world order and conflict. The growing influence of religion in many parts of the world, and its increasing importance as a factor in local, national, and international politics, has underlined the potential relevance of the sociology of religion for understanding the changes of contemporary global society. But only by moving beyond a localized focus on the American (or European) case will the sub-discipline be able to respond to this challenge. In that sense, then, Dillon’s *Handbook* is both a distillation of the considerable past achievements of the American sociology of religion, but also a reminder of the work that remains to be done for it to become fully relevant to understanding the globalized society of today.