

EIGHT THEORIES OF RELIGION

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Book Review: Daniel L. Pals. *Eight Theories of Religion*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2006. 2nd Edition. 340 pp. RM 147.73.

This book is a sequel to the *Seven Theories of Religion* (1996) by the same author and the same publisher. As mentioned by the author himself, the present edition is the revised, amplified work from the previous, and added a new chapter which is the work of German social theorist, Max Weber (1864-1920). In sum, including a theory on religion by Weber, the author also portrayed those by E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) and James G. Frazer (1854-1941), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) and Clifford Geertz (1926-2006).

Since 19th century, there have been eight major theories of religion in the western world. These theories derived from the specialists and scholars of various fields from anthropology to psychology, and from sociology to economic in trying to figure the way to explain the religious phenomena of human lives. In such a way, it should be understood that the author purports to introduce the non-religious (or irreligious) way in the study of religion.

The first and foremost discussed theory is about religion as an evolution of animism and magic from two 19th century English anthropologists, Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer. Preceding this discussion, is the culmination of Tylor's academic exposition is published in a book, *Primitive Culture* in 1871. Tylor concluded that religion is the belief in spiritual beings, which from this premise he described that religion originated from animism i.e. a belief in spirit. Having himself influenced by the idea of evolution given by its proponents i.e. Lamarck (1744-1829), Charles Darwin (1809-1882) etc; Tylor introduced the idea of religious evolution and its growth. He

explained that from a belief in spirits in trees, rivers, mountains and others, people will then experience the progress of thought that brings them to a polytheistic beliefs. Later on, to monotheistic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam. James G. Frazer came along later with his *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915). It is in this writing that Frazer explicated his more advanced (from the prior i.e. Tylor) ideas on religion and its origin from magic. The whole picture in this writing is a blend of the study in anthropology and classics, the classics here refers to book rooted in the civilization of the Greek and Roman. He is greatly influenced by Tylor and William Robertson Smith (1846 – 1894), a Scottish orientalist and Biblical scholar. Religion is perceived as a transitional period for the development towards science and originated from magic. Frazer analyzed the different ancient cultures and civilizations to find similarities in their religious stories so he could conclude how they all evolved from magic to religion and then science. Eventually, with the advent of scientific age, people will only uphold the ethical values educated in these beliefs, not the ideas on gods, magic and myths.

Secondly the theory discussed is the origination of religion from the Oedipus complex and from an illusion by the godless Jew and the founding father of psychoanalysis, namely Sigmund Freud. At the initial level in understanding Freud's theorization of religion, one must know that personalities are divided into the ego, superego or the id, which illustrated a continuing struggle to balance out powerful conflicting forces inside oneself. Due to that, in configurating religion as merely physical and psychological conception of mind, he depicted religion as an interesting superstition where this is made in sequels of *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), which is posthumously published. Freud saw that the first religions were created because some sons were feeling guilty for killing their father in order to marry their father's wives. Therefore, Freud concluded that religion is the oldest obsessive based neurosis within the human race and it arose from relations with one's father. In such reductionist genre, religion is seen not as a genuine reality, where it is actually an expression of something else.

Next, the discussion moved to Emile Durkheim's theory of the sacralized society. In *The Division of Labor* (1893), Durkheim noted how religion and society were interconnected and how religion changed when society's morals changed. This book became the bedrock of his sociological study of religion and illustrated the strongest knot between the society and the origination of religion in his theory. It is in his next work, namely *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912); Durkheim wrote about the basic nature of religion and theorized that primitive peoples divided the world into two main spectra, of sacred and profane. Durkheim saw religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices in relation to the sacred. Therefore, religion to him is a reflection of the mood of the society.

Subsequently, Karl Marx sees religion as an alienation from material realities, which theory he actually adapted from the prominent German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Von Hegel (1770-1831). As such, this theory is also rooted in his socialist idealism of blaming the wrong human thought where people would put God, spirits, royalties, capitalists and those in the same manner to a sense of absolutism and readily to suffer self-alienation. Marx stated in his *Critiques of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* that "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people." Even though his theorization of religion is filled with the reductionist genre, but his manner of study is still considered as sociological, political and economical.

However, Max Weber theorized that religion is a source of social action. As a result, his sociological study of religion is embedded with the three sociological stances or tools undertaken for the study of man. These tools are *verstehen*, Ideal-Types and Values. Same as the tools, there are also three seminal readings should be made to understand the idealism of Weber's theory of religion. First, his evergreen *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958). Secondly, the *Sociology of Religion* (1963) and lastly, *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions*, which is less than half finished. In sum, Weber

concluded that religion is either a system of beliefs in asceticism which included both magical and salvation interests or in mysticism of nonsalvationist ethical interests.

Sixth is a study on the discursive ideas by Mircea Eliade, a Romanian-born American scholar. He is also widely known as one of the pivotal intelligentsias in the Chicago school of the study of religion, besides Joachim Wach (1898-1955) and Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa (1915-1992). In Eliade's starting point there are two main axioms that should be acknowledged, namely religion as *sine qua non* or independence, and secondly religion to be studied phenomenologically. His stand against the reductionism mode of religion studies is best depicted in his own words, where he remarked in his *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949): "A religious phenomena will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistic, art, or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it-the element of sacred." As such, religion to Mircea Eliade is a sacred reality as the belief in the realm of the gods, ancestors and miracle-working heroes.

The seventh figure follows by Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, an English anthropologist at the Oxford University. Tutored by many great anthropologists of his contemporaries, to name a few e.g., C.G.Seligman (1873-1940) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard was largely influenced by them. In Evans-Pritchard's anthropology was against Victorian anthropology, French Sociology, and by British empirical anthropology, which is to make a complete study of a single culture that includes all in a unitary whole like the religion, law, economic, social classes and kinship connections to fully understand a society. There are three most referred texts in undertaking the task to have a grasp of Evans-Pritchard's anthropological study of religion i.e. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), *Nuer Religion* (1940) and the *Theories of Primitive Religion* (1956).

Lastly, is the study on the theory of religion as a cultural system by Clifford Geertz, an American interpretive anthropologist from the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) in Princeton. Like many other previous figures described above, Geertz too was also influenced by the thought of his mentors and in his case he was inclined towards the ideas of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). It was in the *Religion of Java* (1960) where he firstly initiated his unique stance of approaching religion as a culture. Then he further described his theory in his widely celebrated essay: *Religion as a Cultural System* (1966), where he defined religion as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” Submitting himself to the current interpretive anthropology, invited not only acknowledgements, but also critiques from the academia.

To conclude, recent theoretical interests in religion revolve around five major leading patterns, namely 1) humanistic, 2) psychological, 3) sociological, 4) political-economical and 5) anthropological. This theorization will lean upon mostly, prescribing on the definition of religion, reductionism or anti-reductionism types of its study, its range of usefulness, evidences and finally, the personal belief of the theorists. The research and examination on the methodological study of religion will never end as long as the theorization still exists. Therefore, both theorization and methodology could never be apart and both are very useful for the future researchers in this particular. To quote Jacques Waardenburg (b. 1930) in *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (1999): “To put it briefly, we do not understand a scholar’s work unless we understand his methodology, and we cannot work in a discipline unless we can practice its methodology.”