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The New Visibility of Religion: Studies in Religion and Cultural Hermeneutics

Graham Ward and Michael Hoelzl eds.

Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008. 219p.

How are we to understand the recent surge in the public visibility of religion? Are we experiencing the renaissance of traditional religious beliefs and institutions, or are we dealing with something entirely new? *The New Visibility of Religion* -- a recent collection of essays by Western European sociologists, political scientists, theorists, and philosophers -- attempts to answer these questions and provide new insight into the role that religion is currently playing within society.

In keeping with sound academic principles, the first order of business is method. James Sweeney in "Revising Secularization Theory" argues that the sociology of religion is presently ill-equipped for dealing with the hermeneutical challenges associated with the resurgence of the sacred. Peter Manley Scott similarly remarks how the resurgence of religion raises difficult sociological questions. Scott asks, "Why do the religions persist despite the processes of secularization, and what are the consequences of this persistence for sociology as an explanatory discipline?" (172). For Sweeney, "a sociology that is methodologically atheist, confining itself to phenomenological comparative analysis, is inevitably drawn towards an epiphenomenal portrayal of religion" (21). Since the object of religious belief, the supernatural, is not sociologically apparent, it falls outside the purview of sociological inspection, and the resulting analysis of religious phenomena is necessarily reductionist. Sweeney therefore calls for a major change in sociological method, whereby theology and sociology combine forces, so to speak, in order to more effectively explain the meaning and value of religious truths. For Sweeney, "the view from *inside* religious culture, which nurtures meaning, is an essential account" (25).

While Sweeney suggests that sociology, despite its best intentions, is methodologically inclined to misdiagnose the state of modern society as secular, others such as Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, take the matter a step further, declaring that secularism is in fact a dangerous illusion designed to accord more power to the state under the guise of ideological neutrality. Williams argues in "Secularism, Faith and Freedom," that "the sphere of public and political negotiation flourishes only in the context of larger commitments and visions, and that if this is forgotten or repressed by a supposedly neutral ideology of the public sphere, immense damage is done to the moral energy of a liberal society" (55). For Williams, the state is nothing more than a mutually beneficial arrangement for individuals with wider identities and solidarities, and as such, the state cannot, in and of itself, dictate legitimate behavior. For Williams, a

supposedly liberal society that assumes absolutely that it has the resources for producing and sustaining moral motivation independently of the *actual* moral or spiritual commitments of its citizens, is in danger of behaving and speaking as if the only kind of human solidarity that really matters is that of the state (53).

Williams therefore calls for “not a narrowing but a broadening of the moral sources from which the motivation for social action and political self-determination can be drawn” (55).

But politics aside, what can be made of this resurgence of the sacred? How and why is it happening? In one of the more insightful essays in *The New Visibility*, Lieven Boeve observes how the diminishing impact of Christianity has created a vacant space that has since been taken over by a variety of religions and life views. This freshly installed religious pluralism in turn breeds a new form of religious awareness for all. For Boeve, “the consciousness of religious plurality feeds the intuition of a general religiosity, constitutive for being a human person as such (...), of which particular traditions are then particular examples of manifestations” (193). For Boeve then, as for Sweeney and Williams, the secularization thesis, inasmuch as it denies the power and impact of religion within society today, is largely misleading. Boeve contends that the detraditionalization of Christianity, as evidenced by decreasing church attendance rates, etc., is a symptom of a deeper religious transformation. Humanity’s religious consciousness, rather than collapsing into atheism, has taken on a new shape, which can be understood as “the expression of a religious longing, adequate to the contemporary context, of the hope that there is more to life than what scientific world-views maintain” (197).

For Boeve, the detraditionalization of Christianity, that is to say the distancing from the conservative ethics and inflexible doctrinal positions of the church, also has implications for identity formation, which “is no longer the growing into pre-given ideological patterns, which condition one’s perspectives on meaning and social life. On the contrary, because of the absence of such unquestioned and quasi-automatic transmission of tradition, identity is no longer given but has to be constructed” (191). Yves de Maeseneer, in his essay called “The Art of Disappearing: Religion and Aestheticization,” similarly remarks how religious subjects have become the authors of their own lives and worlds. For Maeseneer, “postmodern subjects behave as consumers of religious goods: being creative individuals, they consider traditions as a repository of materials for their identity construction” (100). Furthermore, Alexander Darius Ornella points out in his essay how the media plays an important role in providing people with an arrangement of meaning systems from which to choose. For Ornella, “the mediatization of religious acts and symbols as well as an ‘apotheosis’ of mundane

objects turn believers into consumers/customers and consumers/customers into believers" (141).

But Maeseneer also points out, through an analysis of the work of Adorno and von Balthasar, the existence of an irreducible distance between subject and object within the aesthetic experience. As a result of this distance, "the subject's relation to reality is inverted; the subject is no longer the centre of its own experience, but is involuntarily oriented towards the aesthetic object" (105). As a result, "the aesthetic form actively imprints itself on the receptive subject" (105). Maeseneer highlights, for instance, the power of commercial logos in the branding process. In branding aesthetics, "there is a constitutive power of the image at work, which actively transforms the subject" (107). The power of the modern image takes over the subject, fooling the subject into thinking that he or she is having a creative moment, while it secretly conveys its intended message and, as a result, effectively produces a certain desired behavior. Peter Weibel, in relation to the current aesthetic turn in Western society, speaks of an "uncontrollable subjectivity" which he associates with the sentiment which drives artistic intuition. For Weibel, this "dictatorship of subjectivity" is dangerous because it turns the image into a tool, a tool than can be used to accomplish specific ends. Weibel cites, for instance, the television pictures of Abu Ghraib as a case in point. According to Weibel, "the Americans did not really harm the people, they only made them look as though they were very oppressed; the degradation was the picturing itself, the picturing was a tool of degradation" (121).

In summary, *The New Visibility* undoubtedly raises some thought-provoking issues, and many of the authors who contributed to this volume do a fair job of tackling those issues. Furthermore, the multi-disciplinary approach employed by the book is effective and in tune with the current trend in religious studies. On the other hand, *The New Visibility's* geographical limitation to Western Europe is an unnecessary and unfortunate limitation insofar as it needlessly leaves the reader wondering how a North American (or other) perspective might have differed from the ones presented. Another limiting factor of *The New Visibility* is that it tends to rely on a decidedly Christian definition of religion throughout, while making little mention of other religious traditions. Furthermore, the few references it makes to Islam tend to associate that religion with terrorism and violence, an inappropriate and distracting revelation of some of the contributors' personal biases. Nonetheless, I would recommend some (but not all) of the essays in this volume to those interested in investigating the new visibility of religion.

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