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Hartmut Zinser, Grundfragen der Religionswissenschaft,

Paderborn et al.: Ferdinand
Schöningh 2010, 296 p.
ISBN 978-3-506-76898-8.

The notion of secularization literally has had its day. Today, many scholars insistently declare an ominous “return of religion”. But has religion really been away? Can we earnestly talk about the stage of post-secularization? Anyhow, religion seems to have made a staggering comeback, moving to the center of political awareness and media attention. Beyond doubt, religion still has a tremendous impact on societies all over the world and, therefore, deserves proper advertence.

Strange to say, the foremost academic field dealing with religion in a non-confessional way – i.e. the Study of Religions (or Religious Studies) – has nonetheless still to be considered a stepchild of higher education funding policies. Notwithstanding its institutional marginalization and scarce financial support, the Study of Religions has contributed immensely to the scholarly discourse on religion. However, the Study of Religions indubitably needs to enhance its profile, highlighting more publicly its non-confessional and matter-of-factly professional stance towards its object of investigation, i.e. religion. It necessitates a more theoretical elaboration delineating and working on the key questions (“Grundfragen der Religionswissenschaft”) and approaches within its discourse in order to sharpen its self-image and to spotlight its professional competence.

The study at hand seeks to provide those questions while attempting to frame appropriate answers with the purpose of consolidating the scientific integrity of the Study of Religions within its domain (p. 284).

Hartmut Zinser (b. 1944), one of the most renowned scholars of the Study of Religions in Germany, is Professor at the Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion at

Free University Berlin. Having published vastly on a wide range of topics, Zinser has repeatedly demonstrated comprehensive knowledge, and sound understanding of the crucial issues of the academic Study of Religions. The author does not want to put out yet another introductory guide to the Study of Religions – simply reviewing basic ideas, approaches and concepts –, after already having edited one in 1988 (Hartmut Zinser [ed.], *Religionswissenschaft: Eine Einführung*, Berlin: Reimer 1988). Rather, by mustering up his broad scholarship, he tries to collect and reconsider pivotal problems in the Study of Religions, thereby giving his own solutions and understanding.

Introduction (p. 11-19) and epilogue (p. 281-284) tersely overview the aim of the study, encompassing eleven chapters that cover major categories and issues of research on religion. After outlining the main tenets of the Study of Religions – inherent difference to theology, objects of investigation, objectives – in chapter 1 (p. 21-34), Zinser puts down his bold views on the issue of defining religion (p. 35-80). Chapter 3 offers a disquisition on a number of eminent typologies classifying religion (p. 81-115), whilst chapter 4 inquires the coherence of religious history (p. 117-136) including a discussion on concepts of evolution of religion, secularization and criticism of religion. The next chapters contain numerous instructive reflections on major features of religion such as rituals (p. 137-153), oral and written texts (p. 155-193), clergy, sacrifices and edifices (p. 195-216), deities, spirits and other venerated entities (p. 217-231), and oracles and revelations (p. 233-245). Chapter 10 is focusing upon the religious context of work and death (p. 247-269), whilst the last chapter, eventually, depicts the preceding modern stages of today’s scientific Study of Religions (p. 271-280).

The author advocates high readability and, thus, refrains from adding extensive quotations and references (p. 284). In fact, the study is written in a smooth and reader-friendly language. When using technical terms, Zinser quickly provides plain explanations making his work also readable for

a non-specialized audience. In general, some basic knowledge on large religious traditions is taken for granted, otherwise – the author states – readers will find difficulties following up the theoretical discussion (p. 18).

Throughout the book, Zinser continuously displays his expertise in Roman and Greek religion. However, in my opinion he somewhat misses a balance when relating most issues to practices and beliefs in Roman or ancient Greek times. Moreover, some of his views and ideas will “set tongues wagging” – and this is hardly surprising given the fact that the Study of Religions still knows numerous “discursive battle fields”. Such will be the case with his harsh criticism towards functional and substantial approaches of defining religion (p. 70-72) or his dichotomous categorization into “Heilsreligion” and “Erlösungsreligion” (p. 100-101), just to mention two among several other possible points of contention. Regardless of these controversial issues – and we should keep in mind that dissension rises automatically when dealing with such fundamental questions –, Zinser puts forward well-scrutinized and matter-of-fact answers to the “Grundfragen der Religionswissenschaft” that definitely need to be discussed further.

To sum it up, Hartmut Zinser provides a well-written and intriguing study on key issues in the Study of Religions based on his life-long professional dedication to his academic subject.

LUKAS POKORNY

Zdeněk R. Nešpor, Ne/náboženské naděje intelektuálů: Vývoj české sociologie náboženství,

Praha: Scriptorium 2008, 432 s.
ISBN 978-80-86197-97-5.

Novodobá česká religionistika se připravuje na třetí desetiletí své existence, a proto se nevyhnutelně začíná objevovat otázka, zda by nebylo vhodné zhodnotit její dosavadní vývoj. Recenzovaná kniha plodného pražského autora Zdeňka R. Nešpora takovým zhodnocením je, a to i přesto, že autor se dle svých slov věnuje především vývoji české sociologie náboženství. Obsah i charakter knihy však relativně úzkou oblast sociologie náboženství výrazně překračuje.

Svůj více než čtyř set stránkový přehled dějin českého bádání o náboženství z perspektivy sociálních věd začíná Nešpor obecným vymezením základních témat a teorií, s nimiž se v sociologii náboženství můžeme setkat. Důraz přitom klade zejména na ty teorie, které nalezly větší odezvu právě v českém prostředí. Jde o relativně stručný, nicméně velmi věcný přehled, který by mohl být součástí jakékoli propedeutické knihy věnované akademickému studiu náboženství. Nešpor se zde opírá o své starší texty, zejména o *Sociologii náboženství*, kterou vydal se svým brněnským kolegou Dušanem Lužným (Zdeněk R. Nešpor – Dušan Lužný, *Sociologie náboženství*, Praha: Portál 2007), a dále také o publikaci *Příručka sociologie náboženství*, jejímž byl spolueditorem a autorem významné části kapitol (Zdeněk R. Nešpor – David Václavík [eds.], *Příručka sociologie náboženství*, Praha: SLON 2008).

Po této úvodní kapitole následují tři historicky zaměřené části. První z nich je věnována počátkům české sociologie náboženství a období jejího prvního velkého rozvoje v období první republiky a v letech následujících po druhé světové válce (kapitola „Religiozita svobodné společnosti a její studium“). Poté následuje kapitola zaměřená na období komunistického režimu