
Brent Nongbri has achieved a rarity in the study of religion in that his book has received accolades not only from scholars of religion, but from theologians, columnists, and even political commentators. The widespread attention is justified, in my opinion, because Nongbri has crafted a lucid and informative study, which is, as the title indicates, a history of how “religion” as a concept has come to be accepted as a universal, even “natural,” element in every culture. In the spirit of Nietzsche, Nongbri demonstrates to the contrary that the concept of religion is not universal but has a history.

As a specialist in the ancient Mediterranean world, Nongbri’s primary interest is to demonstrate that “ancient religions” is an artificial category that is not descriptive—describing something “out there ‘embedded in’ or ‘diffused in’ the ancient evidence”—but is more appropriately, to borrow from J. Z. Smith, redescriptive or second-order (158)—something foreign to the ancient sources (21). To make this point, Nongbri deploys philological, exegetical, and intertextual tools across a breathtaking amount of primary source material in the early chapters of the book to show that the modern concept of religion as an interior, private phenomenon is an inadequate descriptor of the breadth of social practices that were part of ancient social formations (see especially chs. 2-3).

The reader must wait until chapters five and six for Nongbri to delineate just when in history “religion,” according to the modern understanding, emerged. For Nongbri, seventeenth century Deists provide the initial instances of what would become “the growing sense that religion [is primarily] … a mental phenomenon (95-96), that is, something private and internal, walled off from the social world. This perspective of religion as a “private affair” (97) emerged at roughly the same time as the “development of the nation-state” and “religious pluralism” (97, 100-101), when, argues Nongbri, citing John Locke, “religion would ideally not be a part of the political world” (101). Nongbri makes the additional point that this understanding of religion goes hand-in-glove with classification. As a result of the colonial project, classification became a desideratum as the “genus of religion … [and] interactions with previously unknown peoples were beginning to create new species of individual religions” (106).

Nongbri observes that the concept of religion as “an internal, private, depoliticized entity” (106) created a template for scholars to sift cultural archives and then fabricate individual religions. He highlights three examples—“religion” in India (109-113), Southern Africa (113-116), and Japan (116-118)—and then demonstrates that the broader categories of classification, both the older fourfold designation—pagan, Jewish, Christian, Mohammedan—as well as the more recent concept of “World Religions” itself, which has guided taxonomies of religions since the nineteenth century, did not organize religions that had been discovered in the world, but rather “ga[ve] substance to the objects [they were] supposed to describe” (125). Though he does not cite Foucault, Nongbri makes, in effect, a Foucauldian argument about the formation of objects. His conclusions are provocative and worth citing in full: “Textbooks, departmental websites of universities, and the media tend to present the model of World Religions as a self-evident fact: these religions are ‘simply there,’ and classifying them in this way is a natural and neutral activity. I have shown, however, that there is nothing neutral about either the concept of religion or the framework of World Religions” (129).
Specialists in the study of religion will find Nongbri’s footnotes to be as robust as those of J. Z. Smith, able to guide further research. Non-specialists will find this book to be a detailed and well-organized introduction to a fundamental issue in the academic study of religion. The book could be especially useful in an undergraduate introduction to religious studies course. Instructors will find that it does much of the foundational work for them, and will undoubtedly provide various points of departure for undergraduate group projects and papers. My only criticism of the book relates to its method. Nongbri’s intention is to write a history of the concept of religion (15). But what is “a history,” and how does one do it? I wonder if instead of history, Nongbri should have followed the lead of, say, Agamben in his study of the oath, and done an archaeology of religion as a discourse. Would such a focus have detracted from this book, or would it have made what is already a good and useful contribution to our field even better by also making a bold contribution to method?

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