

Richard WENTZ, *The Contemplation of Otherness: The Critical Vision of Religion*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984. 132 pp., including a 2-page index. Hardcover. US\$13.90.

“This book is a plea for a return to letters, to artistry. To write about religion is to work with the secret of words; it is a literary task, not an exercise in reporting” (p. 121). This statement by Richard Wentz in the book under review at once illustrates and encapsules the author’s main concern: to propound the view that people who devote themselves to religious studies should beware of lending themselves to the corporation ethos of “research” and “results,” of “structures” and “models,” and should seek instead, through reflection and writing, through teaching and questioning, to get at the heart of the otherness hinted at by the word “religion.”

The author, professor of religious studies at Arizona State University, has chosen to cast his book in a form that corresponds to his concern. In essence the book is an argument for a stance, a point of view, but the form of the argument is far removed from the usual “statement of the problem, review of research to date, the thesis to be defended, the first argument, refutation of objections, etc.” Instead of following this procedure, Wentz presents us with a series of essays-literary, critical, imaginative essays. We are reintroduced to Moby Dick and to the contrast between Ahab, with his tunnel vision, and Ishmael, with his questing sense of wonder and mystery. He tells us the Hasidic tale of a sage who pretended to be a rooster, and challenges us to engage in our own acts of personal madness in order to demonstrate the nature of reality.

Throughout, Wentz argues for “contemplation” as the path to the kind of knowledge appropriate to religious studies. He does so not by stating propositions and defending them, but by weaving a veil of words suggestive of what it means to contemplate religion.

It follows, therefore, that one will look in vain here for a definition of religion, a clearly stated methodology, or a concise summary of “findings.” We encounter, rather, a literary creation that illustrates how this particular scholar engages in the contemplation of religion. As shaped by a deft, artistic hand, we find a perspective informed by wide reading, imaginative reflection, and open-eyed questioning.

Whether one will evaluate this book positively or negatively depends, I suppose, on one’s own perspective, presuppositions, even sense of identity. For one to whom it has become second nature to apply to the study of religious phenomena the methods of research that have led to such brilliant

successes in the natural sciences, a work like this is bound to appear mystical, romantic, and conceptually fuzzy. For one who has grown dubious about the application of positivistic methods to the understanding of human religion, a work like this may come as a breath of fresh air.

My own stance is closer to the latter, but even so, I cannot be unqualifiedly positive about this book. The main reason is that it is too idiosyncratic. Even with the best of intentions, one cannot read this book and end up with a clear idea of how to achieve what Wentz commends. It is best read not as a rigorous defence of an alternative to positivism, but as an invitation to adopt a spiritual stance that might lead to such an alternative.

The book is exceptionally well written, and some stretches make for delightful reading. At the risk of proposing too neat a contrast, I would suggest that this book by Wentz and the works of Alfred Schutz stand at opposite poles of the same continuum. What joins the two is the view that a path to knowledge that dichotomizes subject and object and attends only to the object is not the path to knowledge appropriate to human reality. What divides them is that Schutz writing, though conceptually rigorous, is Teutonically turgid, whereas Wentz's writing, though lacking conceptual rigor, is beautifully, even playfully crafted.

I commend this book for the view it advances, however idiosyncratic, but for those who wish to explore in analytical detail the concepts that properly belong with this view, Schutz is the better guide.

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