

## Book Review

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**Graham Harvey (ed.)**, *Religions in Focus: New Approaches to Tradition and Contemporary Practices*. Equinox, London, 2009, pp. i-vii + 366, ISBN 978-1-84553-217-8 (Hbk).

Graham Harvey's *Religions in Focus* comes at just the time that the call for introductions to religion and religions is at a peak, given the daily experience of religious diversity enjoyed by most people in the world. This book offers a novel approach in several ways, each of which enhances its value. He, rightly in my view, avoids trying to define religion, being more inclined to observe what people include in whatever related category that, in their way of being, relates to what we Western Protestant, cerebral-centric scholars might have labelled 'religious'.

The 'focus is on the doing of religion' (p. 1). Each chapter begins with a vignette of the lived experience of someone who does not represent, or speak for, but provides a window on being and doing, a religion. Harvey argues that lived and experienced religion is the place to start and, for that matter, to stay, unless constructing some artificial real or normative religion that is neither lived nor encountered. This is very refreshing and starts in a lively way rather than trying to breathe life into the desiccated remains of scholarly analysis. There is reference to a 'companion website' that augments the information included in the book, but no address was given, nor could I find one through a brief web search.

The structure of the book moves alphabetically backwards from Zoroastrians to Baha'is, covering seventeen different groups. In addition to the usual suspects, less obvious, but highly valuable, chapters deal with Shamans and Animists, African Indigenous religions, Pagans, Latter-day Saints and Korean new religions. The fact that it goes beyond the big six, or nine, is one of its greatest strengths.

I found the chapters to be very informative. I felt that I had a better sense of what it was like to be an X, to do religion Y, or to be in a community of Zs. I would like my students to have this sense of religions and religious life. I am fed up with the 'take me to your creed and leader' approaches. Organisational forms are dealt with in more detail for those religions that are more organised, and where organisational differences reflect and represent internal variation, for example, Christianity.

Each chapter is written by someone from—not representing—the religion. This necessarily locates the perspective taken, but does so honestly rather than claiming to be objective or to speak for a group. The locations also vary as some chapters are more tied to a particular society than others. Again this is not a weakness, but reflects the reality that Islam, for example, is experienced differently in Indonesia than in Iran or Saudi Arabia. I found the Christian chapter to be very centred in the United Kingdom. Being written by someone who appears to be a Greek Orthodox scholar, the chapter is on the one hand refreshingly free from Western Christian presuppositions, and on the other an interesting exercise in how others see us. A correction: the Church of England does re-marry within the church divorced parties whose former spouses still live (*sed contra* p. 289). But again

the perception is obviously still there that this is not the case. Of course, some chapters are better than others, or more appealing to me, but such is the nature of any attempt to cover as much territory as this book does.

I recommend this book for general reading, or for a refreshing review for those already familiar with many, or most, of the groups portrayed. I will be recommending it to any and to all who seek an introduction to religions in the twenty-first century. Any and all students of religion should read it and have it on their shelves for reference.

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