

PETER METCALF. *THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION AND THE WORLDS OF THE INDEPENDENT THINKERS.* LONDON: ROUTLEDGE 2023. 216 P. ISBN: 1000782387

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In the guise of a textbook introduction to the anthropology of religion Peter Metcalf gives a wonderfully erudite introduction to the anthropological project as a whole. In doing this we are given a take on comparison (comparative religion) that is refreshingly different in not starting from the 'religions of the book', and is clearly explained.

The book starts with 'the Great Project of anthropology, which was nothing less than the discovery of the full range of human possibility' (4). To that end the idea of 'independent thinkers' is crucial. These are different groups of people living relatively independent of one another who have different ways of thinking and talking about the world they live in. As Metcalf explores across the globe, people know their environments in great, great detail, and this is reflected in various ways in their ritual lives. The so-called 'religions of the book', Metcalf prefers to talk of the 'Judeo-Christian-Islamic-Complex', are not very important to this (except negatively by trying to force other ways of thinking into their own categories). Repeatedly, we are given examples of how religions can work very well without theology or theologians.

By starting without any presumptions about how religion has evolved or that any one religion is better than any others (or could serve as an exemplar or a measure of any other) Metcalf is at pains to unpack the difficulties for properly global accounts of religion, and any that seek to talk about more than relatively recent history (say a few thousand years). He uses his extensive knowledge of Berawan death rites as a recurrent case to test the various theories about religion that have been popular over the last 150 years of academic discussion. Most of these are found wanting. He is rightly scathing about the racism and presumption of much nineteenth-century theories of 'primitive' religion, although I note that two of those who emerge well from his account are Robertson-Smith (the primacy of ritual over theology and importance of commensality) and Durkheim (the importance of joint ritual activity).

Along the way we are given some wonderful one- or two-page asides: There is a takedown of sociobiology in its current form of evolutionary psychology (104-105) as well as a robust defence of linguistics against evolutionary reductionism (108-109). Before this, page 53 gives us a beautifully nuanced account of the problems and limitations of the attempt to translate indigenous terms into a metalanguage such as English.

Overall, I think this work has great promise as the textbook it is described as being. However, it is much more than this, a paean to the importance of anthropology as a global 'science', a plea for modesty and humanism, exemplified by the impossibility of ever fully

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knowing anyone else (what is in another head is unknowable), and trying to think through the implications of recognising that as a fundamental part of the human condition.

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