

**Book Reviews**

*Jehovah's Witnesses*. Chu, Jolene & Ollimatti Peltonen. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781009509763 £55 (hbk), 9781009375184 £18 (pbk). Online ISBN: 9781009375191.

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Since 1942, Watch Tower articles have been written anonymously, and only a very small number of external publications have been written by a named Jehovah's Witness office bearer. Hence it is unusual for Jolene Chu and Ollimatti Peltonen, who work at the World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses and the European Association of Jehovah's Witnesses respectively, and both of whom are lifelong Witnesses, to have penned this short book on the Watch Tower organization. *Jehovah's Witnesses* forms part of a series of Cambridge Elements in New Religious Movements, each of which is roughly 30,000 words in length, and it covers the basics of Jehovah's Witnesses' beliefs, practices, and organization in five Sections: History, Doctrine, Identity, Organization, and Interaction. The book covers the usual topics that one might expect: blood transfusion, political neutrality, preaching work, disfellowshipping, *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, and prophecy. Regarding the last of these, the authors are to be commended for acknowledging that prophecy can fail, and they usefully note that the Society regularly lists doctrinal changes as "Beliefs Clarified". Perhaps surprisingly, there is no mention of Armageddon, although the authors refer to the expected Paradise on earth and the 144,000 who will rule with Christ in heaven.

It can be debated whether the insider or the outsider is in a better position to discuss a religious organization. Certainly, Chu and Peltonen present a more reliable account of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society than the huge number of ex-member and Protestant evangelical counter cult critics. The authors rightly decided not to expound Watch Tower teachings by constantly prefixing them with qualifications like "Jehovah's Witnesses believe..." However, one consequence of this is that it is not always clear which are their distinctive doctrines, and which beliefs and practices are held in common with mainstream Christianity. For example, they affirm that Jesus Christ was a created being, having pre-existed as the Archangel Michael, and that he became the Messiah at his baptism, that they do not accept the Trinity, and that the holy spirit (which Watch Tower publications invariably spell in lower case) is Jehovah's active force rather than a person. It would be interesting to have some explanation of why Jehovah's Witnesses depart here from these mainstream doctrines, although obviously 30,000 words severely restricts what can be explained.

Being insiders has the obvious advantage that the authors know their material well, but their position also creates problems. Jehovah's Witnesses generally decline to read material that is written by "apostates" – that is, those who have left the organization either through dissociation (formal resignation) or through disfellowshipping. There is also internal literature that is restricted, most notably the elders' manual *Shepherd the Flock of God*, and which is cited and discussed by external neutral scholars, as well as by opponents. I do not know whether the Society's hierarchy grants special authorization to approved

personnel who work at the World Headquarters or the European Association, but such material is not discussed in this volume. The lack of discussion of counter cult literature entails that the authors do not reply to typical criticisms that are made of Jehovah's Witnesses. One obvious example is the mention of child protection (p.40), where the authors point out that children are never separated from parents at Kingdom Hall meetings, and that the Watch Tower organization has produced literature on the topic and seeks to comply with the law of the land. It would have been helpful to make some response to critics, who will no doubt point to numerous legal cases where Jehovah's Witnesses have been convicted of child abuse in the United States, Britain, Australia, and several European countries, and where the Society has been compelled to pay compensation. In this connection, the authors might usefully have commented on the controversial "two witness" rule, which goes unmentioned.

Perhaps inevitably, insider authors will be drawn to minimizing the distance between the ideal and the real. The authors write, "Avoidance of marital infidelity, alcohol abuse, gambling, uncontrolled anger, materialistic excess, and similar harmful or wasteful practices enables Witness families to direct financial and emotional resources to the nurturing of healthy family relationships" (p.60). These are values that the Society seeks to promote, but this statement makes it sound as if Jehovah's Witnesses are perfect! Conversely, the authors mention "serious violation of moral standards, such as sexual misconduct, substance abuse, violence, fraud, and occasionally apostasy, that is, public denigration of the faith or aggressive efforts to turn others against the community" (p.42). They rightly point out that these are potential causes of disfellowshipping, which, on the one hand, indicates Jehovah's Witnesses' high expectations, but on the other hand acknowledges that there are occasions when such misconduct happens.

The book ends by noting that scholarly research on Jehovah's Witnesses has been lacking until recently, and the authors itemize a number of recent doctoral theses that have been successfully approved. Although it seems logical to look into the future of publications on the Watch Tower organization, I am not convinced that it is particularly helpful to readers to be directed to erudition that they will probably not be tempted to consult. The works cited tend to be supportive of Jehovah's Witnesses, but equally there are several highly critical postgraduate theses which I have examined, and which have been approved by these candidates' universities.

To sum up, I would rate Chu and Peltonen's *Jehovah's Witnesses* as a readable and concise introduction to the Watch Tower Society, but one which is inclined to view it through rose-colored spectacles. So long as the reader bears in mind that it is very much an insider account, the book is worthy of commendation.

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***Networks and the Spread of Ideas in the Past: Strong Ties, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange.* Collar, Anna, ed. London: Routledge, 2022. 316 pp. \$57.99 paperback; \$49.29 e-book. ISBN: 9780429429217 (e-book).**

Can scholarship on premodernity benefit students of modern new religions? One potential commonality between the two spheres lies in their use of network methodologies. On the premodern side, Anna Collar has recently (2022) edited a volume for Routledge: *Networks and the Spread of Ideas in the Past: Strong Ties, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange*. Its contributions grapple with applying social network analysis to subjects temporally ranging from the Iron Age to the late medieval period (eighth century BCE–fourteenth century CE).

Both Collar’s previous monograph (*Religious Networks in the Roman Empire* (2013)) and the present volume engage with Mark Granovetter’s important article, “The Strength of Weak Ties” (1973). In Granovetter’s model, crucial for information transfer and therefore innovation are the “weak ties” between people: these are the less intimate, more distant connections, as opposed to the clusters of “strong ties”—the more intimate, repeated familial relations and friendships. Because strong ties tend to be tightly clustered and redundant, new information is harder to come by without the more distant, weak ties linking these clusters to other networks.

Collar uses this volume to critique this model—and indeed to push social network analysis in a direction more interesting than developed in her earlier book. Collar emphasizes trust, affect, and emotional ties among close contacts as crucial for innovations to actually take hold within networks. This means telling a more granular, more local story: the historian pays closer attention to the contexts and qualities of interactions among intimates. Collar’s 2013 book was more happy to credit the sheer weight of social ties with introducing innovations and allowing the spread of ideas, but the present volume looks more to the actual content and specific contexts of interactions between actors in strong-tie networks. Rather than remain at the level of the “unfeeling nodes and edges” of social network analysis (p. 22), the historian is meant to live in the more affective world of the strong tie—because trust, reciprocity, and intimacy in repeated interactions are necessary for an innovation to truly take hold.

As with most edited volumes, the pieces in this one engage with this “return to the strong tie” in different ways and to different degrees. The book is organized into three parts centered on “Sanctuaries”, “Narratives”, and “Systems”. The chapters’ order also runs chronologically, covering the late Iron Age, Hellenistic period, Roman period, and late antiquity, with a final chapter on the late Middle Ages.

Rather than totally reproduce this organizing schema for this review, I instead slightly modify it: I cluster the chapters around how each piece could be comparatively useful to understanding how the strong tie may benefit the study of new religions.

First: three chapters highlight how particular spaces and events act as hubs to facilitate the formation of strong tie networks and thereby engender innovation.

Megan Daniels (ch. 2) focuses on the spaces of cultic worship in the late Iron Age/Archaic Greek sphere (roughly the ninth to sixth centuries BCE). She asks how the nude female figurine, already widely distributed throughout the eastern Mediterranean and Near

East, came to be so popular in Greek worship settings. Daniels credits “cross-cultural sanctuaries” with acting as the “wide bridges” that connected Greeks with other elites. In these hubs, there developed a shared notion of the divine–human relationship in which the female deity nourished and thereby supported the male ruler. This is just one important possibility, however. The focus on local context means other conceptions of relations with the divine using this figure were possible. Daniels nicely illustrates how particular spaces create the clusters that allow innovations to spread—but also how those clusters shape those innovations to particular purposes.

Christina Williamson (ch. 5) looks to Greek festivals as a hub for the forging of close contacts in the Hellenistic period (late fourth century to first century BCE). Comparing them with modern festivals, Williamson casts ancient festivals as “portable communities” that created strong ties between the people involved in them. Not only the sheer fact of collecting people in a given location gave festivals this power, but also certain important frameworks—for example, claims of ultimate kinship between the cities represented at a festival, or the associations of performers involved, or the elites who made up the ambassadors and observers to the festival. All these represent more intimate contacts than those presumed by a view of festivals as essentially temporary conglomerations of weak ties.

John Mooring (ch. 3) also works with the importance of festivals: he agrees that they supplied the strong ties necessary for innovations to spread. The innovation in this chapter’s case was the rapid adoption of coinage by Greek cities in the latter sixth century BCE. In an era with obviously no telecommunications, pan-Hellenic festivals could facilitate the intimate networking among elites required for such innovations to take hold. Mooring raises the question of whether modern events analogous to these ancient festivals could have functioned similarly.

Three other contributions in this volume highlight the tensions between the diversity and unity of religious expression in the ancient world. What does it mean, in other words, to dub a constellation of phenomena a singular “religion”? The contributors here focus on the particular contexts of ancient religions—the local—in making a given religious expression the way it was.

Sandra Blakely and Joanna Mundy’s chapter (ch. 4) looks at the mysteries of the Great Gods of Samothrace in the Hellenistic period. While this cult was geographically located only on this island, its initiates carried their status as such across the Mediterranean. Blakely and Mundy describe the diversity of initiates’ presentations of this cult as they variously intertwined with their local, civic, and associational contexts. When initiates interacted with their own local strong ties, in other words, the depiction and meaning of the mysteries of Samothrace changed in diverse ways. Blakely and Mundy thus offer a model for considering diaspora religion in local settings.

Kevin Stoba (ch. 6) also stresses the importance of locality in producing diversity of religious expression, here for the Mithras cult, popular in the Roman period. He focuses on the oft-differing depictions of the “tauroctony”—the moment when the eponymous hero of the Mithras cult wounds or slays a bull. Stoba finds that the depictions of the tauroctony were typically highly local, and resemblances between the various tauroctonies often unpredictable, not even being coherent regionally. He links this diversity with a denial that the Mithras cult was a unified phenomenon in the Roman Empire: rather the cult was highly

local, and its ties to other groups were idiosyncratic. This view of the Mithras cult offers interesting comparative material with ancient Christianity, or really any movement without a centralizing authority, in the tensions between local and global expression.

Finally, Nathanael Andrade (ch. 7) builds on his previous work on the late-antique spread of the cult of Saint Thomas from the Roman Empire to the Near East and India. Contrary to the above two pieces' view of diversity, however, Andrade focuses on a remarkably unified phenomenon: the narratives about the relics of Thomas across the Mediterranean, Near East, and India were quite similar. He argues that these narratives were forged in preexisting networks (which he delineates as commercial, ecclesiastical, diplomatic, and pilgrimage), all of which operated on strong ties based above all on trust. These networks allowed the narrative of Saint Thomas to not only cover long distances but also maintain relatively high homogeneity.

The last section of three chapters corresponds to the "Systems" grouping. These contributions are interesting because they turn towards including components of networks that go beyond just human-human connections. They further illustrate the benefits of analyzing not just strong-tie networks themselves, but the forces shaping and complicating them as well.

Rebecca Sweetman's contribution (ch. 8) interacts unevenly with the volume's central concern about strong ties. There are still some points of interest here, however. Sweetman asks about the advent of monumental Christian building activity in late antiquity throughout the eastern Mediterranean (after the Roman emperors adopted Christianity, in other words). She uses these buildings as a synecdoche for the spread of Christianity in general to a given city, asking more about the *how* than the outcome. Sweetman rightly notes the importance of preexisting networks in these cities. One of these networks relates to imperial patronage: did networks built on euergetic money flows already exist? Sweetman also brings up an interesting point about the destruction of former "pagan" sites and the effect this could have had on the cultural memory of those sites in general—this was a gap that could be filled by a Christian site afterward. She further notes that cities with a reputation as sites for education—cities with preexisting philosophical networks—were less disposed to be Christianized until later than other cities.

Kilian Mallon (ch. 9) departs from the book's focus on increases in innovation to a contrary case: ecclesiastical law in late antiquity. Here, the concern of church authorities was in *preventing* innovation, in checking the spread of undesirable information—that is, heresy. Mallon argues that elite bishops (at least ideally speaking) tried to restrict the number of ties a lower-level clergyman could forge with others, for instance by restricting his mobility and relegating his strong ties solely to his bishop. Applying this model to other religious situations in which mobility and sociality are legally restricted could be interesting.

Esther Lewis's chapter (ch. 10) jumps to late-medieval Bristol, which had a reputation at the time as a hub of heretical activity. Lewis performs social network analysis on surviving wills from Bristol to confirm the picture of Bristol as a center for Lollardy (a proto-Protestant movement inspired by John Wyclif) in particular, and to demonstrate that geography and neighborhood were more important than conventional boundaries like the parish in shaping both orthodox and heretical networks. There are two benefits as I see it in this chapter. One, Lewis reminds us that we shouldn't look solely to insider boundaries and

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demarcations—we should consider external factors that could shape networks as well (here geography). Two, Lewis’s chapter is a good antidote to viewing theologically deviant religious movements as necessarily socially deviant as well: Lewis found that the networks of orthodox and heretic were shaped by the same factors, and both included elites as members. While this kind of situation may not necessarily be true everywhere, one could nevertheless productively compare the forces shaping new religions’ networks and those of their more “mainstream” counterparts.

*Networks and the Spread of Ideas in the Past* ultimately shows that scholars of premodernity are taking network approaches in interesting directions. Importantly, scholars are also qualifying social network analysis to make it more attentive to local specificity—and therefore more useful overall. The turn to the strong tie makes historical work more interesting because it requires attention to detail, context, and often less quantifiable data like ideology, affect, trust, and values. The pieces in this volume no longer merely consider the position and number of ties and nodes in a network, but require considering the context and place of those connections. In so doing, they expand our understanding of what belongs in the definition of a “network”.

These kinds of expansions on network methodology may prove helpful to people working on more modern materials. The non-antiquarian could probably consult one or two of the pieces as needed for comparison’s sake, but the chapters are largely written to the standard of specialists. (The reader should also be prepared for many places in which Routledge’s copyediting was distractingly deficient.) That said, this volume represents an interesting contribution to the use of network approaches in the humanities. Even though the book is broad in scope of topics, the interested reader should still be able to take something away from every one of the contributions.

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***Theosophy and the Study of Religion*. Charles M. Stang and Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024. 370 pages. Ebook. \$191.00. ISBN: 9789004694163.**

Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm is no stranger to the intersection of scholarship and the esoteric, as his 2017 *The Myth of Disenchantment* attests. The present edited volume, co-edited with Harvard's Charles Stang, extends several themes only briefly explored in that earlier work. This collection turns its attention especially to the reciprocal influence between the academic study of religion and one of the most consequential religious movements of the late nineteenth century: Theosophy.

The editors frame the book's thesis as an attempt to expose "Theosophy's complicated relationship with the study of religion" (3). Part 1 assembles a disparate set of essays on the origins of Christianity and other religions, but their contribution to the overarching thesis remains uneven. Denise Kimber Buell, for instance, offers a stimulating comparison between Theosophical readings of the New Testament and the writings of prominent biblical scholar Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), yet she stops short of establishing any direct influence. Likewise, Charles Stang's account of Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), cofounder of the Theosophical Society, and her engagement with the early Christian figure Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 253) concludes by casting Origen as a resource for theological creativity beyond orthodoxy, but by contrasting Blavatsky's interpretations with contemporary retrieval theology, Stang appears to undercut the book's central argument.<sup>24</sup> Chapter 3 explores the late-career fascination of E. R. Dodds (1893–1979), a renowned Oxford professor of classical Greek culture, with paranormal phenomena, though it at times digresses into anecdotes about the author's own connection to Erma Pounds, the alleged reincarnation of Blavatsky. Here again, the overlap between Theosophy and religious studies proves tenuous: both Blavatsky and Dodds shared an interest in spiritualism, but little more.

The next two chapters, by seasoned esotericism scholars Wouter Hanegraaff and Olav Hammer, recalibrate the volume toward its stated aim. Hanegraaff demonstrates how G. R. S. Mead (1863–1933), a famed member of the Theosophical Society, illuminated the "nonrational" dimensions of the Hermetic tradition—elements largely ignored in his own day but now gaining recognition—and how these insights were the direct result of his Theosophical commitments. Hammer, conversely, shows how academic models of cultural origins (decline, diffusionism, and evolutionism) were appropriated by Blavatsky into her sweeping theories of religious and cultural history. Both essays stand out for their clarity, scholarship, and direct relevance to the book's thesis.

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<sup>24</sup> One could likewise question Stang's interpretation of Origen. For instance, Stang embraces, without argument, the contention that Origen held to a version of reincarnation, a common assertion that has been seriously challenged (see, for instance, Cyril Wohrer, "Pop Patristic Reincarnation? A Critique of Origen's Alleged Doctrine of Reincarnation", *Religious Studies and Theology* 31, no. 1 (2012): 91–103). Stang also suggests that "conciliar orthodoxy runs against the grain of [Origen's] thinking" (67) when, in fact, Origen strictly maintained that only those beliefs should be held that are not in conflict with the tradition of the church and apostles (see his *On First Principles* Preface §2).

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Part 2 of the book shifts to the conversation of race and its often-troubled connection to both Theosophy and religious studies. Too often, this topic has been sanitized by apologists eager to downplay the racial theories of early Theosophists. Erin Prophet opens the section by acknowledging Theosophy's entanglement with scientific racism while also noting that the Theosophical Society "transcended and subverted it by providing a theology of human possibility that could appeal to all races" (145). Stephen Finley follows with a welcome recovery of Robert T. Browne (1882–1978), an African American Theosophist who rubbed shoulders with many of the most prominent fellow African Americans of his day. Finley summarizes both the life and teachings—what he calls Browne's "Afro-Theosophysics"—and how his religion and race were inseparably intertwined. Julian Strube's chapter echoes Prophet's concerns, arguing that Theosophy adopted many of the racial hierarchies of its own day even in their attempts to subvert them. Strube further contends that modern scholarship has ignored the Indian contributions to Theosophical thought—a feat made possible by labelling Theosophy as a form of *Western Esotericism*. He argues that Theosophy not only appropriated but also fueled Hindu revivalism and Indian nationalism.

Part 3, perhaps the strongest portion of the book, explores Theosophy's engagement with Asian religions. Isaac Lubelsky examines the asymmetrical relationship between Blavatsky and the man often regarded as the founder of religious studies, Max Müller (1823–1900): while she revered him, Müller distanced himself from her and the Society. Indeed, despite Theosophists' occasional successes in securing scientific converts, Lubelsky suggests that organizations such as the Society for Psychical Research actively undermined their efforts for very *unscientific* reasons, such as a desire to eliminate competitors. Michael Gomes continues the focus on Müller, noting his dismissal of Theosophical "esoteric Buddhism" in favor of an exoteric interpretation. Ironically, more recent scholarship has sided with the Theosophists, especially regarding Tantra, leading Gomes to conclude that Theosophists "began a debate that would influence later studies in Asian religions" (260). Arthur Versluis closes the section with a sharp critique of the scholarly tendency (one found even within other chapters of this book) to conflate divergent traditions of Theosophy. Distinguishing the thought of Christian mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), Blavatsky, and French philosopher Henry Corbin (1903–1978), he warns against reducing them to abstract commonalities. His chapter is also striking for its transparent dismissal of hyper-rationalistic systems (such as Blavatsky's) and its admiration for Buddhist meditation, a contrast that underscores his claim that such rigid systems obscure rather than facilitate mystical experience.

The final section, called "Theosophy and Language," features contributions by Gauri Viswanathan, James Santucci, and coeditor Josephson Storm. Viswanathan shows how Blavatsky synthesized Eastern and Western concepts, thereby mediating Hindu thought for Western audiences, including Gandhi (1869–1948) himself, whose exposure to Sanskrit texts through Theosophy shaped his spiritual formation. Santucci follows this with a remarkably detailed account of Theosophy's critical role in the Sanskrit revival in India—a movement that continues apace today. The closing chapter by Josephson Storm traces the roots of one of the twentieth century's most important philosophical movements, linguistic relativism (i.e., the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), to its Theosophical source, noting that

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Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941) first published in a Theosophical journal and credited the movement with shaping his views. Josephson Storm thus reinforces the central contention of the volume: that religious studies did not emerge solely from the rationalist impulses of skeptics and liberal Protestants but was equally shaped by the speculative energies of Theosophists and esotericists.

In the end, the success of the volume's endeavor proves uneven. Some chapters make genuine contributions to reimagining the history of the discipline. Josephson Storm's essay, in particular, offers the most compelling and forceful articulation of the central thesis. However, other chapters engage the theme only obliquely, and this lack of sustained focus ultimately blunts the project's impact. The result is less a fundamental unsettling of the established narrative than a modest reframing of it. This is not to say the work lacks value; scholars of both Western esotericism and the history of religious studies will certainly find much here that rewards attention. But the ambitious aspirations of the editors are only partially realized. Still, the collection marks an important beginning, even if the broader path it gestures toward remains to be charted.

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***Early Twentieth Century New Black Religious Movements in the United States*. Darrius D. Hills. Cambridge Elements: New Religious Movements. Cambridge University Press, 2025. \$23.00 Paperback; Ebook and hardback available. 65 pp. ISBN: 9781009534451 (Paperback).**

This short volume is a wonderful introduction to the various new and alternative religious activities of Black Americans in the early twentieth century. *Early Twentieth Century New Black Religious Movements in the United States* argues that “activism and identity negotiation,” through new Black religious movements, “provides a powerful means for the self-(re)construction and survival of Black communities in an anti-Black world” (1).

Chapter 1 discusses not a specific group of religionists, but the general movements of Conjure and Spiritualism in Black America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hills uses these two movements to frame the later attempts of Black religionists in the Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple of America, and Father Divine’s Peace Mission to create and center Black agency in a white supremacist society.

Chapter 2 details the Nation of Islam (NOI) in this agentic frame. For Hills, the particularistic view of what “Islam” is to the NOI is the defining characteristic to “Black Muslims’ sacred imagination, pursuit of social liberation, and material flourishing against the backdrop of anti-Black racism” (23). Hills traces well the NOI origin myth for whiteness and Blackness through the machinations of the ancient scientist Yakub, as well as the NOI’s theology, rituals, and practices—like a particular prescribed diet—that helped Black Americans pursue “alternative conceptions of Black meaning-making” (31).

Chapter 3 contends with the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) and its racial theology. Hills covers the naming conventions, dress choices, dietary restrictions, and more of the MSTA, and convincingly argues that these outward religious markers contested the “racial apartheid in American society” (37). His chapter concludes with an interesting analysis of an MSTA ID card, which directly proclaims that the holder is a citizen of the United States.

Chapter 4 covers Father Divine and his Depression-era Peace Mission. Hills admits that the categorization of Divine’s Peace Mission (PM) as a “Black” movement, since it was overtly interracial, is a bit strange, but he argues that the PM has a non-racial theology behind it that is worth studying (42). Divine and his PM employed New Thought theology to enact (non-)racial change in America. Divine viewed racial terms like “white,” “Black,” etc. as meaningless terms that carried no real descriptive weight. Divine’s ideas “offered members a theology and social platform emphasizing the denial of race as the determining feature of a person or community’s value” (56).

Hills’s conclusion discusses the implications of studying new Black religious movements through the lens of waywardness (from Saidiya Hartman), anarchy (from J. Kameron Carter), and others. Hills invites readers to “see the study of religion and Black religious studies in particular as part of a methodological approach that strengthens our understanding of the many ways racialized groups navigate and negotiate the terms of their collective existence under varied regimes of power” (62).

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Hills adds little in terms of empirical analysis of new Black religious movements. But empirical analysis is clearly not the point of the book. When examined as an overview, this work is fantastic. Hills regularly pulls from historian of religion Judith Weisenfeld's *New World A-Coming* (2017), which has the analytic depth that this overview does not have. Weisenfeld's book and others in Hills's bibliography allow readers to explore this topic further. Scholars and students alike interested in learning more about new Black religious movements in early-twentieth-century America would certainly benefit from reading this concise text.

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***Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory.* Steve Bruce. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 243 pp. \$39.03. ISBN: 9780199584406.**

Steve Bruce's *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* is one of the most systematic and determined defenses of the "secularization thesis" in contemporary sociology. It not only reiterates the classical sociological propositions regarding religious decline but also responds to the multiple challenges posed by theories of "religious revival" and "desecularization" over the last thirty years.

In the first three chapters, taking sociological empirical analysis as his starting point, Bruce strictly defines the concept of "secularization." He inherits definitions from Bryan Wilson and others, arguing that the core of secularization lies in social differentiation driven by modernity: that is, the institutional autonomy of spheres such as politics, the economy, education, and science has caused religion to lose its overarching function of integrating the social whole. Religion has retreated from the public sphere into private life and no longer plays a central role in education, welfare, or law. Bruce also summarizes three empirical dimensions of secularization: the overall decline of religious beliefs and practices; the functional differentiation between religious institutions and social systems; and the privatization and individualization of religious influence. He emphasizes that the "secularization" discussed in sociology is an unintended consequence of a variety of complex social changes accompanying modernity. It is neither a form of historical fatalism nor a teleological view of history. By doing so, he attempts to detach secularization theory from the accusations of the past, returning it to the status of an empirically verifiable social scientific proposition.

The middle and later parts of the book (Chapters 4 to 9) can be viewed as a point-by-point rebuttal of anti-secularization theories, constituting the main body of Bruce's "defense of an unfashionable theory." In Chapter 4, Bruce responds to Grace Davie's theory of "believing without belonging," pointing out that it is in fact a simultaneous decline in both belief and belonging. Addressing David Clark's claim that the apparent religious booms in certain periods seem to be revivals, Bruce argues, when viewed from a temporal dimension, religion in the same region remains in a state of decline. In the subsequent Chapters 5 through 7, Bruce criticizes several specific anti-secularization theories. Regarding the contemporary phenomenon of "spirituality," he points out that these practices lack institutionalization and intergenerational transmission; therefore, they cannot form sustainable religious structures and can only be viewed as the "consumerization of religious fragments." Regarding "Religious Market Theory" (Rodney Stark), he argues religion is not a consumer product. Its fundamental logic differs from the market—for example, one cannot "compare prices"—and religious participation is actually lower in religiously diverse areas.

Regarding "American Exceptionalism," Bruce uses intergenerational statistical data to point out that American religion has shown a continuous trend of decline; more importantly, the "internal secularization" (psychologization of faith, liberalization of morals) within American churches shows that even in a society with superficially high participation, religion is tending towards the secular in both structure and concept. When facing the politicization of religion in the Global South, Bruce insists that these movements are

essentially “political mobilization rather than religious revival.” In his view, many revival movements are a mixed reaction to modernization crises and nationalism, where religion is merely a slogan used by the movement rather than its substance.

Bruce’s book is clear in argumentation, consistent in logic, and rigorous in structure. Using a large amount of data from British and Nordic societies, he reiterates the long-term declining trends in indicators such as religious belief, church attendance, and religious education. The data is empirical and the research method is transparent, making the book’s argument concise and powerful. It comprehensively responds to many questions and claims opposing secularization theory, and can be said to be the most complete defense of secularization theory to date. Furthermore, his book discusses not only religious issues in Europe and America but also analyzes regions like Asia and Africa, which were previously ignored by Western secularization research. However, the book also has some problems. His refutation is mainly based on his functional emphasis on the concept of religion itself—that is, the religion he defines must be an institutional social integration mechanism. He emphasizes the social function of religion while downplaying religion as a faith experience. Moreover, Bruce treats all evidence and phenomena unfavorable to him as not being religious phenomena, excluding them from the scope of discussion.

We specifically comment here on Bruce’s discussion of New Religious Movements (NRMs). Does the revival of NRMs in the twentieth century represent a religious revival? Bruce believes that, on one hand, NRMs are not significant in scale overall; more importantly, the New Age movement itself is a manifestation of religious secularization. He points out that the New Age movement is essentially an individualistic, consumerist, and self-centered religious form. It emphasizes personal judgment and self-preference rather than standardized doctrines and rituals. From the perspective of community maintenance, New Age movements are often very loosely organized and do not emphasize the commitment of believers to the organization. From the perspective of doctrine, New Age movements do not have rigorous doctrines; their views are often a collage of traditional religious views and certain modern viewpoints. These all indicate the secularized characteristics of these spiritual movements, meaning that religion is not for worshipping the sacred, but for self-satisfaction. In the next chapter, Bruce further discusses the issue of superstition. He points out that the phenomenon of superstition also cannot prove the failure of secularization theory. The quantity of superstition itself is decreasing, and its functions are being replaced by modern technology and education. In particular, its function has shifted from praying to gods for blessings to “enhancing self-confidence,” a psychological purpose of self-satisfaction.

Overall, in these two chapters, Bruce’s conclusion is that neither spirituality nor superstitions are sufficient to refute secularization theory; they are themselves important manifestations of religious secularization, representing a transitional stage from institutional religion to secularity. Although Bruce deeply reveals the secular core of the New Age movement, in his discussion of “spirituality” in Chapter 5, he discusses only the New Age movement and some loose spiritual activities, such as fortune-telling, yoga, and horoscopes, and completely fails to mention the many highly influential NRMs of the twentieth century, such as Scientology, Soka Gakkai, and the Unification Church. These sects not only possess complete doctrines and rituals, but their organization is even stricter than traditional

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religions, with clear transcendent objects of belief. They actually possess the characteristics and functions of the traditional institutional religion advocated by Bruce. Bruce argues that it is the loss of these social integrative functions that leads to secularization and individualism, but how can he explain these strictly organized, highly mobilized forms of NRMs? In his book, Bruce briefly mentions that the actual scale and influence of these movements are very small (p. 102). However, in fact, we know that to this day, the Unification Church, for example, still exerts significant influence on the religious and political spheres in South Korea and Japan. These NRMs cannot be simply classified as so-called spiritual religion that merely satisfies personal needs; on the contrary, they represent a collective form. The absence of these NRMs from Bruce's discussion is undoubtedly a major gap in his argumentation. Furthermore, why were these NRMs generated in the twentieth century—a time of advanced religious secularization—and why do they possess such huge social influence and attraction? Does this validate Stark's religious market theory that "high tension leads to high commitment," or is it the "cross-pressures" produced by the breakthrough of the "immanent frame" discussed by Taylor in *A Secular Age*, or is it a resistance to secularization? This phenomenon of "counter-institutionalization" that still stubbornly exists, as well as its deep tension or internal relationship with secularization theory, and the forms of religious existence in a secular age, still require us to continue exploring on the basis of Bruce's work.

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