

*The Concept of Religion: Defining and Measuring Contemporary Beliefs and Practices.*

By Hans Schilderman (editor)

Leiden: Brill

2014, 198 pages. ISBN: 978-90-640-29930-6

Reviewer: Jaco Beyers, University of Pretoria

## **Introduction**

In this publication Hans Schilderman (Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands) attempts to present a new and current explanation as to what religion is. He utilises several contributions from different authors writing about the appearance of religion as empirically observed among different sections of society, ranging from children, adolescents to the elderly. The content of the book is presented in a highly academic form and is intended for all scholars interested in religion in contemporary society and the effective methodology of studying religion. The book mainly contains theoretical discussions as to how religion should be studied today. The majority of contributions present the results of empirical research of religion based on a qualitative approach.

In the first chapter which serves as introduction, Schilderman provides the reader with a brief overview of possible approaches to defining religion. Religion has been viewed as a cultural phenomenon. Religion has also been studied from a narrative or discourse-related position examining the rhetorical devices used by religion and how meaning is conveyed. Phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches seek to explain religious communication and interpretation. The current trend of spiritual neuroscience intends to explore the relation between brain activity and spiritual experiences and religious behaviour. Experimental science discusses religious phenomena of religion (i.e. meditation and prayer) and the mental functions underlying myth and rituals. Spirituality in health-care sciences investigates the way in which spirituality contributes to the recovery of patients. With this overview Schilderman presents the traditional sociological and psychological and the current biological approaches to the study of religion.

Schilderman is emphasising the position of empirical theology as the preferred approach. Thereby he acknowledges the complexity of religion as consisting of beliefs and rituals. Such an approach emphasises the role of

religion within society. The way in which the results from empirical research are applied in theology need careful scrutiny as Schilderman (2014:4) points out. For Schilderman the study of religion can not only be an academic affair. Empirical theology intends to study religion and identify ways in which religion can contribute to the “free exchange of ideas” and simultaneously “appeal to the sovereignty of the public it addresses” (2014:11).

## **Structure and Content**

This publication is the result of the 10<sup>th</sup> meeting of the International Society of Empirical Research in Theology (ISERT) which took place in Nijmegen in the spring of 2012. The conference theme was ‘The Concept of Religion, defining and measuring contemporary beliefs and practices’ reflected in the title of this publication. Schilderman acted as editor for several papers presented at the conference. The contributions are arranged according to three categories: schools and education, church and spiritual care and society at large.

The first contribution by Friedrich Schweitzer (University of Tübingen) investigates the question how religion is perceived in childhood and adolescence. He discusses the challenges such research may pose. Children tend to have naive and unnaunced beliefs in something not yet clear to them. This presents a challenge as to the methodology necessary to study this phenomenon.

Tobias Faix (University of South Africa) engages empirically with religious expressions among children and adolescents. He points out that spirituality among adolescents remains a vague concept. Based on research among German-speaking youths it became clear that the interviewed adolescents do not have the vocabulary to express religion. God is a ‘semantic blank space’ (2014:38).

In a third section a group of contributors from various universities in Western Europe investigated empirically the way in which the presence and participation of churches in schools contributed to the religious (ethical) formation of society.

Christine Brewster (Glyndwr University) investigates the role of religion as coping mechanism for clergy under pressure in rural environments

(2014:87). She emphasises that religion can act as an accepted concept within psychology.

Two colleagues of Schilderman from Radboud University, Wim Smeets and Tessa Morice-Calkhoven, investigate the connection between ministry and spiritual competence within a context of spiritual care in The Netherlands. The relationship between churchly ministry acting within a health profession is investigated. This relation causes religion to be redefined in terms of spiritual care and not as ministry.

Chris Hermans and Carl Sterkens also from Radboud University, evaluates methodology that characterises comparative research in religion. The main problem identified is when empirically studying material coming from different religious background, how to build a coherent theory. The main question in such research is always how to assess similar phenomena coming from different religious traditions. This section is particularly helpful to scholars engaging in comparative studies.

In a combined effort by several scholars from Radboud University a historical overview of the development of belief and belonging of religious communities in Europe is investigated. In an attempt at redefining religion, dimensions of believing and belonging is identified. From the research it becomes apparent that in spite of secularisation, religiosity in Western Europe remained intact while religion in Eastern Europe shows signs of growth (2014:171).

In a final chapter Schilderman addresses again a methodological concern. He attempts to indicate how the diversity of approaches in empirical study of religion can be incorporated in theology. He suggests in addressing this question the definitions of religion from a humanities point of view might be helpful. By discussing analysis of religion from a humanities point of view a redefinition of religion might come from religious forms of meaning.

## **Overall Impressions and Relevance**

The book is well written in good English. It might be asked how the German speaking world, which is investigated in the publication, will gain access to the content.

A couple of concerns can be identified. Schilderman does not reflect on the current trend where religion is becoming more of a private matter.

Religion has relinquished its position of authority in the public domain. It is no longer obvious that religion has a place in the public domain. In such instances the form of religion becomes quite diverse as every individual has its own way of expressing religiosity. An individual also does not necessarily need to continue a fixed form of expression. Expressions vary. This is empirically difficult to investigate. One would have expected Schilderman or one of the papers selected for this publication to address this tendency. Only in the contribution by Faix (2014:39) is there a reference to religion being a private matter where adolescents especially are reluctant to talk about.

Case studies in the publication reflect a European context. This might limit the relevance of the insights. The results from the research however provide insight into the nature of religion and makes suggestions as to the effective methodology of studying religion. It is particularly in the field of methodology that this publication proves to be helpful. The publication provides all those with interest in the studying of religion with material to reflect on.

