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# [Review of "Society, spirituality and the sacred: a social scientific introduction" by Donald S. Swenson]

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intolerant, right-wing, dogmatic box (though evangelicalism has plenty of proponents who present these qualities so that the stereotypes are not unfounded). While I don't think this book will have the influence of *American Evangelicalism*, it succeeds in reaching its more modest goal. This book deserves a wider readership, and should not be limited to students of American evangelicalism. As Professor Ammerman states on the back cover, "This book clearly demonstrates how important it is to listen [to the evangelicals themselves]."

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*Society, Spirituality and the Sacred: A social scientific introduction*, by DONALD S. SWENSON, Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999, 432 pp. \$22.95 (paper).

Were one to attempt a *summa* of achievement in the sociology of religion to date, a concise introduction to the field, a personal statement and a contribution to the discipline all in one volume, one might reasonably expect a painful fall between four widely-spaced stools. That Donald Swenson avoids this fate is a testament to his ability, work and worth as a sociologist of religion. This is a book that repays careful reading and repeated reference: it deserves to be on the 'active' bookshelf of every scholar in the field.

This is not to say that the book is without its inevitable limitations or minor flaws. As Swenson himself makes clear, *Society, Spirituality and the Sacred*, though impressively comprehensive in scope, is written with particular concerns in mind, and from a particular set of theoretical and foundational commitments. Swenson notes explicitly that he writes out of a background that includes a stint in the Roman Catholic

priesthood and a continuing commitment to Christian faith and community. But for the sociologist, what marks the book most strongly is its Weberian flavour, which appears clearly in Swenson's definitions, his theoretical orientation, and his choice of substantive topics and problems. Thus, for example, a Durkheimian will look in vain for an extended treatment of the sacred as a social category; Swenson instead works from Weber and Otto to treat the sacred as a feature of human experience with implications for action and institutional life. Nonetheless, other approaches and perspectives in the sociology of religion are for the most part treated fairly and often insightfully: Swenson's Weberianism is often a strength rather than a limitation in this regard, and Swenson is no uncritical disciple.

After a brief but well-structured theoretical overview, Swenson begins with a discussion of the psychological and social generation of religious "worldviews," the functions they serve and the boundaries that define and delineate them. This leads him, in the second section of the book, into a discussion (inspired by the work of Thomas O'Dea) of the various dilemmas posed by the institutionalization of religious action in forms of leadership, ritual, belief, ethical disposition, social organization, and political order. The third and final section addresses the interaction of religion with family life, the economy, forms of social stratification, and culture; the secularization process, and encounters between religion and post-modernism.

This book is clearly and elegantly written, and well-organized. As such, it would make an excellent senior undergraduate or graduate text in the sociology of religion, or in religious studies or comparative religion courses. It works well to encourage students to consider a synthetic approach to individual and social experience, individual beliefs and cultural worldviews, personal choices and their institutional, cultural and historical contexts. A strength of Swenson's approach is that he combines a great deal of useful historical and contemporary material on world religions with a clearly-written

theoretical overview of social scientific approaches to religion. At the same time, he is unafraid to bring the respective claims of social science and religion into confrontation with each other, challenging the privileged status of social scientific discourse on religion in the process.

There are, inevitably, regrets raised by a book of this scope and ambition. One might wish for more attention to cutting-edge theory, or to historical or ethnographic material in fields of the reviewer's rather than the author's purview. Certainly, this book is strongest as a review of mainstream social-scientific approaches to religion rather than as a survey of the leading edge of future research and debate. In the chapter on postmodernism, for example, I might have expected some attention to the growing field of implicit religion (and in particular, given the author's nationality, to one of its Canadian practitioners, Bill Stahl). The impact of feminism (as Nancy Nason-Clark has mentioned in another review) and of the revival of indigenous cultures on religious expression and on theories of religion, are other topics that might merit further mention.

But these are minor, and perhaps unjustified criticisms. This is a book against which all scholars of religion, beginning or advanced, can take their measure and find insight, whether or not they agree with the author's approach or choice of subject matter. It is to be hoped that Broadview and Swenson not only will keep it in print, but will see fit to issue updated editions in future, fixing a few small editorial and theoretical glitches, but more importantly, revising and adding material on developments in the field as they occur. This is a book which deserves continued currency.

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*Restoring the Goddess: Equal rites for modern women*, by BARBARA G. WALKER.  
Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000,  
422 pp. \$25.95 (cloth)

Barbara G. Walker is probably best known for her *Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, a treasured staple in the libraries of many feminists and Goddess celebrants. It is often used as the ultimate authority in the Goddess community on subjects as diverse as the origin of the belief in a cat's nine lives to the existence of "the matriarchate." In 1983, when the book first appeared, no one had attempted to focus on women, prehistory, myth and folklore to the extent that Walker did, and her leaps of faith and in places, outrageous assumptions, were not challenged. Women were hungry to learn about what they were calling *herstory*, and they devoured the book eagerly, usually without teasing apart fact from fiction. They still do.

Walker's latest book, *Restoring the Goddess: Equal rites for modern women*, is presented as scholarship on theology and, as such, was sent to *Sociology of Religion* for review. The book proposes to study Goddess theology (thea as is female divinity) by examining what female practitioners actually believe. It is organized around themes such as what is wrong with patriarchy, women's physicality and reproduction, rituals, images of divinity, and visions of the future. Each section begins with Walker's reflections on the topic and is followed by open-ended interviews with individual women that appear to support Walker's thesis.

Therein lies a major problem. We are never given any information on these women — nothing on how they were selected or interviewed, no demographics, not how long they have been practitioners, not even the total number of women responding. It is unclear whether each response is even from a single woman. They are individuated in the chapters by a small graphic design which might suggest individual women or a way of grouping certain ideas together, and one woman may be represented several times. Nor is there any explanation of why on one topic there might be eight responses and another