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# Book Reviews

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*Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion.* Edited by Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward A. Yonan. Leiden; Albany, NY: E.J. Brill, 1994. ISBN 9-0040-9870-4. Pp. viii+241.

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Methodological concerns over reductionism in the study of religion have defined much of the recent scholarship in religious studies, especially the writings of social scientists. With a few notable exceptions, such as Daniel Pals, controversies over reductionism have usually consisted of social scientific reductionists debating the issues, with the nonreductionist or antireductionist scholars of religion simply ignoring the criticisms posed by reductionist scholars. Perhaps the most determined defender of reductionism has been Robert Segal, and his main target has been Mircea Eliade. For the most part, reductionists such as Segal have attacked the nonreductionist scholars for being methodologically uncritical and unscientific and for assuming and endorsing a personal religious commitment. For the most part, nonreductionists or antireductionists such as Eliade have simply ignored the criticism while often condemning reductionists for employing a methodology inappropriate for the legitimate study of religion.

*Religion and Reductionism* grew out of a conference held in 1990 at Miami University in Ohio, although most of the contributors to this volume did not attend that conference. The conference discussion focused on Segal's essay, "In Defense of Reductionism," published in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (March 1983), and reproduced in revised form as the first chapter in this volume.

*Religion and Reductionism* is divided into three parts. Part I, "The Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion," includes contributions by Segal, Thomas Ryba, Edward Yonan, and Terry Goodlove. Part II, "Reductionism, Eliade, and Segal," consists of contributions by Thomas Idinopulos, Wayne Elzey, Ivan Strenski, Donald Wiebe, Arvind Sharma, Lorne Dawson, Tony Edwards, and Daniel Pals. Part III, "Sources and Applications of Reductionism," includes chapters by William Paden, George Weckman, Dan Merkur, and Edward Tomarken.

This edited volume, while containing several excellent studies, suffers from many weaknesses. First, in terms of the specific Segal-Eliade reductionist-nonreductionist methodological issues, the book presents a rather one-sided debate. Included are most of the leading social-scientific, reductionist critics of Eliade and other "religionists." By contrast, with one or two exceptions, schol-

ars who have written extensively defending Eliade's antireductionism, or have tried sympathetically to understand what Eliade means by the irreducibility of the sacred and the need to understand religion on a religious plane of reference, are not included. In addition, quite a few of the contributors show little or no interest in the Segal-Eliade controversy over reductionism.

Second, and more important, as one reads some of the technical literature on reductionism, especially in the philosophy of science, it is not always evident what these proponents, much less opponents, of reductionism in the study of religion mean by this term. A number of the contributors, including staunch supporters of Segal's defense of reductionism, indicate that it is not even clear precisely what Segal means by "reductionism."

Third, and most important, these contributors are usually speaking at cross-purposes. There is little sense of proponents and critics of reductionism engaged in meaningful interaction. It seems to me that these social scientific critics are correct. If one applies the complex, technical, theoretical analysis on reductionism from the philosophy of science to Eliade's antireductionist formulation, his antireductionism is hopelessly vague, confused, uncritical, unscientific, and indefensible.

But Eliade had no interest in this scientific literature and was not trying to provide such a scientific explanation of religious phenomena. There were other influences on his views of reductionism, such as attacks on rationalistic, scientific, and technological reductionism that devalued the imagination, nonrational phenomena, and other modes of experience and cognition; attacks on narrow secular forms of reductionism that devalued spiritual, mythic, aesthetic, and other phenomena; contributions by scholars identified with romanticism, mysticism, alchemy, and the occult; critiques of "psychologism," "scientism," and other forms of modern reductionism by philosophical phenomenology, and especially antireductionist formulations in existential and hermeneutical phenomenology.

Nevertheless, scholars interested in learning about controversial issues in the study of religion related to methodological reductionism will benefit greatly from reading this volume. Contributors raise many of the key questions. Is there an irreducible religious essence? Does the study of religion require a special methodology that upholds the irreducibility of religious phenomena? Does nonreductionism really beg the serious scholarly questions in the study of religion, and do proponents of a unique, irreducibly religious approach really endorse a religious position? Are nonreductionist formulations by religionists hopelessly confused, unscholarly, and unscientific? Do scientific, reductionist approaches to religion provide a false sense of objectivity and do they ignore or explain away the fundamental religious intentionality, function, significance, and meaning of religious phenomena? The contributions in this volume are very uneven in quality, but many of the studies are of excellent quality and provide insightful responses to these and related questions.

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