

On Religions, Liturgies, Distinctions—and a Huge Difference. A Book Review

Colleagues,

Today we send you another gift from Ed Schroeder, this time a book review. We got it from him a few days ago. It follows nicely on last week's pitch for the Crossings conference at the end of January. The conference topic, you'll recall, will be pluralism and a Christ-confessor's response to that. Ed provides such a response here as he explores an intriguing argument by a sociologist of religion and unwitting theologian. Enjoy.

Jerry Burce,
for the editorial team

The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion
Martin Riesebrodt (Author), Steven Rendell
(Translator). Univ. of Chicago Press. 2010.
Hardcover. 228 pp.

"Why has religion persisted across the course of human history? Secularists have predicted the end of faith for a long time, but religions continue to attract followers. Meanwhile, scholars of religion have expanded their field to such an extent that we lack a basic framework for making sense of the chaos of religious phenomena. To remedy this state of affairs, Martin Riesebrodt here undertakes a task that is at once simple and monumental: to define, understand, and explain religion as a universal concept.

“Instead of propounding abstract theories, Riesebrodt concentrates on the concrete realities of worship, examining religious holidays, conversion stories, prophetic visions, and life-cycle events. In analyzing these practices, his scope is appropriately broad, taking into consideration traditions in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, and Shinto. Ultimately, Riesebrodt argues, all religions promise to avert misfortune, help their followers manage crises, and bring both temporal blessings and eternal salvation. And, as *The Promise of Salvation* makes clear through abundant empirical evidence, religion will not disappear as long as these promises continue to help people cope with life.”

So reads the PR blurb on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

When I saw the title (no longer remember where), I wondered. Who is this guy? Where did he learn this Reformation arch-axiom, that salvation is trusting promises? Did he read Apology IV of the Augsburg Confession? He is, after all, a German and this book is a translation of his *CULTUS UND HEILVERSPRECHEN. EINE THEORIE DER RELIGIONEN* (2007). Could he have learned that in a German “Gymnasium”?

Now I’ve read the book and I still wonder. The author is a prof in the Divinity School at the U. of Chicago. So maybe his Lutheran colleague there, Martin Marty, clued him in. To find out I wrote to Marty.

Answer: “I hardly got to know MR, even though we were on the same faculty for years. He commuted to Germany (has a German artist wife), and hung out mainly with sociologists; I don’t think he had any interest in theology. [Concerning] that ‘promise’ book, I would be surprised to learn that it got close to theology.”

But if you’re doing sociology of religion, and writing a book on

the promise of salvation, how can you avoid “doing” theology? Theology of some sort?

That depends on what you understand to be the subject matter that theology works with. If you think theology’s subject for study is God, then you might think that in doing sociology of religion you are examining human data, as MR says, what people do “to avert misfortune, help...manage crises, and bring both temporary blessings and eternal salvation,” and so you are not doing god-stuff at all.

But our Crossings Ur-teacher, Robert Bertram, sought to instruct us otherwise. Look at the title of his doctoral dissertation (also at the Divinity School of the U. of Chicago. 1963. Paul Tillich and Jaroslav Pelikan his doctoral committee. Full text available on the Crossings website.) [“The Human Subject as the Object of Theology: Luther by Way of Barth.”](#) Short title: “How Luther’s Theology is about Man.”

For Luther’s theology (and St. Paul’s, St. John’s too?) is about people, people in their relationship to God. Culminating in the God-incarnate human Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, him and HIS relationship to God. Well, then, how can you escape doing theology when you’re examining people and the promises they trust to avert misfortune, manage crises, and attain both temporal blessings and eternal salvation?

But Marty is probably right in that MR doesn’t think he’s doing theology. Often in his book he says that’s a different discipline from the sociology of religion he is doing. And what he is doing is seeking to “save” religion, not only as a subject matter for academic study with a place at the university, but also to show that religion is human reality that really exists on the planet, and not an illusion.

For the so-called Enlightenment, still pervasive in Western

culture—and maybe now a global given—has been hard on religion. The so-called god-killers of the past two hundred years—Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Feuerbach, to name a few—have claimed to show that religion is real only to those not yet enlightened by what, what all, human reason can achieve. The German term for the Enlightenment, the original term, is “Aufklärung.” It is less a metaphor for light than it is a term for clarity. Getting the fog to “clear up” so that you can indeed see the world for what it really is.

From such new clarity one can see, so said the Enlightenment’s gurus, that religion is largely unclarity about intellect (superstition, illusion about how things work), or unclarity about affect (Freud), or unclarity about ethics (Kant), or (à la Marx) unclarity about the economic structures that keep the elite on top and the religion-opiated peasants underfoot. Or even as super-high-tech neurologists now tell us: religious experience is “just” electrical waves dancing in a specific spot in our brains.

Now that we can finally see all this, they ask us, what’s left to be covered by the word ‘religion’? By the 21st century religion should have faded away. But it hasn’t. In fact, it’s booming all over the planet. How come?

MR’s answer to the religion-killers and to his sociology of religion colleagues, the ones who keep dabbling in items of intellect, affect, or ethics for the data of religion, is: You’ve been looking in the wrong place, the wrong “source materials” (87). Intellect, affect, ethics are in the mix in religion, but they are not its home base. The roots of religion are elsewhere. When it gets to intellect, affect, ethics, that’s already consequences, fruits nourished by these roots. So “back to the sources,” the data that are the primal data of religion, “concrete practiced religion.” And guess where that is.

Liturgy!!! Huh?

“Concentration on liturgy has far-reaching implications for the explanation of religion” (89). From the PR blurb: “The concrete realities of worship, religious holidays, conversion stories, prophetic visions, and life-cycle events.” Better still, again in HR’s own words: “My thesis [is] that religion is based on communication with superhuman powers and is concerned with warding off misfortune, coping with crises, and laying the foundation for salvation” (xii). Or again: “Religion is a complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, either personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible” (74f.).

Religion is “practices,” human actions. What people actually do when they are “doing” their religion. Yes, they do indeed reflect on and talk about these actions (intellect). And affect is all over the place. And they do behave in certain ways (ethics) because of these concrete practices of worship. Seems so simple. So obvious. Why didn’t someone notice that before?

For nigh onto two hundred pages HR is arguing his thesis in dialogue and debate with the big names (past and present) in sociology of religion, some of whom I know of in my work-world over the years, some not. From my basically knothole spot peering into the sociology stadium I think he makes his case. Compellingly. Winsomely.

But is he doing theology too, even unwittingly? Even though he says he doesn’t want to be doing so? Let’s go back to Bertram’s dissertation. Theology’s turf is human data. So “people and the promises they trust to avert misfortune, manage crises, and attain both temporal blessings and eternal salvation” are theological data. But they are also HR’s data for doing his discipline. What need have we of further witnesses?

But what we do have need of is further questions. Questions that HR doesn't ask. Doesn't ask, but should have asked, even as a sociologist. Precisely so, in view of his overarching procedural axiom for the scholarly work he is doing in this book. "All categories of thought are based on a perception of distinctions" (171).

Ah, distinctions! A primal Reformation term. And primal in HR's own discourse throughout the book as he engages his peers in constantly making distinctions where they often do not in order to make his point perfectly "clear."

Herewith some distinctions—both sociological AND theological—that are absent, but should not have been.

Distinction #1. Promises and promise-trusting.

A "perception of distinctions" is in order here. There are promises that are conditional and promises that are not. You've heard that drumbeat before on these pages. Law-promises and Gospel-promises are not the same sort of promise.

"Do this and thou shalt live. I promise." This is one kind of promise. It's conditional. It obligates me to fulfill the first two words.

"Young man, you'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven. I promise." This is not the same kind of promise. Here the obligations are on the promisor. No conditions at all for the promisee.

This distinction is fundamental to the different ways that promises work when trusted. For the former, promise-trusting is a never-ending hustle to keep fulfilling the condition. For the latter, promise-trusting is freedom. Freedom from the very hustle that the other promise inflicts in order "to avert misfortune, manage crises, and bring both temporal blessings and

eternal salvation.” When one trusts a Gospel-promise, the salvation agenda is a done deal. The sin-forgiver took care of that. Yes, the misfortunes/crises are still no piece of cake, but they are no ultimate nemeses. In no way do they require additional work to keep the promise trustworthy.

And this distinction leads to different liturgies. “Frequently, however, superhuman powers...have to be appeased by material or symbolic bribery in the form of sacrifices and vows, or neutralized by invoking opposing powers” (97). If that’s not communication with deus absconditus, what is? Which leads to the next distinction.

Distinction #2. Communication with superhuman powers.

A “perception of distinctions” is in order here. Namely, the distinction between “superhuman powers”—deus absconditus and deus revelatus. God veiled and God with the veil taken away in Christ. Communication with the former is eventually lethal. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Sinners turn into cinders in such communication. Au contraire communication with God “clothed” in Christ. Christ has taken the heat. He initiates the conversation. It’s always some variation on that overture, “Young man, you’ll be glad to hear this.” Instead of cinders it leads to singing. A very different liturgy from the “Dies irae” that always comes in the requiem mass at the end of the former liturgy.

Distinction #3. Salvation.

A “perception of distinctions” is in order here.

There is salvation and there is salvation. Some years ago S. Mark Heim did considerable fog-dissipation (Aufklärung) for missiologists with his book “Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion.”

You can see it right away in the word “difference.” That means distinction. Heim shows the distinctions between the different kinds of salvation offered by different religions. Salvations are plural. Note the first word in the title of his book. And then: “Truth in Religion.”

“Truth in Religion” is that not all religions are guiding their devotees up the same mountain of salvation. Different religions offer different promises. [Remember the frequent references to “better promises” in the New Testament book of Hebrews, namely, Jesus’s priestly promise better than that of Levitical priests. Someone ought to do a study of world religions in terms of comparative promises.] There are different mountains of salvation in the world’s differing religions. Heim’s mantra is, “Nirvana is not the Kingdom of God.” When salvations are different, then the misfortunes and crises of daily life that challenge salvation may still be common to humankind, but their impact on folks climbing one salvation-mountain is likely to be different from what it is on another.

Summa: When one makes these distinctions, distinctions that (so it seems to me) MR’s own distinction-axiom requires, the conclusion is unavoidable: MR is doing theology. But not doing it well enough.

It’s human data, yes, human data common to both sociology and theology. But only half of the data, and not the better half. The data that MR works with never get beyond the data of human communication with deus absconditus, humans trusting law-promises, humans doing their liturgy “as foundation for [law]-salvation.”

If that is what religion is, then the Christian faith, people trusting Christ’s promise, is definitely not “religion.” Dare one call it liberation from religion?

So the liturgy of Christ-trusters must be something else. If their liturgy performance is not “laying the foundation for [their] salvation” (MR’s thesis), since that firm foundation is already a done deal, then what are they doing? And why? Could they just be doing it for the fun of it? Count it all joy? Also for the enjoyment of the “superhuman power” managing their salvation-mountain, from Genesis to Jesus to Judgment Day? Liturgy as doxology? What a concept! Nothing more, nothing less. No hidden additional agendas. Definitely not “laying the foundation for their salvation.” Just Hallelujahs.

Could MR do his next sociology of religion working with such Gospel-grounded liturgical data? Isn’t it just as empirical as the liturgical data he does analyze? Would you possibly have to be a Christ-truster to do it? Maybe MR is. He doesn’t say. Are there any such Christ-trusters doing this sort of sociology of religion anywhere nowadays? That’s a new thing I wonder about after reading his book.

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