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Ian S. Markham, Christy Lohr Sapp, eds. *A World Religions Reader*. Newark: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2020. 408 pp. $44.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-119-35709-4.

Reviewed by Claire Maes (University of Texas at Austin)

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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Maes on Markham, _World Religions Reader_

A World Religions Reader is the fourth edition of a classic textbook first published in 1996. It introduces readers to a wide array of religious traditions, covering the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the dharmic religions: Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism; the Eastern traditions: Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism; Zoroastrianism; three religions of relatively modern origins: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Baha'i Faith, and, new to this edition, Rastafarianism. It also includes a chapter on secular humanism and a chapter on indigenous religions. All traditions are introduced in a similar fashion. The editors start with a survey before giving representative excerpts of primary texts. The survey, which is a new feature of the edition, briefly covers a tradition's history, teaching, practices, and shadow side, as well as its attractions and appeal. It is a "gentle introduction" (p. 2), aiming to give an overview for those who are entirely unfamiliar with a particular tradition. The primary texts, on the other hand, are meant to stress a tradition's inherent complexity. They are "scriptures, texts from authorities, texts from scholars, and texts from converts" (p. 3). Ian Markham and Christy Lohr Sapp organized these primary texts around "the mind," "worldview," "institutions and rituals," "ethical expressions," and "modern expressions," allowing a thematic comparison across traditions. The textual selections range from a one-sentence paragraph up to several pages. Each chapter ends with a "fact sheet," containing a summary of the tradition in terms of its belief system, key historical highlights, festivals, and terminology, followed by a list of essay questions.

In the opening chapter, Markham and Sapp engage with a set of basic but pertinent questions: what is religion, how is it best studied, and what is the value of academic courses on religion in today's society? Scholars of religion know well that defining religion is a thorny task. Subscribing to Ludwig Wittgenstein's insight that it is "a mistake to search for the essence of a 'thing' which could embrace everything in that category" (p. 4), they rightfully reject defining religion in terms of essence. Instead, they stress the all-embracing aspect of religion, arguing that religion influences not only what one believes but also how one acts in the world. They further seem to depart from an inherent and apparently unbridgeable tension between religion and secularism. Markham and Sapp see religion as "a way of life (one which embraces a total worldview, certain ethical demands, and certain social practices) that refuses to accept

the secular view that sees human life as nothing more than complex bundles of atoms in an ultimately meaningless universe" (p. 4).

Markham and Sapp endorse the "empathetic approach" in the study of religion (p. 7). They defend their approach vis-à-vis other well-known methods, such as the historical-comparative method and the phenomenological method. For Markham and Sapp, the main problem with these two methods is their so-called claim to "objectivity" (p. 6). In their opinion, objective accounts are by default cold and uninvolved. Instead of showing students the attractiveness and vibrant reality of a particular religious tradition, objective accounts, they argue, cast the religion in an arbitrary and bizarre light. When you add to this "a stream of unfamiliar names and places, the raw data of a religion," the result is a puzzled and bewildered student who fails to understand why one would even adhere to the religion in the first place (pp. 6-7). In response, Markham and Sapp purposefully aim to represent each religious tradition in "*its best or most typical light"* (p. 7, italics orig.).

Should courses like "World Religions" still be offered in institutions of higher education? Are they still appropriate? Do they succeed in offering anything but superficial and therefore essentializing knowledge of different religious traditions? Markham and Sapp's position is clear: "provided one is aware of the superficiality of that knowledge, it is still better to have some awareness than none at all" (p. 10). At the same time, they realize the need to stress the inherent complexity of religious traditions. "The complexity," they write, "is important because it is all too easy to imagine that one understands that which is often very alien and very different" (p. 3). In part, they hope readers will experience this complexity through their selection of primary sources. They also often remind readers explicitly of the complexity of religious traditions in the survey sections and headnotes.

Despite these efforts, ***A World Religions Reader*** is full of essentializing concepts and statements. While most of these may appear benign because they cast a particular religious tradition or its adherents in a positive light, they are no less problematic as they are testimony of long-standing stereotyping or, in relation to Asia, also orientalizing patterns. For instance, when introducing Japan they state, "This small group of islands has produced a remarkable people" (p. 180). In a headnote introducing a Jain textual passage, they write: "This extract captures the essence of Jainism" (p. 108). Statements such as "it [i.e., Islam] sees itself as the culmination of Judaism and Christianity" (p. 272) should be rewritten to, for example, "Some Muslims see Islam as the culmination of Judaism and Christianity." It is also not clear why the editorschose the term "Chinese religion" when the chapter deals with Confucianism and Taoism. Chinese religion, Confucianism, and Taoism do not form an equation. In the same vein, the editors should rethink sentences such as "Japanese religion is very complex" (p. 180). There is no such thing as "Japanese religion" but, rather, religion(s) in Japan.

For the chapter on Jainism, Markham and Sapp explain in the "Shadow Side" in the survey section that Jains' "commitments to honesty have garnered many Jains an excellent reputation as businesspeople, and many have, as a result, established great wealth. This seems to be a contradiction for a people who eschew material attachment" (p. 107). This description is problematic for two reasons. First, many Jains today are weary of such stereotyping descriptions of their community. Second, they mistakenly evaluate all (historical) Jains against one (ahistorical) principle. When stating that Jains "eschew material attachment," Markham and Sapp allude to the Jain principle of ***aparigraha*** or non-possessiveness. They fail to recognize, however, that this principle is understood and practiced differently among Jain ascetics and lay followers. Part of the process of becoming a Jain ascetic is to renounce all posses-

sions. Also, this dramatic act is most meaningful in the context of wealth.

A final example of essentialism relates to the editors' ***motivation*** to introduce religions through texts. In the introduction, they write: "To understand a tradition, one needs to access the sources that define or typify that tradition. Ideally one needs to learn the necessary language(s), and then read the scriptures or other texts of the tradition in the original. But most of us do not have the time (let alone the skill) to master all the relevant languages. So turning to good translations can provide a helpful way in (though translations can never be perfect and free from interpretations)" (p. 2). In other words, Markham and Sapp not only seem to adhere to the notion that religion has an essence, but also that this essence is located in sacred texts. In addition, they seem to imply that with the adequate language skills one can access this essence. To be clear, I agree with Markham and Sapp that "working with the primary text is an important skill to learn" (p. 3). I take issue, however, with the way they justify this importance by means of a positivistic textual attitude.

The reader hosts a rich, varied, and interesting selection of significant texts and voices. The chapter on secularism, for instance, playfully starts with John Lennon's 1971 classic song "Imagine," preceding an excerpt from Charles Darwin's ***Origin of Species.*** Other selections in the chapter range from Karl Marx's ***Towards a Critique of Hegel***'s ***Philosophy of Right*** (1843-44) and Bertrand Russel's ***Why I Am Not a Christian*** (1927) to the official Humanist Manifesto III (2003) and the personal account of a former priest who recently became an atheist. The selections for the various religious traditions are equally rich. Apart from verses from the Quran and sections from the hadith, the chapter on Islam also reproduces a fatwa by Osama Bin Laden followed immediately by the contemporary Muslim voice of Sheikh Yusuf Quradawi, who explicitly condemns all attacks against civilians. The chapter ends with the 1986 interview with another Yusuf, formerly known as Cat Stevens, explaining his conversion to Islam. ***A World Religions Reader*** should be applauded for offering an insightful combination of primary texts and contemporary voices. Yet, the reader could be improved in a variety of ways.

First, the headnotes introducing each reading selection are not consistent in quality. While several headnotes contextualize the passages well, too many do not go beyond a generic statement, leaving the reader in the dark as to the authorship, reception, or significance of the text. For example, in the chapter on Jainism, Markham and Sapp reproduce under the section "The Jain Mind" a Jain prayer. The entire headnote to the prayer reads: "The following prayer by Dr. Ransukh J. Salgia also outlines the ways in which Jains strive to live out their faith" (p. 107) Being intrigued by the prayer, I wanted to learn more: who is Dr. Ransukh J. Salgia, how popular is the prayer among the Jain community, and why does it end on "AMEN" (is it a sign of Dr. Salgia's multireligious background or was it inserted by the editors)? As the headnote does not provide any clues, I googled. The only substantial hit, however, for "Dr. Ransukh J. Salgia" was this very reader. My point is clear: the headnotes need to give more background information if teachers and students are to have a meaningful engagement with the texts.

Second, the headnotes often do not state when the textual fragments were composed or published. I realize that the dates of many sacred texts are the subject of scholarly debate, but at the bare minimum dates could be given for historical figures and their writings. Students may be seriously confused by seeing 1968 for Darwin's ***Origin of Species,*** for example. It takes little effort to make readers aware that Darwin's revolutionary text was first published in 1859.

Third, when quoting other readers and textbooks, I think the editors stretch the concept of "primary texts" or "significant texts" too far. In the

chapter of indigenous religions, for instance, they quote as a text illustrating "The Indigenous Mind" a section of Robert Staffanson's entry on "Native American Spirituality" from the ***Sourcebook of the World's Religions,*** edited by Joel Beversluis (2000) (p. 49). Staffanson's passage is not a primary source in any sense of the word. It simply gives in bullet points the "several defining characteristics" of Native American spirituality. It would have been more apt to include such general descriptions in the survey section of the book. The same is true for the quoted entries of Mary Pat Fisher from ***Living Religions*** (1997) in "Indigenous Religions" and of Jamsheed K. Choksy from ***Triumph over Evil: Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*** (1989), and Dr. Jehan Bagli from ***Sourcebook of the World's Religions*** for Zoroastrianism.

Fourth, Markham and Sapp often quote the same author, thinker, or religious expert in different segments of the reader. In "Humanism," Bertrand Russel is quoted both under the section "Worldviews" (p. 23) and "Ethical Expression" (p. 31). In "Indigenous Religions," the writings of John Mbiti are quoted under "The Indigenous Mind" (p. 48), "Worldviews" (p. 49), and "Ethical Expressions" (p. 56), et cetera. Considering the editors' aim to emphasize the complexity of religious traditions, different voices for different sections would have been recommended. John Mbiti (1931-2019), I must point out, was an Anglican priest, philosopher, and researcher who interpreted the belief systems of African tribes from a Christian perspective. While Mbiti's writings are clearly sympathetic and grounded in sound anthropological fieldwork, one should nevertheless ask whether indigenous traditions should be presented through the lens of a Christian priest-scholar. Similarly, one of the excerpts for "Rastafarianism" is a "deeply sympathetic reading of the tradition" by John V. Owens, a Roman Catholic priest (p. 343). Would it not be better to give agency to adherents of tribal religions and Rastafarianism by letting them speak for themselves?

Finally, if ***A World Religions Reader*** should go into a fifth edition, the following corrections should be made: In "The two key texts of Shintoism emerge in the eighth century BCE" (p. 180), "BCE" should be "AD"; "Balthaza" should be "Balthazar" (p. 344); repetitions of "protect" in the enumeration on p. 345 should be eliminated; and the refrain from Bob Marley's song should be "one love / one heart" and not "one love / one hear" (p. 346).

While ***A World Religions Reader*** could be improved in the way the various religions are introduced both in the survey section and headnotes, the reader is invaluable insofar that it hosts a rich and insightful collection of significant texts from scriptures as well as writings from philosophers, activists, and significant thinkers throughout history. I recommend this book to all readers, students, and teachers who are interested to learn about the world's living religions through primary texts. As Markham and Sapp say: "Religion would be much easier if one could ignore the messiness of the primary texts. But this would miss so much. The primary texts expose both the brilliance and the bumbling confusion that lie at the heart of most innovation" (p. 3).