Review of Melissa Wilcox’s *Religion in Today’s World*

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As stated in a brief preamble, Professor Wilcox’s first purpose in writing *Religion in Today’s World: Global Issues, Sociological Perspectives* was to provide a “new, innovative text/reader” that provides an analytically rigorous presentation. She is suited to this task, currently serving as Chair of Religion at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, where she has taught courses on the sociology of religion for more than ten years. She has authored and co-edited three other books, most notably *Coming Out in Christianity and Queer Women and Religious Individualism* (2003 and 2009, both of Indiana University Press).

*Religion in Today’s World* is organized around five sections, each of which begins with a cogent 12-18 page essay framing the major issue. The five to seven readings in each section are organized in two groups. For example, Section I (“What is Religion?”) opens with “Tilting at Windmills: Defining and Predicting Religion.” There Wilcox invites the reader to, first, “write down your own definition of religion” before she offers a scholarly definition of religion, while explicating the important intellectual components of such a formulation. In the first essay, she differentiates between substantive and functional definitions and articulates the importance of quantitative and qualitative approaches, including lived religion. Two readings on “defining religion” are followed by five readings on secularization. A reading on the movement toward individualized spirituality would have been useful.

In her preamble, Wilcox states that she intended a text/reader that will meet the needs for a course taught less as an “ivory tower subject” than as a “contemporary, ‘issues-oriented’ subject.” The selections in “Religion and Social Institutions” (perhaps a better title would have been “Religion and the State”), “Religion and Social Power;” “Religion and Social Movements;” and “Religion, Local and Global” accomplish that objective. Wilcox includes not only selections from Marx and Du Bois, but also Bellah’s “Civil Religion” and Berger’s *Sacred Canopy*, as well as readings that tap into some of the most rousing areas in the sociology of religion (e.g., militant Christians, Messianic Judaism, domestic violence). A few items from the canon are conspicuous by their absence, including Durkheim on *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and Wuthnow on American religion and civil society, although both are included in the well-organized Glossary/Index (Wuthnow only briefly) and Works Cited. However, the readings embrace diverse traditions beyond Abrahamic faiths (with five selections on different aspects of Islam), including Buddhism, Shintoism, Satanic, and Voodoo traditions. Most laudable is Wilcox’s commitment to intersectionalities. Several selections address the ways in which religion traverses social locations such as gender, sexualities, ethnicity, immigrant status, and nationality.
Wilcox also sought a format that “allows instructors to involve their undergraduate students in the broad debates and issues that will equip them to analyze, discuss, and make their own judgments about religion/society long after they move on from the course.” The framing essays are written in a clear, engaging style, with good organization (including bold-faced major terms) that will appeal to undergraduates and make their learning more efficient.

Religion in Today’s World is one of 19 books in Routledge’s Contemporary Social Issues Series. Wilcox’s volume, with both classic and contemporary primary sources and integrating framing essays, serves the series’ objective well: “[to] provide frameworks for making sense of the complexities of contemporary social life” [through a] sociological lens … with an aim toward public education and engagement” (p. xi).