Book Review/Compte rendu

Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 228 pp. $US 37.50 hardcover (978-0-226-71391-5)

General sociological theories of religion are uncommon; good general theories of religion, even rarer. This alone means that sociologists of religion are apt to be talking about Martin Riesebrodt's most recent book for a very long time. The most recent previous attempt at such an ambitious undertaking was Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge's *A Theory of Religion* in 1987— more recent rational choice work consisting mostly of tinkering under the hood.

Riesebrodt begins with a defence of what would have been, not very long ago, a relatively unremarkable claim: there is such a thing as religion, such that it can be defined and studied across cultures and through history. Riesebrodt's defence rests on three claims: 1) The suggestion that there is no corresponding category for religion in many cultures is exaggerated; 2) his own conception of religion as "a complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible" (p. 75) can be used to distinguish analytically between religious and nonreligious actions, a distinction recognized in most cultures (Riesebrodt uses the term "superhuman" because he accepts Durkheim's critique of the natural/supernatural distinction as utterly alien to many cultures); 3) even in the absence of a concept of "religion," religious groups have recognized each other as contenders over the same social field.

Although it is fundamentally Weberian, Riesebrodt's conception of religiously meaningful action is somewhat distinctive. He does not consider the meaningfulness of action in terms of the subjective understanding of actors, its "normal" or "average" meaning, or ideal-type constructions of meaning patterns. Rather, Riesebrodt considers what one might call "objective" meaningfulness, that is, the meanings that are embedded in concrete discursive practices oriented towards the gods, which he calls "interventionist practices": liturgies, rituals, prayers, hymns, psalms, incantations, spells, and so forth. He concedes that these may subjectively mean quite different things to different participants, but it does not matter: a comparative sociology of religion is impossible unless we look at

objectively meaningful practices. This methodological position seems inseparable from Riesebrodt's substantive focus on "interventionist practices" (interaction with the gods), rather than on normative, regulatory, or life-conduct implications which flow from such interactions, or the "horizontal" relationships between believers.

Religious action may be different for the laity than for religious virtuosi, as indeed are their conceptions of salvation. For most people, Riesebrodt argues, religion is a means of convincing superhuman powers to protect them from harm and misfortune, and when they do occur, to deal with such crises. The emphasis tends to be on "this worldly" concerns stemming from the crises of birth, illness, suffering, and death, although salvation can also be otherworldly, as it tends to be for the religious virtuosi. Chapter six provides fantastic examples, from several different cultures, of the kind of suffering to which religious virtuosi submit themselves, largely because the salvation that they seek lies beyond the mundane sufferings, misfortunes, and challenges of embodied existence.

Riesebrodt argues that religious propaganda, as well as the narratives of converts, provides evidence in favour of the claim that religion is meaningful action relative to the superhuman, and consists first and foremost in the attempt to avert misfortune and attain salvation. The chapter on conversion provides one of the most insightful discussions I have seen on the topic, moving the conversation well beyond the assumptions of a denominational society, though it seems to me it stops short of a theory of conversion *per se*. The final, shortest chapter of the book deals with what has often been the greatest concern of sociological theorists of religion — its origins and future. Riesebrodt finds a compatible theory of religious origins in a modified Freudian theory whereby religious action springs from the fragility of the human body, and a coping strategy in the face of suffering, death, and the complications of social relations. Naturally, then, he suggests that religion is likely to continue to play a role in the human world, even as he accepts that the differentiation of spheres has resulted in a more secular social world, at least in the modern west.

Any attempt to write a general theory of religion opens itself up to an endless number of faults by the very virtue undertaking the construction of a systematic theory. For that reason, it is not fair to critique Riesebrodt's omissions. There are a number of things about the argument Riesebrodt does make, however, that I find less than satisfactory: his discussion of the category of religion, his methodological precepts, and the stresses and emphases of his theory of religion.

I would like to be convinced by Riesebrodt's case for the analytic utility of religion as a transhistorical and cross cultural category, but I am not — without being in any way a "postmodernist." Neither am I

convinced that his analysis of the quest for salvation and attempts to avert misfortune really requires the concept of "religion." Perhaps, in fact, it is more interesting if we dispense with it. How, for example, can Riesebrodt's analysis be used to make sense of apparently "secular" phenomena? While he clearly has misgivings about such a project, he has provided some very useful tools for those who might want to undertake it. The obstacle to a useful theory of culture is his conception of religion requiring appeals to the "superhuman." This category seems to me a bit vague, and is ultimately used as a synonym for "supernatural," and in practice, for "the gods," suggesting that the theory has not moved far from the western assumptions that worried Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms*.

Riesebrodt's most novel contribution is to argue that, even in the absence of a concept of religion, different "religious" groups have long recognized themselves as contenders over the same social space. Christians have often locked heads with scientists, Muslims with feminists, and Buddhists with Marxists, but I don't think they recognize each other as part of the same game. The further back in history one goes (or the more undifferentiated the society we're talking about) the more difficult it becomes to sustain Riesebrodt's argument: was Nero's attack on the Christians a "religious" matter or a "political" one?

While I find Riesebrodt's methodological innovations, particularly his conception of objective meaningfulness embedded in collective religious acts, liturgies, and so forth highly suggestive, I wouldn't want to see sociological analyses limited to objective meaningfulness. Riesebrodt recognizes that an analysis of subjective meaningfulness is important in ethnographic research, but considers it unnecessary and impossible for a theory of religion. If there are sometimes important contradictions between the "objective" and "subjective" meanings of a ritual action, why are they not important enough to be considered theoretically?

Despite Riesebrodt's contention that his theory can bridge the self-presentation of religious groups and social-scientific analyses of religion, it seems to me that it can only do so in the absence of an analysis of subjective meaningfulness. I do not know enough about many of the "eastern" religious practices that Riesebrodt discusses to judge, but I have serious doubts about whether most Jews, Christians, or Muslims would understand what they're doing in worship as attempting to avert misfortune.

Finally, while I am taken with Riesebrodt's emphasis on religious practice (over belief) I would not want to prioritize the liturgical aspects of religion over religious ethics and life-conduct, discipline, the exercise of power, control, and dissent. I am not convinced that these are all out-

growths of liturgical practices, and if they are not, then they need to be theorized in their own right.

I do not expect Riesebrodt's book to mark the beginning of a sectarian theoretical movement in the sociology of religion, as did the publication of Rodney Stark's theory of religion. Riesebrodt promises not salvation, but the beginning of a conversation about how to study the paths to salvation. He has got the discussion off to an excellent start, and for that he is to be thanked.

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