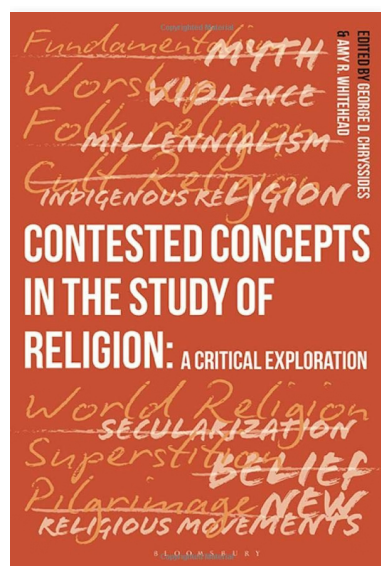


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Contested Concepts In The Study Of Religion



Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion

A Critical Exploration

Edited by: [George D. Chryssides](#) and [Amy R. Whitehead](#)

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REVIEW

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Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion: A Critical Exploration is, as editors George D. Chryssides and Amy R. Whitehead highlight, not “another keywords book” (2). Instead, it gathers critical reflections on a series of “problematic” concepts in the study of religion. The

topics addressed include components typically organized under the rubric “religion” (e.g., belief, myth, and prophesy) and (scholarly) categories used to describe, classify, or denigrate religion(s), their rituals, and their practitioners (e.g., New Age, New Religious Movements, Indigenous religions, syncretism, and world religion). The bulk of this volume consists of twenty-four brief chapters, each treating one of the selected concepts by name (arranged in alphabetical order), and a concluding essay (by the editors) that applies the critical ideas expressed in some of the chapters to a particular case study: Buddhist Wesak celebrations in Wolverhampton Town Hall, which one of the editors attended. The book also includes an introduction that explains the origin of and general analytical framework for the collection, a reading list for each essay (collected in a separate section at the end of the book), and a general index.

The editors asked the authors to reflect on their respective concepts with the help of five leading questions: “Why is the concept problematic? What are the origins of the concept? How is it used or misused, and by whom? Is it still a legitimate concept in the study of religion, and, if so, what are its legitimate uses? Are there other concepts that are preferable when writing on religion?” (3) Not surprisingly, the various chapters in the collection underscore certain problems and issues common to several concepts. For instance, many chapters (e.g., on diaspora, cult, folk religion, guru, myth, New Age, religious violence) lament that popular—or politically motivated—usages of a given term undermined its heuristic utility for scholarly purposes. In addition, several essays (e.g., diaspora, magic, New Age, prophesy, spirituality, and superstition) frontally engage with the emic-etic/insider-outsider divide. Yet not all chapters arrive at the same conclusions. Some of the authors writing on topics such as fundamentalism, guru, indigenous religions, magic, millennialism, pilgrimage, and worship concluded that a given term could remain in use in the study of religion—albeit with clear usage and with appropriate attention to its historical context/baggage and to the party using it—while others (e.g., dealing with cult, folk religion, and world religion) push for the removal of the concept from our shared scholarly lexicon.

The anthology is certainly commendable. Several of the essays productively model how students and scholars might grapple critically with these contested categories without simply dispensing with them. For instance, Carol M. Cusack’s chapter on pilgrimage does not merely highlight the complexities involved in distinguishing pilgrimage from related concepts (e.g., spiritual tourism), but it also appropriately argues for the heuristic deployment of the rubric “pilgrimage”—so long as it approached from “a careful and empirically supported fashion” (97). In addition, the five-question framework provides a useful degree of consistency throughout the chapters. Consequently, scholars and students alike will benefit from the quick and easy overview of the (scholarly) history and the criticisms of each concept by established experts.

Nevertheless, the volume also has shortcomings regarding both the concepts absent from the volume and the general disciplinary orientation of the essays that are included. Although (as the editors appropriately concede) any collection of this type cannot be comprehensive, several important concepts in the study of religion are missing. Perhaps most striking is the

absence of a chapter devoted to ritual. In addition, there is no chapter on “lived religion,” despite its prominence in the volume and recent critical reflections on it elsewhere. One might also have expected an essay on science given its important role in discussions of religion and contiguous concepts in academic contexts (noted especially in the chapters on belief, myth, and superstition).

At a broader level, the general orientation of the volume—around the use of problematic concepts in scholarship on contemporary or (relatively) recent religious movements and contexts, with only occasional references to research (often outdated) on the premodern world—offers a rather limited disciplinary scope to terminology in the study of religion. To be sure, Gregory W. Dawes, for example, has published extensively in early Christian studies and makes use of the ancient Greek evidence to contextualize his chapter on myth. Nevertheless, a greater number of contributions by those familiar with recent research on earlier historical periods would have provided much-needed nuance to several of the concepts treated in the volume, especially syncretism (e.g., David Frankfurter, *Christianizing Egypt: Syncretism and Local Worlds*, Princeton, 2018).

In addition, scholars of antiquity are particularly sensitive to the taxonomic problems associated with rubrics such as “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and “Islam.” This research, for instance, has undermined the applicability of the category “Christianity” to the formative Jesus movement and underscored the complexities involved in analyzing, among other things, the Jewish-Christian interface throughout late antiquity and beyond (e.g., Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Mohr Siebeck, 2003). This perspective grounded in premodern evidence could have offered a useful counterpoint to some of the essays that deploy “Christianity”/“Christian” as a discrete and unproblematic category. One can already get a sense of this posture from the introduction, where the editors defend (with minimal critical discussion) the use of the adjective “Abrahamic,” noting its heuristic utility as a “convenient shorthand for referring collectively to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam” (5).

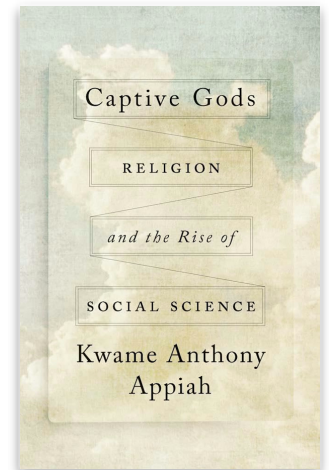
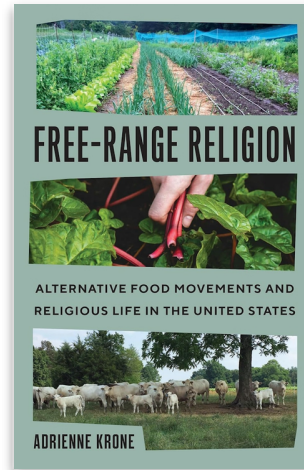
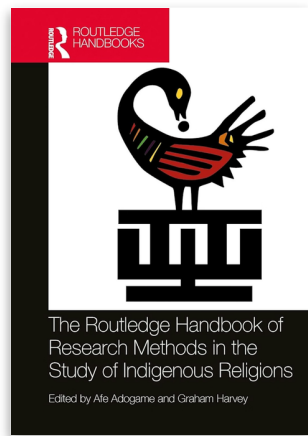
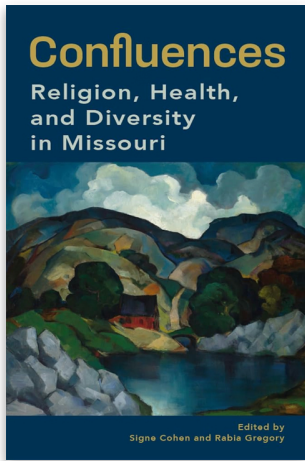
These criticisms notwithstanding, the editors of *Contested Concepts in the Study of Religion* should be congratulated for assembling a helpful collection of essays on several problematic terms in the study of religion, which is more accessible to non-specialists than comparable volumes.

Joseph E. Sanzo is an associate professor in the history of religions at Ca' Foscari University of Venice.

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