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Paul Cassell, *Religion, Emergence, and the Origins of Meaning: Beyond Durkheim and Rappaport*. Leiden: Brill, 2015, 203 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-29365-6 (hdbk) \$109.00 €84.00

This book, as its author recounts in the preface, began as a “vague idea” (p. vii) of his about religion. It is the condensed version (after “hard work”, p. vii) of a doctoral dissertation. The basic idea of the book is that religion can be explained as an emergent phenomenon (in that respect, the book is entirely unoriginal). In the book – after a “primer” on emergence and semiotics, based largely on work from Terrence Deacon – two canonical authors in religious studies, sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1919) and anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1926–1997), are reinterpreted in the light of recent emergence theories. Before I assess what the reader in the end gains from this critical exegesis and update, let me outline the overarching approach towards religion.

The aim of emergence theories of religion is to “provide natural explanations for what has traditionally begged for supernatural explanation” (p. 3). Religions can be seen as an examples of “systems whose organizational dynamics use signs to maintain themselves and navigate their environment, without the need for divine help” (p. 3). The divine, instead, represents an emergent quality of these systems. Authors such as Durkheim and Rappaport have already offered emergence theories of religion, but Cassell sees value in updating their accounts based on the latest writings on emergence theories (mostly focused on biology).

According to Cassell, good theories of religion must explain “why the experiences resulting from religious participation can be such a powerful source of personal transformation” (p. 10) and why they give the impression of transcendence. Ritual and myth must play central roles in such theories. Durkheim and Rappaport do not yet offer good theories of religion. Cassell points out that Durkheim “is not able to theoretically distinguish politics from religion” (p. 12) and that Rappaport “does not adequately explain how ritual and myth . . . create meaningful religious experience” (p. 12).

After his first introductory chapter, six chapters follow, distributed over two parts (on the emergent dynamics of religion and the emergence of meaning in religion, respectively). Chapter 2 introduces and revisits Rappaport, Chapter 3 gives the primer into emergence and semiotics, and Chapter 4 describes religion’s emergent characteristics. The latter two chapters are quite difficult to plough through as a reader not well steaped in the theories that Cassell describes. They describe religion as an emergent social phenomenon, “where mythic beliefs about the divine (a form of culturally-passed down memory) are taken up in ritual (a

cultural practice) to link synergistically the psychological experiences of individuals and the dynamics of group organization” (p. 107).

Part 2, “focus[ing] more on the question of religion’s meaningfulness, following Durkheim’s approach” (p. 107), is more accessible and starts in Chapter 5 with an interesting rendering of the arguments of evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson and philosopher Daniel Dennett that religion has no meaning. Cassell claims that both authors have ignored any emergent experiences, values, or meaning associated with religion. In Chapter 6, he then adds Durkheim’s “account of the emergent qualities of religious community participation” to the mix, in order to be able to conclude in Chapter 7 with “a fuller account of these emergent qualities” (p. 107).

The last chapter of the book, titled “Varieties of Religious Meaning”, is the most interesting one, even though it is not clearly structured. The general gist of his illustrations of the way in which religions have meaning is that from positing the divine as true in religious ritual something valuable is leveraged to individuals. Cassell discusses how religion can offer therapeutic truth (healing physically and psychologically; resolving unresolvables via hope; creating better selves; evoking novel blends of emotions) and social orientation.

I doubt, however, that the reader in the end has gained much insight from Cassell’s exercise. Philosophically, the book is not very systematic and the author tries to compare and combine too many theories with too many other theories. That being said, there are a couple of really deep insights contained in the book and readers who are well-versed in Terrence Deacon’s works may find it of use.

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