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PREDICTING RELIGION

A profile of *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*. Edited by Grace Davie, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003. pp. xii + 253. \$29.95 (paper). ISBN 0-7546-3010-2.

LIKE NEARLY EVERY OTHER FACET of postmodern culture, religion (in its many and varied manifestations) is in a state of continual and increasingly rapid change. Historically, religious movements have made numerous predictions about the future of our world. In *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* the tables are turned as a number of sociologists of religion offer their hypotheses concerning the state of religion throughout the remainder of the 21st century. As the editors of *Predicting Religion* explain, "The contributors to this volume were bold enough to accept an unfashionable challenge: make a prediction about the state of religion in 30 to 50 years from now and be as bold and concrete in the prediction as you can" (1). The result of answering this challenge is a surprisingly insightful and accessible collection of essays with wide appeal and broad content.

The editors of *Predicting Religion* perceive their target audience to be quite diverse, suggesting that this text may be profitably utilized by religious professionals, educators, political officials, business people, and those within the medical community. Such an interdisciplinary target audience is in continuity with the broader goals of the *Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series* of which this text is a part. In keeping with an interdisciplinary methodological goal, *Predicting Religion* draws upon the insight of twenty experts in the field of religion and spirituality. The range of contributors includes sixteen academics and four professionals. Moreover, the editors have intentionally included contributions "from across the generations" and "from colleagues from outside the UK" (vii).

The range of hypotheses found in *Predicting Religion* fall into two broad categories. First, a number of contributors envision further secularization and the consequent decline of religion. This hypothetical future of religion seems bleak,

but this is not the only assessment. Second, the remaining contributors do not foresee a decline in religion but rather predict varied types of transformation in both the character and content of multifarious modes of religious and spiritual expression. The precise form of this transformation, though, is a matter of contention. Suggestions concerning the type of impending transformation include a shift from outer authority to inner authority, a move away from theism and toward pantheism, and a rejection of God in favor of self-as-god. Infusing each of these three proposed categories of change is the prediction that religion will continue to move away from established religion in favor of more amorphous and self-realized versions of spirituality. This hypothesis is, perhaps, the most pervasive of those offered within the pages of *Predicting Religion*.

The above-mentioned predictions concerning religion emerge from three sections of text, each of which considers the future of religion through a different lens. In chapters one through three, the authors take up the theme of secularization theory and its various manifestations and influences within the sociology of religion. In these chapters, divergent interpretations of secularization theory are proposed, and the resultant implications of each are applied to the context of the West.

Chapters four through ten consider the future of Christianity, again doing so primarily within the Western context. In addressing this pervasive form of religious expression, the following themes are considered in detail: (1) the recent decline of the church both in personal and public life; (2) the impact of diminishing communitarian life in general and the influence of such diminution within the church; (3) the differences in church growth between conservative and liberal denominations; (4) the emergence of charismatic revival within the Christian church; (5) the distinction between personal belief and institutional decline in today's churches; (6) the decline of participation in formal organizations in general and the impact of such a phenomenon on church membership; and (7) alternative and complimentary manifestations of Christianity within secularized society.

In the final section of the text, various contributors seek to predict the future of non-Christian religious expression. While historically the Christian religious establishment has largely dominated the West, in today's ever-diverse and global world, religion represents an increasingly fragmented social, cultural, and theological phenomenon. As the editors explain in their introduction, "Religion might be in decline, but spirituality – perceived to be less dogmatic, more tolerant and flexible, and better suited to the pursuit of personal inner quests – is waxing" (2). In the assessment of many of the authors of *Predicting Religion*, such diverse forms of religious expression are gaining momentum because of the

increasing plurality of culture, the less rigid doctrinal boundaries allowed by such religious alternatives, and the pervasive bent toward spirituality as opposed to established religion. When considering such alternatives, the authors of chapters eleven through nineteen take up the following themes: (1) an examination of various post-Christian or non-Christian manifestations of religion and spirituality among gay and lesbian men and women; (2) a consideration of the rise of personal spirituality; (3) the emphasis upon praxis over theory; (4) the re-appropriation of Christian language and imagery in post-Christian or non-Christian contexts; (5) a discussion of varied manifestations of Wicca, witchcraft, and neopaganism; (6) the rise of pantheism in North America; (7) an explanation of the role of democratization in religion and spirituality; (8) the impact of cyberspace on religion and spirituality; and (9) the growing belief in the paranormal, astrology, and the New Age movement.

Quite evidently, the scope of matters considered within the pages of *Predicting Religion* is ambitious to say the least. As is regularly the case for books containing collections of essays, thematic and structural unity suffers at the hands of breadth. Though the style and (from time to time) the quality of the work herein varies significantly from one contributor to the next, the editors have nevertheless done a good job of producing a text with thematic consistency. This feature of the text derives in large part from the fact that the authors wrote intentionally for this volume. Even so, given the span of matters addressed and perspectives employed, this uniformity is no small task. *Predicting Religion* is a text with broad scholarly and non-scholarly appeal. Though it is certainly accessible to a wide range of readers, content or depth is not sacrificed in search of gaining a popular audience. Moreover, this is a timely and insightful text, one that adroitly exegetes the world in which we currently live. Time will tell us whether the ideas of some of the authors in this volume will have been prophetic. Regardless of the ultimate verity of the text's claims, in an era of pervasive political correctness and epistemic agnosticism, *Predicting Religion* is a welcome contribution given its intentional and refreshing boldness.

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