

BOOK REVIEW

Situating Spirituality: Context, Practice, and Power, edited by BRIAN STEENSLAND, JAIME KUCINSKAS, and ANNA SUN. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022, 357 pp.; \$34.95 (paperback).

There has been a growing interest in the study of spirituality as a set of beliefs and practices distinct from religion, and *Situating Spirituality* is one of the first volumes to provide an overarching analytic framework for understanding this new line of scholarship. This edited volume includes 16 different accounts of “lived spirituality” in contexts across the globe, and editors Brian Steensland, Jaime Kucinkas, and Anna Sun provide a detailed history of spirituality studies and suggest important new directions for the study of spirituality.

The editors argue that we are now in the “second wave” of scholarship on spirituality. While the first wave, which they date back to the early 1990s, focused on identifying “the society-wide shift away from religion and toward spirituality” (5) and analyzing the factors that account for this shift, the second wave is focused on “situating” spiritual beliefs and practices in specific contexts and social relations. The editors laud first-wave spirituality studies for beginning to delineate the boundaries between religion and spirituality, but they highlight some key pitfalls of the first wave that they hope the second wave can start to address.

One pitfall is that spirituality is often assumed to be individuated, asocial, and “floating above human power relations” (4). In the first wave, spirituality came to

be conflated with an “idiosyncratic bricolage that has little to do with communal and social arrangements” (179), and the editors argue that spirituality research has done little to investigate the social origins of spirituality. To address this, the authors in this volume conduct analyses that highlight the socially embedded aspects of spirituality. Michal Pagis develops the concept of “collective solitude” and analyzes the ways that microsocial group dynamics in vipassana meditation centers shape the private spiritual experiences of practitioners. Afe Adogame conceptualizes spirituality in Africa as a “spirituality of the marketplace” that is specifically linked to the history of African spiritualities and epistemologies. And Anna Sun compares conceptions of spirituality in the USA and China, showing how understandings of spirituality vary across cultures because they stem directly from the larger social and political contexts in which they are practiced.

Another pitfall is the lack of attention paid to practice. The editors argue that spiritual practices are social, embodied, empowering, and pragmatic, and the authors in this volume explore these practice-based aspects of spirituality in a variety of ways. Ann Swidler shows how rural Malawians draw on their spirituality to “shore up the inner resources of the self in times of trouble” (22). Robert Brenneman explores how Pentecostals in Central America see spirituality as both a “gift” and a “weapon” that can be used to combat the negative impacts of gang-related violence. And Candy Gunther Brown explains how American yoga practitioners engage in code-switching when they talk about yoga, framing it as either religious, spiritual, or secular depending on their institutional context.

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What readers will not find in this volume is a clear definition of spirituality, and in fact, the editors are explicit in their decision not to provide one. In line with the volume's emphasis on spirituality being relational and shaped by context, the editors argue "it is misguided to search for an overarching definition of spirituality that would work transhistorically, transnationally, and transculturally" (9). This means that each chapter works from a slightly different definition of spirituality. While some authors attempt to define spirituality more explicitly, others, like Kucinskis, argue that spirituality is a "porous cultural object" (314–5) that can be imbued with an array of different meanings.

While I agree that a one-size-fits-all definition of spirituality is untenable, the lack of consensus on definitions did result in some important oversights in terms of the kinds of spirituality covered in this volume. Most notably for me was the lack of attention paid to spirituality among the nonreligious. While some chapters used definitions of spirituality that were not exclusively religious or supernatural, there were no sustained treatments of the growing

number of atheist and secular people who practice a "secular spirituality." Steensland does spend two paragraphs in the conclusion noting that secular spirituality is something to study in the future, but there are numerous social scientists doing work in this area now and more attention to explicitly nonreligious forms of spirituality would have enriched this volume. Without it, one comes away from this volume with the sense that spirituality is still only largely in the realm of the religious.

I found this volume to be innovative, engaging, and an important contribution that will be useful to both new students of religion and scholars who have been studying religion for years. The "spiritual turn" is a phenomenon that all religious scholars need to understand, and this volume is not only a great overview of spirituality research, but it offers a useful analytic framework for improving this research going forward.

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