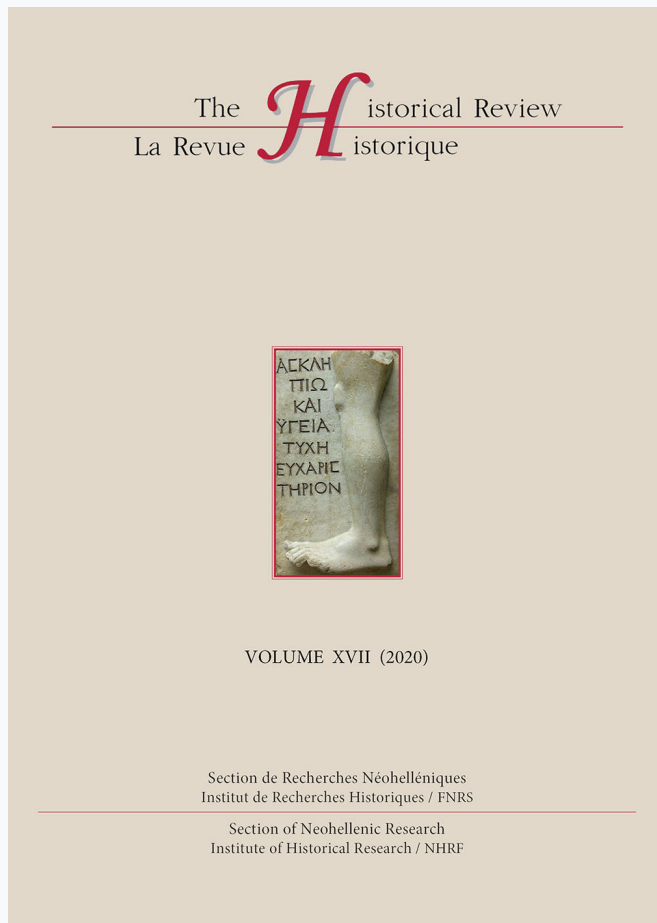


## The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 17 (2020)



### Christian Smith, Religion: What it Is, How it Works, and Why it Matters

*Efthymios Nikolaidis*

doi: [10.12681/hr.27077](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.27077)

Copyright © 2021, Efthymios Nikolaidis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Nikolaidis, E. (2021). Christian Smith, Religion: What it Is, How it Works, and Why it Matters. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 17, 387–389. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.27077>

Christian Smith,  
*RELIGION: WHAT IT IS, HOW IT WORKS, AND WHY IT MATTERS*,  
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, x + 277 pages.

Religious practices have been a part of human life since Palaeolithic times; no human society has existed that did not include some religion. Even today, the big majority of people in the world affiliate with a religion. Christian Smith's book provides a social theory of religion as such. It belongs to the category of books that try to develop a theory of religion widely applicable in all civilisations. The author has already published on the sociology of religion, notably the book *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

In his new book, Smith elaborates his own theory about religion and organises this theory by asking and answering the following questions: What is religion? What causal powers does religion generate for influencing people, institutions and cultures? What is the key cognitive process involved in practicing religion? Why are people religious (or not), and in particular why do humans seem to be the one animal species on earth that practices religion? What is the fate of religion in modern societies?

From the outset, the author declares that his "argument ... is shaped by three key theoretical influences: first, a substantive, practice-centered view of religion; second, the philosophy of critical realism; and, third, the social theory of personal-

ism" (p. 6). Smith declares too that he follows Martin Riesebrodt to define religion and especially the definition as developed in his book *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), but that his account combines what Riesebrodt divides analytically into the three separate steps of "defining", "understanding" and "explaining" religion. More, he criticises the universality of salvation because it is closely associated with the Christian religion. Finally, Smith declares that while he uses the "etic" approach of anthropologists (define, categorise, understand, and explain a social group using different, scholarly, "non-native" terminology and explanations), he tries to take into account the "insider" or "native" beliefs (the "emic" approach).

The first chapter deals with the question "what is religion". This chapter focuses on the reality of religion, not on its concepts: what is this reality in human lives and societies? Thus, Smith gives the following definition: "Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realising human goods and avoiding things bad" (p. 22). The author tries in this chapter

to find the religion's core distinguishing features by excluding "accidental" and "superfluous" characteristics of each religion. Following his sociological approach, the author provides the reader with a table of religious practices in all religions (p. 29) and with two illustrations to make his definition more concrete: Sunni Islam where the superhuman power is the "One, Eternal, and Absolute, all-powerful, all-merciful, all-knowing God, Allah" (p. 53), and American Protestant Evangelicalism that seems to be one of the least practice-oriented religious traditions. The chapter concludes with an appendix that situates Smith's definition of religion vis à vis other theoretical accounts.

Chapter 2 tackles the question of what causal powers religion generates for influencing people, institutions and cultures. More, why and how religion influences people and society in spheres beyond religion. The author examines the ecstatic experiences of the divine, the fellowship among believers and the power of religious identities. For him, "practices to access superhuman powers for things like blessings and help are the core, the essence, the deepest wellspring of religion. All of the many other features of religion are secondary outgrowths and supports. None of them are unique to religion" (p. 78). Following his sociological approach, the author examines how religion influences the social world in other ways than those based on behaviours shared by religious teaching: Thus, he tackles the question of social control and of the "dark side" of religion, its negative impact on societies. In order to give specific examples of the influence of

religion on society, Smith presents that of the Mormons and of Buddhism.

Chapter 3 analyses how religion works. As, according to the author, all religious practice and experience depends on the making of causal attributions to supernatural powers, this chapter analyses this specific process. For Smith, the religious practices succeed and religious commitment is strengthened when an outcome can be explained as the result of the action or influence of a superhuman power. Of course, this is related to miracles and to supernatural causes of earthly events. In Christian theology, miracles happen when God's supernatural power violates the laws of nature that are predictable and causes an abnormal situation. This violation is related to "religious experience", that is, in fact, a direct encounter with the supernatural. Smith analyses these causal attributions by tools of sociology and investigates how religious practitioners evaluate and interpret various kinds of outcomes: he studies what he calls "cognitive lubricants for religious attributions". People's ability to make sense of the world is shaped by cognitive biases and social psychological effects in all domains of life and the author analyses these biases and effects to account for "how and why many people can make and believe religious attributions with little apparent difficulty" (p. 183). He then presents a list of "cognitive lubricants", that is, social psychological effects that can help make religious attributions, from the Bandwagon to the Von Restorff effects (pp. 183-88) and concludes that, although humans attribute the causes of certain life events to the intervening

influence of superhuman powers, making attributions is not limited to religious doings, because assigning causal forces to results is a basic need to understand how life and the world work.

Chapter 4, which seeks to answer the question why humans are religious, addresses three inquiries: what motivates religious people to practice religion, which kinds of people tend to be religious and why we human beings appear to be the only species on earth that practices religion. In fact, the third question seems to me a rhetorical one, as we could ask the same question for almost all features of civilisation. The author lists the beneficial effects of religion for everyday life (the quest for happiness in a broad sense), for spiritual life, for the seminal question of death and for the secondary capacities that religions generate (identities, community, etc). He concludes that “it may actually be religious unbelievers and secularists who need more sociological explaining than religious practitioners” (p. 233). Again, the author’s approach is purely social-psychological and does not take into account any political implication on the shaping of religious (or non-religious) identities.

The concluding fifth chapter tackles the question of the future of religions. Will the resurgence of religions continue or will secular culture overcome them? And if religions survive will they dramatically mute due to technological change, globalisation and cultural evolution? As

no sociological or historical research can forecast the future, Smith concludes that “a variety of powerful causal forces do indeed work against religious belief and practice, perhaps especially in the modern world – secularisation surely happens under certain conditions. But numerous other powerful causal influences simultaneously encourage the practice of religion. Exactly which of those causal mechanisms operates under what social conditions to produce differing religious outcomes we cannot predict according to some general law of social life” (p. 260).

The book is concluded by an appendix that lists research questions for future investigation for each chapter. An index is included but not a bibliography.

Christian Smith’s book is an interesting sociological account about religion addressed to scholars and interested people as well. Although it presents other theories, it is not an overview of the theories of religions. Smith develops his own global theory based on sociological and sociopsychological theoretical tools and illustrates it with specific examples. The only criticism I would make is that the book does not take into account political ideological influences that can shape believers’ (or non-believers’) collective mentalities.

Efthymios Nicolaidis

*Institute of Historical Research / NHRF*