

## **PROPOSED EDITED COLLECTION**

# **Ordering Religion: Empirical Approaches in Religious Studies**

**Dr. Steven Sutcliffe**  
**(editor)**

## **AIMS OF THE COLLECTION**

This volume represents a collection of papers and essays that articulates and documents a series of debates and positions on the nature and purpose of the 'Study of Religions', or 'Religious Studies', as a distinctive academic position. It has two main purposes. First, it illustrates the nuance, diversity and theoretical viability of 'empirical' methodologies in the study of religions and thereby functions as an introductory guide and handbook to this influential - and politically relevant - academic field. Second, it documents the historical and cultural circumstances attending the emergence, defence and future prospects of Religious Studies, drawing on theoretical material and case studies prepared and delivered within the context of the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR), and making frequent reference to wider European, North American and other international debates and critiques on the nature and purpose of the contemporary 'Study of Religions' or 'Religious Studies'. Hence the volume demonstrates a distinctive 'British' contribution to the international 'Religious Studies' arena.

## **PROPOSED CONTENTS**

**Foreword** by Peggy Morgan, current president of the BASR, to mark the 50th anniversary of the BASR (1954-2004).

### **Introduction: Ordering Religion** by Steven Sutcliffe (editor)

This sets out the aim of the collection and explains the theoretical significance of 'order' and 'empirical studies' as core strategies underpinning the interdisciplinarity of Religious Studies, with reference to strategies of definition, classification, taxonomy, description, contextualisation, comparison and explanation, and a range of practical methods including ethnographic fieldwork, textual analysis and case study.

As the distinctive contribution of the Study of Religions or Religious Studies (RS), particularly since the 1960s, I discuss and explain the significance of an 'empirical' research and teaching programme, centred around transparent methodologies and nuanced descriptions of material and discursive practices and interpretations, dynamically balancing inductive and deductive analyses, and willing and able to incorporate colleagues and contributors from neighbouring disciplinary expertises as necessary. This 'empirical' orientation is exemplified by the contributions to this volume which are fully revised versions of keynote addresses given at conferences of the BASR from the early/mid 1990s to 2002 - by British, European and African scholars - plus an essay by the editor on the historical development of empirical theory and method in Religious Studies from the 1950s to the present, and its significance and utility for the study of religion(s) in a 'postmodern' world.

### **Part One. Approaches**

c. 35,000 words: 5 chapters under the sub-headings of 'concept' and 'method'

### **Part Two. Case Studies**

c. 63, 000 words: 9 chapters under the following sub-headings: 'gender', 'experience', 'indigeneity', 'encounter'.

### **Part Three: 'The Study of Religions: A British Genealogy'**

c.7,000 words

The concluding essay will trace the development of theory and method in Religious Studies in the UK in the contemporary period: i.e., between the early 1950s and the present. Through an examination of the archive of the BASR (executive committee minutes and bulletin publications) in the context of wider IAHR activities, together with identifying 'milestones' in conferences, publications and institutional projects, the first part of the essay reconstructs a brief genealogy of 'empirical traditions' in Religious Studies.

The second part explores the potential of empirical approaches to represent viably and fruitfully the qualitative, popular, local and radically heterogenous features of religious practices, past and present, in the face of certain challenges to naive and/or reifying representations from postmodernism and post-structuralism. In response, in the essays in Parts One and Two, as well as in traditions of Religious Studies and the Study of Religions more generally, I identify strategies to develop a practical and productive middle-ground between epiphenomenalist and *sui generis* accounts of religion, allowing 'religion' social and political agency, but within cultural and historical constraints.

**Afterword** by James Cox, president-elect of the BASR

### **Editor's biography**

Dr. Steven Sutcliffe was recently research fellow and visiting lecturer in the Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Stirling, Scotland, UK, and has also taught at the University of Sunderland and The Open University. He is co-editor of *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (2000), guest editor of *Culture and Religion* vol. 4 no. 1, May 2003 ('Studying "New Age": Reconfiguring the Field') and author of *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (2003). He edited UK symposium proceedings included in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* vol. 10 no.3 (1998) and has published papers in the *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* and *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. He is reviews editor of *Culture and Religion* and serves on the European editorial board of *Religion*.