

RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD¹

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Talking about religion, or in this case world religions, in as objective a way as possible is quite a challenging task an author has to tackle when setting out to write about the topic. In the preface to his book *World Religions* (2008) Warren Matthews introduces this problem to his readership (2008, 1): "At stake is our point of view of all world religions. If we accept all religious stories of faithful followers at face value, we can become lost in vast seas of wonder stories, legends, and beliefs that are rejected even by other followers of the religion. If we insist on objectivity and reject all stories that cannot be easily explained in natural and humanist terms, we discard much that believers in a particular religion find essential to its understanding."

Religions of the World is a collection of papers edited by Dragoljub B. Đorđević and Predrag Stajić. It gives a balanced account of the major world religions, ensuring that various opinions are heard, all through the framework of the Sociology of Religion, which serves as a necessary anchor and gives this collection its scientific validity.

In the preface entitled *About World Religions*, Đorđević and Stajić state that present-day Serbia does not have enough comprehensive literature on world religions, which encouraged them to make this collection in the first place. The book consists of two parts, the first one dealing with historical, sociological, philosophical and theological circumstances in which the principal religions of the world – Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Daoism, Confucianism and Islam developed, grew and persisted, and the second one tackling the current state of religion and the relations amongst the believers (tolerance, Ecumenism, Protestantism and the minorities, etc.). The book has the total of 10 papers, each one comprising a separate chapter.

The first paper/chapter is entitled *Hinduism and the Present-Day India*, and it was written by Goran Arsić, whose aim was to reveal the essence of Hinduism

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through religion and art, science and skills, customs and tradition, the totality of life, all from a point of view of an observer. He opens with one of the most important rules in Sanskrit, which points out that one needs to be at a proper distance from something one is watching or thinking about, adding that one needs to find balance as well.

The second paper, written by Radosav Pušić and entitled *Buddhism from India to China*, opens with an intriguing question which has puzzled the western scholars for almost two centuries now – the question of whether Buddhism is a philosophy or a religion. Pušić stresses that there is no right or wrong answer to this question. He also mentions Buddha's message to his followers, in which he advises them to study Buddha's teaching in their own language, where again what "one's own language" means is open to interpretation. The chapter/paper which follows was written by Isak Asiel and it talks about Judaism. It is entitled *The Jewish Religion: a strong alliance between God and people* and is built on the story of how Abraham made a pact with God. The aim of Asiel's text is to interpret the story of Abraham and show its symbolism, as well as explain how one can relate to it in 21st century. According to Asiel, the nature of the alliance between God and people is not a historical category, but rather an eternal one. Chapter IV is entitled *How Christianity Came into Being: the First Four Centuries*, and comprises a paper by Milan Vukomanović. From the perspective of an interdisciplinary analyst, who takes into consideration the history of religion, archeological findings, and views the Bible as something of historical, philosophical and even literary importance, he attempts to put the beginnings of Christianity into the context of the times in which it originated. The author points out that Christianity was under various influences which later on led to clashes and disagreements amongst the followers, ultimately resulting in the split between the Eastern and the Western Christianity, as well as the divergence of Protestantism later on.

The next chapter (chapter V) was written by the same author, Radosav Pušić, but this time it is about two religions of the far east. It is entitled *Daoism and Confucianism: the Two Chinese Stories*. The paper is about the two principal schools of thought in China: Daoism, the existence of which was a contribution of all the peoples who lived on the territory of China from 4th century BC to 2nd century AD, and Confucianism, which many do not even deem religion, or alternatively call it "the religion of common sense". The important thing about both these religions is that they are not in their essence monotheistic like Christianity, Islam or Judaism – they do not revere only God. Pušić also writes that at the core of Confucianism we can find the ideal, or the humanistic ideal, as it is called nowadays, of the Chinese people, which amounts to searching for the meaning of one's existence in everyday life, instead of waiting for the afterlife.

Chapter VI is entitled *Islam between dogma and reality: Fundamentalism and*

Wahhabism, Jihad and Terrorism, and comprises a paper by Miroljub Jevtić, a politicalologist of religion. Jevtić opens the question of the essence of Islamic religion, saying that Islamic dogma is a very clear and precise one, as well as that the Islamic community is established as a very serious and disciplined community, which meticulously carries out all the tasks set by its religious leaders. The next chapter tackles a more local topic concerning southern Serbia and the spreading of Protestantism, especially amongst the Roma people. It is a paper entitled *The Protestantisation of Serbia: the Case of Leskovac and Southern Serbia*, written by Dragan Todorović. The conversion of the Roma, who are traditionally either Orthodox Christian or Muslim, is a very current and hot issue dating back to the end of the last century. It is such an intriguing process with far-reaching consequences that sociologists of religion should make sure they record, analyse and describe all of its aspects, writes Đorđević. Behind this trend we find a myriad of complex social, economic, cultural and political factors.

Chapter VIII was written by Andrija Kopilović, and is entitled *The Unity of All Christians: Roman Catholicism, Dialogue and Ecumenism*. Kopilović is certainly one of the leaders in practical ecumenism amongst the Roman Catholics of the Balkans. In this paper he presents four topics: "Ecumenism and the Second Vatican Council", "The ecumenism of Pope Paul VI", "Important encounters in the field of ecumenism", and "The Octave of Christian Unity". The paper which follows was written by the editor of this collection, Dragoljub B. Đorđević, and it is entitled *How Believers Organise: from Cult to Church*. Đorđević is undoubtedly an authority on this intriguing topic from the field of the Sociology of Religion, for which there is much interest amongst people from all walks of life: politicians, journalists, teachers, students, the believers and the non-believers, to name the few. The paper talks about four types of religious communities that people organise into: cults, sects, denominations, and churches, and analyses them through various sociological perspectives. The collection ends with a paper by Radovan Bigović, a theologian and philosopher, who appropriately puts faith into a wider context. The chapter is entitled *Faith in a Postmodern and Postsecular World*, and it warns that nowadays many words have lost or changed their meaning, including the notion of faith. Some of the questions that he raises are: Why are the messages about religion not only unconvincing, but also boring? Why do people reduce Christian faith to a mere human faith? The whole discussion about the prospects of religion in a postmodern and postsecular world continues into a heated debate between Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger (2006).

The collection ends with *the biographies of the authors and a convenient name registry*. To conclude, we can say that this collection can serve as a perfect starting point for any attempt to study major world religions. It is a valuable comprehensive study on the topic, and a rare one written in Serbian. The variety of authors and the diversity of their perspectives ensure that the elusive topic of religion is viewed from

many different angles, thus bringing the reader closer to perceiving it in as objective a way as possible.

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References

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