

Brent Nongbri. *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*. Yale University Press, 2013. ISBN 9780300154160. Pp. x + 275. \$35 (cloth).

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In 1981, Raymond Carver published a short story called, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The two couples in the story spend a long, gin-lubricated afternoon discussing love. They agree neither about what it is nor about the usefulness of talking about it; they're keen, however, to find and show it, and part of the story's effect is to suggest to readers that they might exchange reading about love for making it, whatever it is. An afternoon like the one I've just spent with Brent Nongbri's book about religion is like this (without the gin): it makes me want to stop thinking about religion and offer the Lord some love.

Nongbri's argument is worth attending to, even so. It's mostly right, even though it has some significant lacunae, and even though it privileges the scholarly project without much awareness that it's doing so or understanding of what it means to do so. I'll return to those points.

The first plank of the argument is descriptive: we twenty-first-century English speakers have, Nongbri thinks, a fairly well developed and intuitively easily applicable understanding of what religion is and what counts as religious. This understanding is derived, mostly, from Protestant Christianity. We judge a phenomenon to be religious, roughly speaking, to the extent that it conforms to what that kind of Christianity is like. Belief in and beliefs about God; ways of relating to him; authoritative texts having to do with these matters; institutional forms and pedagogical practices that nurture the belief/practice complex; a concern with salvation; the allocation of all that to the individual and experiential realm rather than to the public/social/political realm ... these (and other) phenomena, it's reasonable to say, make Protestant Christianity what it is now, when considered very abstractly. When we call something 'religious' or a 'religion' we mean (not usually consciously, of course) that what we're talking about has some or all of these elements, or is itself among them. That's what we talk about when we talk about religion.

Fair enough. This isn't a new thesis, but Nongbri presents it with clarity and some brio. And it's right. What it means, historically, is that there really isn't a developed concept of religion in the modern sense until after the Reformation; its full development had to wait upon the work of theorists such as Jean Bodin (1530-1596), Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), and John Locke (1632-1704). They, together with the European political upheavals and settlements following upon the Reformation, and with the development of categories to aid understanding of the mass of broadly ethnographic information about the habits and mores of non-Europeans following upon the colonial projects beginning in the fifteenth century, provide the grammar of our contemporary concept of religion. All this made it possible to write books with titles like *Chinese Religion* and *The Religion of the Aztecs*, and to have university departments devoted to the study of religion, ordered, very often, by the rightly vilified (from a Christian point of view as well as from Nongbri's) world-religions paradigm.

It follows nicely, and almost by entailment, that if we're interested in describing (rather than redescribing or interpreting) the thought-world of premodern texts, the extent to which 'religion' and 'religious' appear in our descriptions is just the extent to which we're likely to sow confusion and be ourselves confused. Nongbri spends a good deal of time on this. He shows to his own satisfaction, and mine (yours too, I hope), that using 'religion' to render words such as the Arabic *din*, the Greek *threskeia*, and (even) the Latin *religio*, may indeed systematically mislead by suggesting that the authors of those works sorted the universe in the same way that we do. He makes a good case that *din* in post-Qur'anic Arabic is often more appropriately rendered by 'law' or 'ritual custom' than by 'religion'; that *religio* in pre-Christian and Patristic texts should direct thought toward rite, worship, and cult rather than 'religion' in the modern sense; and so on. There are nice case studies to illustrate and support all these points. I'm especially appreciative of Nongbri's comparative analysis of the renderings of *din* in English versions of the Qur'an made by Alexander Ross (1649) and N. J. Dawood (2003, in its most recent revision). This work shows nicely how 'religion' encroaches, and how it misleads: Ross never translates *din* in that way, while Dawood often does.

Nongbri successfully shows, then, that our understanding of religion is not evident before the sixteenth century, and not fully developed until the eighteenth. This is, by now, almost a commonplace of work in this area: it's been argued in extenso by, inter alia, William Cavanaugh, Daniel Dubuisson, Timothy Fitzgerald, Tomoko Masuzawa, and J. Z. Smith. He also shows the dangers of translating premodern texts as though 'religion' were indigenous to them. Nothing new here, either.

The distinctive contribution of the book lies, instead, in two things. First, in the compressed elegance and close textual reading (yes, it is possible to combine these, and Nongbri does) of the case studies; these are well done, and they fully support Nongbri's analysis. Second, in Nongbri's realistic judgment that we can't just stop using 'religion' as a category for analysis and interpretation, even if we need to learn to be wary about using it as if it were present in premodern sources as a category of just that sort. But if we are going to use 'religion' in our interpretations – in what Nongbri prefers to call our redescriptions – under what conditions and for what purposes should we do so? Here Nongbri is disappointing. All he has to say about this is, quoting Stanley Stowers with approval, is that if using 'religion' as an interpretive or redescriptive concept serves scholarly purposes, then it's fine. That's effectively what Nongbri ends his book with, and it leaves entirely uninterrogated what counts as a scholarly purpose and why anyone should think it important to serve such a thing. He's more interested, clearly, in the yield of abandoning 'religion' as a category descriptive of premodern cultural formations and texts. He thinks, rightly, that if we do give 'religion' up for those purposes, we'll look at different things and from different angles, and that this will be, or at least may be, illuminating.

There's a further interesting lacuna in Nongbri's study. It's that he pays almost no attention to indigenous Christian uses of 'religion' (or *religio*) as a term of constructive art after late antiquity. He does comment on Augustine's usage at some length, but, for example, Thomas Aquinas' extended analysis of *religio* in *Summa Theologiae* 2/2.81-100, as one of the virtues annexed to justice, is dismissed by Nongbri in a paragraph or so (he seems to think that Thomas' treatment of the subject begins and ends with q.81; but that question contains only the preliminary definitional moves). And yet, Thomas'

analysis of *religio* is the root of more European writing about the subject than anything addressed by Nongbri; it has interesting connections with and affinities to some of what the early modern theorists he does discuss have to say; and it remains a lively source to this day. A history of the modern concept of religion that simply ignores it is, well, odd. Another instance: among the most theoretically developed treatments of 'religion' in the twentieth century is Karl Barth's in §17 of the *Dogmatics*, where there is an extended argument that the proper way to construe the relation of revelation to religion is via the category of *Aufhebung* (sublimation, perhaps, in English; it's a Hegelian concept). This, together with its precursors and progeny, passes without comment by Nongbri.

This lacuna is explicable, I expect, by the second criticism I mentioned at the beginning of this review, which is that Nongbri unselfconsciously privileges what he understands to be the scholarly project. That's why he's blind to what Christians have made of *religio* (and 'religion') as a term of art for their – our, given the readership of this journal – own theoretical purposes. We all have our blindnesses and we all privilege this or that; it's what intellectuals do, and so it's no criticism of Nongbri to say that he does it. But when a book is devoted to showing how the unacknowledged ideological and local interests of scholars can shape – and warp – their descriptions of texts from eras and places distant from their own, it's surprising to find an apparent lack of awareness that the author's – Nongbri's – ideological and local interests must have shaped his own depiction of the modern concept of religion. This is an internal tension in the book that edges it toward incoherence.

So: what do we talk about when we talk about religion? Not something that our premodern ancestors talked about much. Nongbri's right about that, and we should keep it in mind.

[NOTE: the 'i' in the Arabic word *din* should appear with a macron over it]

[NOTE: the first 'e' in the Greek word *threskeia* should appear with a macron over it]