

# Seven Theories of Religion.

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By Daniel L. Pals. Oxford University Press, 294 pp., \$13.95 paperback.

DANIEL PALS identifies seven prominent and influential theories of religion and elucidates their meanings and implications. The theories under study are those of E. B. Tylor and James Frazer (constituting a single chapter), Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Mircea Eliade, E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Clifford Geertz. The theories are variously rooted in anthropology, sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, economic theory and cultural analysis, phenomenology and the history of religions. Together the seven theories offer impressive witness to the power of religion to create meaning, invite critical investigation, and spark sustained and sometimes heated controversy.

Pals, who is professor of religious studies and chair of the department at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, does not claim that these are the most essential or even the most important theories of religion. They do, however, illustrate some of the impressive ways in which religion has caught the interest and imagination of scholars, each of whom claims scientific respectability for his approach.

Numerous fields and disciplines within the social sciences and humanities have taken religion seriously, even on their own terms. And the influences are reciprocal. Serious scholarship has made due place for religion, and the insights from such scholarship have influenced the way religion is understood. Consequently, the discussion has moved far beyond whether religion deserves to be advocated or disclaimed. Rather, there is now at least tacit agreement about what religion is, how it functions in societies and cultures, how it affects those who espouse it (as well as those who do not), and what place it inhabits within the larger inventory of ingredients that make upworldviews and life-views.

In his final, somewhat abbreviated chapter, Pals tackles questions about the ramifications of these theories. Since all seven throw light on the subject, how does one select between them? Pals answers that one need not make such a choice. Since all seven seem to account for religion without using supernaturalistic explanations, haven't they explained the subject away? Here Pals's answer is more subtle: the seven theorists do in fact take a position toward their subjects, whether reductionistic or sympathetic. Pals chooses not to trace the implications of this finding very far, since each of these theories is dated. Finally, Pals raises the question of whether there is anyway at all, in today's intellectual climate, to develop a general theory of religion that might attain the status of the seven examined here.

Pals would have completed his task had he not raised the last question at all. Certainly the attempt to develop general theories of religion will continue, generation after generation, and age after age: we have been curious about religion since the questions about the True, the Good, the Beautiful and the Holy were first formulated. As Pals's book illustrates, it is not so much this or that product of this insatiable quest that impresses us as it is the confirming force of the quest itself, and the quality of mind that attaches itself thereto. I do not consider any of the seven theories as the final word, nor did those who constructed them. There are at least seven new theories of religion in the process of formulation today. These, like Pals's book, help illustrate religion's enduring intellectual appeal.

Reviewed by Walter H. Capps, professor of religious studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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