

A short review in the style of a blog

The Anthropology of Religion, Magic and Witchcraft, Rebecca, L Stein & Phillip Stein.

The chosen text book by Rebecca and Philip Stein aims to provide information for novice Anthropologists and disciplines including the study of religion. The book seeks to explain terminology and problematic jargon in a style that is accessible to all levels of study, recognizing in the introduction that previous textbooks of this nature, have not met the reading requirements of an introductory reading for people interested in the discipline. I can resonate with this idea, as a student, academic readings could be problematic and off putting. In my opinion Rebecca and Phillip Stein have achieved what they sought to do, in producing accessible to all textbook to delve into the world of anthropology of Religion. A truly exciting look at ethnographies of various peoples and livelihoods, whilst not shying from academic terms, but introducing and explaining them in a manner which enables the reader to critically engage with the reading.

Rebecca and Phillip Stein tackle the complicated definition of religion early on in the textbook, in chapter one they describe the depth of the term. In chapter one recognizing the definition of Religion by Ninian Smart. Discussing religion in six categories; The institutional dimension, ergo organisation and leadership. The narrative dimension ergo myths, creation stories and world views. The ritual dimension, ergo rights of passage and other important ritual activities. The social dimension, ergo religion being a group activity that binds people together. The ethical dimension, ergo customs and moral rules. The experiential dimension, ergo religion involving experiences of a sacred reality that is beyond ordinary experience. The very definition of religion can be problematic, as there are many definitions and viewpoints on the meaning of this terminology.

As there are many definitions of the term, there are various theoretical views of what Religion is. Rebecca and Phillip offer five examples in the textbook to which there are many more, here i seek to discuss the five theories within my chosen textbook; Anthropology of Religion, Magic and Witchcraft. These theories are a direction of study of Religion where anthropologists have sought to study Religion by definition, meaning and attempt to answer questions as old as time. The late 1800s saw the evolutionary approach, developing questions such as how the world was made and when was the world made? The 1800s also mapped a way for Karl Marx, a theorist influential and critical of Religion, the theory adopting the name 'The Marxist approach'. Non critical of the logic and reason of Religion, for Karl Marx, the problems lay with society, recognizing that the world around him was constructed by the few and not the many powerful people. The interpretive approach, associated with Cliff Geertz, who discusses the interpretive approach as 'a cluster of symbols' that when studied can lend a hand to anthropologists through cultural understanding of values and livelihoods, thus within this theory affording anthropologists an avenue in which to conduct research to understanding people and their lives. The functional approach, discusses what Religion can do? For instance he discusses how magic can lend a hand to unfamiliar or

uncertain situations. The psychosocial approach, approaches the symbiosis between personality and culture. Making sense of Religion through brain activity and evolution.

Afterall, we all need something to believe in, belief takes many forms. Previous eras have seen the people's dependence on Religion in the traditional sense, church services, congregation and mass. The turn of the century saw the expansion from what I have coined 'the black and white of religion' the traditional popular religions, i.e. Christianity and Judaism. As the world we know it progresses, as do the cultural ideas and social norms. Where once upon a time the social norm to attend a worship house and prayer was socially acceptable, we now see a turn of tradition. It is now acceptable to praise what we choose, for some this is still the church, others have adopted physical regimes in the form of yoga and meditation to find their peace. One must only look at the Census, and study the Religious aspect of the census to see that people are not so rigid in their ideas of worship, some people even identifying as Jedi followers as a religion.

Rebecca and Phillip Stein, delve into the world of magic, witchcraft and sorcery. Discussing the taboo subject to many. Explanations given not only to the practice of witchcraft and ritualistic practices, Rebecca and Phillip Stein through the use of ethnographies and cultural studies to not only describe what people do, but why people do things. For example discussed in chapter 7, Rebecca and Phillip tackle the problematic Euro - American understanding of magic. Lending example to tricksters with a rabbit and a hat, as the majority understanding of magic. Explaining further that as anthropologists, we are to study magic as the act of magical activities, i.e. rituals. Further explanations as to the different interpretations cross- culturally of the practice of 'magic. Magic can be used subtly, in the form of gifts as a means of persuasion. Discuss the Fore and the act of Kuru, where The Fore people would take care of personal items, not to fall victim to contagious magic. A most thrilling read, personally the reference to Wiccan magic. Learning the ideas of Wiccan magic "with a worldwide view that power that exists in all things". The Wiccan magic an ability to move from person to person, object to object. Rebecca and Philli Stein discuss the magical paraphernalia associated with Wiccan magic practice; crystals, herbs, essential oils, candles, imagery and runes.

In conclusion to reading the work of Rebecca and Phillip Stein, I am pleased i chose the textbook, as I engaged with the authors in a way which, not only did I become thoroughly engrossed with the readings, (especially teh ethnographies) i have learned a great deal, a variety of academic terminology explained in a manner that gave me the ability to learn readily. I shall take forth the knowledge gained from this book to all my studies.

Stein, R. and Stein, P. (n.d.). *The anthropology of religion, magic, and witchcraft -- pearson etext.*