

So the question to ask is how close are we to the writing, that is to the real Jesus?' For Casey this is quite close indeed. Professor Casey was an Aramaic scholar and on this basis, his lifelong work is to argue that the *Gospel of Mark* contains translations from Aramaic originals. This disposes Casey to see *Mark* as fairly early. He agrees with James Crossley, who has argued for a date c.40 CE for the *Gospel of Mark*, which is earlier than for many conservative Christians. From the early date of *Mark* we can go on to earlier dates than usual for *Matthew*, 50–60 CE rather than 75–85, though he agrees with what he calls the conventional date of *Luke* as 80–90 CE. He then goes on to argue that these three gospels can be used as historical texts which tell us something about the events of Jesus's life. St Paul too has historical value, though here Professor Casey has to invoke the idea of the 'high context situation' where St Paul does not have to repeat to his epistles' recipients, information which they already know.

The last chapter deals more directly with the whole idea of 'mythicism', as he calls it. The title of the chapter so admirably sums up the absurdity of the mythicist view that it almost makes the chapter superfluous. This is the title: 'It all happened before, in Egypt, India, or wherever you fancy, but there was nowhere for it to happen in Israel'. If St Paul lived and wrote in a 'high context situation' to use Professor Casey's phrase, mythicists seem to live in a world with no context at all. The ancient world is itself part of the context, and this makes it difficult to convey to people who have not spent a lot of time reading ancient texts. Biblical scholars are themselves not guiltless of failing to have any sense of the larger ancient world which surrounded the world of Israel. It was not a primitive world, but highly developed where educated people might travel thousands of miles in their lives and communicate through Greek and Latin with their own caste. Events taking place hundreds of miles away might be known in a matter of a few days. The key word here is immersion. Anyone who wants to understand the ancient world needs to be immersed in it. The sort of blogger Professor Casey is trying to bring down to earth, float away in their imaginary world. I doubt he will have much impact on them. For anyone interested in the nature of the New Testament as history though, this is very valuable book indeed.

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A SOCIOLOGY OF PRAYER edited by Giuseppe Giordan and Linda Woodhead, *Ashgate*, Farnham, 2015, pp. xix + 239,

This book is a very fine and wide ranging illustration of what academic sociology can say about prayer. Giuseppe Giordan and Linda Woodhead have put together a thorough and wide-ranging collection of papers which together show how the practices of prayer are variable

across creed and denomination, without creed and denomination and, moreover, in different settings. The papers are empirical studies of faith communities, practices or settings and are all based on thorough application of the research methodologies of academic sociology.

In her excellent concluding essay Woodhead coins the punning phrase ‘prayer as changing the subject’ (p. 224). This is meant in two ways. First of all, the chapters in the book imply a necessity to change how academic sociologists might approach the subject of prayer. Following from Mauss it has been common to link prayer to certain definite bodily practices, and following Otto it has usually been understood as an address to the *mysterium tremendum*. The empirical studies in this book show how prayer might now be too complex and variable to fit with such general pronouncements. The practices and addresses of prayer are far more various than we might at first imagine. But prayer also ‘changes the subject’ of the person who prays. In prayer, Woodhead writes, ‘changing the subject involves relating to something or someone “higher” or different from oneself and one’s normal state of mind’ (p. 226).

These remarks are taken up to make a call for ‘the construction of a general framework for the sociological study and interpretation of prayer’. This framework must, first, identify prayer as a practice somewhere on a continuum stretching from the private to the public; second it must recognise how prayer varies in terms of bodily practice; third it must be alert to how prayer varies according to setting and symbolic objects; fourth there must be appreciation of different emotional investments and expressions of prayer; finally the framework must be able to address how ‘prayer varies in terms of the social and super-social relations involved’ (p. 227).

Inevitably Durkheim’s ghost lurks in the shadows. The book’s discovery of the complexity and variations of practices of prayer, as well as how it can involve a multiplicity of embodiments, presumes the Durkheimian identification of religion and religious practice as a social fact. A social fact is a structure which is socially produced but acts upon individuals as if it were an external force – a social fact *compels*. As such the discovery of the extent to which prayer no longer fits with the presumptions of previous academic sociology requires a fine-tuning of the conceptualization of the fact, and in due course this will almost certainly lead to a call for a revision of methodology. Better methods lead to better description.

For this volume the question is how best to do an academic sociology of prayer. But to my mind, having read the book, I think a much more fundamental question needs to be addressed. *Can there be a sociology of prayer?*

Academic sociology is very much a product and producer of what Charles Taylor called the ‘immanent frame’. This frame is an imaginary which emerged in the period after 1500, and makes two assumptions. First, individual subjects are assumed to be ‘buffered’ in relation to their

external world. There is a firm frontier, not a fuzzy merging: 'Where earlier people spoke of possession by evil spirits, we think of mental illness' (*A Secular Age*, 2007, p.540). Second, these buffered individuals are imagined as moving solely within 'a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular' (*ibid.* p.542). The papers in this book are entirely within this imaginary of the immanent frame. They all conceive of the relationship between the person who prays and the addressee of the prayer as a frontier, with the prayer being conceptualized as a bridging mechanism (even if the bridge might merely loop back to whence it came). Furthermore the papers tend to collapse prayer into an instrumental act. The concern is to describe all of this, and any explanation has to be supported by the empirical data. If this is what prayer is taken to be there can indeed be a sociology of prayer just as there can be a sociology of work, family life, education or anything else we might care to mention. Consequently the specificity of prayer gets completely lost. It is just one more fact within the immanent frame, as more or less important as anything else. But maybe some things *are* more important than others.

The book is content to describe the social facts of the immanent frame. Prayer is approached as one such fact. *But is it?* The book is neither willing nor able to open up the immanent frame to what might be beyond the sociological understanding. Quite simply prayer *can* be approached as a practical refutation of the immanent frame and of the description of facts. Prayer is based on a wager on a referent beyond instrumental reason and secular time. Prayer is about what cannot be described. Ultimately then prayer is a practice which presumes a theology and cannot really be understood without it. The theology, the meaningfulness beyond the immanent frame, has to come before the description. In as much as academic sociology is entirely of and for the immanent frame it cannot say anything about the referents of prayer. Neither then can it do anything more than describe what people do when they pray. But when we pray we do much more than what can be described.

In its own terms this book is a success and a significant contribution to the academic sociology of prayer. It will be, and deserves to be, taken very seriously by the sociology of religion. The question is whether academic sociology can understand prayer. It is by no means obvious that it can.

KEITH TESTER

POETRY AND THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION: THE POWER OF THE WORD
 edited by Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale, *Ashgate*, Farnham,
 2015, pp. xii + 268, £60.00, hbk

Poetry and the Religious Imagination contains essays derived from the first 'Power of the Word' conference sponsored by Heythrop