

*center of gravity to Petersburg, which is giving Buddhism a new coloration in the eyes of the populace.*” Termen also cited rumors circulating among Buriats to the effect that “the tsar has ordered a magnificent *datsan* to be built for Dorzhiev alongside his own palace,” that “lamas live in the palace of the tsar himself,” and that “the tsar sympathizes greatly with Lamaism and would have all Buriats be Lamaist” (pp. 205–6). In other words, Dorzhiev actively created a myth of the Russian tsars’ patronage of Buddhism, which he needed in order

to carry through his extensive political project of “Russo-Tibetan rapprochement.”

In sum, it should be noted that this study’s principal value is that in it Tsyrempilov has been able to gather and summarize a large amount of empirical material, which he uses as a basis on which to reveal the logic behind the historical processes he examines, in both the Russian and the pan-Asian contexts.

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**Alexey Rakhmanin et al., eds. 2016. *The Study of Religion: Textbook and Practicum for Academic Bachelor Students. (Religiovedenie: uchebnik i praktikum dlia akademicheskogo bakalavriata)*. Moscow: Iurait (in Russian). — 307 pages.**

The educational and methodological discourse of contemporary religious studies is highly diversified; there are dozens of textbooks, instructional aids, academic dictionaries and anthologies. The sheer variety of texts and approaches often makes it difficult for both instructors and students to navigate through the literature. Furthermore, the authors of textbooks often pursue originality for its own sake, which leads them to avoid presenting concepts that are generally accepted in the religious studies community in favor

of offering the theories and hypotheses of individual schools or branches of the discipline. Since these positions are not firmly established, they cannot help being read as controversial. In short, the “time-tested” is often sacrificed to the “up-to-date.” Obviously, students require balanced materials that will enable them to develop a conception of both the basic framework of academic religious studies and the current state of the field. It seems to me that the main strength of this peer-reviewed textbook is the fact

that the authors have succeeded in finding and maintaining that balance. This is largely due to the rigorous and coherent structuring of the book's content.

The textbook consists of three sections that cover:

1. Theoretical concepts in religious studies.
2. What the authors call "the subject matter of religious studies."
3. Theoretical and practical problems in contemporary religious studies associated with the study of contemporary religiosity and the dynamics of the contemporary religious situation.

This three-part structure deserves recognition; it enables the reader to develop a comprehensive view of religious studies as a set of disciplines and methods for the study of religion that form a unified whole.

The textbook is quite extensive, and is well-structured; it is divided into sections, chapters and paragraphs. Since summarizing the contents of a book falls beyond my role as a reviewer, I will concentrate on the aspects of this textbook that set it apart from the wide range of other religious studies textbooks, its merits, as well as those elements that are subject to varying interpretations and evaluations.

It is clear that the contents of a textbook, the principles shaping how the material is presented, the points that are emphasized, and so on, depend on its purpose, on the goals that it could be used to achieve. For whom is this textbook intended?

I believe its potential audience is quite broad; it may include students at liberal arts universities who are taking religious studies as one of their core disciplines, whose exploration of religious studies is aimed not only at becoming generally "cultured" people, but at developing sufficient expertise to the use religious material in historical, philological and sociological research. Students at technical universities, whose degree programs sometimes include religious studies or history of religion courses, may find this textbook quite difficult, since it is focused on professional rather than educational training.

Of course, this textbook will be relevant not only for students, but also for anyone who is pursuing knowledge independently and wishes to understand the contemporary religious situation, the effect of religious factors on social and political processes, and the nuances of religious conflicts.

An analysis of the current state of the educational and methodological discourse in religious stud-

ies leads to the conclusion that religious studies textbooks are often constructed around various classificatory approaches to religion. As a result, these textbooks are largely dedicated to describing specific religions and beliefs, detailed accounts of ritual practices and the specifics of mythological narratives and theologies. As a result, students often lose sight of the subject, drowning in a sea of details. This approach to religious studies reduces it to a description of individual faiths—a kind of encyclopedia of world religions.

This observation does not apply to Rakhmanin's textbook. The theoretical section with which it opens allows for the development of basic skills that are necessary for further study of factual material, and also cultivating a clear idea of the nature of religious studies as an academic discipline that is not limited to simply recording facts and describing the discourses of various religions.

The detailed chapter dealing with the principles and methods of research work in the field deserves special attention. In debates, conference presentations, and published articles, I have often drawn the attention of my colleagues to the fact that contemporary Russian religious studies is undergoing a methodological crisis. Contemporary religious scholars are not suffi-

ciently prepared for research, source criticism and analysis. Although, as the textbook correctly observes, "there is not, and cannot be, a unified method for religious studies research given the current state of the field. A researcher must strictly abide by the academic methods required by a multidisciplinary approach" (p. 109). It is not completely clear, however, what the authors mean by their statement that "any research into religion accomplishes . . . specific ideological tasks" (p. 109), but I presume that the authors' thinking in no way ascribes an a priori ideological orientation to the discourse of religious studies. Considering the fact that the views expressed in expert assessments provided by religious studies scholars often become stumbling blocks not only for scholars, but also for journalists, political figures and lawyers, discussion of the ideological and philosophical connotations of religious studies research requires extreme precision in terminology.

It is worth noting that the authors weigh in on the origins of the field (there is no consensus on this question among contemporary scholars), arguing that it was established as an institution in the 1860s–70s, though that process played out differently in different countries (p. 25). Section 1.3, "Periodization and the

Key Stages in the Development of Religious Studies,” is dedicated to the development of academic religious studies. When it comes to teaching methods, familiarizing students with the history of the field and its canonical authors, whose names will continue to appear in textbooks, is an urgent and important task. Its significance in religious studies can primarily be attributed to the fact that many debatable questions in the field, such as how to define the term “religion,” the concept of “religious belief,” and so on, are decided on the level of the authors’ approaches and interpretations. Since this is the case, it is necessary to have some degree of familiarity with the relevant authors.

The problem of how to define the term “religion” deserves special attention. I once argued for the need to distinguish between two levels of this problem—the academic and the methodological (Prilutsky 2013). On the level of academic inquiry, the most unexpected and extravagant definitions are permissible, as long as their competence and generative quality are based on convincing argumentation. A textbook, however, has a different task; it must help students entering the field to develop a sufficient grasp of the subject matter. It would be naïve to suppose that everyone already knows perfect-

ly well what religion is. As understandable as it might be from an academic perspective, rejecting any normative definition and reducing it to academic pragmatics does not facilitate efforts to achieve this methodological/pedagogical goal. The authors quite rightly argue that “since research goals differ, it is impossible to articulate a universal definition of religion. In this case, universalism must be rejected, since religion is envisioned by researchers in different ways in different contexts” (Rakhmanin et al., 47). But to what extent does this approach help students to absorb the material? What should be given preference—methodological/practicality or academic accuracy? This problem is not a new one, and there is no clear-cut solution. Naturally, the choice between a “bad definition” and no definition at all cannot be definitely resolved one way or the other. I must admit that the approach chosen by the authors of this textbook is close to my own, but we should also recognize the right of other scholars to hold a different point of view, and thus, to offer criticism.

The authors have made a point of noting that while the discipline of religious studies first emerged in historical and theological contexts, in the process of becoming institutionalized and

achieving academic autonomy, it was transformed into an independent sphere of knowledge. The problem of the relationship between religious studies and theology, which is acquiring ever greater importance today in the context of the ongoing “official institutionalization” of theology in contemporary Russian legal and academic spaces, is discussed in greater detail in the second section of the textbook. Not everything here seems entirely successful to me, however. While the reference to “the convergence of theology and philosophy that is occurring in the new space of the post-secular world” (p. 168) seems quite fair on the whole (although “new space” is an insufficiently precise formulation), the definition of the goals of theology as the systematization of all of the propositions and elements of religion that are suitable to function as a basis for supporting and protecting religious doctrine (p. 182) is clearly unsuccessful from the point of view of the style and content of the text. In any case, interpreting theology through the prism of apologetics impoverishes the subject matter of theology; among other things, it implicitly excludes apophatic theology.

There is also the issue of the selection and arrangement of the material in chapter four, which contains three subsections enti-

tled: “Religious Thought in India,” “Religious Thought in the West,” and “The Philosophy of Religion.” It is not entirely clear why the editors opted for this selection of material, which virtually excludes all other areas, including Russian religious philosophy. Section 4.1.3 is devoted to the cultic side of Hinduism. In the context of continuing fascination with India, it is excellent that students are becoming acquainted with accurate information about the relevant religious traditions. It is no less important, however, for the student of religious studies to develop an understanding of the cultic practices of world religions, which have not received sufficient discussion here.

In conclusion, I would like to share my general impressions: this textbook made for interesting reading, and I hold that using it in the context of a university course exploring religious studies will be equally interesting and enlightening. It can serve all of the functions of a basic college textbook quite successfully. Most importantly, the excellent presentation of the material might inspire the student to continue their exploration of religious studies after completing their introductory course.

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## References

- Prilutsky, A. M. 2013. "Termin 'religiia' v nauchnoi i nauchno-metodicheskoi literature" [The term "religion" in academic and methodological literature]. *UNIVERSUM: Vestnik Gertsenovskogo universiteta* 2: 87–92.