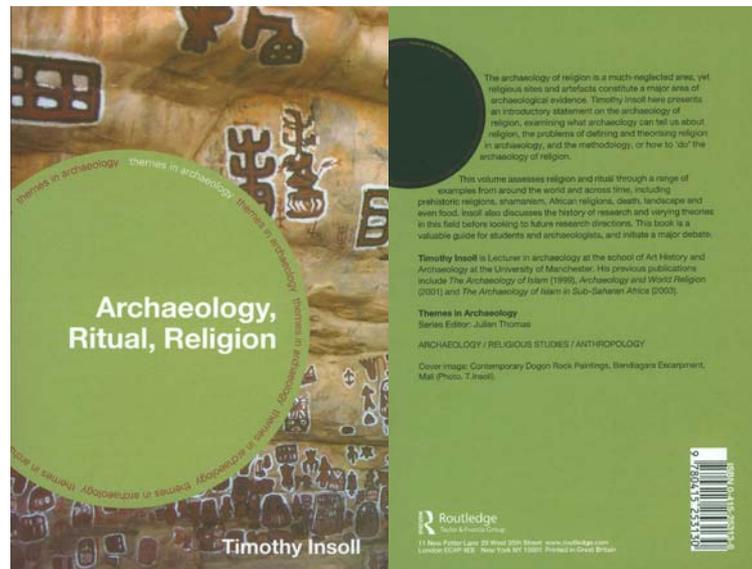


Insoll, T. 2004. Archaeology, ritual, religion. – London, Routledge

Book review by W.M. van Haarlem



The contents of this compact book, 155 text pages, are clearly and logically divided in an ‘Introduction’, ‘History of research’, ‘Contemporary approaches’, some case studies and ‘Prospects’ with a conclusion. A bibliography and an index make up the service section.

In the first section it is pointed out that there are no clear-cut definitions of what constitutes religion or what a ritual is, as it is even in the study of contemporary phenomena already sometimes difficult to separate the secular from the non-secular in the non-western atmosphere. Another important point here is from which point in history ‘religion’ originates. Some scholars advocate an origin as far back as Neanderthal man, but as it is doubtful whether he had any linguistic competence to speak of at all, the author rightly states that “...it can be suggested that grunts, prods and pointing are not the ideal means for perpetuating myth and ritual...”.

The ‘History of research’-chapter mentions side disciplines to the archaeology of religion like anthropology stating the problems with the interpretation of contemporary religions, let alone those with “living informants removed” (p. 35), and deriving the immaterial from material remains...and the history and phenomenology of religions. A history of approaches follows, from the early ones like the antiquarian and the Darwinist to the Marxist and New Archaeology approach as well as the direct analogy and the art-historical views. A separate paragraph is devoted to religious zealots who seek to ‘prove’ their convictions by interpreting archaeological ‘evidence’ in that direction. The biblical case, the search for ‘Exodus’ evidence, is a famous case in point.

In the ‘Contemporary approach’-section, the study of isolated aspects of ‘religion’ (death, animal and plant remains as regards to sacrifice) without looking at the whole picture is criticised. On the post-processual side, New Age and feminist interpretations of the ‘shrines’ at Çatal Hüyük are cited as examples of a questionable nature. The archaeological study of the religious phenomena of landscapes is considered much more of a promise. The significance of the archaeology of religion for indigenous peoples deserves much more attention as well.

Next, the author discusses some West-African case studies to illustrate his points so far: the religion of the Yoruba and the Dogon. Examples of syncretism, *e.g.* in the field of religious calendars, are given within the framework of the interaction between Islam and traditional African beliefs; another case in point is the relation between Islam and Hinduism in the Indian subcontinent.

The final chapter on prospects states promising elements as the beginning of the development of a theory on the archaeology of religion as a discipline on its own. Several points of special attention are presented in this respect and the recognition and subsequent correction of biased Western attitudes in the study of non-western religions so far.

In summary, this is a work presenting a useful overview of the discipline, without offering much new insights. But then, it has no other pretensions than doing just that.

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