

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

CHRISTIAN SMITH, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*. New York: NY: Oxford University Press. 2003. 164p (hardcover).

Christian Smith writes an engaging and provocative critique of social theory that attempts to account for human motivation and social action. His own assumptions are shaped by the moral philosophy and epistemology of Charles Taylor and the anthropology of human personhood by Mary Douglas. He argues that in spite of the many cultural differences worldwide and throughout history, there is a common structure of human personhood that orders human culture. This common structure is based on the idea that all humans are believers, and that social life is based upon sets of basic assumptions and beliefs. These basic assumptions about moral order, how life ought to be lived, have consequences for how it is lived. All social institutions express and animate these moral orders. Important for Smith is the need for studies in culture and society to examine seriously the relationship between beliefs, moral order, culture, and social institutions. Smith claims his ideas are not new as anthropology has explored variations of the culture and human personhood theme since the beginning of the discipline. It is sociology and psychology, however, that needs to explore further the role of beliefs and human personhood for theorizing culture and social action.

The book is organized around six chapters that explore culture and moral order, the nature of beliefs and believing, the role of narratives, religion, and culture. Two themes are apparent in the book. They are what Smith refers to as the need in the social sciences to account for human motivations, culture and social action and second, his critique of rational-choice and neo-Darwinian theories, both prominent in sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Together they form a credible argument that needs serious consideration.

The chapter on “Living Narratives” deserves some attention here. Smith states that narratives are a form of communication that organizes human action into meaningful relations. Beyond the basic elements of characters, plot, and meaning, humans are animals that make and tell “stories” but also animals who are told and made by these narratives. More specifically, societies consist of normative moral and are organized by narratives which generate culture and social institutions. Throughout history humans have lived by various narratives including what he refers to as the American experiment narrative, the militant Islamic resurgence narrative, the Christian meta-narrative, the capitalist prosperity narrative, the progressive socialism narrative, the expressive Romantic narrative, the scientific Enlightenment narrative, and so on. Each of these “stories” constructs an ideal about the composition, direction, and interpretation of human life. Smith also rightly, in my opinion, discusses the problems associated with a plural and global world of rival stories. He does not attempt to

convey that there is one grand story that all humans live by. His point is that humans cannot live without stories, big stories that tell us what is real and significant, who we are, where we are, what we are doing, and why. While humans are similar in this respect, they differ based on the particular cultural moral orders to which they commit their lives.

Smith critically engages the various views of theorists in the sociology of culture to question the so-called cultural turn thesis. He argues that Parsons, while wrong on many accounts, examined culture seriously. Since then, much good work has occurred in the sociology of culture especially in the past twenty-five years. What is missing, however, is an account of human motivation that is empirically credible and theoretically sound. Smith intends to sharpen the focus in the sociology of culture with an emphasis on the relationship between moral order and social institutions precisely because beliefs have consequences. Furthermore, focusing on these consequences will help account for the diversity of human cultures and practices, explain the practice of making sacred the physical, and assist in understanding the content and function of beliefs that humans build their lives upon. What may be the biggest idea in Smith's book that is still to be explored, however, is his emerging critique of the post-modern idea of the truly autonomous individual which he claims does not exist. Rather, humans exist as believers in relation to moral orders derived from particular historical traditions, which according to Smith, are truly social.

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