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Dale Cannon 1996 — Six ways of being religious: A framework for comparative studies of religion.

Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. 402 pages. Price: Unknown

Reviewer: M Clasquin (UNISA)

When doing comparative work among religious traditions and between subtraditions, can we compare just any two phenomena that we fancy? Not according to Dale Cannon, who argues for a six-factor typology of religious phenomena. Only when we compare, say, Christian and Hindu mysticism with each other, or Jewish and Buddhist social activism, can we hope to make valid comparisons. The same is true when comparing subtraditions within a major tradition. But before we can make up our mind to compare only apples with apples, and pears with pears, we need a taxonomical system to decide which are apples, which are pears, and which are perhaps not fruit at all. Cannon sets out to construct such a system for religion — a framework of generic types of religiosity, or 'ways of being religious'.

Cannon owes a considerable debt to the work of Frederick Streng, a debt which is explicitly acknowledged in the book. Like Streng's major work on the subject (*Understanding Religious Life*, 1985, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth), Cannon's book leans heavily for its inspiration on the Hindu (and to a lesser extent the Buddhist) understanding of religion as being a multi-factorial entity that does not necessarily try to fit all adherents into the same mould. Cannon improves on Streng here by acknowledging this influence more explicitly. The influence of Streng's work can be seen in the following table, in which Streng's and Cannon's categories are placed side-by-side where, in this reviewer's opinion, they largely coincide:

STRENG	CANNON
Traditional ways of being religious	
1. Personal apprehension of a Holy Presence	1. The way of devotion
2. Creation of community through sacred symbols	2. The way of sacred rite
3. Living in harmony with Cosmic Law	3. The way of right action
4. Attaining freedom through Spiritual Discipline	4. The way of mystical quest
Modes of human awareness and actions used to express religious meaning	
5. The religious significance of fulfilling human relationships	5. The way of reasoned enquiry
6. The religious significance of social responsibility	6. The way of shamanic mediation
7. The power of rationality	
8. The power of artistic creativity	
9. The religious response to physical existence	

The relationship between the two systems is actually less precise than it might seem above. For example, Streng sees 'the power of rationality' primarily as a nontraditional way of expressing religious sentiment. While he does acknowledge that traditional religion has used rational enquiry for its own purposes, he does not really manage to lift rationality out of its secular context. Cannon's analysis is more subtle — here there is no need to separate the factors of religious expression into traditional and nontraditional forms, for each of the six forms of religious expression can be seen in 'secular' as well as in 'religious' life. In this analysis, religion is something that permeates all our lives, and which of the six expressions occupies the major part of our attention will depend on factors such as personality and the cultural environment. If these factors predispose us to, say, the 'way of mystical quest', but the religion we inherited from our parents happens to be underdeveloped in that aspect, trouble may be expected ahead, in the form of a switch of allegiances or an attempt at internal reform. In both authors' cases, we must not imagine that we shall ever find a 'pure' form of any of the ways of being religious — all known forms of religion are a mixture of several of them, but with one or two clearly being a dominant theme, a kind of essence of that religion.

Cannon sets out at some length what the framework could be used for, and is equally careful to specify how it should not be used. nevertheless, there are a few embarrassing gaps. For example, this framework is explicitly set up for the comparative study of the five or six major world religions and their respective subdivisions. Cannon admits that in 'small-scale, nonliterate, relatively undifferentiated societies', one only finds evidence of 'sacred rite' and 'shamanic mediation'. The other four factors only emerge with agriculture, literacy and divisions of labour. But that raises the question: why? If these six ways of being religious are as universal as Cannon would have them be, can it be that four of them have only been around for, at most, the last ten thousand years?

There are other reservations on my part. The conventional division of religion into a small number of big 'chunks', such as Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, is simply and uncritically accepted as correct, even though Cannon's own system of thought would suggest that a Vedantin might have more in common with a Zen Buddhist than with the practitioner of devotional Hinduism next door. And despite Cannon's protestations that the repeated use of the term 'absolute reality' in the context of many different traditions serves merely as a verbal 'placeholder', to be filled in by the traditions themselves, one does get a sense that the basic thinking here is close to that of the Huxleyan *philosophia perennis*. But, as Cannon is the first to suggest, this is the beginning of the development of a theory, not the end. It is to be hoped that the author will continue to develop the thinking behind this framework, extending it both in utility and subtlety.

Although Cannon's explanation of the six 'ways' is heavily peppered with examples as it stands, in Part II of the book the framework is applied to Buddhism and Christianity, in each case supposedly to that tradition 'as a whole', but actually to the development of their respective major subdivisions. And here we can perhaps object that this is just too easy to make any real test for Cannon's framework. Buddhism and Christianity are two old, sophisticated and highly diverse religious traditions: it would be surprising if all six of Cannon's 'ways of being religious' could not be found somewhere in each of them. To select these two for comparison (a selection that is never satisfactorily justified) is almost to set up a self-fulfilling prophecy. Also, the comparison of and dialogue between these two religions has become something of an academic growth industry the last few decades — there is just so much material available that one wonders if Cannon's successful comparison of the two is due to the utility value of the framework or to the sheer amount of information. Now if the system could be shown to work with, say, a comparison between Jainism and Mormonism, perhaps the academic world would sit up and take notice ...

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It is with some apprehension that one approaches Part III of the book. Having applied the framework to Buddhism and Christianity each 'as a whole', we are now told that it will be applied to the same two traditions along the lines of 'a comparison of parallel ways in different traditions.' In other words, instead of a chapter each on Buddhism and Christianity, exploring how the six ways figure in each, we here find six chapters, one on each way and how it fits into each religion. But just as we start to fear that we are about to get a massive repetition of what has gone before, restated in a slightly different way, we find instead that each of the six chapters in Part III consists of original (though translated) documents from Buddhism and Christianity that illustrate how that particular way functions in both religions. In the chapter on devotion, for example, we see a text by Shinran and one by Billy Graham, with a minimum of comment. In one sense, this is a welcome attempt to illustrate the framework in a more concrete way. But in another sense, one cannot help but wonder if Part III is really a vital part of the book. Would it have been missed if it had been omitted? I doubt it.

The book seems to have been designed as a textbook for senior undergraduate (or junior post-graduate) students, with copious study questions, a summary at the end of each chapter, and extensive suggestions for further reading. This may well seal its fate: to hark back to Streng's book, that work seems to have been reprinted often and prescribed widely, but I am not aware of any serious attempt by scholars to use Streng's framework in their own researches. Cannon certainly extends and improves on Streng's work: it is to be hoped that this book's influence will extend beyond the examination-bounded memories of undergraduates.
