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ANDREA ROTA, *Collective Intentionality and the Study of Religion: Social Ontology and Empirical Research*, London, Bloomsbury, 2023, 270 p., ISBN 978-1-3503-0374-4 (hardback) / 978-1-3503-0377-5 (online).

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Andrea Rota's new monograph is a clever addition and valuable intervention in the academic study of religion regarding group formation and cohesion. With *Collective Intentionality and the Study of Religion*, the author introduces the discipline not only to the philosophy of « collective intentionality », but also to the Watch Tower Society (WTS or Jehovah's Witnesses, JW) as a field of research. The monograph, which is available in open access on the Bloomsbury website (and highly recommended, as the font in the printed book is unfortunately small) is Rota's revised and shortened *Habilitationsschrift* (Bern 2019).

What is at stake? Here is the author's fine summary:

a large part of the ongoing research into contemporary religion in the West is concerned with individualized forms of religion. Religious collectivities appear to be marginal in the study of religion. Congregations are mostly conceived of within an organizational perspective and discussed in macro-sociological terms that frame them as producers of religious goods in competition over social power and individual « customers » – religious organizations are thus still a proxy to speak about individuals and their preferences. New forms of community, by contrast, are mainly addressed through the perspective of an idyllic past characterized as « warm », « soothing », and « intimate » (Gebhardt 1999) but which appears to have been lost forever and which may, at best, be revived through fleeting personal experiences. Accordingly, such analysis offers important insights into the way that people and scholars alike envision « community » but is less useful for grasping the idea of a religious collective as a social reality beyond the imagination of more

or less isolated individuals. Instead, the analysis that I am pushing for is one that would elucidate the mode of existence of religious collectives on the basis of the collective intentions that they involve. (p. 6)

Reading this, many scholars of religion will experience a sense of being caught. As a historian of religion, I must admit that I am torn between a reductionist view of ancient communities as quaint and harmonious, and an anti-reductionist view of group agency as a multifaceted and complicated matter. The solution to this dilemma, Rota suggests, lies in the philosophical approach « collective intentionality », and he will demonstrate its potential on empirical data from his research among JW.

The fundamental premises of « collective intentionality » on which philosophers agree, are the following: 1) summative or aggregative social behavior (the majority opinion) are not part of the approach, because group opinion may be strategic choices for the group and may differ diametrically from the majority's private opinions; 2) homogenous mass behavior must likewise be clearly attributable to a social group (of acquaintances, in the least) to qualify; 3) to constitute a group with collective intentionality, commonalities are not sufficient. Rather, what is needed is a self-constitution as a « we » (pp. 18-19).

This « we », however, is defined differently by the « Big Four », the main four philosophers who advanced the idea. For Michael Bratman, intention is not « common », but « shared », a web of personal intentions that interlock with someone else's based on common knowledge. Without the inclusion of a normative dimension, forms of obligation and promise, Bratman's shared intention remains however « confined to (...) two people walking together toward a railway station » (p. 25). In contrast,

John Searle posits that the «we» emerges through individual intentions that are assumed to be part of a collective intention. This conviction is the result of communication, planning, commitment, and participation in collective action (pp. 29-40). Raimo Tuomela, again, addressed the subject from the standpoint that humans possess the «capacity of doing things together» as evidenced by their ability to organize a picnic (p. 41). According to Tuomela, humans can develop a «for-groupness» and a «we-mode», which can be understood as the capacity to set aside individual intentions and needs in favor of pursuing collective goals. It is this commitment to the we-mode and the agreements it entails that creates a cohesion among the members. In contrast to the aforementioned perspectives, Margaret Gilbert asserts that a group can be conceptualized as a social subject, pervasive throughout human life (e.g., in the form of the family, the nation, the guild, voluntary groups etc.). She distinguishes between a strong sense of «we» (i.e., doing something together) and a weak sense (i.e., doing the same thing next to each other). In order to gain insight into the essence of a group, it is essential to identify the «smallest carrier of genuine sociality» (p. 60). Mere inclinations are trumped by commitment when it comes to action, and joint commitment trumps personal commitment (pp. 62-63). Moreover, joint commitment requires the subordination of personal intentions, as it comes with obligations and the right of others to certain actions.

While transitioning to the empirical section, Rota elucidates the significance of Gilbert's and Tuomela's contributions, particularly their emphasis on «a type of public communicative (ex)change [that] is required for full-blown collective intentionality» as well as a distinction «between collective and personal reasons for action» (p. 81). In essence, Rota's inquiry pertains to the underlying motivations that drive individuals to engage in collective action despite reservations or disapproval expressed in private discourse.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of the history of the WTS, Rota's data and the available sources. In terms of group formation, the following statistics drawn from 183 interviewed JW are particularly noteworthy: 56% grew up in the movement, 13% joined before reaching the age of 21, 23.5% joined between the ages of 21 and 41, and 7.5% joined between the ages 41 and 60. Of their three closest friends, 2.75 friends are also members of the WTS, and less than 10% indicated they had a partner who was not part of the movement (p. 89). These figures illustrate deeply biographical and emotional bonds between the group members and highlight group dynamics that eschew rationality and choice. Can this group be measured with rational choice theory, which posits that the individual commitment depends on «the net balance of rewards and costs humans perceive they will experience from participation» (p. 96, quote from Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, Berlin, Peter Lang, 1987, p. 42)? Based on the research of David Voas and his own data Rota expresses skepticism for the following reason: the WTS is built around the recruitment of members, yet the latter has experienced a notable decline since the 1980s. In light of mounting numerical frustration, it is more probable that it is collective recruitment efforts that reinforce the community, rather than the incentive of success (pp. 98-99).

Regular JW, so-called publishers, are expected to devote approximately ten hours to field ministry, door-to-door-visits or the display and distribution of *Watch Tower* publications in the streets every month. A report card must be completed that documents their activities. Based on these cards, JW are distinguished as «regular», «irregular», or «inactive» witnesses (pp. 99-100). Preaching is not seen as salvation-relevant per se, and the act itself is valued more than the number of new members it generates (pp. 106-107). And yet, this ministry is the *raison d'être* of the movement. As early as 1922, mid-week gatherings ded-

icated to singing and praying were replaced with « service meetings » that focused on the study of the publications by the WTS, especially the current issue of the *Watch Tower*, whose lead articles were now appended with study questions (pp. 108-111). It is evident that the JW's preaching activity is not analogous to other collective endeavors undertaken by church members, such as operating a soup kitchen, conducting Sunday school classes, or participating in a choir. Those who join the Jehovah's Witnesses' church make a commitment to engage in missionary outreach and to study the *Watch Tower* to gain an understanding of the articles and to be able to respond to questions related to them. Per Rota's analysis, about 44% of these questions use the third person plural (e.g., « How did Jesus...? »), followed by 38% of questions using the first-person plural (e.g., « How do we...? ») (p. 115). The structured question-and-answer meetings, in which attendees are invited to respond to questions about the newest issue publicly is aligned by Rota to the « group-will-formation-system » or authority system described by Raimo Tuomela. Such a system serves to make the group action, the group intention, and the respective aims public, at least to the members. This enforces the « we-mode » of the group and « creates desire-independent reasons for action (...) and binds congregants through collective commitment » (p. 121). Yet, the public praise for a satisfactory answer to a question (on the podium and over the microphone) constitutes in my opinion an object of desire. And while Rota's invoked philosophers wonder what may cause people to bridge the gap between the expression of commitment and actual deed, the WTS makes sure that the commitment is fulfilled through outreach-planning meetings and the simple fact that JW go out in pairs (p. 122).

Chapter 9 serves to reiterate the point that the questions asked in the question-and-answer sessions are closed questions whose answers are paraphrases or quotations drawn

from the text under discussion. Rather than casting this procedure as a blunt « brainwashing », Rota reiterates his argument that it should be regarded as a « group-will-formation system ». The chapter provides further insight into the JW's use of media. On the one hand, they employ up-to-date technology for missionary purposes. On the other, they condemn secular mass media for its bad influence. Rota dedicates a considerable portion of the chapter to an analysis of Heidi Campbell's « factors that shape the adoption of media technologies by a religious community » (p. 133). However, the discussion ultimately proves inconsequential to the central argument, as the theory in question pertains to negotiation processes between established groups and, in particular, group leaders and new technologies. This is incongruent with Rota's objective of group-will-formation (p. 151). The choice to leave this theoretical escapade in the chapter is regrettable, as it distracts from the actual argument.

Chapter 10 offers the actual *pièce de résistance* of the book and will prompt reflection among scholars engaged in the study of religious emotions. Even at their large annual conventions (24 000 gathered in Zurich this July), JW do not engage in much singing. There is no group ecstasy or euphoria supported by rhythm and dance. The application of Durkheimian conceptualizations of thinking about collective emotion as a mental and bodily state become moot in this case. Rota identifies a more suitable framework in Gilbert's, but also Arlie Hochschild's approach (« Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure », *American Journal of Sociology* 85.3 [1979], pp. 551-575; *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012), which emphasize the cognitive and normative dimensions of emotions. Especially Hochschild's coinage of « feeling rules », which dictate how people regulate their emotions, seems to account for the discrepancy between not only Rota's own surprise at the tedious nature of the conven-

tions, but the fact that people speak in the interviews with a great deal of fondness about the mass conventions and their experiences there. However, upon further inquiry, they admit to employing strategies to overcome sleepiness and dwindling focus. One potential explanation, as Rota notes, is that the articles published by the WTS generate enthusiasm for the forthcoming convention while also delineating the appropriate forms of expression. Moreover, weeks before the event, the spreading of invitations takes precedent over everything else. The JW, Rota concludes, « collectively share the excitement of conventions – in both senses of the word » (p. 186).

In the concluding chapter, Rota examines collective aesthetic experiences. This serves to further explore the collective commitment of the JW to their austere lifestyle and meetings. Indeed, the Kingdom Halls are largely devoid of decoration, evoking in Rota a comparison to « hotel seminar rooms » (p. 196). There is no cross, but a yearly changing biblical verse hanging on the wall. Although the interior constitutes a statement in itself, it is difficult to work with « nothing » and Rota takes the quick adoption of a tablet with a Bible app in lieu of the traditional physical Bible book as his point of departure. The chapter is couched in a discussion of Birgit Meyer's approach to material religion and a historical account of the history of the WTS's Bible publishing and translation. Today, the WTS qualifies as one of the many Bible Societies. Their theology « accepts the 66 books of the canonical Protestant Bible (...) and asserts the principle of *sola scriptura* » (p. 201). JW are encouraged to engage in daily Bible study with the assistance of an annual Bible reading program. This program furnishes a text from the Bible and a commentary from *The Watch Tower* from the preceding year. Although read in isolation, the Bible should never be interpreted alone but with the guidance of the community (a deeply non-Protestant and non-pietistic premise, in fact). Furthermore, the biblical text is not read

in sequence, but rather in an episodic manner, according to a specific topic. Since its introduction in 2012, the website *jw.org* has become a pivotal platform for new media content, as well as for the JW themselves. Given the importance of media to the WTS, the internet as a medium to spread God's word was swiftly adopted. A more recent addition to the array of available media is the Bible in its digital form, accessible on an iPad. The new technology proliferated at such a rapid pace that Rota himself was able to observe a transformation occurring within a mere two years. Individuals transitioned from the traditional practice of turning the pages of a physical Bible to a more digital approach, where they would tap on squares corresponding to specific books of the Bible and scroll to find the desired verses. The adoption of the sober tablet appeared to be a logical decision. The interviews, however, revealed that there was a significant initial resistance against the substitution of the physical Bible through electronic devices. Especially the elderly generation objected against reading from the tablet on the pulpit. This resistance was ultimately addressed by the WTS Governing Body, which decreed that the use of tablets was in order. The use of the tablet clearly disturbed the aesthetic perception of some members. Rota concludes that he wants to « redefine the idea of a collective aesthetic experience as an intentional attitude held by a plural subject rather than by its individual members » (p. 216). The whole, again, is greater than the sum of its parts.

The juxtaposition of theory and empirical evidence in this book is both stimulating and fraught with tension. The examples with which the philosophers of collective intentionality worked were carefully chosen and one- or two-dimensional, so to speak (i.e., two people cooking a complex sauce, a soccer club), and clashed with the three- or four-dimensional empiric evidence from a religious community (the individual JW as liable to their local JW community, the international community, the

Governing Body of the WTS, and Jehovah). Indeed, it still seems to me that the primary intentionality is not directed to the group, but that it is a commitment to Jehovah and his word, the Bible. It is not so much the group's biography that is at stake as the biography of each member. The group can help achieve the goal (e.g., through mutual exchange, encouragement, correction, or to provide partners for the mission). In the end, I don't think we can approach religious communities with strictly rational theories. There are just too many variables in play: Religion is messy. Rota acknowledges that his objective was not to present « a theoretical account of a specific form of a religious collectivity » (p. 226). While he delineates the mechanisms that define the WTS as a collectivity, he does not elucidate the specific characteristics that distinguish this collectivity as a religious one, nor does he compare and contrast it with a secular collectivity. In the conclusion, the author makes passing reference to Jeppe Sinding Jensen (*What Is Religion?*, London, Routledge, 2014) and his concept of e-religion (e=external) and i-reli-

gion (i=internal), suggesting that, based on his findings, greater tension should be assumed between the « e » and the « i ».

The phenomenological approach to religion has been much criticized and was abandoned by many scholars. It is undeniable that it went in many ways too far. But as scholars of religion, we render our very own subject insignificant by comparing religious communities to soccer clubs, without at least a basic recognition of the experiences that many of the people who submit themselves to collective intentionality perceive as extraordinary, miraculous, and supernatural, and that mark real turning points in their biographies. In the end, it should be the duty of scholars of religion to theorize the incomprehensible without generalizing or belittling the devotion to an unmeasurable cause. Rota may not have done the former (alas!), but he clearly excels at providing a micro-analysis that takes the religious community and its members seriously.

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ANDREA ROTA ED., *Religion and Academia Reframed: Connecting Religion, Science, and Society in the Long Sixties*, Leiden – Boston, Brill, « Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion, 21 », 2023, 229 p., ISBN 978-90-04-54657-8.

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The contributions contained in this volume edited by Andrea Rota present case studies that show the effectiveness of ethnographic and sociological analysis carried out in a historical key; they respond to a research question clearly expressed by the editor in the introduction and, of course, in his chapter: which categories and which methods can we use today to study the continuous implication and the relational interconnection between religion as an object of study – as an observed phenomenon – and religion as a field of action?

The age-old and intricate problem of the reciprocity between subject and object is

addressed here within a particular historical context – the so-called Long Sixties (ca. 1955-1973) – and a limited geographical context which, for the sake of simplicity, we will call the West (the book focuses on European and North American cases).

Notwithstanding the deconstructive impulse of David Atwood's contribution, « The Lust for Order in History: Axiality in the "Long Sixties" », which critically challenges the rigidity of selecting specific events or periods as a necessary framework for research (an operation that risks ossifying and crystallizing time), the label Long Sixties remains entirely valid. As