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Jeppe Sinding Jensen, *The Study of Religion in a New Key: Theoretical and Philosophical Soundings in the Comparative and General Study of Religion*. Aarhus, Denmark, Aarhus University Press, 2003, Oakville, CT., David Brown, 2004, 509 pp., \$53 (paperback), ISBN 87 7934 091 1.

This is an important work ‘about the present plight—and future possibility—of a general and comparative study of religion’ the ‘basic intention’ of which is ‘to install a theoretically oriented comparative and general perspective’ (p. 9). Jeppe Sinding Jensen, originally an Islamicist, well-schooled in anthropology and philosophy, emerges as a significant scholar of method and theory in the study of religion. This book can be seen as the culmination of his work to date and to some extent its argument depends on his earlier publications. Clearly, his work is not of value only to specialists in theory and method. I wish I could have read this or its equivalent when I was a graduate student, and I feel that all Religious Studies graduate students, whatever their areas of expertise, would be well served to read it.

Jensen’s work is of a fundamentally anthropological and semiotic orientation and displays a generally semiotic and structuralist perspective. It promises something for everyone in the study of religion in that it “illustrate[s] how and on what conditions it is possible to study not just specific religions as ethnographic or historical facts, but also to study religion as a general human and social activity, and in a manner that respects advances in the philosophy of science as well as in other disciplines studying related human data” (p. 13).

Jensen’s influences are legion. He cites Tylor, Durkheim, Mauss, Lévy-Bruhl, Lévi-Strauss,

Clifford Geertz, and Edmund Leach, and also Kurt Rudolph and Åke Hultrantz. He considers Hans Penner's *Impasse and Resolution* (New York, Peter Lang, 1989) to be the best introduction available to the student of religion, and Geo Widengren's approach to the phenomenology of religion 'in spite of its shortcomings ... to be the most viable and commendable starting point for a reformed comparative study of religion' (pp. 69-70). The 'eclectic' position both in Jensen's earlier work, *Rationality and the Study of Religion: Introduction* (Aarhus and Oakville, Aarhus University Press, 1997) and here is indebted to Hilary Putnam, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida and he acknowledges his debt to Umberto Eco and to Benson Saler. Finally, his view of these matters owes much to Michel Foucault and he employs philosophical arguments from Donald Davidson, John Searle, Michael Dummett, and Michael Devitt.

It is not surprising that a scholar with such influences should slay some sacred cows, and Jensen indeed does so. More surprising is the reinstatement of others. The most surprising, especially for an admirer of Penner, is of the phenomenology of religion—although also surprising are Jensen's reappraisal of the role of theology in the early scientific study of religion and his tolerant approach to the 'essence' of religion: 'Essentialism is part and parcel of the entire scientific project', he writes (p. 324), even though 'there are no real essences in religion' (p. 326). This distinction hinges on the word 'real', and Jensen might be thought to dissimulate somewhat, here and elsewhere. He argues that any putative essences, as nominal essences, are social facts and as such *are* real. However, they do not have independent ontology or agency so they are not in *this* way 'real'. This *apparent* desire to 'have it both ways' characterises what Jensen himself calls a 'middle road' (p. 404), which occasionally seems to struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable and counsels both realism *and* anti-realism. However, I emphasize the word 'apparent' since the contradictions are usually resolved by careful and detailed arguments.

Jensen also restores some measure of scholarly respectability (with cautious reserve and philosophical precision) to normativity, non-reduction, and religion as *sui generis*. As with relativism and other postmodern totems, Jensen is very clear that he rejects all ‘strong’, ‘radical’, and ‘self-defeating skeptical’ (p. 312) forms, but nonetheless allows the adequacy of more nuanced and self-reflexive forms. His detailed arguments are more successful and convincing than might be imagined from any short summary of their contents.

On the phenomenology of religion Jensen divides scholars into ‘originators of the phenomenology of religion’, Chantepie de la Saussaye, Tiele, and Kristensen and the ‘classical phenomenologists’, including Otto, van der Leeuw, Heiler, Bleeker, Eliade, and Widengren. Somewhat confusingly he lists de la Saussaye and Kristensen again in the latter group, and he seems implicitly to class Joachim Wach in the first group. Widengren, as a major positive influence, also has more in common with the first group although he is listed in the second. More effective, perhaps, is that Jensen “discerns between two radically different conceptions of the task of the phenomenology of religion ... 1) concerned with obtaining objective knowledge about religious traditions and producing taxonomies and typologies of religious ‘phenomena’ through description and classification and 2) concerned with approaching the ‘subjective understanding’ (‘Verstehen’) of the ‘essence’ of religion and of religious experience” (p. 30) .

Jensen shortens these to 1) ‘descriptive phenomenology and 2) hermeneutic-existential phenomenology’. Although the first is ‘problematic in its own right’, the second ‘has been the main topic of scrutiny in historical expositions on the rise and demise of “classical” phenomenology of religion’ (p. 30). Apparently the early phenomenology of religion, or at least some of its practitioners, intended ‘a field for systematic studies and generalizing reflective constructions’ (p. 168), and this is what Jensen seeks to restore: 1) free of 2). The relations

between such systematic studies and generalizing constructions concerning religion and specific historical studies of religion 'parallel the relations between anthropology and ethnographies, as well as the relations between linguistics and the philologies of the world's languages' (p. 168).

This attempt to restore an intellectually sound and philosophically justified phenomenology of religion seeks to give a firm and fully considered basis to what some scholars are doing already, among whom Jensen cites Gavin Flood. Jensen necessarily gives detailed consideration to many related philosophical topics whose understanding is crucial for anyone in the academic study of religion. The volume sets out to explain what went wrong with the 'classical' phenomenology of religion. Chapter 2 asks whether renaming would help and argues that if one does not maintain the name, 'phenomenology of religion', then at least the necessity and inescapability of a field of comparative and general study must be recognized.

In Chapter 3 Jensen attempts a 'benevolent reading' of some of the originators of the phenomenology of religion and considers the 'essence' of religion and whether phenomenology is a method or a discipline. Universalism, evolutionism, and relativism are considered as candidates for enabling the move from the particular to the comparative and general. In Chapter 5 Jensen proposes some initial premises for a revised paradigm and considers the questions of moral and epistemological normativity and the issue of reductionism. Chapter 6 involves an investigation of anthropology and linguistics as 'model sciences' for the study of religion and concludes that a 'scientific' investigation is eminently possible, even if theory-dependent. Such investigation is also, by its very nature, comparative.

Chapter 7 presents limits and boundary conditions to the investigation of religion and explains why it is necessary to draw from the philosophy of the social and human sciences. Chapter 8 addresses various realist and anti-realist positions, epistemological as well as semantic.

Chapter 9 concentrates on the problem of both religion and science as ‘social facts’. The study of religion is portrayed as a field that has all in common with all other socio-cultural domains: religion is not a privileged and thus not a particularly problematic field. Chapter 10 focuses on problems related to the ‘constructed’ nature of scholarly thought.

Chapter 11 deals with some fundamental epistemological questions: positivism and logical empiricism are seen as long past, but the present confusion of relativist and postmodernist hermeneutics makes it imperative to delineate theories in order to retain the study of religion as a scholarly and analytical enterprise. Finally, chapter 12 constitutes a general discussion of the scientific status of the study of religion. One of Jensen’s main claims is that religion may be considered a fully legitimate field of inquiry, precisely by recognizing the peculiar character and function of religious universes. Also worthy of mention are his discussions of concepts—particularly the concept of religion; deduction and induction; narrativity; explanation and interpretation; and the ‘new comparativism’ including grounds for comparison.

Jensen’s conclusions are in favour of a ‘symbolic realism’ that ‘denotes the reality of symbolic “entities” ’ (p. 258). This follows a golden mean between anti-realism ‘in what concerns the relations between language and the world’, and realism ‘in what concerns the ontology of cultural systems’ (p. 259) and it is useful because ‘it is only through a realist epistemology that we can uphold a cultural relativist world-making picture without dissolving the substance of a scholarly discourse on religion’ (p. 271). In this way, ‘it is legitimate to speak of, e.g. “the sacred” as a practical kind term based on certain theoretical conventions (pragmatism), ... knowing that it does not refer to or derive any truth-value from some metaphysically or ontologically real entity (semantic anti-realism) and ... to discern between scientific and religious discourse (epistemological, internal realism)’ (p. 338).

It is a perennial problem of such philosophically oriented studies that they often seem overly general and disconnected from specific instances and problems. In his defense, Jensen is arguing specifically for the value of such general studies, but nonetheless it remains true that a salting of specific instances and applications makes any such text both more readable and more comprehensible.

Jensen appears to have struggled somewhat with the overall organization of the work. There is so much ground covered and so many inter-related issues that self-referentiality is problematic. It is disappointing in places that the author says 'as discussed above', without giving his readers the benefit of a page reference to that discussion. Some explanations (for example, of the various types of relativism) come so far into the on-going discussion of the term that some of their value is lost. Only when I reorganized my notes on the whole volume and brought together topically related claims from disparate chapters did I more fully appreciate Jensen's arguments. Nonetheless, the effort required to digest the work as a whole was finally well-spent.

Jensen's detailed knowledge and understanding of his precursors in the philosophical analysis of religion and its study makes for a very rich and informative text and a particularly useful bibliography. His application of a 'benevolent reading' and a 'hermeneutics of benevolent restoration' (p. 15 and 73) of some of the inceptors of phenomenology indicates at least some degree of a pendulum swing from a critical and destructive to a more appreciative and constructive model of scholarship. Jensen speaks of a 'Principle of Charity' derived from the work of Donald Davidson and of 'interpretational generosity' (p. 334). This principle 'is not ... an ethical standard or a heuristic device, but it is a fundamental premise, the basic condition of the possibility of interpretation, as it proceeds from the axiom that all utterances, to be meaningful, must comply with coherent sets of belief and depend ... on the existence of a

fundamentally rational pattern' (p. 281-82, quoting Davidson, *The Structure and Content of Truth*, *Journal of Philosophy* 87/6, 1990, 320). 'In order to understand anything at all ... we are under an obligation [to] impute to actors and their discourses some contextual form of rationality' (p. 371). In conjunction with this, Jensen is repeatedly insistent that standards of criticism, especially radical self-criticism, must not be relaxed. These are very productive methodological suggestions, applicable to both primary sources and to the history of the study of religion. However, it is not for that reason alone that the reader may become more informed, knowledgeable, and even to some possible extent wiser, for this *wissenschaftliche* volume, which should constitute a reference work for many years to come.

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