

What Is Religion? by Jeppe Sinding Jensen, Routledge, 2014. 186pp., Hb. \$80.00, ISBN-13: 9781844657582; Pb. 19.95, ISBN-13: 9781844657599.

Reviewed by Leonardo Ambasciano, Independent researcher, leonardo.ambasciano@gmail.com

Keywords
Cognitive Science of Religion, Religious Studies

Over the course of the past century, defining religion proved to be the quintessential Sisyphean task for humanities and social sciences alike. A mind-boggling, tireless flux of scholars had been joining the trustful ranks of the definitional army at least since the very inception of the modern academy. Alas, no agreement was ever reached. In the phenomenological *Religionswissenschaft*, the non-agreement itself became a sort of tacit agreement. As Hans H. Penner and Edward A. Yonan showed in their article *Is a Science of Religion Possible?* (1972), a bewildering array of definitions was used as a preventive strategy to immunize from criticism the special status conferred to religion, which was deemed at the same time absorptive, impermeable and ontologically different from ordinary experience. Paradoxically, a fierce antireductionism was reputed a necessary condition for the existence of history of religions as an academic discipline. During the last thirty years, however, scholars have become gradually aware that religion cannot be considered anymore the *sui generis*, monolithic, coherent, overarching concept that it was once assumed to be. Thanks to the poststructuralist, evolutionary and cognitive turns, today we are better equipped than ever to provide a satisfying answer to the Gordian knot that has baffled generations of scholars: what is religion?

This question provides both the starting point and the title of Jeppe Sinding Jensen's new volume, in which the author skilfully navigates the *mare magnum* of religious academic historiography with the compass firmly set on the contemporary cognitive science of religion (CSR henceforth). Inspired by the compartmental approach advocated by Ann Taves' 2009 *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Jensen, reader in the *Department for Culture and Society* and a research associate at MINDLab (both based at Aarhus University, Denmark), resolves the definitional conundrum thanks to a deconstruction of the concept of religion into smaller, manageable and interdisciplinary units. Hence, religion is a "term referring to a concept and not any "given" fact" (1), by which scholars study the interactions between *e-religion* (external, i.e. social or individual behaviours) and *i-religion* (internal, i.e. mental mechanisms). These two components are the causal and caused factors in a complex system of building blocks which binds

together potentially heterogeneous behaviours and beliefs while contextually trying to make sense of them: “There does not seem to be more to religion than that. We are left with social acts and facts (which are ultimately made of mental acts and facts), and so with religion in “i-” or “e-” versions. Without mental facts, there would probably not be any social facts” (42). Jensen also asserts that the academic concept of religion is theory-dependent, namely that it hinges on previous theoretically embedded assumptions (2).

This point is explored in the *Introduction*, where an intriguing selection of five scholars’ definitional proposals is presented (Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, Paul Tillich, Clifford Geertz, Pascal Boyer), each one significantly tied to a specific intellectual turn (respectively, functional, psychoanalytic, theologico-existentialist, anthropologico-linguistic and cognitive). Strongly refusing any theological interference, but unwilling to renounce meaning as a semiotic category of religious critical enquiry (cf. 66), Jensen builds up his own stipulative and polythetic definition: religion is composed by “semantic and cognitive networks comprising ideas, behaviours and institutions in relation to counter-intuitive superhuman agents, objects and posits” (8).

The following chapter is dedicated to *A Very Short History of the Idea of Religion*, where Jensen covers the historical development of the scholarly and critical investigations about the essence and role of religion. From Descartes to Pascal Boyer, from Marx to evolutionary psychology, the intellectual landscape is finely contoured and clearly explained. A significant part of the chapter highlights the fact that scholarly religious criticisms paved the way for a theological-free, scientific study and that critics of religion/s always existed in every historical society. At the end of the historical résumé, “what is religion?” changes into another question, i.e. “who do you ask?” (37).

Types and Elements of Religion sets up the intellectual gears that are used in the next three sections. At a fundamental level, the role of imagination and cognitive blending is underscored as a pivotal element in the creation of collectively shared and externally downloaded symbolic cultures (though the equivalence between Paleolithic cultures and current “aboriginal cultures,” 45, quoted from evolutionary psychologist Merlin Donald, is unwarranted and unsupported). The gap between *e-religion* and *i-religion* is bridged by the adoption of philosopher John R. Searle’s theories of collective intentionality and constitutive rules which support institutional facts and social institutions (43). What follows is a painstaking list of eleven religious dichotomies and four main kinds of theoretical approach (intellectualist, symbolist, existentialist, cognitivist). This taxonomic overabundance is exemplified by the motto that “there is no periodic table for elements of religion” (50).

Accordingly, the following three chapters, dedicated respectively to beliefs, practices and institutions, present a myriad of descriptions, tables and schemes which correctly reject any aprioristical label but nonetheless end up with flooding the explanatory panorama. This decision is justified as “an attempt to produce an up-to-date version of [previous] classificatory phenomenologies of religion” (78), using neurocognitive studies to revive and correct the traditional hermeneutics based on self-reports about subjective experiences (*ibidem*). Cognitive studies are also recalled to refresh other humanistic questions. For instance, the most recent explorations on morality as a universal, evolutionary heritage in part shared with other animals (and primates in particular) conduct Jensen to underscore the relevance of religious and moral “symbolic social systems” as the peculiar semiotic glue between human sociality and culture/s (151). One of the most striking characteristics that stands out in these three chapters is the remarkable space given to the socio-historical role of power and authority (often neglected in CSR) in discussions and definitions of myth (92), ritual (101) and social institutions (133). *Cui bono?* (“to the benefit of whom?”) emerges as the ultimate question when dealing with religious materials (122).

The penultimate chapter is entirely dedicated to *Religion Today: Modernity, Postmodernity and Secularization* and, as it stands, represents perhaps the weakest part of the book. The descriptions of contemporary processes of religious *bricolage* and mythmaking in society, institutions and politics is accompanied by the problematic idea of the consciously disguised or unconscious resistance of mythical elements in secularized societies (166). The latter point seems to neglect the hardwired appeal of certain themes and it is strangely at odds with the rest of the book—in particular with the existence of universal cognitive mechanisms underpinning both religious and non-religious beliefs and behaviours – thus complicating the analysis by giving myth a sort of prestigious primacy. Secondly, in the wake of the first Axial Age (a definition originally coined by German philosopher Karl Jaspers to describe the apparent simultaneous flourishing of classical Eurasian civilizations around c. 500 BCE, recently re-adopted by sociologist Robert N. Bellah), Jensen identifies a second Axial Age in the Protestant Reformation, with the religious cooptation of printing technology (167), and foresees a third, digital Axial Age, when «Electronic media will, not least, offer new possibilities of religious affirmation as well as of religious criticism» (168). Given that the Axial Age is a much debated term in itself, one can easily question the heuristic usefulness of such an axial multiplication. Besides that, the following discussion is positively biased towards religious democratization. Hazardous as every historical forecast is, Jensen’s prevision seems to take for granted the existence of the complex system shaped by media technol-

ogy and the science that made it possible (not to mention democracy). Anyway, these cultural elements might be lost, or might be equally used in an antidemocratic way, as brilliantly noted in Robert N. McCauley's book *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not* (2011).

The *Brief Conclusion* offers a summary of the contents, contextualises the book in Jensen's previous academic production, and defends the adopted (neo) phenomenological approach: "religion is not one "thing"; rather "it" (the general abstract category) and they (religious traditions) are composed of many "things" in varying proportions" (169) and, as the author continues, it is the duty of a "typological phenomenology of religion to identify, describe, analyse, interpret, explain and understand these 'things' and their combinations and so it forms the backbone of the study of all religions and of religion *in general*, formerly also known as the academic discipline of *comparative religion*" (169). Additionally, Jensen provides a list of universals found in all religions, showing that religion *per se* is not an unbreakable, "primitive notion": "imagination, experience, intentionality, narrative, discourse, classification, cognitive governance, emotion regulation, action, behaviour, roles, social control, authority, institutions, power, economies, exchanges, reciprocity, sociality and world-making" (171).

What Is Religion? is probably one of the best and most updated introductory textbooks on religious studies currently available, but its most basic theoretical commitment to phenomenology remains problematic. In 1972, Penner and Yonan decried the phenomenological and hermeneutical trends as vague or tautologically useless, highlighting that only a profound epistemological renewal could have made *Verstehen* ("understanding") meaningful (Penner and Yonan 1972, 133). Jensen has showed that CSR, or at least the research led by the Aarhus school, can provide such a basis. Yet, the unchaining of religious phenomenology from the shackles of the *sui generis* theological and supernatural viewpoints might bring about the unexpected retrieval of some obsolete or falsified scholarship. Terms and their histories matter and, as Jensen himself notes, phenomenology is hardly a univocal method (76 ff., 169). Are we really sure that what has emerged from poststructuralism and CSR can fit into the (old) phenomenological box/es in a sufficient manner to justify the retention of the label? Do we really need a cognitively readjusted neophenomenological approach to make sense of *e-religion* and *i-religion*? Despite Jensen's best efforts, the answers remain unsettled.

References

- McCauley, Robert N. 2011. *Why Religion Is Natural and Science Is Not*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Penner, Hans H. and Edward A. Yonan. 1972. "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" *The Journal of Religion* 52(2): 107–133.
- Taves, Ann. 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.