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Jepppe Sinding Jensen

*A Point by Point Response to Don Wiebe: A Manifesto for the Scientific Study of Religion*

The Manifesto

1. “Religion” is used to designate an object of study (the subject matter) of a discipline in the modern university variously designated, among other appellations, “religious studies,” “study of religion,” “the academic study of religion,” “science of religion.”

JSJ: ‘Subject matter’ yes, as the stuff that scholars look at. However, and more important, what is the ‘theoretical object’ (of any study...)? For instance, C.G. Jung studied myths as his subject matter but the theoretical object, i.e., what he used the study of myths *for*, was theorizing about the archetypes and the collective subconscious. As a subject matter, religions is not ‘just there’, is must be imagined; scholars need theory (im-or explicit) to make up the ‘subject matter’. It is a somewhat circular affair, but that is how it is with humanities’ ‘stuff’ - it is highly theory-dependent. (Jensen 2009)

2. But “religion” is simply an abstract noun; it is not an empirical category that has a specifiable reference range signifying an actual reality in the world. The concept is therefore of little analytical value with respect to establishing the boundaries of a scientific enterprise or discipline.

JSJ: No, on the contrary, a concept carries all the analytical value as concepts are always informed by theory(ies) - if concepts were without theoretical ‘gravity’ then they would be vacuous and have no referential ‘grasp’. Similarly, and self-evidently, categories are not empirical, they are as abstract as concepts, but they do refer / point to objects in the world. Thus, the concept of religion is crucial for ‘establishing the boundaries...’. My own recognition of the value of Schilbrack’s work is laid out in a comprehensive review (Jensen 2016)

3. The word/concept of religion, however, is widely used in a metaphysical sense within the university community to refer to claims about extraordinary (transcendent) agents and realities not (entirely) explicable within the categorical frame of the natural and social sciences and is used to

“establish” the boundaries for an extra-scientific study of them by, among others, philosophers and theologians.

JSJ: The concept(s) of religion is truly a playground for category mistakes: words may induce the erroneous sense that they refer to objects. Wittgenstein once said that it is our language, which mislead us to think that we can talk about consciousness as we talk about tomatoes (analogous to A. N. Whitehead’s ‘the fallacy of misplaced concreteness’). Here, the mistake consists in claiming that because religions often refer (ultimately) to nebulous entities then religion is itself ‘mysterious’. It is not - ‘it’ is a conglomerate of human behaviors. Period.

4. The wide divergence of scholarly opinion in the field as to the nature of its subject matter suggests that the quest for definition of “religion” is misconceived and ultimately futile, substituting a dispute over words to the neglect of dealing with real problems.

JSJ: Any definition reflects a theory - a definition is a theory in its shortest possible form. No definition is theory-free. Try defining ‘sacrifice’ without the aid of Homer, W. Robertson Smith, Marcel Mauss, Stanley J. Tambiah, R. Girard, P. Bourdieu (etc.)

5. Beliefs and practices - on an individual and/or institutional level - legitimated by reference to culturally postulated superhuman or supernatural agents and realities may reasonably be described as “religious” phenomena.

JSJ: Agree. The institutional level, the ‘cultural posits’... are most salient but not always recognized as such. (Jensen 2020: 120-138)

6. Religious beliefs and practices as social realities are isomorphic with other human behaviors related to mundane economic, political, cultural, and other social practices that are inter-subjectively available for examination and analysis, and can, therefore, establish the boundaries of a scientific discipline for their study.

JSJ: Precisely, as good instances, take politics, economy, social architectures, music, cuisine and traditional lore - they are all ‘composed’ and the results of human transactions and transformations

where the 'stuff-of-the-world' is imbued with value and importance and so becomes composite life-worlds. Such social realities should be studied with isomorphic methods and theories. No special, privileged or esoteric knowledge is required. Insiders may hide 'secret knowledge' but they pass it on among themselves in public language, symbols and actions that may as well provide the materials for outsiders' analysis when available (Jensen 2015)

7. The objective of such a scientific study is simply to obtain and disseminate, empirical, explanatory, and theoretical knowledge about such religious phenomena (including theological and other types of systematic religious thought).

JSJ: Agree - all kinds of inter-subjectively testable knowledge are welcomed and surely make the study of religion a never-ending (and fallibilistic) project, which is the nature of all scientific endeavor.

8. "Scientific knowledge" is objective in the sense that it can be expressed in coherent propositional claims about the world and states of affairs in the world that are testable against inter-subjectively available data. The intersubjective testability of scientific claims significantly mitigates the cultural embeddedness of the natural and (to a lesser extent) the social sciences. The sciences, therefore, are not equally embedded in (and committed to) political, cultural, moral, religious or other ideological concerns that characterize other types of epistemic claims.

JSJ: Methodological naturalism rests on such commonalities as empirical verifiability and falsifiability - many topics (ideas, discourse, practice and institutions) in religious worlds do not respect either.

9. The objective of such a scientific study is also to improve the tools, techniques, and methods used in generating such knowledge. Though there is no such thing as guaranteeing the truth of scientific claims, there are established methods in the sciences that amount to more than mere rhetorical skills, making the sciences "epistemologically distinguishable" from other types of knowledge claims (Haack 1998: 94).

JSJ: And the sciences (including the human and social) are a motley crew. To help escape the conundrum John Dupré advocated a ‘pluralistic epistemology’ with ‘promiscuous realism’ concerning the different kinds of ‘epistemic virtues’ that various sciences espouse (this being one of the most thoughtful books I ever read). He suggested:

...that we try to replace the kind of epistemology that unites pure descriptivism and scientific apologetics with something more like a virtue epistemology [virtues such as] sensitivity to empirical fact, plausible background assumptions, coherence with other things we know, exposure to criticism from the widest variety of sources (Dupré 1993, 221-243).

The traditional view of the hierarchy of the sciences with physics as the pinnacle seems to need recalibrating. For instance, as Dupré notes, literary criticism may turn out to be more empirical than macro-economics or theoretical ecology (243).

10. The sciences, therefore, appropriately set the benchmark for knowledge claims about religious phenomena.

JSJ: Again, let us be careful about the term ‘sciences’ - in standard English the term refers to and connotes measurable, quantifiable, replicable and unfortunately leaves ‘the epistemic aptitudes of the humanities’ in the dark (Wierzbicka 2011). In 2010 the American Anthropological Association dropped the term ‘science’ from its *Long-Range Plan*. That move sparked a long controversy in the association. How the study of religion would consider itself in this regard, no one knows. In a continental European perspective, leaning of such notions as ‘Wissenschaft’ or ‘les sciences humaines’, the study of ancient Buddhist text would obviously be considered highly scientific - it displays many epistemic virtues. At the time of E. B. Tylor, anthropology was introduced as a ‘science of culture’. The Anglophone vocabulary since shifted the meaning of ‘science’ - but such unintended and normative linguistic hegemony should be questioned.

11. This commits the scientific student of religion to espousing a methodological naturalism in seeking to explain and theorize religious phenomena, to account for religion reductionistically, from an etic rather than from an emic standpoint.

JSJ: Anything studied in the humanities ultimately reduces to methodological naturalism, that is, to thoughts, ideas, imaginations, actions and all kinds of human behaviors. Even the strangest confabulations are made or had by humans and may be studied in methodological individualist modes or, when in groups, through collectivist methodologies and social ontologies. (Jensen 2016a) Nor is reduction always a necessary move, semantics need (or can) not be ‘reduced’ to anything more meaningful (Jensen 2004).

12. Therefore, the appropriate enterprise for explaining and theorizing religious thought and behavior in the context of the modern university is the scientific study of religion.

JSJ: Agree, and notice that ‘modern’ literally and in philosophical parlance normally means the elimination of tradition and transcendental ‘other-wordly’ authority. Perhaps it is time to develop a workable philosophy of science for the study of religion?

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