

Jan-Olav Henriksen. *Religious Pluralism and Pragmatist Theology: Openness and Resistance.* Brill 2019. 284 pp. \$64.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9789004412323).

Jan-Olav Henriksen's *Religious Pluralism and Pragmatist Theology* is a well-researched book. It will reward readers interested in pragmatic points of contact in religion, particularly in theological and philosophical discussions of faith. Henriksen is Professor of Contemporary Religion at Agder University, Kristiansand, Norway, and Professor of Philosophy of Religion at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society in Oslo, Norway.

After a brief acknowledgement and introduction, the primary portion of the book is composed of ten chapters of varying length. Each chapter is annotated with useful footnotes. The body of the book is followed by an epilogue, bibliography, and both author and subject indices.

The 'Introduction' clearly lays out the thesis of the book. Henriksen's goal is to frame 'religions as symbolically mediated clusters of practices that provide means for orientation, transformation, and reflection' (1). In so doing, all religions function in ways that are both distinct from and similar to each other. He further argues that religions can be framed pragmatically, in so far as they are part of a world that is 'constantly open to change ... with categories that are not fixed or pre-determined' (15). None of which is to suggest that the relationship between religions is uncomplicated. In the first chapter, 'The Other: Hermeneutics of Recognition,' Henriksen grapples with how to respectfully recognize other faith traditions while also cherishing one's own spiritual identity. Here, as elsewhere, he promotes a pragmatic insistence that '*a priori* theorizing' should be resisted (22). Instead, a spirit of *agape*, one that embraces both openness and recognition, should be promoted (37).

A further consideration relates to the nature of religion itself. In 'What Makes a Religion? Experience and Semiosis,' Henriksen conceptualizes religion as an *experience* that impacts 'our mode of being in the world in a way that mere everyday occurrences do not' (43). He argues against mystical explanations and instead grounds his approach in a pragmatic consideration of contexts wherein religion is 'interrelated with a variety of different conditions for human life' (46). Borrowing from Peirce, Henriksen further argues for a *contingent* approach to religions that admits of 'no direct access to any divine or ultimate reality' (51). The result is a form of humility whereby one recognizes all religious yearnings as fundamentally purpose-driven, as attempts by humans to make sense of their lives and their world.

In 'A Basis for Comparison? On "Religious Experience" as Universals or Particulars,' Henriksen extends this thinking to the act of comparing religions. Here again, he argues for a pragmatic *a posteriori* approach, where experiences can be discussed without reducing all religions to some pre-existing universal standard (66). 'Who is the Other? Categories for Relationships Revisited' provides a more granular version of the previous chapter, with Henriksen noting the impact that framing has for interacting with members of another faith tradition. While *stranger*, *foreigner*, and *other* can hamper interreligious connection, conceptualizing people as *neighbor*, *relative* and *friend* can move them closer together. This framing is done pragmatically, based on '*historical and contextual considerations*' that advances inclusion and pluralism while reducing appeals to 'sameness' (80; 78).

Chapter five, 'The Stuff of Religions: Dealing with the Human Condition,' operates as a catalog of *phenomena* and *material conditions* that are of religious significance. The former—including conceptualizations of life and death, vulnerability and health, among others—function to denote what makes life worth living. While these phenomena are common, how religions recognize

and contextualize them can vary greatly (100). The latter—including sites of worship and sacred texts—are much the same, sharing commonalities and variations that mark religions as similar and yet distinct. Moreover, Henriksen notes these phenomena and conditions are part of the human condition more generally, orientating people to ‘what matters’ while promoting transformations that hopefully ‘make human life better’ (100). In some ways, ‘Salvation in the Context of Religious Practices’ operates as a postscript to the aforementioned chapter. Henriksen describes salvation in decidedly pragmatic terms. In his telling, one that leans on the work of William James, it is a solution to problems. While it is conceived as being connected to ‘higher powers,’ he is quick to remind readers that salvation-as-solution is ‘mediated by practices in which others are involved’ with ‘actual relevance for life in the present’ (123; 125). He addresses two approaches to salvation. The first, derived from the sociology of religion, argues that people turn to religion ‘to overcome the predicaments of life’ over which they lack control (129). The second, a theological approach, recognizes that religious views of salvation differ. The pragmatic resolution to this quandary returns to pluralism; it is a recognition that ‘humans are in need of different modes of salvation’ consonant with the contextual conditions of the existence (141).

The next three chapters transform the theoretical lessons from previous discussions into practical observations—suggestions regarding a pluralistic approach to interreligious understanding. ‘Truth and Religious Orientations,’ referencing theologian Werner Jeanrond, anchors the search for religious truth to a desire ‘to know,’ ‘to test,’ and ‘to know more deeply, and if appropriate, also differently’ (153). Given this pursuit, a priori assertions are avoided. In their place, Henriksen stresses *dialogue*, whereby one can present their orientation to truth while also coming to understand and respect the viewpoint of others (183-185). ‘Conflict and the Common Good’ places religion within sociopolitical contexts. Arguing against blasé assertions about religion as a justification for violence, Henriksen instead suggests that it is rarely, if ever, an ‘independent variable’ (190). The solution is a variation on the dialogue discussed in the previous chapter, ‘on developing institutions in society that acknowledge the importance of religion in people’s lives’ (209). ‘Coming Together in Reasoning Practice’ thus provides a potential model for how this sort of communication might occur. Henriksen endorses *Scriptural Reasoning* (SR), which, by virtue of its features, helps to reduce binary thinking. Framed with reference to Peirce, such reasoning can serve a ‘restorative’ function (215-216). In what sense? By fostering openness to multiple truths and using longstanding faith traditions as a mechanism for ‘potential reform’ in contemporary society (225).

In the epilogue, ‘Plurality and Unity: Two Metaphors for the Future of Religions,’ Henriksen strikes an optimistic note. He provides several metaphors consonant with a pluralistic approach to religion. To him, religion is like a music score where we see ‘religious traditions played in multiple ways’ (254), or a play that ‘requires the self to take on a specific role or character’ (255). Religions can also be conceived as functioning like a university, where decidedly different departments and colleges nonetheless work together ‘in practices of learning and in the pursuit of truth’ (256).

Henriksen is clearly speaking to a religious audience. Nonetheless, he makes a number of learned arguments that, while supporting matters of faith, also embrace pragmatism specifically and philosophy more generally. One important historical matter deserves note. While pragmatism is often framed as a humanist tradition with limited points of religious contact, Henriksen highlights how its early proponents often supported notions of spirituality. Another dichotomy that Henriksen attempts to destabilize relates to questions of faith and science. Simply put, he urges that those two areas can operate as complimentary parts of human experience (156).

There are, of course, questions that can be raised if one approaches this book from a respectfully secular viewpoint. One intriguing issue arises in Henriksen’s discussion of God in chapter ten,

‘The Trinitarian God and the Diversity of Experiences with Religion.’ While noting that ‘God is revealed through specific human *practices*’ (245), he goes on to quote biochemist and theologian Arthur Robert Peacock: ‘God is best conceived as the circumambient Reality enclosing all existing entities, structures, and processes; and as operating in and through all while being more than all’ (246). Observations such as this, while essential to any number of religious arguments, also end up creating an odd juxtaposition when viewed from a pragmatic perspective. To wit, this and other comments suggest the trappings of British Idealism, a strain of philosophy that several first-generation pragmatists challenged near the turn of the previous century. Another issue is an insistence made at several points in the book that, while embracing a firmly Christian perspective, Henriksen is also endorsing ‘post-colonial and post-imperialist’ positions (30). The specifics of that stance remain largely implicit. There are also some ambiguities in his characterizations of other faith traditions and, on occasion, secular society (212-215). That said, Henriksen’s suggestion of SR is both pragmatic in disposition and pluralistic in approaching interfaith dialogue in an increasingly secular society.

Religious Pluralism is recommended on a variety of levels. By embracing pragmatism, it opens up points of contact for members of different faith traditions. At the same time, the book reminds readers of the compelling links between philosophy and theology. Finally, it offers up an implicit argument for bridging divides between those who believe and those who do not. On any or all of those levels, Henriksen’s book will reward readers so inclined to reflect on and reconsider their own assumptions.

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