

MYTH, RITUAL & THE SACRED

Phenomenology of Religion

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1 Introduction

This first Brief Study discusses the approach to the study of religion as proposed by Friedrich Streng and Norman Habel.¹ In the light of this methodological discussion I will also look at the description of the Ainu Bear Sacrifice by John Batchelor.

2 Normal Habel

Norman Habel proposes a phenomenological approach to the study of religion. One aspect of phenomenology of religion is the sympathetic study of religious phenomena, implying that one should not pass judgement on the truth of a particular set of beliefs.² Eric Sharpe proposes in his article *The Phenomenology of Religion* three possible attitudes towards religion as a subject of study.³

- The simplest solution to the problem according to Sharpe is to keep well clear of all religion except one's own;
- The second attitude is being agnostic about any truth regarding all religions as essentially human phenomena;

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¹Normal Habel, Michael O'Donoghue, and Marion Maddox, *Myth, ritual and the sacred. Introducing the phenomena of religion*, (Underdale: University of South Australia, 1993) and Friedrich Streng, C Lloyd, and J Allen, *Ways of being religious*, (New York: Englewood Cliffs, 1973).

²Habel, O'Donoghue, and Maddox (1993).

³Eric Sharpe, 'The phenomenology of religion', *Learning for living* 15 (1975):1.

- The third attitude regards all religions as actually or potentially sources of knowledge.

Sharpe concludes that virtually all modern phenomenologists adhere to the second or third attitude. The phenomenological approach in religion studies does not seek to explain the origin of religion in any way, but rather to describe the religion from an internal point of view. ‘The devotee is always right’, is according to Habel an important rule of thumb for phenomenological research of religion. Phenomenology of religion describes religious phenomena in terms consistent with the orientation of the worshippers, a method consistent with current hermeneutical trends in humanities. The phenomenology of religion looks at religion as being made up of different components. It is by both identifying the different components within religions and looking at these across traditions that an understanding of them can be gained.

3 Friedrich Streng

The text by Streng describes a method for researching different religions. The central definition for religion used by Streng in this text is religion a means toward ultimate transformation.⁴ The method described by Streng — a functional definition.⁵ — basically tries to answer the question of how a religion functions in life or society.

Streng gives some practical suggestions for locating the elements of a structure in religion. The first rule is to assume that the religious data that you are observing has meaning for the believer. The researcher is to ask a question of the data regarding the intention of the activities.

Functional approaches towards religion have, according to Moore and Habel, two basic problems.⁶ Firstly, functional definitions are not helpful in isolating and selecting the necessary content and data because they have not clarified what is to count as religion and what is not.

The second problem with functional definitions is that they attempt to give explanations of religion from the outside without conceding the possibility of internal explanations from the believers perspective. There is no particularly compelling

⁴Streng, Lloyd, and Allen (1973).

⁵B. Moore and N. Habel, *On religion related to education*, (Adelaide: SACAE, 1982).

⁶Ibid.

reason for assuming that the only adequate explanations of religious phenomena are from outside the structure of religion.

4 The Ainu Bear Sacrifice

This account, written by John Batchelor, describes the Ainu people from northern Japan and their most important ritual, the bear sacrifice. In this ritual, a bear cub is caught and kept in captivity for several years. The animal is thereupon sacrificed during a special ritual. John Batchelor was an English missionary who lived among the Ainu for several decades around the turn of the twentieth century, Batchelor carefully recorded the people's folklore even as he proselytized the Christian faith.⁷

The description of the Ainu Bear Sacrifice by Batchelor is not very sympathetic towards the Ainu believers. He refers to the ritual as a 'cruel and barbarous feast' and refers to the sacrificial bear as 'the poor beast' or 'the poor brute'. Batchelor does not attempt to explain the ritual in a broader context and he passes moral judgment upon the believers. The reason for this lack of understanding lies probably in the fact that the main reason for Batchelor's presence on the island was not to study the culture of the Ainu, but the convert them to the Christian faith.

His study does not fit in the phenomenological framework of religion studies, nor can his description of the Bear Sacrifice be called a functionalist approach. Batchelor's study is very counterproductive because of the moral prejudice towards the Ainu and the lack of internal perspective.

5 Conclusion

The definition of religion is a complicated subject. Scientists are always seeking to find ways to tame chaotic reality and contain it in simple terms and theories. This struggle becomes clear when reading the attempts of scholars to define the term religion. The phenomenological approach towards the study of religion attempts to escape from this dilemma by not pinning religion down to a certain function or essence, but to look at religion as it appears to the researcher. A disadvantage of the phenomenological approach however is that it offers no explanation of religious phenomena in any way, but focuses instead on its appearance.

⁷Nova Online, *Island of spirits*, 1999 (URL: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/hokkaido/>).

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