BENSON SALER, “CONCEPTUALISING RELIGION”

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Review article


In this book Saler focuses his attention on the problems attending the definition of religion in various academic discourses. “Religion,” he argues, is a (Western) folk-category that requires clarification if it is to become an analytically useful category which is able to facilitate transcultural research and understanding (1). He quite rightly notes, however, that “[e]lecting a conceptualization of religion that is neither intellectually simplistic nor transculturally inappropriate is not a simple matter” (74). What is needed, he insists, is a notion of religion which allows the anthropologists, (or ethnographers, or students of religion), to transcend the professionally approbated “domains of reality” or “realms of discourse” within which they operate to attain some understanding of “the other,” (i.e., the native), who is being studied and who, therefore, by virtue of the possession of different language-games and discourses, transcends the scientists/scholars. And it is the exploration of the conceptual options available to scientists and other scholars in search of a definition of religion that will assist in bridging, at least to some degree, the perspectival gap between the anthropologists (and other interested students of religion) and natives to which Saler applies himself here.

Saler, in the Introduction, begins his exploration of those conceptual options regarding “religion” by contrasting essentialist and nominalist approaches to the task of definition which lead, respectively, to the use of digital and analogue scales in representing religion(s). The latter he suggests are preferable since “definitions” of religion deriving from an analogue approach are unbounded and therefore, as he argues in chapter 7, more likely to be of assistance in bridging “the gap between ‘immanent anthropologists’ and ‘transcendent natives’” (25).

In chapters 1 and 2 Saler treats a variety of matters related to the ques-
tion of the definition, whether positively or negatively so, and pays particular attention to the role of the notion of the transcendent. Though recognizing the force of arguments against the use of the notion of religion, like those of W.C. Smith for example,1 Saler points out that anthropologists still nevertheless "appear to favor, on general principles, refining or reforming well used categories," rather than simply dropping them (69). He proceeds then to argue that, after positing need for an explicit definition, one not simply provide a definition of religion but also show how it can be used productively (85).

At the end of chapter two Saler gives notice that he will advocate the rejection of traditional monothetic definitions—along with their essentialists commitments—"in favor of a family resemblance approach to the category religion" (85), but he still, nevertheless, reviews the nature and value of various types of monothetic definitions in chapters 3 and 4 in order to show their deficiencies as tools for anthropological understanding of the anthropological data. Their fundamental problem, according to Saler, is that they attempt to provide wholly unambiguous boundaries to the notion so that religious phenomena will be able to be easily sorted out from non-religious phenomena. That constitutes a problem because, he claims, borderline cases emerge which cannot be settled by the definition adopted. As he puts it, "The phenomena commonly comprehended by applications of the word "religion" are too complex and variable, and often too enmeshed with other phenomena in a larger universe, to be confined analytically within sharp, impermeable boundaries" (197). If, however, we do not use "religion" as designating some abstract, universal meaning which we then conflate with some supposed "reality in the world," Saler thinks the word can be put to fruitful use by anthropologists.

In the final three chapters of the book (chapter 5, 6, and 7) Saler attempts to provide an alternative way of putting the notion of religion to use. In chapter five he argues that a multi-factorial approach to conceptualizing religion can be of enormous benefit to the anthropologist. A polythetic notion of religion that would emerge from such an approach to definition, he then argues, could be very fruitfully employed in clearly delimited areas in the study of religions. "Where, for instance," he writes, "we suppose that we can identify phenomenal entities, and where we initially hypothesize that those entities in some sense or other pertain to a group, treating them as if they were denota of a classification and comparing them multidimensionally would seem to be methodologically sound in testing our initial hypothesis and perhaps in considering others" (194-195). The study of Hinduism, he suggests as an example, might well