

## Book Review: Jan-Olav Henriksen, Christianity as Distinct Practices: A Complicated Relationship (T&T Clark, 2019)

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Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Christianity as Distinct Practices: a Complicated Relationship*. London:

T&T Clark, 2019; vii + 206pp; 978-0-68327-4; £85.00 hbk.

Henriksen begins this book with a problem, which is that Christianity (and religion in general) has been perceived, both within the academy and society at large, as primarily an intellectual undertaking, whereas it should more properly be considered as ‘a cluster of practices that taken together manifest a distinct historically and contextually shaped mode of being in the world’ (p. 1). These practices are mediated through the interplay between the religious tradition (understood as primarily instantiated through, and communicated by, practices); the communities that are themselves both defined by and instantiate such practices; and the individual actor or religious practitioner. Tradition is less a canon of belief or orthodoxy than ‘a chain of memory’: generations of conventional ways of ordering and expressing faith through various practices.

Such a development will be familiar to scholars of religion who locate themselves within anthropological, phenomenological traditions, or who identify material cultures as significant milieux in which religion takes place, or practical and liberationist theologians who have come to regard the praxis of the faithful as the Alpha and Omega of theological understanding. Increasingly, too, scholars have turned their attention to ways in which practices of everyday life – belonging as much to spheres marked ‘secular’ as those conventionally ‘spiritual’ – might be deemed in some way religious. Henriksen’s purpose in this book is to attempt to articulate what this might mean from and for the perspective of the philosophy of religion. He is also concerned to address what such attention to the practices of faith might mean to questions of religious pluralism and the relative truth-claims of different traditions. What might it mean for a religious community to understand

itself as 'distinctive': not necessarily superior to others, but nevertheless possessing certain defining characteristics and norms?

In the second half of the book, therefore, Henriksen's analysis takes a more theological direction, as he argues that the distinctive character of Christianity is not determined by philosophical or doctrinal belief but by virtue of its focal practices, which are centred on what Henriksen terms the 'Jesus story'. This serves as the central imperative or framework of meaning around which a range of practices are orientated and regulated. This focus on practice requires the acknowledgement of a degree of plurality and contextuality, since communities of practice will take a diversity of forms, depending on how they negotiate their immediate context in light of inherited conventions and norms. Many of these will be shared across cultures and traditions, and so this is implicitly a plea for religious tolerance and to regard diversity – both within and between traditions – as 'expression[s] of the richness of resources from which humans draw when they engage with the world' (p. 6).

As Henriksen acknowledges, there will be those who object to the way in which, by venturing a theological interpretation of Christian practice, he has crossed the boundary between the descriptive and the normative. This is something that is often frowned upon in many academic circles by those who prefer to maintain the disciplinary demarcations between religious studies (understood as phenomenological and objective) and theology (confessional and subjective). Yet this may be seen as another manifestation of the very binary between contemplation and action, theory and practice, that Henriksen wishes to deconstruct. While Henriksen is not unique amongst contemporary scholars in regarding 'religion as practice' and 'theology as practical', it is his attempt to forge connections between the two and to pursue the logic of a philosophical reading of religion as practice

through to a theological reading of the distinctive qualities of Christian practices that is of particular significance.

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