

Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach, Timothy Jenkins, Berghahn Books 1999 (1-57181-769-7), pp. xv + 256, £14.50

The idea of an empirical study of religion in England will conjure up for many a vision of tables of statistics charting the decline (or, by some numerical trickery, the stability) of church attendance or of professions of religious belief—material which might be considered practically interesting, theologically all but irrelevant. In this book, Timothy Jenkins rejects such an approach as one which, by cramming the denatured and standardised empirical features of religion into the uniformly countable boxes of a foreign set of categories, misses the very nature of the facts it is trying to convey. His alternative, an ethnographic approach to religion in English everyday life, is a fascinating and thought-provoking attempt to show how religion is inextricably situated in the complexity of social life, within the particular configurations of local practice and symbols. His argument is of considerable theological significance.

The heart of the book is a detailed and engaging study of the ‘Kingswood Whit Walk’, a procession organised by the churches in a working-class suburb of East Bristol, in which some three thousand active participants march, watched by many thousands more on the pavements. This is supplemented by a shorter study of Comberton, a small village in Cambridgeshire, focusing on the role which different groups of villagers play in the life of the village and of the parish church. Two other essays and an introduction complete the package.

Jenkins shows that, in order to account for the resistances which both the Comberton and Kingswood situations put up to more straightforward accounts, one must conceptualise the social life within which each is embedded as an ‘economy of fantasies’. He shows that different groups of people in each situation employ different ways of making sense of the world, affecting the way in which they make distinctions between themselves and other

groups, the kinds of behaviour which they deem appropriate or possible, the kinds of relationships that make sense to them, and the ways they relate to the institutions of their locality. Social life can be carried on because there is an extent to which these differing ways of making sense match up: they do not entirely fail to grasp hold of regularities, they do not entirely fail to allow such shared but differentiated actions as participation (for different reasons and in different ways) in the Kingswood procession. Nevertheless, these ways of making sense do not match up perfectly: social life is made up not just of the congruence between ways of making sense, but also of the mutual misrecognitions and failures of comprehension, the silences and secrets which occur between the imperfectly meshing teeth of these ways of making sense. It is an 'economy of fantasies'.

It is in the interplay between these ways of making sense, and in the processes by which they are passed on, that the 'local particularity' of a social situation is built up. The societies in Kingswood and in Comberton include means by which the differing ways of making sense—and the mismatches and lacunae between them—are passed on in 'apprenticeships of signs': new generations learn to conduct themselves appropriately in the spaces opened up by the distinctions and orderings of the previous generations, in such a way that they themselves come to perpetuate those distinctions and orderings. In Kingswood, the distinction between what Jenkins calls respectability and fecklessness, a distinction which operates differently in different parts of society and which can be used with great flexibility by actors as they position themselves amongst their neighbours, is sustained not so much by individuals' patterns of action, but rather (in part) by the interplay of family relationships (the family being in many ways the basic unit necessary in accounting for Kingswood life). The same distinction between respectability and fecklessness is also funded by indigenous perceptions of local history, and in particular by folk memories of Methodist revivals (and subsequent schisms). It is in this mix of remembered history, familial structures, and moral

distinctions, all working differently for different groups of residents, that the local particularity of Kingswood is made up.

The churches in Kingswood and Comberton—the buildings, the congregations, the activities, the histories—are integral parts of the economy of fantasies and the local particularity which surrounds them. Far beyond the statistical significance of their attendance figures, they stand out as sites of peculiar intensity in the landscape of perceptions and distinctions made by the inhabitants of the two communities. As social facts, the churches are made up not just of what goes on in them, not just of attendances and professions of allegiance, but by the ways in which they are perceived and the ways in which they affect the perceptions of all those who live in their shadow. Jenkins refers in particular to the representative quality of some of those who attend and some of what goes on in the churches, to the senses of ownership and expectation or of obligation which surround them, and to the sheer physical presence of the buildings which act as markers of a certain kind of local history. The churches' symbolic significance in the various local ways of making sense of the world—ways of making sense of family relationships, of social standing, of class conflict, of families, as well as of matters more obviously 'religious'—is part of what they are, and must be part of any account which seeks to do empirical justice to religion in England.

With this recognition, Jenkins steps away from traditional sociological discussions about secularisation or its opposites, and begins to uncover the place that those histories, distinctions and activities which have come to be called religious actually takes in the lives and categories of ordinary English people—something which the sociologist's statistics all too easily hide from view. The first short section of the book is taken up with a review of two recent accounts of religion in modern Britain, with Jenkins arguing forcefully against the statistically-driven account of secularisation and its implications, and for a more nuanced approach which seeks to account for the different 'vocations' of the various churches, their

differing ways of meshing with the surrounding society, and the different ways which members of modern British society have of participating in and relating to them. This disagreement between modes of sociological and anthropological research is given pride of place in the book, the whole being shaped primarily as a contribution to social-scientific debates—as witness its publication as part of Berghahn Books' *Methodology and History in Anthropology* series. Nevertheless, the book is also of considerable theological importance.

Characterisations of the Church, and in particular of the Church's relationship to the world, even when they are part of a thoroughly dogmatic theology and hence governed primarily by doctrinal rather than empirical considerations, still need to be sensitive to the nature of the empirical reality to which they at some point must refer. Reflections, for instance, on the relationship of church to state will be missing an important component if they refuse to learn from the kinds of political and social settlements actually represented by the different ways in which churches are embedded in the play of social life, the local particularities and economy of fantasies in which they play a part, and the sheer complexity of that embedding as described so forcibly in this book. Discussions of establishment and nonconformity which fail to do justice to the implication of the different churches in various webs of distinctions and orderings to do with what Jenkins identifies in Kingswood as claims to respectability and status must look, in the light of this book, naïve. Ecumenical work needs to pay attention to the sites in this complex symbolic economy in which the different churches stand, and the processes of apprenticeship by which such distinctions are locally preserved and developed.

There are other ways, though, in which the book presents themes of theological interest. The theme, for instance, of secrecy and silence, of the mismatches between different ways of making sense which structure the social, enables theologians to begin to rethink mystery and ineffability not only as features of on the one hand metaphysical and on the other

psychological distance from the ordinary world of human interactions, but as constitutive elements of that ordinary social world, of moral action *per se*. Or, as another instance, we may look at the apprenticeships of signs which Jenkins identifies, in which ways of making sense are reproduced in later generations not so much by a process of handing down from individual to individual, but by the opening up of possibilities and constraints within the orderings and structures of, say, family life. Such an account could contribute considerable depth and complexity to a view of human life as fundamentally relational, a popular theological theme at present. Or, as a final example, we might look at the category of ‘human flourishing’, so far unexamined in this review but important in the book as a whole. Jenkins identifies the aspiration to human flourishing as, in forms which differ according to local particularity and the economy of fantasies, central both to those practices identified as religious as well as to society more broadly conceived: the aspiration for well-formed lives which is not so much a possession of individuals, but rather built in to the ordering and perpetuation of social life. The relation of such a social aspiration, now understood less psychologically and more sociologically, to salvation theologically understood is a topic worthy of detailed consideration.

All in all, the book suggests a demand upon theologians: a demand to pay careful attention to the social and ecclesial life in which their theological concepts take their rise, and which is the referent of many of their discussions—but not now in a mood of suspicion, as if such attention is bound to dissolve theological concepts into limited social interactions in pursuit of power or prestige. Rather, theological ways of making sense of the world (theologians would argue: ways of making good sense, ways which make for true human flourishing) and the ecclesial and academic practices with which they are associated partake of the same social complexity and richness which Jenkins has uncovered, and deserve the same painstaking and revealing attention to detail which makes this book a pleasure to read.

The book is not always easy, and is would not be suitable as a whole for any but the most alert undergraduate readers. The section on Comberton, however, would make a very good excerpt for undergraduate courses, whether they were on ecclesiology, Anglicanism or the sociology of religion, and the section on ‘Two Sociological Approaches to Religion in Modern Britain’ could also be used in those settings. The long central section on Kingswood is the next most accessible, and those who are not fired up by the arguments of sociologists and anthropologists might wish to read these three sections together, before reading the rather dense Introduction and the somewhat tangential final section on secrecy and the occult in Kingswood. David Parkin’s short Foreword is also worth reading, though perhaps only after the central sections of the book have been digested. The book is attractively produced, and the series of which it forms a part seems to be well worth keeping an eye on—although it seems unlikely that it will produce too readily another book of such importance as this for scholars of religion and theology.

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