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Book Review

The Dancing Sharma: A review of 'To the Things Themselves'

Arvind Sharma (2001). *To the Things Themselves: Essays on the Discourse and Practice of the Phenomenology of Religion*. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter

Hard Cover (311 pages)

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by **Stuart Devenish**

Introduction

The title 'the dancing Sharma' is not intended, as the heading might suggest, to be an evocation of a sacred hierophany or a description of a whirling Dervish. It is an elicitation of a memory of Prof. Sharma enjoying himself during a relaxed moment in the otherwise intense atmosphere of the XVIIIth Quinquennial World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Durban, South Africa August 5-12, 2000. It points to the rather humorous insight that contrary to Marrett's now famous statement that religion is something not so much to be thought out as danced (Marrett, 1914) - that dancing is a human activity which gives release and enjoyment to those scholars who spend their lives thinking about religion! The tall, lithe and stately figure of the author swaying to the music, surrounded by scholars of international standing and dignitaries of all kinds is a metaphor for the book. As he danced his way through the evening with obvious enjoyment and panache, so the book 'dances' with dexterity and skill among the bevy of concepts and scholars whose work he discusses in the book. Also, just as there was a particularity about Sharma's dancing style, so there is a notable singularity of his contribution to the field of the phenomenology of religion in this book.

Survey of the Book:

The book is comprised of twelve chapters which can be further broken into three parts, dealing with (1) the phenomenology of religion subjected to 'detailed analysis', (2) the general methodological framework of religious studies, and (3) the author's own contribution to the field. The 12 chapters address (1) the search for terminological exactitude: phenomenon (2) the search for terminological exactitude: phenomenology of religion (3) the phenomenology of religion (the removal of ambiguity) (4) the phenomenology of religion and the phenomenological movement (5) the application of the phenomenological method to a single religious datum (6) the phenomenology of religion as a phenomenology of families of religions (7) towards a phenomenological hierarchy of methods in the study of religion (8) misconceptions about the phenomenological study of religion in the scientific study of religion (9) antireductionism and the phenomenology of religion (10) some applications of the phenomenology of religion (11) philosophical phenomenology and the phenomenology of religion (12) from the phenomenology of religion to a religious way of studying religion? Jacques Waardenburg, the distinguished Professor of Religion at the University of Lausanne, writes the

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Foreword which gives weight and context to the volume.

Reviewer's Response:

In my recently completed PhD ('The Mind of Christ? A phenomenological explication of personal transformation and cosmic revision in Christian converts in Western Australia', Edith Cowan University, 2002) I made reference to regretting the delay in publishing of Sharma's book. That delay made the present work unavailable to my research at the time. Waardenburg, the writer of the Foreword, had told me that the book would be the 'most recent and comprehensive overview of the field of the phenomenology of religion' (Devenish 2002, 124). Happily the publishers have now seen fit to make a review copy available. I have discovered in my own experience that Waardenburg was right when he praised Sharma's facility as a writer and scholar.

Sharma characterizes the phenomenology of religion as having five distinguishing features. It is:

- (1) thematic
- (2) sympathetic
- (3) value-free
- (4) investigatory iro forms or structures
- (5) interpretive.

In providing these distinguishing features Sharma has delivered a knockout blow to those who would critique the discipline as discordant and without having a central core. The reality is - as Sharma has demonstrated - that there *is* an identifiable unity, if not uniformity, within the discipline of the phenomenology of religion.

I think the book is well written. It is both thoughtful and thought-provoking. It is well organised and has a rhythm and style to it which makes it eminently readable. What impressed me during my reading of the book (it took me 2 full days to read) was the breadth of the author's reading and knowledge, the acute nature of his understanding of the issues involved, and his ability to steer a middle-path between the issues raised and the controversies he visits. Sharma has an uncanny knack of being able to rehearse the key components of an argument and to squeeze the best value from them without being caught up or lost in the argumentation itself. Of special note is Sharma's clarity of insight and neat construction of memorable one-liners, such as, "Although Eliade may not be more than a

phenomenologist of religion, he is not less." (p. 239), "philosophical phenomenology and phenomenology of religion are different animals of the same species" (p. 244), and "the distinctive method of the cultural sciences is understanding (*Verstehen*), whereas that of the natural sciences is explanation (*Erklärung*)" [from V. A. Harvey, p. 122]. This gives the book a didactic quality, although the intent of the book is more one of tightening up scholars' conceptions of the phenomenology of religion than of writing a textbook. It is my assessment however that such is the readability and applicability of this work that it will in future become *the* textbook for students of the phenomenology of religion.

The book is subject to some repetition and exhibits a dependence on Eliade's *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Neither of these developments are surprising however. Given the complexity of the subject-material addressed there is need for the repetition of points fundamental to the author's argument. Likewise the repeated dipping into Eliade's *Encyclopedia* is probably an intelligent move given that regardless of the discipline - whether it be the history of religions, the philosophy of religion or the phenomenology of religion - the *Encyclopedia* is invariably accepted as an authoritative source of reliable opinion and information. I found Sharma to demonstrate a high level of personal and academic integrity throughout the book. He clearly acknowledges his debt to such authors as Douglas Allen and John Arapura where necessary. This integrity is also apparent at the intellectual level where, for example, Sharma is unable to locate a more satisfactory description of studying religion "from a religious point of view" (the subject of chapter 12, pp. 248-274) - and in the light of Waardenburg's recommendation that he "find a better phrase" (p. 274), Sharma admits he has been unsuccessful in doing so and invites the reader to provide one (*ibid*). Although I concur with Sharma when he admits that the idea of studying religion "from a religious point of view" is "perhaps clearer than the expression used to describe it" (*ibid*), I too have been unable to elucidate a satisfactory phrase which does not simply re-state the substance of Sharma's existing configuration of the idea. This inability is in part associated with the complexity of the subject-area of religion itself. Segal asks the question, "What after all *is* religion?" (Sharma, p. 268).

The book concludes with the unresolved question of the "Dilthean paradox" (p. 286) which is

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maddening to the reader to have a new issue introduced in the last few pages of a book and to have it left hanging like a Damocles sword. But that is the nature of the phenomenon of religion; this *ir*resolution signals that the book is not only a historical survey of the phenomenology of religion, but a critical survey as well (p. 275). Consistent with the commitment of the phenomenology of religion, Sharma's intention is to keep the perspective of the believer foremost in the minds of those studying religion. He holds that the insider's perspective is not to be rejected but is in fact the central repository of the phenomenon of religion and must be taken seriously. For the phenomenology of religion, it is not God who stands at center-stage (because God is not a phenomenon available for scientific study); but it is the religious believer or community in his [their] presentational actions, thoughts, rituals and sacred dramas which provides the phenomenal material upon which the phenomenology of religion feeds. William Cantwell Smith can even say, "We do not see a person's faith, but [we] see expressions of it" (p. 259).

This theme is demonstrated by Kristensen's oft-repeated phrase, "Let us never forget that there exists no other religious reality than the faith of the believer" (p. 41). Although the believer can be wrong and the description provided by the phenomenologist only an "approximation" (p. 277) of the believer's experience and commitments, nonetheless it is a close approximation and the phenomenology of religion therefore lays claim to being scientific in nature. The charge - made by the reductionists - that the phenomenology of religion is totally subjective is mistaken according to Sharma, because anyone undertaking the study of religion must allow for a degree of ambiguity (because of the nature of religion itself), and because *any* claim to total objectivity is built upon an edifice *either* of reductionism, or a complete rejection of the insider's point of view. Further, there are different levels at which the study of religion can be undertaken; the micro-level (the historical), the meso-level (the phenomenal), the macro-level (sociological and psychological), and the mega-level (the hermeneutical and philosophical) (pp. 116 ff.). Sharma also makes room for a "meta-level" in the study of religion (p. 159) although without further elucidating its characteristics.

I was particularly interested in Sharma's chapter 11, "Philosophical Phenomenology and the Phenomenology of Religion". Having read widely

in the field of Husserlian philosophical phenomenology and felt myself to have acquired an adequate grounding in that field, when I moved across to the phenomenology of religion I was confronted with the question, "What is the relationship between these two disciplines?" Sharma too asks the question and provides useful answers. Allen's five characteristics of philosophical phenomenology which have particular relevance for the phenomenology of religion (pp. 73 & 231ff.), are (1) descriptive in nature (2) opposition to reductionism (3) intentionality (4) bracketing or *epoche* (5) the eidetic vision. While Sharma discusses these widely, he rightly locates the eidetic vision and *epoche* as the two most significant components of philosophical phenomenology which have carried over into the phenomenology of religion as primary components of its method. A comparison of Husserl's (philosophical phenomenology) and van der Leeuw's (phenomenology of religion) (p. 244) shows how close but how distant these two disciplines are. In essence, philosophical phenomenology confronts the believer and his or her 'world' as an external 'other' to be described; whereas the phenomenology of religion addresses the believer by entering his or her 'world' from the inside with the intention of 'understanding' their meanings and motivations...something philosophical phenomenology *can* do through intersubjectivity but seems often not to want to do.

Finally, Sharma not only rehearses the substance of the phenomenology of religion as it has been historically conceived. He also makes a contribution of his own, around the substance of studying religion "from a religious point of view". Sharma insists (with Kristensen) that the phenomenology of religion must study religion from the believer's point of view, but in so doing it must "never allow its explicit epistemology to slide into, or even towards, an implicit ontology or 'theology'" (p. 281). At this point I think Sharma is breaking new ground *but* he is also walking into a minefield. He consistently laments that the voice of the believer has been stifled in the study of religion and suggests some helpful strategies for ensuring that voice is heard--but he remains committed to the scholarly device of looking at religious experience 'as' an outsider.

It is at this point that I have particular difficulties not with what Sharma says as with what he does not say. He makes the statement: "theology accepts the proposition that the ultimate reality of religion is religious ontologically, and first hand.

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Phenomenology of religion accepts the same proposition, but empirically, and second hand” (p. 257). However there is a raft of scholars who, as believers themselves, have wished to understand their faith better. Following the Augustinian principle in which faith seeks to understand itself, they have acquired the tools of phenomenology in an attempt to understand the characteristics of their own faith through obtaining insights into the rituals and sacred objects particular to their own religious tradition. Sharma allows no place for religious scholars amongst the plethora of scholars of religion. In this regard he appears to disallow, or at least find discomfort in the important scholarship of those older scholars such as Otto (1918), Bettis (1969), van der Leeuw (1967), Scheler (1972), Lijpen (1964), Maritain (1959), Trestemont (1961), Hocking (1912), Dumery (1968), Eliade (1957 *et al*), Berger (1969), Farley (1975), Danielou (1957), Stein (1973), Weil (1973), and Dupre (1972); and the newer scholars of religion such as Westphal (1987), Sokolowski (2000), Hart (1992), Ryba (1991) and Willard (1998). *What if* these scholar-believers should obtain the tools of phenomenology, and by means of employing the phenomenological bracketing and eidetic reduction, should uncover features essential to their own belief while admitting to the doctrines of antireductionism and studying religion from a religious perspective? These scholars do not fit the standard description hung on them by the average scholar of religion, that they do not have the language or sophistication with which to describe their own interior experience or belief. It is my observation that listening to such scholars would enable a more careful application of the phenomenology of religion at a number of levels.

First, such applications will commence at the micro-level or the level of one’s own experience. I have written elsewhere:

In my view it seems an unwarranted restriction of phenomenology to restrict it to the broader historical and philosophical realms, when it is uniquely capable of addressing through intersubjective inquiry the processes of meaning construction and alteration within individuals and sub-groups. In this research I am seeking to apply phenomenology’s ability to identify and scholarship but extenuates the difficulties experienced by those skilled and articulate ‘religious’ phenomenologists of religion whose

elicit meaning in the microcosmic dimension of personal religious experience (Devenish, 2002, p. 119).

(2) But such scholars are also able to extrapolate findings related to the faith they confess from their own experience out onto the broader canvas of the historical horizons of the macro-level of the tradition within which they dwell, so that entire religious movements and traditions are addressed at the universal or nomothetic level.

(3) If the believer himself or herself is able to recognize, on the basis of the *epoché*, the distinction between theology and the phenomenology of religion, why is it that phenomenology is held to be exclusively the domain of scholars of religion, and theology exclusively the domain of religious scholars? Can there be middle ground?

(4) Philosophers of religion *who are religious* will be eager to speak not ‘for’ God or the gods, but to speak ‘out of’ their experience of the Holy, which is, after all, the manifestation of the primary experience central to the phenomenology of religion. So long as the believing phenomenologist uses the tools of the phenomenology of religion to explore the richness of one’s own faith and not in the first place to seek to convert others, then it would appear that such an endeavour is no longer peculiar but beneficial. Waardenburg himself in the Foreword exhibits a concern for the “subject’s meaning” or “the study of religious constructions of reality.” Is this not the fulfilment of the goal towards which the phenomenology of religion strives?

(5) The possibility of philosophers of religion *who are religious* studying their own beliefs applies to *all* philosophers of *all* religions not just to Christians, so Sharma’s mimicking of Penner’s critique that the phenomenology of religion is simply a “theological campaign carried out under the banner of religious science” (p. 250) does not of necessity apply.

In summary, it is apparent that Sharma has made the choice to make use of a ‘scientific’ methodology over against the properly ‘religious’, yet continues to insist he is studying religion “from a religious point of view”. This is understandable from the perspective of voices remain muffled and indistinct amidst the cacophony of scholars calling us back to “the things themselves!”

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Conclusion:

I have enjoyed reading Sharma's *To the Things Themselves* and recommend it to anyone interested in the study of religion. I predict the book will grow in stature and take a rightful place

as a required textbook for students of the phenomenology of religion in the future, and sit with dignity on the shelves of great scholars and libraries around the world.

About the Author



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