

ARTICLES AND TREATISES / ARTYKUŁY I ROZPRAWY

The phenomenological method revisited: towards comparative studies and non-theological interpretations of the religious experience

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ABSTRACT

In recent last decades, two major and interrelated themes have dominated the study of religion: (a) the theme claiming that the long taken-for-granted so-called “secularization” thesis was all wrong, and (b) the theme of the so-called “return” or “resurgence of religion”. This global revival of religion has been chronicled lately in a number of important books, referred to in this paper. Nowadays, comparative religion can, very broadly, be conducted using two types of data: texts or living human beings. In this paper I will argue that the best way to conduct comparative studies of lived religion is the method of a Husserlian based phenomenology of religion in the sense of a “de-theologized” interpretative approach to religious consciousness and experience, which make no claims concerning the *sui generis* or the essential nature of religion.

KEYWORDS

philosophy of religion; sociology of religion; phenomenology of religion; religious studies; comparative studies; comparative methodology; secularization

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INTRODUCTION

For several decades now academic study of religion has been dominated by the claim that the once taken-for-granted secularization thesis has proved entirely incorrect and that, to the contrary, religion has experienced a “return” or “resurgence” instead.¹ The findings chronicled in the studies that have pursued either one or both facets of this two-pronged claim have more or less answered the old question of why it is important to study religion. They have, however, largely failed to address the equally old question of precisely how the study of religion should best be approached.

The fact that this is indeed the case can be confirmed by reviewing any of the numerous textbooks on religious studies,² which plainly reveal that the subject of religion can be studied in a variety of ways (*e.g.*, theologically, sociologically, psychologically, philosophically, neurologically, and so forth) and from a variety of theoretical perspectives or “slants” (*e.g.*, hermeneutics, orientalism, postmodernism, feminism, and so forth). This, of course, is not exactly surprising because, as a general rule, the more important, complex and controversial a scientific subject appears to be, the more heated is the debate surrounding theory, method, and how concepts should be defined will be.

¹ Today there is general agreement among sociologists of religion, political scientists and others about the empirical reality (but not the interpretation) of what has been variously called “the desecularization of the world” (Berger, 1999), “the revenge of God” (Kepel, 1997), “the deprivatization of religiousness” (Casanova, 1994), “the return of religions” (Riesebrodt, 2000), “the return of the Gods” (Graf, 2004), “the spiritual revolution” (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) and so forth. It had been these empirical developments that induced Peter Berger to pen the much-quoted words: “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that the whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled «secularization theory» is essentially mistaken” (Berger, 1999: 2). Religion has, in the words of Monica D. Toft, Daniel Philott and Timothy S. Shah: “Become and in all likelihood will continue to be a vital — and sometimes furious — shaper of war, peace, terrorism, democracy, theocracy, authoritarianism, national identities, economic growth and development, productivity, the fate of human rights, the United Nations, the rise and contraction of populations, and cultural mores regarding sexuality, marriage, the family, the role of women, loyalty to nations and regime, and the character of education” (Toft, Philott, & Shah, 2011: 7–8). See also: Neuhaus, 2001; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 2009; Kaufmann, 2010; Stark & Finke, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2000; Juergensmeyer, 2008; Sander & Andersson, 2009; Sander, 2013; as well as many of the articles in: Barrett, Kurian, & Johnson, 2001; Hurd, 2007; Eisenstadt, 2000; Thomas, 2005; Hermida, 2008. See also many of the studies published by The PEW Forum on Religion & Public life (<http://pewforum.org>), Gallup (<http://www.gallup.com/home.aspx>) and World Value Survey (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>).

² To mention only a few: Whaling, 1984; Whaling, 1985; Antes, Geertz, & Warne, 2004; Hinnells, 2005; Segal, 2006b; Connolly, 1999; Braun & McCutcheon, 2000; Morrell & Sonn, 2011.

From my perspective, there is not “one right way” to study religion, although there are certainly “wrong ways” — *e.g.*, by the adoption of a preconceived, dogmatic or one-sided stance. What remains, then, are “better and worse ways”, depending upon the specific aspect of religion one has chosen to explore. In other words, one’s research questions largely specify the “object” one is attempting to study, which, in turn, determines the theories and research methods that one decides to apply. Put more simply, questions determine the object; different objects demand different research methods. If, for example, we are concerned with measuring, explaining and/or predicting church attendance, we will require a set of methods that are appropriate to the task. If, on the other hand, we are concerned with understanding and/or interpreting mystical or religious experience, we will require a very different set of methods indeed.³

As with religious studies in general, the comparative study of religion has largely relied upon two types of data in pursuit of its research questions: the study of texts (and other artefacts) on the one hand, and contact with living human beings on the other. Over the last three or so decades, and in tandem with the aforementioned two-pronged claim, “religion as it is actually lived and experienced”⁴ has increasingly come to the fore in religious studies and other departments that are interested in the subject of religion.

In some sense, this recent turn to “lived religion” can be seen as a “restoration” of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s (1769–1834) conclusion that the only way to adequately study religion is in and through the beliefs and practices of living human beings, and that the heart of religion lies not in rules, regulations, hierarchies and hymnbooks, but in the individuals’ senses of and dependence upon a power infinitely greater than their own (Schleiermacher, 1996). Here the student of religion is encouraged to concentrate not on what people might do, ought to do, or are supposed by textbooks to do, but rather on what they actually do and why they tend to do it (their motives, reasons and/or inducements). And in terms of these last two questions, it appears that more and more social scientists (Waardenburg, 1973) are coming to recognize that in order to understand and explain people’s (religious) behaviour one needs to understand and explain their (religious) experiences.

In this regard, the present paper argues that the best way to conduct (comparative) empirical studies on religious consciousness and experience is by means of a “de-theologized”, non-reductive Husserlian-based interpretive approach that, among other things, makes no claim concerning the *sui generis* or essential nature of religion. It will further attempt to provide a brief sketch of what such a phenomenological approach might look like.

³ My own preferred approach can be described as Husserlian phenomenology processed through sociology (primarily Alfred Schütz) and psychology (primarily Aron Gurwitsch), cf. Sander, 1988.

⁴ For example: Hall, 1997; Orsi, 2005; Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008.

Before beginning, however, it should be mentioned that for some time now the phenomenology of religion has been heavily (and often justifiably) criticized within the field of religious studies and is presently in a state of some disrepair (cf. Penner, 1970; Segal, 1983; Segal, 1993; McCutcheon, 1997; McCutcheon, 2001; Flood, 1999; Fitzgerald, 2000). Nonetheless, I have decided to move forward with this presentation because it appears to fall within the framework of the overall aim of this conference: to explore and discuss diverse methods for use in the study of religion.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

In general, the term “phenomenology” has been subject to a variety of interpretations and widely used (some would say misused) in a variety of connections. Historically it can be said to have originated with Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) famous distinction between “that which shows itself” (*phenomena*) and “the reality” (*noumena* or *Ding an sich*). Thus, the phenomenology of religion can be generally defined as the study of “religious phenomena”. Since Kant’s time, however, the term *phenomenon* has come to refer to different “things”.

Broadly speaking, one can distinguish between two highly divergent interpretations of the term and thus two distinct types of phenomenology of religion. One takes as its starting point the philosophical theories of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), where phenomena refer to peculiar types of “mental entities”.⁵ The other employs the term to refer to diverse descriptive studies that have attempted to describe, typologise, etc. concrete empirical phenomena, the particular “thing” in question (Abram & Hultkrantz, 1955); Widengren, 1971; deVries, 2008). This sense of the term has worked its way into the history of religion through studies on specific religious phenomena (*e.g.*, rituals, rites, sacrificial performances, prayer) that have made no attempt to hypothesize as to their “real” meaning, significance, reality-status, origin, *etc.*

Scholars such as William Brede Kristensen, Gerardus van der Leeuw, William James, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, and Ninian Smart can be said to occupy something of a middle position in this regard, sometimes called “hermeneutic phenomenology of religion” (Gilhus, 1984). As James Cox (2006: 204–205) describes it, these and other such scholars adopted means such as bracketing prior assumptions, employing an empathetic attitude and identifying typologies, all of which are associated with philosophical phenomenology. Moreover, moving beyond a strict focus on ideas, they were interested in studying religion as something lived. It should also be noted, however, that apart from James, Otto, and possibly Eliade, describing and understanding the subjective experience of religious subjects was not their primary aim. Rather, as suggested

⁵ An object as experienced, an intentional object or a *noema*.

by Jim Spickard (2011), the dominant aim of their approach was to describe the religions of various times and places extremely well.

An important distinction between the Husserlian and the particular type of phenomenology is that the object of study of the latter, but not the former, object of study is intersubjectively observable empirical entities. The two are similar, however, in that both accept the Kantian epistemological assumption that because human consciousness can have no access to *noumena*, or things-in-themselves, all knowledge must be strictly about *phenomena*, without any reference to their possible “metaphysical” origin or dimension.

Here it should also be noted that many different movements or forms of approach exist within the field of philosophical phenomenology (Spiegelberg, 1976), with figures such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Aron Gurwitsch and Maurice Merleau-Ponty differing in terms of their idea(s) and understanding(s). These different vantage points are often distinguished in terms of titles like “transcendental phenomenology”, “social phenomenology”, “phenomenological ontology”, “life-world phenomenology”, “phenomenology of the body” and so forth. Nonetheless, they all share the common aim of attempting to capture, interpret and comprehend subjective consciousness: the object toward which the specific method of philosophical phenomenology is directed.⁶ Indeed, it is this method that is said to be the primary distinguishing characteristic of philosophical phenomenology, “namely, to account for objects as they really are in terms of objects taken for what they are experienced as” (Gurwitsch, 1964: 232; cf. Spiegelberg, 1976: introd. & ch. 14, esp.: 655; Merleau-Ponty, 1965: vii; Natanson, 1973: 3; Haglund, 1977: 8, 12; Cairns, 1950: 4; Husserl, 1950b: 23ff.; Gurwitsch, 1966b: 175).

Although one can certainly enter into lengthy exegetical and other types of discussions concerning what really characterizes this method, for brevity’s sake I will here stipulate that its two most essential elements are: 1) the so-called *epoché*, meaning the “parenthesizing” (*einklammerung*) of objective reality (in the normal sense of the term); and, 2) the so-called phenomenological reduction, meaning the philosophical technique whereby normally experienced reality becomes pure phenomena (*bloße Phänomene*). Taken together, these two moments constitute what I have termed (Sander, 1988: sect. 3.1) “the transcendental phenomenological reduction”.⁷

⁶ According to Husserl, this “subjective turn” enables the discovery not of a new range of facts, but rather of a new way of looking at the facts.

⁷ It is, of course, a bit more complicated than this. In the second “moment”, for example, Husserl distinguishes between the phenomenological reduction, the eidetic reduction and the transcendental reduction. For present purposes, however, what has been said should suffice. See Edie, 1964, for a discussion on Husserl’s understanding of “transcendental”, which differs from that of classical Greek philosophy as well as Cartesianism and Kantianism.

It is, theoretically, by means of these two methodological steps that the phenomenology presented here of religion would attempt to conduct its specific task of describing, interpreting and understanding religious experience and consciousness. A phenomenology of religion, in other words, would seek to disclose and comprehend the meaning(s) of religious phenomena as they are constituted,⁸ perceived and experienced within consciousness, i.e., from the religious subject's point of view. As I see it, it is particularly this interpretive function that defines the phenomenology of religion and sets it apart from more naturalistic methods, which generally seek to explain and/or make predictions about religion in a largely reductive manner. Having drawn this distinction, however, it must also be said that phenomenology's interpretive task is not necessarily opposed to the explanatory one. Indeed, it can be viewed as an aid, or even a necessary step, in the process of explanation.⁹ Before embarking upon a more precise delineation of the phenomenological method, however, it is necessary to first discuss what the term "religion" refers to, meaning which phenomena are to be included within this category.

RELIGION, RELIGIONS AND THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Is it feasible to speak of an "essence" of religion or to generally regard religion as a distinct category or rubric? Is it legitimate to speak about "religion" in the singular, or must it always be referred to in the plural, as religions? Can the sphere of "religion" be isolated from other spheres of human culture and activity, such as "art", "politics", "music" or "economics"? Is "religion" a natural category or merely a "social construct"? Is it a universal category or merely a Western European formulation that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries?

⁸ A note on terminology: Within sociology, most phenomenologically oriented writers talk about experience as being constructed, as, for example, "the social construction of reality" and the like. Philosophically oriented phenomenologists, on the other hand, following Husserl, prefer to use the term constituted, claiming that constructions are conducted in the mundane world of real objects (things) — as when a carpenter constructs a cradle — whereas ideal, unreal phenomena such as experiences, meanings, *noemas*, etc. are being constituted. I follow this latter usage.

⁹ Most social scientists will agree that in order to explain (or criticize, etc.) a given phenomenon (idea, opinion, type of behaviour, etc.) you first have to be able to provide an accurate description (and display a proper understanding) of the phenomenon in question. Even Wayne Proudfoot, who advocates an explanatory, naturalistic approach to the study of religion and is not particularly fond of phenomenology, believes (Proudfoot, 1985: 195) that before attempting to explain or criticize a given religious phenomenon, the scholar must first accurately "describe" said phenomenon. To me, such statements appear to highlight and reinforce the primary role of phenomenology in the study of religion.

Anyone that is the least familiar with the debate surrounding “the definition of religion” is aware that the questions above represent only a fraction of this field’s unresolved issues, and that there are an immense number of suggestions concerning how religion (and closely related terms) should be defined.¹⁰ Given this circumstance, it appears that the best tack therefore is to roughly state my own point of view.¹¹

Almost all of today’s religious traditions claim an empirical basis, at least in the sense of resting their origin and authority on the foundation of lived experience as opposed to purely theoretical thinking or metaphysical speculation. In terms of this issue, I am in agreement with Peter Berger’s assessment that “religion is not primarily a matter of reflection or theorizing. At the heart of the religious phenomenon is prereflective, pretheoretical experience [...] experience is prior to all theories about it” (Berger, 1980: 34, 123; cf. Sander, 1988: 536ff.).¹² Given this, our task becomes to more closely determine which out of the broad spectrum of human experiences can be distinguished as religious; or, put more simply, the task at hand becomes determining what constitutes a typical religious experience.

Let us begin by confirming the validity of the established sociological observation that religions (like all human phenomena) always reside within culture and that man is always “situationally conditioned”, meaning that “whatever he experiences, he experiences in time and space” and that “he cannot but give expression to what he has seen, felt, *etc.*, *per analogian entis*, by means of analogy from what is known and familiar to him” (Wach, 1972: 34; Schütz, 1976: 229; Schütz, 1973: 347ff.; Sander & Andersson, 2009).¹³ It is, however, also important to note that religious experience does reveal something about (or point towards) a world that transcends or exists beyond the pale of human culture, yet also leaving open the question of whether or not such revelations are “true”. With these points in mind, the following consists of our rough attempt to identify the constituents of the typical religious experience.

¹⁰ The body of weighty volumes dedicated to the question of “religion” and other related terms is obviously too vast to review herein; nonetheless, some of those that I consider worth looking into are: Fitzgerald, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2007; Masuzawa, 2005; Asad, 1993; King, 1999; Staal, 1989; Lash, 1996; Harrison, 1990; Stroumsa, 2010; Flood, 1999; Flood, 2012; Bianchi, 1994; deVries, 2008; Clarke & Byrne, 1993; Ward, 2004; Sander, 1994.

¹¹ For more lengthy and elaborate renderings of this view, see Sander, 1988; Sander, 1994.

¹² This, of course, is another way of saying that “religiosity” is prior or primary to “religion”, and thereby taking a stand in yet another debate (Sander, 1988: 536ff.).

¹³ This opinion is also vigorously argued from a Kantian perspective by John Hick (1989: esp. part III); cf. Eliade, 1969: 87.

No experienced object¹⁴ is inherently religious and thus any given object can potentially be experienced as a typical religious object.¹⁵ In other words, an object is religious not by virtue of any objectively identifiable empirical property (in the normal sense of these terms), but rather by virtue of its having been endowed with a special stratum of meaning (a special interpretation), the existence of which constitutes a reason for the experiencer to adopt a special attitude — a special way of thinking, feeling, willing and behaving — towards the object in question (Sander, 1988: sect. 2.4., 4.1.4., 4.1.6.) Thus, the difference between a typically religious and a non-religious object has nothing to do with differences between different kinds of “normal” (natural) things, occurrences, events, *etc.*; instead religious objects are distinguished from others because of a specific surplus of meaning (Sander, 1988: sect. 4.4.2.1.) that the experiencer invests in them. In sum, a typically religious object is such by virtue of its having been experienced with a special stratum of meaning that never presents itself in a direct and unambiguous way to the consciousness of the experiencing subject; in phenomenological terminology, it is an *appresented* stratum of meaning (Sander, 1988: esp. sect. 3.2.3.2.). What, then, can be said to characterize this stratum?

Its first characteristic is that the individuals, in and through their experience of a “normal” mundane object, become aware of (apperceive) a new and radically different reality (or dimension of reality) that is apprehended as exceeding, going beyond or transcending¹⁶ the normal mundane world. The mundane object is experienced as becoming “transparent”, to “rupture” or to “open itself up” and reveal a radically different and deeper reality that lies “beyond” or “behind” reality as normally experienced — beyond the mundane sphere. It is an experience of gaining a deeper insight or realization about reality, the world and oneself. At the same time, it is the experience or realization that one hitherto has not known the world and oneself as they “really” are. From the perspective of the person experiencing such a rupture, the world of mundane experience (including the experiencer him-/herself) is not only relativized, but also revealed to contain hitherto unperceived properties. It is, in other words, the experience of another dimension of reality, understood as having been there, unnoticed, all the time. Imagine, if you will, an illiterate person who suddenly becomes literate while gazing upon a formerly inexplicable piece of written text. In this circumstance,

¹⁴ In this context, “object” is to be understood in the widest possible sense, denoting everything that can come before a consciousness, whether real or unreal/ideal, whether perceived, imagined, dreamt, felt or intuited (cf. Husserl, 1976: sect. 22; Gurwitsch, 1967: 28; Gurwitsch, 1966b: 141ff.; Gurwitsch, 1964: 4).

¹⁵ Or, in more phenomenological terms: since all meaning, including the meaning of “religiosity”, resides in the intention rather than in the sensation (in *morphe*, not *hyle*).

¹⁶ “Transcendence” is a complicated term that has a variety of applications and related meanings. I discuss a number of these in Sander, 1988: 27–31.

the person's intentional object would abruptly transform from random squiggles on paper (a real concrete object) to the meaning of the text (an "ir-real" or ideal object). Such an event would most likely be accompanied by the experience of having obtained a "deeper insight" into things (cf. Sander, 1988: sect. 3.3.1., 3.3.3.8., 4.4.2.1.). For this individual, reality has shown itself to be *Doppelbödig* — i.e., to have double floors (Sander, 1988: sect. 3.4.4.4.2.).

But the above experience of this new and previously invisible stratum of reality is not enough in and of itself to qualify it as the experience of a typically religious object. For this, the experience of the object must be accompanied by a second characteristic: it must be endowed with those special characteristics that are often summarized by the term "holy" (or "sacred"). And it is likely that no scholar has delineated what constitutes "the holy" in greater detail than Rudolf Otto (1929), followed by Mircea Eliade (1959). Here, however, only two central characteristics will be emphasized: absolute reality and absolute value. Let us attempt to unpack these currently ambiguous phrases.

The experience of a holy or sacred dimension of reality is one in which that reality is perceived to simultaneously have both an absolute normative and an absolute ontological (or reality) status. It is the experience of a transcendent (dimension of) reality that transforms normal mundane reality into a "quasi reality" and all mundane authorities, norms and values into "quasi authorities, norms and values". It is, in other words, a stratum of meaning that is experienced as having absolute reality (ontological status) and absolute, intrinsic value (normative status), which includes being of immense, and indeed redemptive, significance to the experiencer. Taken together, these two characteristics or moments (absolute reality and absolute value) of the experience of a religious stratum of meaning can be said to constitute the typical religious attitude: one of reverence and moral commitment.

Here it is important to note, however, that the experience of the transcendent and that of the holy or sacred are not necessarily or intrinsically connected to each other. In other words, one can experience a transcendent (dimension of) reality without necessarily experiencing that reality as being sacred or holy; and, in the alternatively, one can experience a particular object as being sacred or holy without necessarily experiencing it as an object implying transcendence (Sander, 1988: 392ff.).

In sum, a typically religious object is an ordinary object through which one experiences the revelation of a transcendent, sacred and normally invisible dimension of reality, the apprehension of which has a profound impact on how that person lives life, occupies time and thinks or opines about him-/herself, other people and the world (Sander, 1988: sect. 4.5.3.).

It has been argued above that the origin, foundation or "essence" of religion is to be found not in rituals, dogmas or other outer objective expressions, but instead in the typical (as defined above) religious experiences of those that Max

Weber (1948: 287) has termed religious virtuosos.¹⁷ If this were indeed the case, the best explanation would be that “religion” (i.e. typical religious experience) constitutes a universal category that, so far as the empirical record would seem to indicate, has existed throughout human history.¹⁸ Here empirical religious traditions, with their scriptures, symbolic representations, rituals, myths, and so forth, are viewed as diverse culturally specific attempts to affirm, communicate and explicate these experiences, thereby making them immanently available to those that have not (yet) directly apprehended them.¹⁹ Moreover, because, on the one hand, empirical religious traditions are grounded in and grow out of typical religious experiences, and because, on the other hand, they serve to facilitate others in having those experiences for themselves, such traditions (with their scriptures, rituals, myths, and so forth) can be viewed as being dependent upon and connected to religious experience in at least two important ways. This dual relationship exists relative to culture as well.

Typical religious experiences show human beings that there is a reality beyond culture. Such experiences constitute and objectify themselves in cultural forms as religious traditions (or religions). In this way, I understand religious traditions to be cultural forms that mediate the human encounter with the transcendent and sacred.²⁰ These encounters with something beyond culture are invariably mediated by culturally determined structures of tradition primarily through text, myth and ritual.²¹

¹⁷ Cf. Söderblom, 1910: 343; Sundén, 1967: 15; James, 1916; Otto, 1929; Eliade, 1959; Suzuki, 1953: ch. 2).

¹⁸ If I am right, those who argue, often on linguistic grounds, that it is a late Western category are victims of what philosophers call the “no name no thing fallacy”, meaning that such individuals are unable to distinguish between phenomena and the words that have been and will continue to be “invented” to refer to them.

¹⁹ According to Joachim Wach, the history of religion can be seen from this perspective as a “consistent and more or less successful struggle for the adequate manifestation and expression of religious experience” (Wach, 1962: 17). According to this, all religious “cumulative traditions” (Smith, 1962: 156ff.) have their source or genesis in lived “prereflective, pretheoretical experience” of the kind I have delimited as “typical religious experience”, experiences which are the “raw material” for later phenomenological philosophical (and theological) reflections; phenomenology is only a reflective technique applied to lived experience (cf. Duméry, 1964: 5). Whether these “prereflective, pretheoretical experiences” can be said to be “pure experience” in the sense of Walter Stace (1960) and Robert Forman (Forman, 1986; Forman, 1998) or if they are always conceptually prestructured in cultural terms as Steven Katz (1978) argues is irrelevant for this argument (and too large and complicated a problem to dwell upon here) (cf. Sander, 1988: part IV; Kimmel, 2008).

²⁰ This is not to claim that all such encounters must be mediated or facilitated by religious traditions. A great number of other facilitators clearly exist as well (cf. Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993: ch. 5).

²¹ This statement should not be viewed as an attempt to contribution to the debate between Katz (1978) and both Stace (1960) and Forman (1986; 1998) regarding the possibility

It has been proposed herein that one characteristic of a typical religious experience is that it strongly influences the manner in which the experiencers live life, occupy time and think or opine about themselves, other people and the world. The plausibility of this proposition is to a large degree confirmed by the fact that all known religious traditions hold certain opinions about how human beings “ought” to live their lives so as to live “the right, ideal and true” way that is “in full accordance” with a transcendent, absolute and objective (personal or impersonal) reality or *ens realissimum*. One way of confirming this is by noting that all the major traditions have their own unique terms for the centrally important concept of path or pathway: *halacha* in Judaism, *shari’a* in Islam, *hodos* in Christianity, *marga* in Hinduism, *magga* in Buddhism, and *Dao* in Daoism, Confucianism and Shintoism.²² In short, all religious traditions claim to chalk out or provide a “way of life” that we as human beings ought to follow so as to live “the right and true” life, legitimized by a transcendent absolute reality or *ens realissimum*.²³

Religions, then, are culturally adapted scripts, derived from typical religious experience, that provide ways of life, ways of living in our bodies. They are scripts for how we as human beings should respond to the raw facts of being and living in the world, to the human condition, which is indelibly marked by suffering and death.

METHODOLOGICAL AGNOSTICISM

It was mentioned above that the primary interest of the phenomenologist is to describe, interpret and understand typical religious experience, *i.e.* the subject’s experience of a transcendent and sacred reality. Put somewhat differently, the interest of the phenomenologist of religion is in understanding religion by disclosing the meaning(s) of these experiences as experienced, perceived or constituted within the consciousness of a given subject or experiencer. Here it is important to emphasize that the phenomenologist is attempting to disclose the meaning(s) that are experienced by the subject and not transcendent reality itself, the confirmation (or disconfirmation) of which is clearly beyond the scope and capacities of the scientific study of religion. Berger puts it this way:

[W]hatever else they [gods and other transcendent entities] may or may not be, the gods are not empirically available, and neither their nature nor their existence can be verified

of “pure conscious events” (PCE); and most especially, it should not be viewed as siding with Katz on this issue.

²² For a more detailed argument on this matter, see Sander & Andersson, 2009.

²³ In other words, I believe that religion and religiosity are primarily about “how one lives one’s life” rather than about “belief”.

through the very limited procedures given to the scientist. What is available to him is a complex of human experience and thought that purports to refer to the gods. [...] within the framework of science the gods will always appear in quotation marks [...] within the framework of science, transcendence must appear as immanence [...]. The gods [...] are only available *qua* contents of human consciousness (Berger, 1974: 126).

In *The sacred canopy*, the work that is perhaps most familiar to sociologists of religion, Berger terms this approach “methodological atheism” (Berger, 1967: 100). Since then, the qualifying term “atheism” has been much criticized as being ill-chosen,²⁴ especially given Berger’s own position on religion and his complaint that many sociologists and sociological theories have not been neutral in this regard, but have rather provided ‘quasiscientific legitimation’ for either ‘the avoidance of transcendence’ or ‘a secularized world view’ (Berger, 1967: 179; Berger, 1970: ix; Berger, 1974: 128; Berger, 1980: xiii).²⁵ Several years after Berger’s publication, Ninian Smart published his *The science of religion and the sociology of knowledge* (1973), in which he employed the alternate term “methodological agnosticism” instead, meaning that “we neither affirm nor deny the existence of the gods” (Smart, 1973: 54). In 1983 he further explained the term as follows: “God, or the Ultimate, need neither be affirmed nor denied, but seen as something present in human experience and belief” (Smart, 1983: 186). For the scientific study of religion, the matter of whether or not transcendent objects (or entities) really exist is irrelevant and immaterial.²⁶ On the other hand, the meaning(s) involved in the experience of these objects and the manner in which that experience informs and influences the subject’s life-world and personal conduct are of great significance indeed.²⁷ The good news is that human meanings and impacts are empirically accessible, and measurable phenomena, that thus fall within the realm of science.

²⁴ See for example Cox, 2003; Pembroke, 2011; Segal, 2006a; Porpora, 2006.

²⁵ In other words, Berger’s criticism of people within religious studies for disavowing the possibility of the existence of transcendent referents of religious discourse (belief, rituals, etc.) is the opposite of that which has been made by Donald Wiebe (1984: 401–422) and Segal (1980; 1983).

²⁶ Cf. the claim of Ralf Hood et al. that science “has no calling to challenge religious institutions and their doctrines. God is not our domain; neither is the world vision of churches. We do not enter into debates of faith versus reason, of one theology versus another, or of religion with science” (Hood et al., 1996: 2).

²⁷ Cf. the so-called Thomas theorem: “It is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct — if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas 1928: 572).

PHENOMENOLOGY AS SKILL

Thus far in this article I have argued that: i) scientific research questions specify certain objects and that various objects demand different research methods; ii) the world of religious experience is prior or primary to religious theories and other religious expressions; and, iii) understanding precedes explanation. From this I have argued that philosophical phenomenology can play an important role in the field of religious studies as the method that is “best suited” to investigate, describe, interpret and understand the typical religious experience, conceived here as the primordial religious object that is the origin or basis of what we normally refer to as “the religious traditions of the world” and normally deem to be “the religious life of individuals”.

In this connection, I have further argued that the primary research object for the phenomenologist of religion is not the transcendent and holy in and of itself, but rather the given subject’s experience of what (s)he takes (apprehends, constitutes) to be transcendent and holy: “The phenomenologist [...] is concerned with what appears in consciousness [...] immanent experience. The notion of transcendence is phenomenologically relevant only insofar as it enters into immanent experience” (Dupré, 1964: 503).

Interpreting religion from the perspective of religious consciousness and experience means coming to understand how the religious subject (whether a single individual or an entire community) regards (constitutes) such phenomena, and specifically what the meaning and significance of such phenomena are for that religious subject(s). This means, among other things, that we want to view our “objects of investigation” not only from the “outside”, like so-called “neutral observers”, but also as far as possible from the “inside”, as active agents attempting to learn about and understand the pattern of interpretation²⁸ of the

²⁸ By “pattern of interpretation” I roughly mean the conceptual system (where “conceptual” is broadly used to indicate an element of a mental code) through which the individual selects, organizes, structures and interprets his/her experience; or, put differently, a conceptual structure through which the individual constitutes and perceives his or her world. To possess a pattern of interpretation in this sense is not only, and not even primarily, a matter of possessing theoretical knowledge or a set of theoretical, propositional beliefs; rather it is a matter of practical competence or skill. This means, among other things, that to possess a pattern of interpretation can be compared in relevant respects to being in possession of a kind of perception, a means of constituting, experiencing, apprehending or “seeing” oneself, reality, and one’s place and role in reality, on the basis of which one lives and acts in the world. Only when one has learned to experience (“see”) oneself and one’s world in a special way can one be said to have acquired a specific pattern of interpretation. To be in genuine possession of a pattern of interpretation is, in many respects, comparable to being in possession of what Aristotle termed “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*), and the acquisition of *phronesis* presupposes not only theoretical studies, but also practice and training. Applied to religion, it follows that the “essence” of religion and religiosity is not the holding of an intellectual or theoretical belief that something is the case, that certain propositions correctly describe the nature of reality. Reli-

individual or group in question. The attempt of practiced phenomenological observers, in other words, is to see the world “through their subjects’ eyes”, to access the subjective meaning that they have given to their experiences.²⁹ This explanation, of course, is in conformity with Eliade’s statement that “there exists no other way to understand a foreign mental universe than to place oneself inside it, at its very center, in order to progress from there to all the values it possesses” (Eliade, 1959: 165); it is also consistent with the views of Brede Kristensen, who noted: “There is no religious reality other than the faith of believers” (Kristensen, 1960: 13).

The task of putting oneself in the position to see and understand how the world is experienced from within the pattern of interpretation of a particular person, group or culture is, to say the least, extremely difficult. It is challenging enough to enter into the consciousness (pattern of interpretation) of a believing subject when the historical, cultural, religious and social differences between observer and observed are not especially large,³⁰ and what to speak of circumstances in which the subject’s pattern of interpretation is markedly different from that of the phenomenologist and most of his/her readership. And yet, this is exactly what the phenomenological method sets out to achieve.

According to phenomenologists, the transcendental phenomenological reduction is the methodological tool that opens the phenomenological field for study. It is, in other words, “the avenue of access to phenomenology and its objects” (Gurwitsch, 1966b: 175) — the procedure that “makes possible the realization of the program of phenomenology, namely, to account for objects as they really are in terms of objects taken for what they are experienced as” (Gurwitsch, 1964: 232; cf. Gurwitsch, 1966b: 182ff.; Husserl, 1950a: sect. 8; Ricoeur, 1976: 8ff., 11ff., 146ff.). According to James M. Edie, the making of this (transcendental) turn from individual particular

giosity does not primarily concern what we can know (or what we believe), meaning that it is not primarily concerned with questions of ontology and epistemology. To hold religious beliefs or be religious, I argue, is to possess a well-internalized religious pattern of interpretation (a religious way of “seeing”) through which one spontaneously (“pre-predicatively”, by way of “passive syntheses”) constitutes a religious life-world wherein to live and act. For the typically religious person, religious belief is inseparable from religious perception and action, inseparable from a religious life in a religious world.

²⁹ Recently, Mark Juergensmeyer and Mona Kanwal Sheikh (2013) suggested a similar approach. For yet another similar approach see Schultz, 2005; Runyan, 1982. It should be noted that my use of the word “meaning” here is in the wide, phenomenological sense, which includes all the strata of a “complete *noema*” (cognitive, tactile, gustatory, olfactory, evaluative, dispositions to react, etc.), perceived as well as apperceived (cf. Sander, 1988: sect. 3.1.4.5.). This is also close to the manner in which John Hick defines his use of “experiencing-as” (Hick, 1968; Hick, 1989: 140ff.).

³⁰ An attempt to describe these difficulties and how they can be overcome in empirical research (in the context of field work) can be found in Sander, 2000, Sander 2011; cf. Winch, 1958.

objects in the real (or imaginary) world to the eidetic intuition of the meanings of such objects is the essence of Husserlian phenomenology (Edie, 1971). These objects are “not real objects as such, but rather the same objects insofar as they are presented from the aspect of their essential types and meanings” (Edie, 1987: 8).

Here it must also be said that the difficulty of systematically describing and precisely communicating that which constitutes the phenomenological method is something about which most phenomenologist (including Husserl himself) are painfully aware.³¹ One aspect of the challenge resides in the fact that phenomenology, both in general and as a particular empirical science, is not merely (or even primarily) a theoretical activity; rather it is a practical activity, or perhaps even an art, in the Aristotelian sense. To become a phenomenologist is to acquire a certain set of skills. In other words, one does not become a phenomenologist merely by reading books about phenomenology; conceptual knowledge is not enough. Don Ihde puts it like this:

[I]n the case of phenomenology, I would make an even stronger claim: Without doing phenomenology, it may be practically impossible to understand phenomenology. This is not to say that one may not learn about phenomenology by other means. [...] Nevertheless, without entering into the doing, the basic thrust and import of phenomenology is likely to be misunderstood at the least or missed at most (Ihde, 1977: 14).³²

HOW THE APPROACH MIGHT BE EXECUTED

A simple formulation of the phenomenological method can be found in a proverb of the North American Indians: “Never judge a man «till you have walked a mile in his moccasins». Several phenomenologists have made the attempt to describe such “moccasin walking”.³³ Below there is only space for a few brief

³¹ Husserl, 1984a: 15ff.; Farber, 1943: kap. XVII, esp. 558ff.; Schütz, 1973: 256ff.

³² This is also something Heidegger was keenly aware of. He “confessed”, for example, that despite having read most of Husserl’s work, he had not really understood phenomenology until he had learned to “see phenomenologically” (Heidegger, 1962: 75–79). This difference between having knowledge on phenomenology and in phenomenology (Spiegelberg, 1975) is frequently referred to in phenomenological works (cf. also Sander, 1988: sect. 2.9., 3.1., 3.3.3.3., 4.1.2., 4.2., 4.4.2.1.; Sander, 2011).

³³ Just to mention one of the later ones: Cox, 2010: esp. ch. 3. Here, of course, the concrete task is to “translate” Husserlian (possibly mixed with Heideggerian, Merleau-Pontian, Gurwitschian and/or Schutzian) methods into forms suitable for empirical-scientific investigations. And this is not an easy task since, on the one hand, these individuals tended to write in abstract philosophical terms and, on the other, they were not that fastidious when it came to describing their method in concrete, practical terms, a negligence that over the years has given phenomenology an air of “mysticism”, at least in the eyes of many non-phenomenologists.

comments on the following four-step model proffered by Amadeo Giorgi and Barbo Giorgi.

For the scientific analysis, one first obtains descriptions of experiences from others, then one enters into a scientific phenomenological reduction while simultaneously adopting a psychological perspective³⁴ of the experience, then one analyzes the raw data to come up with the essential structure of the experience, which is then carefully described at a level other than that of the original description (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003: 247).

The first step consists of gathering data on the particular type of experience that is of interest to the study, the primary data source being persons that claim to have had such experiences.³⁵ In obtaining the accounts of these subjects, researchers will need to immerse themselves in their experiences by conducting lengthy interviews, participant observations, in-depth exegeses of their religious texts, examinations of their community's religious expressions and so forth. To "make sense" of the subject's world "in the subject's own terms" requires one to have a personal, "lived" knowledge of those terms.

However, we must not only gather descriptions of these experiences, but also attempt to understand them. The aim of the researcher's effort is what Weber terms *Verstehen*, meaning the attempt during inquiry to place oneself "in other persons' shoes" and thus "see the world through their patterns of interpretation" (Weber, 1968, ch. 1; cf. Schütz, 1967, ch. 4; Schütz, 1973; Juergensmeyer & Kanwal Sheikh, 2013). The ability to do this presupposes a number of things.³⁶ Apart from acquiring "lived" knowledge of the doctrines, myths, *etc.* that have informed and directed the socialization of the subject as well as of the specific cultural and historical context in which (s)he lives, the development of what is often termed "empathy" is a highly important aspect of the process.³⁷

(My own somewhat more developed attempts at such a "translation" can be found in: Sander, 1988; Sander, 2000; Sander, 2011.

³⁴ If you are not a psychologist like the Giorgis, "psychological" can be substituted with "sociological", "anthropological" and so forth.

³⁵ Other sources can, for example, consist of various archive documents.

³⁶ Several of which can only be acquired through practice (cf. Ihde, 1977; Sander, 2011).

³⁷ Together with the concept of *Vergegenwärtigung* (representation), the concept *Einfühlung* (empathy) is also fundamental to Husserl's attempt to analyse the problem of intersubjectivity, a problem that obviously is of central importance to the present discussion; lengthy involvement in this discussion, however, is beyond the scope of this article (cf. Husserl, 1973b; Theunissen, 1984). To me "empathy" roughly implies "entering", gaining "insight" into or "living the part of" that which happens "inside" another human being (or group of human beings). It can be described as a sort of indirect but immediate experience of the experiential content of other conscious beings, an immediate and unmediated experience of the intentionality of another human being — her intentional acts and their contents or objects (Sander, 2011).

The second step involves the so-called phenomenological reduction (or transcendental turn), in which we turn from natural, non-reflexive (*natürliche Einstellung*) immersion in the ordinary world of factual experience and its determinisms to an attitude that is counter-natural (*widernatürlich*) and reflexive. This can be viewed as a special kind of phenomenological reflexivity that enables us to free the mind from the various presuppositions, assumptions and determinants that normally (in the natural attitude) govern our experience of the world and our selves, thus preventing us from experiencing, seeing and/or intuiting “the things themselves” (*die Sachen selbst*).

It is through this turn that we enter the realm of meaning, essences or eidetic possibilities. Although in the natural attitude, fact and meaning (essence) are inextricably tied to one another, the transcendental turn to the reflexive attitude enables us to distinguish between the two, and thus turn to meaning alone — to essential meaning, to the essential and invariant structures of facts (Husserl, 1976: § 3; Sander, 1988: part III).³⁸ Thus, the phenomenological reduction can be conceived as the methodological tool that opens the phenomenological field for study (Gurwitsch, 1966a: 175).

One important function (or effect) of this method is to expose implicit aspects of consciousness that are normally “invisible” to the naïve experimenter. The method, in other words, facilitates the “uncovering of the potentialities «implicit» in actualities of consciousness” (Husserl, 1950a: 83, cf. sect. 20). As such, phenomenology can be roughly characterized as the descriptive study of the total content (*noemata*) that constitutes our consciousness (or mind), along with its meaning-giving and other activities. Put more simply, at the second stage of this four-step model, phenomenology is concerned with providing a raw description of subjective experience, without attempting to address either its “reality” or its interpretation.

The third step is, perhaps, the most difficult and the most controversial: determining the basic structure (*eidōs* or universal essence) of the experiences under investigation. Describing and analysing particular phenomena and experiences in their full concreteness are considered common for all phenomenologists. Intuiting, describing and analysing general essences by way of what Husserl called *Wesensschau* or eidetic intuition has given rise to far greater suspicion, and even antagonism. In this regard it has been characterized in the negative as a new variety of mysticism and “crypto-theology”, or at least as an endorsement of the same (Segal, 1980; Segal, 1983); moreover, it has been conceived as implying a commitment to Platonic “realism”.³⁹ My own views relative to such criticisms

³⁸ Cf. Farber, 1943: 216, in which he claimed that Husserl regarded (his form of) phenomenology as a method/technique by which to transform and amplify his “seeing” within philosophy and psychology, thereby making it complete or perfect.

³⁹ Because Husserl himself never explicitly clarified his position on the matter, there remains disagreement concerning whether or not he intended his “essences” to be taken as real,

are similar to those of Herbert Spiegelberg, who notes that “there is nothing «mystical» about’ Husserl’s approach” (Spiegelberg, 1976: 660), and James M. Edie, who more strongly claims that “the eidetic seeing of an essence in the facts (*Wesensschau*) is not some esoteric method reserved to phenomenology, but a method which pervades all human experience and all human sciences” (Edie, 1984: 245).

What, then, is this method *Wesensschau*, which enables us to arrive at the “essence” of a phenomenon? Its main component is what Husserl called “free variations” (*Umfingierung*) or “free imaginative variations” (*freie Variation in der Phantasie*).⁴⁰ Stated in extremely simple terms, *Wesensschau* can be explained as follows: the phenomenologist begins with an informant’s description of an individual, particular experiential object, or class of objects (e.g., a rose, a crucifix, the Torah, an icon of Shiva) and, then, treating it as (nothing but) an example of this type of object, attempts to divest that example of its mundane, individual characteristics by shifting from the perceptual intuition of the individual, particular object to the eidetic intuition of that object’s “meaning”, thus enabling the phenomenologist to focus on the general type or category of that which it is the instantiation.

The break between things and meanings (essences) occurs at the precise moment that a given datum is taken as “just an example”, as an instance of that of which it is an instantiation, as an instantiation of an invariant structure. This kind of turn from fact to essence, from contingent example to eidetic necessity, is something that all of us are unreflectively doing all the time, whenever we recognize something as “an example”; it is, in other words, distinctive of human consciousness!

The fourth and final step involves the phenomenologist’s (etic) re-description of the informants’ (emic) descriptions of their experiences, with emphasis on their common, essential, structures.⁴¹ This re-description, however, has to be executed while maintaining a healthy respect for the validity of the subject’s self-understanding of the experience, avoiding that, as Matthew Wood expresses

eternal, changeless, “metaphysical” entities in a Platonic realistic sense. The closest to an explicit explanation on this matter that I have thus far found comes from *Erfahrung und Urteil* (Husserl, 1972; first published 1938), in which he (§ 82) attempts to show that, like all objects of experience, universals are “constituted” by the subjective consciousness. This notwithstanding, as far as I can see, their precise mode of existence remains unestablished, except for the fact that they were called “ideal” (*ideals* or *ideelles Sein*).

⁴⁰ Providing a detailed, comprehensive description of exactly how this method should or can be properly executed is far beyond the scope of this paper (see however: Husserl, 1972: sect. 82, 87ff.; Husserl, 1976: § 2ff.; Gurwitsch, 1964: 190ff.; Spiegelberg, 1976: 676–684; Sander, 1988: sect. 3.3.2).

⁴¹ We are here touching upon one aspect of the huge insider/outsider problematic, which, once again, cannot be discussed herein as it is far beyond the scope of this paper (see for example: McCutcheon, 1999; American Anthropological Association Meeting, 1990).

it, ‘the insiders’ perspectives that are adopted are generally those of published authors’ (Wood, 2007: 8). The trick here is to describe the subject’s experience such that (s)he can still recognize it while simultaneously avoiding the intrusion of his/her particular interpretation of that experience. The interpreter’s (etic) description must be “experience-near”, meaning that it must “show regard for the validity of self-understanding” (Kimmel, 2008: 25; cf. Wolff, 1997: 57) despite the fact that it is framed in words other than those the subject would (be able to) use.⁴²

As should be clear from the above sketch, the proper execution of this four-step phenomenological model is no easy task. Indeed, it is possibly the most difficult research method to successfully enact. Notwithstanding this and all the various criticisms it has received, I nonetheless believe that the phenomenological project remains a worthy, and even a necessary, pursuit relative to a wide range of research questions. Understanding invariably precedes explanation, and since phenomenology is the only research technique that seeks to understand experience *per se*, its further development and practice can only serve to enhance the scientific exploration of the subjective realm. Beyond this, I can personally vouch for the fact that it is both interesting and rewarding in its own right.

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⁴² In this connection readers often raise the question about a conflict that arises when, for example, a Christian claims that his/her religious experience exhibit meanings that confirm the truth of essential characteristics of Christian theology, thereby arguing that religious diversity is not — as for example a Hindu, based on his/her religious experience, might claim — grounded in the divine will, but merely a product of human error. Does not the phenomenologist in such a case have to accept both the emic view of the Christian and the emic view of the Hindu? And if not, doesn’t the phenomenologist have to impose an alien categorical framework (for example, all religions are rooted in one “pure” religious object) on the Christian standpoint? How, as a phenomenologist, to deal with this problem — which can be seen as an instantiation of the previously mentioned “conflict” between Katz on the one hand, and Stace and Forman on the other — exceeds the scope of this paper to deal with. I can, however, refer the reader to Kimmel, 2008, which includes a fairly comprehensive discussion of the problem.

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