The Historical-Typological Phenomenology of Religion: Problems and Promises

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Abstract

The phenomenology of religion has been criticized for failure of identity and critical nerve. Scholars who use this approach are accused of taking a role that amounts to not more than a reporter, repeating the insiders' unsubstantiated claims while invoking methodological agnosticism as justification for doing so. This paper explores the problems and possibilities of balancing critic and caretakership by critically examining the aims and methods of a particular nuance of phenomenology of religion called historical-typological phenomenology of religion. The paper's finding is that by taking a critical stance on the aims and methods of the phenomenology of religion, religious studies scholars can be able to insist on the sui generis nature of religion and at the same time be able to move from caretakership to critics. This has great significance on the issue of the role of the scholar of religion as a public intellectual. The paper begins by raising the definitional problem concerning the phenomenology of religion. This is followed by isolating historical-typological phenomenology of religion and critically examines its aims and methods.

Keywords: phenomenology, empathetic understanding, epoché, evocative description, elucidative comparison

Introduction

There seems to be no conclusive debate about the question of what precisely is the phenomenology of religion and hence a phenomenological approach to the study of religion/religious phenomena. This seems to be frustrating for

undergraduate teachers and students. The aim of this paper is not to answer this important perennial question. To do this would require a separate thesis. It intends to settle for a particular view of phenomenology of religion on which we can base introductory studies of religions. In order to settle for a particular phenomenology of religion I rely on the suggestion that Summer B. Twiss and Walter H. Conser give. Conser and Twiss propose that we can compare phenomenology of religion to a musical composition that contains three but related voices, namely essential, historical- typological and the existential hermeneutic phenomenology. Their view about this is that,

> The first voice begins with the publication of Rudolf Otto's The Idea of the Holy, which establishes the direction and overall tone of the composition. Subsequently, in the work of Gerardus van der Leeuw and others, the second voice appears, embellishing upon the first voice yet clearly projecting its own distinctive sound. Finally, the third voice, that of the existential phenomenology of religion, enters and new elements as well as established themes are audible (Twiss & Conser 1992: 1 -2).

The advantage of this model is that several different strands within the phenomenology of religion can interact and that it is sensitive to the different nuances of tone, which is audible in it (Arthur 1995:450). In the light of the three voices that Twiss and Conser suggest it is in the context of the historical-typological phenomenology of religion that I craft a particular understanding of the phenomenology of religion. I settle for this context because it emphasizes the main thread, which is a concern with, at least as the first necessary step, what religious phenomena mean from the viewpoints of the adherents.

Historical-Typological Phenomenology of Religion

Before I deal with this approach at length by considering its aims and methods I begin by taking a position regarding the first and the third voices in relation to the second voice that I argue for in this paper. As I have already indicated above Twiss and Conser in a bid to show the complexity of the history of the phenomenology of religion compare the phenomenology of

religion to a musical composition with three separate but related voices. The first voice is the essential. It is basically concerned with the essence or true nature of the religious consciousness of the believing soul –the defining traits of his or her apprehensions, emotional states, and motivation for religious activities. An example of a scholar who represents this voice is Rudolf Otto (Twiss & Conser 1992: 7). The main aim that essentialist phenomenologists of religion share is aptly captured in the following words:

> The aim shared by all essentialist phenomenologists of religion is to describe and analyze those experiences and concepts uniquely characteristic of religious consciousness. That is, scholars working within this voice want to clarify for themselves as well as others those apprehensions, emotions, motivations, and activities distinctive to the believing soul who claims to live his or her life in full recognition of a transcendent or sacred dimension of human experience (Twiss & Conser 1992: 8).

Since the three voices interact this main aim of the essential voice acts as basis for the historical-typological phenomenology that I opt for. In doing this I am not therefore discarding the contribution of the essential phenomenology of religion. My only problem with the essential phenomenology of religion is its lack of emphasis on '… an historically contextualized understanding of a particular tradition's ethos and worldview' (Twiss & Conser 1992: 25). This is more so when we understand phenomenology in the following way:

> Another way of saying that phenomenology is driving at the heart of things, is to remind ourselves of its insistence to look at essences of things. For example probing the phenomenon of prayer, the phenomenologist is looking for the essential character of prayer, that without which prayer would no longer be prayer (Kruger 1982: 19).

This understanding implies looking for the ultimate nature of religious phenomena like metaphysicians. The idea of essence that we assume is related to seeking meaning of religious phenomena in terms of the

meaning of religious phenomena for the believer. One of the aims of the study of religions is to, where possible; historically contextualize them.

The third voice is the existential-hermeneutical phenomenology of religion. In order to shed light on the concern of this approach I follow Twiss and Conser's explanation of the key terms 'existential' and hermeneutics. They qualify these terms in the following way:

> Existential refers to this voice's preoccupation with structures and problems of human existence in the world, including such broad themes as freedom, intersubjectivity, temporality, corporeality, finitude, and death as well as particular human experiences such as anxiety, hope, despair, guilt, caring. Hermeneutical refers to this voice's perception that all human experience is mediated by language (or more broadly symbolic systems) (Twiss & Conser 1992: 44 - 45).

The historical typological phenomenology will account for existential-phenomenology insights such as temporality, intersubjectivity and symbolic data as Twiss and Conser rightly point out when they write:

> By contrast, the method of historical-typological phenomenology of religion-despite its apparent adherence to the ideal of a detached, objective, and neutral phenomenological observer-does in fact take account of all three existential insights through those aspects of its method concerned with, for example, diachronic understanding, reference to data made available by other disciplines, and its focus on traditions and communities of ethos and worldview. Diachronic understanding picks up temporality; available data include linguistic and symbolic data; and traditions and communities fix intersubjectivity (Twiss & Conser 1992:52).

So once again even though I emphasize the historical-typological phenomenology of religion I acknowledge that there is a close relationship between this approach and the existential phenomenology of religion. This paper seeks to emphasize historical-typological phenomenology's ability to

deal with religious phenomena in relation to a particular tradition's ethos and worldview.

The Aims and Methods of the Historical-Typological Phenomenology of Religion

The first aim of this approach is

> … an emphasis on understanding in a qualitative manner the particular forms of life within a religious tradition and thereby recover a picture and a sense of what these elements (e.g. doctrinal, beliefs, ritual practices, codes of conduct) mean from the viewpoint of the adherents of particular religious traditions (Twiss & Conser 1992:24).

The second aim of this approach is '… an historically contextualized understanding of a particular tradition's ethos and worldview' (Twiss & Conser 1992:25). This approach also aims, in the context of the latter aim, to recover a dynamic picture of how an ethos and worldview develops over time, not simply how these appear at a given time. It therefore emphasizes a diachronic qualitative understanding focusing on the tradition's own internal development. It however objects to the evolutionary theories that posit that some religions not only precede others temporarily but also 'valuationally so that some traditions are conceived as being 'more primitive' and less developed than other 'more advanced' and 'higher' traditions' (Twiss & Conser 1992: 25. This paper objects to this evolutionary view of religions, particularly when we conceive it to be based on 'scant historical evidence' (Twiss & Conser 1992: 25) and also render it a 'type of reductive analysis' (Twiss & Conser 1992: 25. Elzey captures the assumption of this aim, quoting Mircea Eliade, when he writes:

> In sum a religious phenomenon cannot be understood outside its 'history', that is outside its cultural and socioeconomic contexts. There is no such thing as a 'pure' religious datum, outside of history…. But admitting the historicity of religious experiences does

> not imply that they are reducible to non-religious forms of behavior. Stating that a religious datum is always a historical datum does not mean that it is reducible to a non-religious history, for example, to an economic, social or political (Elzey 1994: 87).

This paper also emphasizes this approach's third aim of 'carefully controlled comparative inquiry' (Elzey 1994: 26). This is a key aim since at the heart of religious studies is a systematic comparison of religions. This comparative analysis also shuns the kind of classification in evolutionary views of religion. I agree with Kristensen who argues that

> phenomenology makes use of comparison only in order to gain a deeper insight into the self-subsistent … meaning of each of the historical data … to understand the conception of believers themselves, who always ascribe an absolute value to their faith (Elzey 1994: 26).

The central view is that by comparing traditions we can gain a better understanding of any one religion. This has the advantage of seeing and appreciating what may be distinctive to the religion under scrutiny (Elzey 1994: 26).

The fourth aim involves an interest in types of religious phenomena that religions share. The paper once again follows Kristensen's view that 'phenomenology has set itself the task of grouping phenomena' (Elzey 1994: 27).

Overall in terms of the aims of the historical-typological phenomenology this paper therefore argues for qualitative understanding, historical sensitivity, comparison and typology. Although we have treated these aims separately for the purpose of analysis they are in fact integrally connected.

The Method

We can correlate the four aims we have considered with distinctive methodological orientations of historical-typological phenomenology (Elzey 1994: 30). The way Twiss and Conser illustrate the correlation is succinct.

They clearly show the type of method that particular aims imply. Their analysis is therefore worth quoting at length. They write,

> That is the four aims can be correlated with the distinctive steps or facets of the of this enterprise's phenomenological procedure. The aim of qualitative understanding of the forms of life of a religious tradition from that tradition's standpoint suggests immediately the propriety of **empathetic understanding** (imaginative experiencing and introspection), **epoché** (with respect to questions of truth, value and theoretic-explanatory commitments), and **evocative description** (conveying a sense of how particular holistic worldviews experience and see life in the world). The aim of **historical sensitivity and contextualization** suggests the propriety of temporally structuring this qualitative understanding and evocative description so as to chat the chronological development of a particular tradition's ethos and worldview. The comparative aim, in turn, suggests the step of **controlled elucidative comparison** of a particular holistic worldview with other worlds of religious meaning, and the first aspect of the typological aim suggests that this controlled comparison relies on the use of constantly refined typological categories (ideal types) of religious phenomena. Finally, the second aspect of the typological aim suggests the step of **elucidative interrogation**[1] of the standpoints of particular holistic traditions so that we may identify and clarify distinctly religious objectives and intentions that may constitute 'universally' or 'recurrent' features of all religious traditions (Elzey 1994: 30).

Out of this analysis we can isolate six methodological steps/attitudes of the historical-typological phenomenology. These are epoché, empathetic understanding, evocative description, diachronic understanding, controlled elucidative comparison, and elucidative interrogation. I examine these one by one.

[1] The bolds in this citation are that of the author of this study.

Empathetic Understanding

This step involves 'both imaginative re-experiencing and systematic introspection of the contents that are imaginatively experienced' (Twiss & Conser 1992:31). This is important to religious studies' concern to understand the particular ethos and worldview of the religions under study. Phenomenology focuses on the empathetic understanding on data related to the religions made available by other historical and social scientific inquiry. The empathetic inquiry into religious data is controlled by, and shaped by, and in constant conversation with the work of other disciplines. Twiss and Conser (1992:31 - 32) give a penetrating description of empathetic understanding. They write:

> Phenomenology so conceived provides a means of effectively 'passing over' into the religious situation which one wants to investigate and 'coming back' with a clearer understanding of it. It is a means of passing over to someone else's religious world so that we may try to see how things appear when viewed through that perspective… Phenomenology viewed as such seeks to offer to its sufficiently competent practitioners as a non-secondhand and insight as it is possible to achieve into what animates different vitalities and movements of meaning within any particular religious outlook. Its basic motivating idea is quite straightforward; to try to apprehend someone else's religions as it appears to them, rather than focusing attention on how their religion appears to us from a non-phenomenological viewpoint.

The method of empathy brings us into contact with the antireductionist thrust of the phenomenology of religion. For 'In any case, it is accepted on all hands that an antireductionist thrust characterizes the phenomenology of religion, a thrust it shares with philosophical phenomenology' (Sharma (1994:132). This points to the position that phenomenologists of religion approach religious data in a specific antireductionist manner (Sharma 1994: 132). In relation to the phenomenology of religion, 'reductionism refers to a mode of explanation or interpretation in the study of religion which deviates from the believer's understanding of it' (Sharma 1994: 133). W.B. Kristensen captures the importance of this step:

> Let us never forget that there exists no other reality than the faith of the believer. If we really want to understand religion, we must refer exclusively to the believer's testimony. What we believe from our point of view, about the nature or value of other religions, is a reliable testimony to our own faith, or to our own understanding of religious faith; but if our opinion about another religion differs from the opinion and evaluations of the believers, then we are no longer talking about their religion. We have turned aside from historical reality, and are concerned only with ourselves (Sharma 1994: 133-134).

Rudolf Otto also shares this view. He emphasizes 'the numinous quality of religious experience per se' (Sharma 1994: 134). He is against the intellectualistic and rationalistic bias in the interpretation of religion and the reduction of religious phenomena to 'the interpretative schema of linguistic analysis, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and various historical approaches' (Sharma 1994: 134). M. Eliade is succinct on this issue. He writes:

> A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false (Eliade 1963: xiii).

The concerns that these citations raise for phenomenologists of religion is the danger of trying to reduce and trivialize, religious phenomena to purely sociological, psychological, economic or environmental terms. This for a phenomenologist is a fundamental mistake. The argument is that

> Such reductions ignore the complexity of the human experience, impose social values on transcendental issues, and ignore the unique intentionality of the religious participant (Moreau 2000: 4).

I take a critical stance concerning empathy. I insist on empathy as a central method in the phenomenology of religion. Empathy has value in ensuring that the scholarly descriptions of the insiders' behavior and claims are accurate. I do not however seek to relinquish critical evaluation of religious data. So the goal is not simply to report and repeat what informants tell us about their religions. We try to avoid a situation where the researcher becomes simply a passive documenter. So the basic assumption here is that

> although research on human institutions and beliefs begins with descriptive information, the overall goal is to develop a generalized theory of one's own making and testing that can be used to elucidate all sorts of human behavior (McCutcheon 1999: 18-19).

So overall I do not construe empathy as 'a magical intuition of the actor's stream of consciousness …' (Segal 1989: 22).

Epoché

The word epoché is 'derived from the Greek *epecho,* I hold back. In effect it means 'stoppage', suspension of judgment, the exclusion from one's mind of every possible presupposition' (Sharpe 1986: 224). Sharma observes a further dimension. He links epoché to empathy. He argues that epoché does not only involve suspension of one's belief but 'involves an active participation in the experience which is being encountered, unencumbered by preexisting or superimposed ideas, beliefs, presuppositions or suspicions' (Sharma 2001: 232). G. van der Leeuw succinctly explains epoché when he says:

> The term epoché is a technical expression employed in current phenomenology by Husserl and other philosophers. It implies that no judgment is expressed concerning the objective world, which is thus placed between brackets, as it were. All phenomena therefore are considered solely as they are presented to the mind, without any further aspects such as their real existence, or their value being taken into account; the observer restricts himself to pure description systematically pursued, himself adopting an attitude of complete

> intellectual suspense, or of abstention from all judgment regarding these controversial topics (Van der Leeuw 1963: 646).

I appreciates the value of epoché but with qualification. The reason for qualifying epoché is that it is beset by limitations. One of the most ardent critics of epoché is Segal. He writes:

> Phenomenologists invariably neglect to explain how to practice it. To prescribe the suspension of bias is one thing. To achieve it is another. Until the actual means of riding oneself of all biases gets explained, the epoché must remain only a forlorn ideal (Segal 1989: 19).

The import of this criticism is that a state of freedom from presupposition is not attainable. Desiring epoché itself may be construed as a judgment. It therefore means that a value free approach is simply unattainable (Sharpe 1978: 84). In the light of such criticisms the position about epoché that I take is consistent with M.F.C. Bourdillon's views. He argues, 'the exercise of epoché can be accepted only as an instruction to listen' (Bourdillon (1993:230).

So the position of this paper is that epoché aims to lay bare the religious phenomena so as to have first an, as far as possible, 'objective' description and second to allow well-informed and justified interpretation (Panikkar 1999: 79). In this way we are able to listen to believers and approach them with minimum presuppositions (Panikkar 1999: 79). This means that epoché has its place in the initial clarification of the religious phenomena, but not in the actual interpretation/explanation. J.S. Kruger (1982: 18) qualifies the role of epoché that I assume well when he says:

> … phenomenology would of course not demand that the researcher should simply black out his own input in perceiving a phenomenon. This would be impossible. To suspend our previous assumptions is not the same as to deny them. Rather we suspend them if we become radically conscious of them and we consciously declare these points of departure …. A student of religion will inevitably bring along with him a set of background assumptions: the more he is conscious

> of these, the more he will be able to keep his own preferences from distorting his observation of something.

The implication of this position is that the concept of epoché does not necessarily mean to recognize and dismiss. It means bracketing whatever may perchance give rise to inappropriate value judgments.

Taking such a position about epoché raises the question whether the phenomenology of religion that I argue for involves a rehabilitation of prejudice. G. Flood would argue that we are moving beyond phenomenology. I argue that we are involved in what we may call 'engaged phenomenology'/reflexive phenomenology. This paper therefore, places emphasis on reflexivity. It raises doubts concerning the possibility of a totally disinterested, objective and detached scholarship. The aim is to undertake engaged phenomenology of religion-a phenomenology that is aware of its presuppositions and agenda and pursues them with passion. The phenomenologist therefore makes judgements concerning what we might term good or bad religious practices.

We appeal to Gadamer's theory of understanding as historical and linguistic. This theory basically criticizes the Enlightenment thought's ideal of the objective interpreter who remains detached from all cultural influences that threaten to prejudice one's understanding. For Gadamer there is no such thing as unprejudiced understanding. Understanding always involves pre-understanding. We are always already historically situated, shaped by our culture and language, and that situatedness shapes our understandings of everything. We bring our own horizon, our own effective history, as a prejudice to any moment of understanding (Kruger 1982: 18).

This reflexive phenomenology is in direct conflict with some classical phenomenology of religion insofar as it suggests that there is no view from nowhere. This view also assumes that a religious community is always in some sense an interpretive community, and that its interpretations are always unique fusions of horizons. Received traditions are always being transformed, and religion is always a dynamic interpretation. So I emphasize with Gadamer that religion is dynamic, interpretive process rather than a fixed set of ideas and institutions.

Overall I take epoché in a critical way. I take epoché to represent a fundamental attitude but that researchers cannot fully rid themselves of their

scholarly precommitments. There are many presuppositions that are so much part of our thinking that that we are not even aware of them (Cox 1998:11). This understanding of epoché is consistent with reflexive phenomenology. Its main thesis is that disinterest, or neutrality, is impossible in the study of religion[2]. One of the main methodological positions of this paper is an argument against the proclaimed value neutrality of traditional phenomenology. It agrees with Flood who argues that neutral critique is impossible and undesirable, 'but reflexive critique in dialogical relation with its object, what might be called "dialogical reflexivity"'. What becomes important is not so much the distinction between reductionists and nonreductionists, insiders and outsiders but between the critical and the non-critical (Flood 1999:226).

Evocative Description

This approach is crucial for attaining the goal/aim of qualitative understanding of religious data. I agree with Arthur's position that evocative description is absolutely crucial to the attainment of truly qualitative understanding (Twiss & Conser 1992:33). Phenomenology, therefore, in the first step does not seek evaluative judgements. It seeks accurate and appropriate descriptions and interpretations of the religious phenomena. So one of the goals of the phenomenologist is to allow each religion to speak for itself and temporarily suspend issues of external validity. Cox captures the import of this method well in his concept 'describing the phenomena.' He writes:

> In his observation of the activities of any religious group and by his getting inside them, the phenomenologists will encounter a wide variety of religious data. His first task in this process is to describe the data as accurately as possible, paying careful attention to the various aspects so as to avoid premature interpretations…Moreover the descriptions obtained must correspond as faithfully as possible to the believers' own testimony (Cox 1992:32).

[2] For an extensive discussion of this thesis see Hufford (1999).

Overall the phenomenologist attempts as much as possible to describe as accurately as possible the religious data.

This approach is not immune from limitations. The phenomenologist acknowledges that no pure description is possible as there is a strong attitudinal component on the part of the researcher. There is an endeavor to describe accurately but let us never forget that the researcher is the one who observes, interviews, records and transmits the data. So although the phenomenologist tries to present the attitudes to nature as the believers would, the judgements of the writer will inevitably influence the descriptions. The phenomenologist therefore within limits attempts to follow the ideal of being faithful to the believers' point of view but not under the illusion that the study can produce pure objectivity. There is creative interaction by the writer with religious data (Cox 1992:32 - 33).

Diachronic Understanding

Phenomenology in this context aims to produce what Smart refers to as 'a moving' phenomenological picture of religious phenomena as the religions themselves change their self- understanding of various religious phenomena. As a result I emphasize the historical-typological phenomenological method of diachronic understanding. Twiss and Conser define this method as a '… temporally structured elucidation of a particular tradition's ethos and worldview and recording changes in that ethos and worldview' (Twiss & Conser 1992:34). In the case of phenomenologists we pay attention to the changes in ethos and worldview in relation to how these changes relate to religious phenomena. The phenomenologist intends to achieve diachronically qualitative understanding of religious data.

By taking this position we implicitly raise the question of the sensitivity of the phenomenology of religion to history. One view is that 'phenomenology knows nothing of any historical development of religion …' (Sharma 2001:54). Some phenomenologists of religion have flatly stated that their phenomenology of religion has nothing to do with the historical origin and development of religious facts (Sharma 2001:54). I do not admit this position because '… the essence of a religious fact is historically conditioned and one cannot overlook history in the manifestation of the religious fact, and the historical development of a fact does contribute to

getting at new meanings or even to correct the older ones in the light of changing circumstances and contexts …' (Sharma 2001:54). I therefore agree with the view that phenomenology and history complement each other (Sharma 2001:54).

It is in this context that we come into contact with, as indicated earlier on, what Smart refers to as 'dialectical phenomenology' (Smart 1996:7). This is a reaction to some essentialist phenomenology's nuances that emphasizes the view that a given type of phenomena has a common essence (Smart 1996:7). The import of this view is that essential phenomenology of religion tends to be 'synchronic and static' (Smart 1996:7).

Smart argues that we should see religion as a structured whole, made up of seven mutually interdependent or dialectically related dimensions: ' myth, rituals, doctrines, ethics, social forms and organisations, emotions and experiences, and material or aesthetic elements' (Strenski 2006:192). The idea is that we have a religion when these dimensions 'are clustered into an interactive complex, we have what is usefully called a "religion"' (Strenski 2006:192). Smart is succinct on this when he says 'By dialectical phenomenology I mean more particularly the relationship between different dimensions of religions and worldviews' (Smart 1996:7).

Phenomenologists therefore not only focus on bringing out the meaning of particular religious data, but also on how religious data fit together with other religious phenomena in a particular religion. The question is how the religious phenomena are in each religious tradition related to, for example, myths, ritual, prayer, soteriology, sacrifice and so on. Overall I agree with Strenski's acknowledgement of the beauty of Smart's dimensional approach. Strenski says (2006: 194):

> The beauty of Smart's dimensional approach is that it can set up a perspective in which a whole series of 'why' questions can be addressed and answered. True to the ideal of autonomy or distinctiveness characteristic of the phenomenology of religion, these are questions and answers that do not pass outside the realm of religion itself. They are not efforts at explaining religion in nonreligious-reductionist-terms. They are efforts to account for how and why things happen in religion in terms of religious factors ….

In following this approach phenomenologists not therefore simply repeat what the believers may say. This is the context in which I stress on a certain kind of explanation that is not antagonistic to understanding. My position is that the phenomenological method is not restricted to perceiving religious phenomena from the point of view of the believer. There is a dimension of it that consists of identifying structures within religious phenomena which the believer may not be conscious of but which do not violate the self-understanding of the believer.

Controlled Elucidative Comparison

One of the long-standing assumptions of the phenomenology of religion is that it is indeed based upon comparative observation. Strenski rightly points out that we owe Max Muller a great deal of debt for his practice and promotion of comparative studies of religion. He was the first scholar prominently to show how useful it would be to study religions in relation to one another (Strenski 2006: 83). His popular dictum is that 'He who knows one religion knows none'. Muller's argument is that one cannot know one religion unless one knows several…, that is to say that a person who knows only about one religion can never be sure that they know more than just what may be peculiar to that particular religion, rather than something fundamental about religions (Strenski 2006: 83). In terms of the aim of comparison I agree with Muller's position that 'comparison makes us think, by suggesting analogies, similarities and differences we might not have entertained before that' (Strenski 2006: 84).

In the light of this, I argue with Moreau for the position that the phenomenological study of religion is comparative in a limited sense. This paper divorces itself from the evolutionary approach to comparative studies in religion where there is a form of comparison that imply superiority or inferiority of religions (Moreau 2004:4). The phenomenologist therefore intends to identify both similarities and differences among religions in order to illuminate each religion's belief and practices and reach general conclusions about the fundamental differences and similarities and possibilities for mutual fecundation.

This is what Twiss and Conser call controlled elucidative comparison. They refer, as one of the examples, to Kristensen's use of this

approach to the phenomenon of prayer in response to what exactly elucidative comparison involve. They make it clear when they say:

> Now what is interesting about all this is the way in which, through identification of both similarities and differences among the prayers from different traditions, Kristensen is able to illuminate each prayer as well as reach some more general conclusions about the fundamental recurrent types of attitudes and actions represented in them all. Thus he is able to see the unique ethos associated with each prayer, use the ethos of one to clarify the ethos of another, and reach a tentative conclusion about some apparently universal features. This is the process of comparative elucidation at work … (Twiss & Conser 1992: 36).

Elucidative Interrogation

This method is bi-polar. One pole deals,

> with distinguishing the distinctively religious objectives, intentions, and motivations operative in a given tradition from other nonreligious motivations that may also be operative in that tradition's ambient culture and may interact with the religious motivations (Twiss & Conser 1992: 37).

It aims at clarifying mixed motives that may be behind some religious phenomena in a given tradition. It focuses on gaining an understanding of the complexities that may be involved in a given tradition's ethos and worldview (Twiss & Conser 1992: 37). In the light of this the phenomenologist identifies both the religious/spiritual and mundane dimensions of religions. She/he assumes that the religious/spiritual dimensions are intermixed with mundane materialistic motives (Twiss & Conser 1992: 37).

The other pole involves clarifying of 'distinctively religious motivations for the purpose of identifying and illuminating structures and phenomena apparently universal to all religious traditions' (Twiss & Conser 1992: 37). This second aspect also assumes the concern with the intrinsic religious objectives and motives involved (Twiss & Conser 1992: 38).

Elucidative interrogation is what phenomenologists of religion commonly refer to as **eidetic intuition/ vision**. Its aim is to search for the **eidos,** which are the essentials of religious phenomena. The phenomenological goal is to decipher the true meaning of religious phenomena for the believer (Segal 1989:18).

Up to this point we now have the view of phenomenological approach suggested in this paper. Although the paper has dealt with weaknesses of particular facets of the approach it is important to bring them together under a general critique of the approach.

General Critique of the Phenomenological Approach

There are several areas in which the nuance of the phenomenological approach presented in this paper faces difficult questions. It is important that one considers them to become aware of its limitations and strength. Work in this section is eased somewhat by the fact that this paper has dealt with many of the criticisms in its discussion of particular methods of this approach.

One can identify six criticisms that appear to be shared by phenomenological approaches in general and a few charges against the phenomenological method of the historical typologist.

First one can criticize the phenomenological approach for the bias associated with a normative agenda (Twiss & Conser 1992: 39). This is a challenge to phenomenologists who prop up theological or philosophical missionary aims. This definitely can in fact distort. There is a danger of a tendency to identify religious consciousness with the consciousness of a classical Christian theistic believer (Twiss & Conser 1992: 16). For an example the danger may be that of couching Shona traditional religious consciousness into Judeo-Christian spectacles. The phenomenologist tries as far as possible to counterveil such problems of bias by employing the principle of epoché.

The second problem revolves around the principle of epoché itself. We have already dealt with problems related to epoché. At this point we need to highlight the problem of whether the phenomenological attitude itself-in its apparent neutrality about truth and value-is able to do justice to religious phenomena of ultimate commitment (faith) which are quite contrary of neutrality and suspended judgment (Twiss & Conser 1992: 17).

Concerning this problem one needs to note that, as already discussed above, that the phenomenological approach also employs empathetic reenactment of the religious consciousness. In this way it enables understanding at a distance. So the suspension of judgment (epoché) enhances empathy by putting out of play the investigator's own distorting prejudices and biases. This enables the investigator to be, as far as possible, empathetic to and resonant with the believing soul's experiences from its own standpoint (Twiss & Conser 1992: 17). I base this explanation on the assumption that there seems to be no contradiction between epoché and empathy. I therefore argue that epoché and empathy are interactive and mutually reinforcing. Epoché does not seem to be necessarily incompatible with empathetic understanding (Twiss & Conser 1992: 17).

A third problem relates to empathetic understanding itself. The claim is that the exact nature of the epistemic value of this process remains somewhat obscure in many phenomenological discussions (Twiss & Conser 1992: 17-16). This paper has dealt with this problem. It has emphasized the demand on empathetic approach, for the purposes of trying as far as possible to represent another's religious experience in a way that the other would affirm before subjecting it to a critical gaze. May be one needs to raise a further critical charge. In the search of empathy, how does one deal with the danger of identification to the extent that religious conversion occurs. (Moreau 2000:6). I find the possibility and relevance of empathy in the sense in which N. Smart explains it in relation to play-acting. Smart's explanation is therefore worth quoting at length;

> …the actor imaginatively rehearses the feelings and beliefs of a given character, while at the simultaneously bracketing issues of truth, value, and commitment – the actor after all does not actually become a character except imaginatively in a kind of epoché. So too the phenomenologists: he/she imaginatively rehearses the feelings and beliefs of the believing soul, while at the same simultaneously bracketing questions of truth, value and commitment (Smart quoted by Twiss & Conser 1992: 20).

I do not in the light of the above suggestion regard empathetic understanding as problematic for the phenomenologists of religion.

A fourth problem is whether the phenomenological attitude of the historical typologist is sufficiently suspicious of, and critical about, the factors involved in religious motivations, intentions and activities (Smart quoted by Twiss & Conser 1992: 39). The import of this criticism is that the phenomenological approach is naïve by failing to consider hidden nonreligious motives and factors influencing religious forms of life … (Smart quoted by Twiss & Conser 1992: 40). I have already dealt with this problem under the method of elucidative interrogation. The point once again is that the phenomenologist does not only focus on the consciously religious motives and intentions that relate to religious phenomena. It focuses on the intrinsically religious motives and intentions and at the same time is clearly cognizant of the fact that mixed motives may be at work in the religious phenomena.

A fifth charge concerns a perceived synchronic and anti-historic bias. This paper has raised this problem under diachronic understanding. In this section the I noted that the import of this charge is that phenomenology tends to look at religious phenomena as though they were set of slides rather than living videos rooted in a historical context. This involves excluding diachronic and developmental analysis. The net effect of this is the lack of ability to properly contextualize religious phenomena (Moreau 2000:5). Considering the paper's position under diachronic understanding the historical-typological phenomenology is explicitly concerned with features of historicity and diachronic analysis.

A sixth charge is that phenomenology's claims of pure description have been open to examination. I have acknowledged under evocative description that; 'no one is immune from the influence of culture, historical setting and social situation. Each of these areas lays assumptive claims on our world view' (Moreau 2000:5). To claim to be purely descriptive is impossible. Since the aim of the phenomenologist is to critically compare religions, it crosses the boundary from description to evaluation. This is what I termed creative interaction by the writer with the religious data among religions.

Conclusion

The aim of paper was to discuss a particular nuance of the phenomenological

approach that acts as the theoretical framework for an introduction to the study of religions. This paper has settled for the historical- typological phenomenology of religion. This approach has four connected aims and six methodological facets. The four aims are first, an emphasis on, as a first necessary step, to understand religions from the viewpoint of the believers. The second aim involves attempting a historically contextualized understanding of religions. The third aim is about engaging in a carefully controlled comparative study. The fourth aim is about having an interest in types of religious phenomena.

These four aims are correlated to six methodological facets namely empathetic understanding, epoché, evocative description, historical sensitivity and contextualization, controlled elucidative comparison and elucidative interrogation. This paper has opted for these aims and methods because of religious studies' need for an insider perspective that attempts to establish the comparable data. One of the major assumptions of phenomenology of religion is that the insider perspective is indeed an essential aspect of the critical analytical comparative approach notwithstanding the fact that however the insider perspective may be limited to understanding (verstehen/data construction).

In the light of the limitations and the position that this paper takes on these limitations other scholars may probably provide alternative nuances of the phenomenological approach and select/emphasize different voices of the phenomenology of religion and aims and methods from the ones I have selected. I have settled for this nuance of the phenomenological approach because the main aim is to achieve what J.L. Cox, following W.B. Kristensen, refers to as 'informed comparison' (Cox 2006:113). I have, following, Kristensen, emphasized the practice of an informed comparison based on historical data. This method leads to understanding rather than judgment. The issue is at every stage in the description of religious phenomena, the phenomenologist attempts, as far as possible, to adhere to the overriding principle of phenomenology of religion which 'wishes to learn to understand the conception of the believer's themselves, who always ascribe an absolute value to their faith' (Cox 2006:113).

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