
Notes and Reflections

Is Phenomenology of Religion the Distinct Method of Religious Studies?

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Although claims have been made on behalf of the phenomenology of religion as the distinct method of religious studies directly or indirectly,¹ the claim seems to run into difficulties, at least at first sight, as soon as the claim is subjected to further examination. Phenomenology is *also* employed as a method in other fields of study (see Embree 1998), and that religious studies itself *also* employs several methods (Cain 1987). Both these facts detract from the proposition that the phenomenology of religion is the distinct method of religious studies. These points may be elaborated as follows:

1. To the extent that one may identify the sensitivity to the insider's perspective as the hallmark of the phenomenology of religion, some other branches of the Humanities apart from religious studies also employ this method. To that extent its status as the distinct method of religious studies is thrown open to question. Anthropology is an obvious example here and psychology also a possible example. Field-studies in anthropology are intended to reflect faithfully the views and responses of the people the anthropologist happens to be studying, rather than those of the anthropologist. I believe the concept of "think

description" is relevant here (Fischer 1999, 43). In this sense phenomenology can be said to be the distinct method of anthropology as well. One is, however, jolted out of this complacent conclusion by the following remark of an anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss:

No common analysis of religion can be given by a believer by a believer and a non-believer, and from this point of view the type of approach known as "religious phenomenology" would be dismissed. (Cited in Smith 1994, 324)

This enables one to distinguish between two aspects of the phenomenological method: as a method of *collecting* data and as a method of *analyzing* data. This distinction creates room for revising the view that the phenomenological method may not be considered the distinctive method of religious studies because it is also the distinct method of anthropological studies. It could now be proposed that while both religious studies and anthropological studies may share the method in common so far as the collection of data is concerned, they may part company when it comes to the analyzing of such data. From such a perspective it could then be proposed that phenomenology is the *distinct* method of religious studies inasmuch as its approach to the analysis of data is *also* phenomenological; that is to say, it does not trespass the self-understanding of the believers.

There is, however, another form of study, which similarly does not overstep the understanding of the believers—namely, *theology*. How then does phenomenology of religion distinguish itself from theology? The answer perhaps lies in this: that while in theology it is the believer himself or herself who analyses his or her own religious tradition, phenomenology of religion typically involves the investigation of another tradition—a tradition other than one's own. Eric Sharpe, for instance, writes of the phenomenologists of religion:

They wish to combine complete accuracy of scholarship with complete sympathy of treatment to ensure the complete understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of other human beings. (Sharpe 1985, 237)

So, if anthropology compromises its claim to distinctiveness at the

level of collection of data, theology seems to comprise it at the level of its analysis.

2. It will now be argued that a more careful analysis of the point enables one to revise this initial impression. It was argued that as both the anthropology and the phenomenology of religion adopt a similar stance in the matter of the collection of data, phenomenology of religion thereby loses its distinctness in this respect as the distinct method of religious studies. While there is some truth to this statement, such an understanding of the situation might well be inadequate, in light of the fact that the data of the phenomenology of religion, as it is practiced, comprises primarily of *historical* data about the traditions rather than field-data. Thus, although the attitude towards data is similar between the two, the database actually employed tends to differ. One could even say that the same attitude to data is retained, namely, privileging the insider's view, but the attitude is applied to different kinds of databases. This enables phenomenology of religion to retain a certain measure of distinction even while sharing certain attitudes towards data-collection in general with the anthropology of religion.

The relationship of phenomenology of religion to theology also deserves to be reexamined. This becomes clear if the quotation of Eric J. Sharpe is also revisited. The citation speaks of the "religious beliefs and practices of other human beings." However, the phenomenology of religion typically studies other religious traditions. If then we replaced the expression "religious beliefs and practices of other human beings," with the expression "other religious traditions" then the distinction from anthropology becomes more obvious. And, the distinction of phenomenology of religion from theology also becomes obvious because, in theology, one typically studies the beliefs and practices of one's own religious tradition, while phenomenology of religion is concerned with studying the religious beliefs and practices of *other* religious traditions. It seems to me then that the distinctiveness of phenomenology of religion does not so much consist in its adoption of the phenomenological method as such, either at the level of collection of data or analysis of data, as in its *application* of this method to the "other." For both collection and analysis of data, with the insider's perspective

as a control, characterizes not merely such traditional fields as theology, but even such modern fields as feminism. Thus, the distinctiveness of phenomenology of religion as a method seems to lie not in the method as such—but at another level—its application of it to the “other” at the level of analysis.

3. This conclusion is strengthened by the following considerations. Feminism also privileges the insider’s perspective, but is typically practiced by insiders, that is to say, women. Orientalism *a la* Said also privileges the insider’s perspective but in order to study how the outsider’s have looked at a tradition; it is insider’s looking out. The phenomenology of religion, however, typically represents the case of outsiders looking in.

4. To conclude: The phenomenology of religion is not a distinct method of religious studies, rather it represents a distinct application of the phenomenological method in religious studies.

Notes

¹ Many would identify this as the thrust of Professor Ninian Smart’s presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion at Nashville, Tennessee entitled “The Future of the Academy.”

Works Cited

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