What is Phenomenology? By Jonathan Tuckett

What is Phenomenology?

By Jonathan Tuckett, University of Stirling

Published by the Religious Studies Project, on 20 January 2012 in response to the Religious Studies Project Interview with James Cox on "The Phenomenology of Religion" (14 January 2012).

In a recent podcast (2012), Professor James Cox has briefly sketched an outline of the phenomenology of religion. His overview has taken broadly the concept of Husserl’s notions of **epoche** and the **eidetic intuition** and carried them through to typologies for the purpose of comparisons. Now, Cox provides us with a rather comprehensive phenomenology which, though briefly explained in the podcast, is expounded upon in greater detail in his book *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (2010). However, Cox is possibly the great syncretist of phenomenology and draws upon a rich and ultimately varied history in the field. In truth, despite Cox’s presentation, what the phenomenology of religion entails is perhaps not as monolithic as he would suggest.

Quite rightly Cox indicates that the beginnings of the phenomenology of religion can be found in what he calls (2010) the Dutch school of phenomenology. However, in a detailed survey of the history of religious studies in the Dutch context, Arie Molendijk (2000) highlights a problem: it is not entirely clear with whom the phenomenology of religion began. He points to authors such as Sharpe, Waardenburgh and Hirschmann as not only differing in deciding when phenomenology first began, but also when considering who does and does not count as phenomenologists. Thus, to give just a brief deluge of figures we might think of as phenomenologists, Molendijk lists at various points: Chantepie de la Saussaye, Nathan Soderblom, Edward Lehmann, William Kristensen, Gerardus van der Leeuw, C.J. Bleeker, Joachim Wach, Joseph Kitagawa, Mircea Eliade, C.P. Tiele, Friedrich Pfister, Max Scheler, Georg Wobbermin, Robert Winkler, Rudolf Otto, Heinrich Frick, Gustav Mensching (2000:28-29). Nor is there much consensus on the matter, Hischmann who was a student of van der Leeuw
does not include Kristensen, van der Leeuw’s teacher, on her list of phenomenologists. This is also a predominantly Dutch and Scandinavian dominated list, to which we might wish to add the further British figures of Edwin W. Smith, Geoffrey Parrinder, Ninian Smart and Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

Nevertheless, it is still a fairly safe comment to say that the phenomenology of religion began with the Dutch. Which scholar was the first phenomenologist, however, is debatable. Molendijk tells us that at the very latest the phenomenology of religion began with Gerardus van der Leeuw. Some might say that Kristensen is the first phenomenologist, and Cox is probably among this group, for his watchword ‘the believers were completely right’ (in 1969:49) has pervaded all phenomenology. Yet Kristensen had a very specific idea of what the phenomenology of religion was, and one which was far stricter than van der Leeuw’s. This general lack of clarity over what is contained in the phrase ‘phenomenology of religion’ and who are phenomenologists has generated considerable misgivings about the field. Indeed, Willard Oxtoby rightly acknowledges that there are ‘as many phenomenologies as there are phenomenologists’ (Oxtoby, 1968:598). Even so, we can identify three dominant forms of phenomenology. Though we can see the beginnings of such a distinction in the Kristensen’s work (he was speaking of a science of religion more generally though), it is Bettis and Smart that provide us with the most substantial classifications.

**Methodological Phenomenology.** In his interview, Cox spoke of how phenomenologists of religion employ Husserl’s notion of bracketing in order to let the ‘phenomena of religion speak for themselves’. The phenomenological method is characterised by the bracketing of scientific and theological theories so as not to bring any presuppositions into the study of religion. We may call this, as Bettis does, ‘psychological descriptions’, for the phenomenological method concerns itself with the activity itself rather than the object of the activity. Our focus is the believers themselves in what they do and think. It would be wrong, though, to think this idea of neutrality that underpins the phenomenological method is solely bound to Husserl’s philosophy (despite Cox’s comments to the contrary). Smart, for instance formulated his idea of methodological agnosticism almost independently of Husserl’s philosophy.

**Typological Phenomenology.** This type of phenomenology began with Kristensen – indeed he saw the phenomenology of religion as nothing but this – and is as Cox said in the interview, the development of typologies such as sacrifice. For Kristensen this meant a ‘systematic survey of the data’ (in Bettis 1969:36). It is the work of comparison, the consideration of data against one another for the purpose of gaining further insight into them. Kristensen maintained that this data is gathered by the History of Religion, work which later phenomenologists would bring under methodological phenomenology. Bettis refers to this as dialectical descriptions and sees this as the application of the phenomenological method to a spectrum of religious ideas, activities, institutions, customs and symbols. Smart, too, uses the phrase ‘dialectical phenomenology’ which he uses synonymously with typological phenomenology until later favouring the latter.

**Speculative Phenomenology.** Smart, from whom I coin the term, says of this kind of phenomenology that the data of typological phenomenology are ‘arranged according to a preconceived pattern, itself incapable of being thoroughly insulated from theological (or anti-theological) assumptions’ (2009:194-5). We can see here the work of what Cox referred to as
‘Comparative Religion’ in the interview, where much of the data is organised in gradations of superiority. And even if no gradations are made we still find much of the work of defining religion from non-religion in this area. Here we start to talk of the essence of religion, usually discovered by the eidetic intuition, which allows us to see the core of all phenomena. Bettis calls these ontological descriptions as they focused on the object of religious activity as opposed to psychological descriptions that looked at the activity itself. Good examples of this kind of phenomenology would be Eliade and Otto.

In An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion, Cox has made an impressive attempt to reconcile these three types of phenomenology. But we are left with the question of who are phenomenologists? Historically, not every scholar has employed all three kinds of phenomenology: are those who utilise only one or two kinds of phenomenology phenomenologists? Take Eliade for instance, he proclaimed himself to be a historian of religion and yet we regard him as one of the field’s seminal phenomenologists. And how do we define the phenomenology of religion when it incorporates all three kinds? The general disagreements within each kind of phenomenology mean that Cox’s attempt, impressive though it is, is by no means complete. Therefore, by extension, there is no complete understanding of the phenomenology of religion.

This material is disseminated under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License, and can be distributed and utilised freely, provided full citation is given.

About the Author

Jonathan is currently a PhD student at the University of Stirling. He has an MA in Philosophy and Religious Studies and an MSc in Religious Studies from the University of Edinburgh. His research is on the phenomenological method in the study of religion. Areas of interest include the phenomenology of religion, theory and method in the study of religion, and philosophy of religion.

References
Smart, N. (2009). *Ninian Smart on World Religions Vol.1: Religious Experience and Philosophical Analysis*; ed. by J. Shepherd; Farnham, Ashgate

Phenomenology of religion

The **phenomenology of religion** concerns the experiential aspect of religion, describing religious phenomena in terms consistent with the orientation of the worshippers. It views religion as being made up of different components, and studies these components across religious traditions so that an understanding of them can be gained. The phenomenological approach to the study of religion owes its conceptualization and development to Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, William Brede Kristensen and Gerardus van der Leeuw.

**Chantepie de la Saussaye**

The first explicit use of the phrase "phenomenology of religion" occurs in the *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (Handbook of the History of Religions), written by Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye in 1887, wherein he articulates the task of the science of religion and gives an "Outline of the phenomenology of religion".\(^1\) Employing the terminology of Hegel, Chantepie divides his science of religion into two areas of investigation, essence and manifestations, which are approached through investigations in philosophy and history, respectively. However, Chantepie’s phenomenology "belongs neither to the history nor the philosophy of religion as Hegel envisioned them".\(^2\) For Chantepie, it is the task of phenomenology to prepare historical data for philosophical analysis through "a collection, a grouping, an arrangement, and a classifying of the principal groups of religious conceptions".\(^3\) This sense of phenomenology as a grouping of manifestations is similar to the conception of phenomenology articulated by Robison and the British; however, insofar as Chantepie conceives of phenomenology as a preparation for the philosophical elucidation of essences, his phenomenology is not completely opposed to that of Hegel.

**Kristensen**

Chantepie’s *Lehrbuch* was highly influential, and many researchers began similar efforts after its publication and its subsequent translation into English and French.\(^4\) One such researcher was William Brede Kristensen. In 1901, Kristensen was appointed the first professorship relating to the phenomenology of religion at the University of Leiden.\(^5\) Some of the material from Kristensen’s lectures on the phenomenology of religion was edited posthumously, and the English translation was published in 1960 as *The Meaning of Religion*.\(^6\) James notes that Kristensen’s phenomenology “adopts many of the features of Chantepie's grouping of religious phenomena,” and penetrates further into the intricacies of Chantepie’s phenomenological approach.\(^7\)

For Chantepie, phenomenology is affected by the philosophy and history of religion, but for Kristensen, it is also the medium whereby the philosophy and history of religion interact with and affect one another.\(^8\) In this sense, Kristensen’s account of the relationship between historical manifestations and philosophy is more similar to that of Hegel than it is to Chantepie. In defining the religious essence of which he explores historical manifestations, Kristensen appropriates Rudolf Otto’s conception of *das Heilige* ("the holy" or "the sacred"). Otto describes *das Heilige* with the expression "mysterium tremendum”—a numinous power revealed in a moment of "awe" that admits of both the horrible shuddering of "religious dread" (*tremendum*) and fascinating wonder (*fascinans*) with the overpowering majesty (*majestas*) of the ineffable, "wholly other" mystery (*mysterium*).\(^9\)

Like Chantepie, Kristensen argues that phenomenology seeks the “meaning” of religious phenomena. Kristensen clarifies this supposition by defining the meaning that his phenomenology is seeking as “the meaning that the religious phenomena have for the believers themselves”.\(^10\) Furthermore, Kristensen argues that phenomenology is not complete in grouping or classifying the phenomena according to their meaning, but in the act of understanding. "Phenomenology has as its objects to come as far as possible into contact with and to understand the extremely varied and divergent religious data".\(^11\)

Being a phenomenologist, Kristensen was less interested in philosophical presuppositions than in his concrete depth-research in the incidental religious phenomena. These subjects concerned mythological material (such as
Creation, the Flood etc.) as well as human action (such as baptism, Olympic Games etc.), and objects of nature and handicrafts. In all of this he only made use of the authentic sources: writings and images by the believers themselves. This procedure compelled him to reduce the field of his research - he had to profoundly master all relating languages and writings in order to be able to understand his sources in a way as they would have wanted to be understood themselves. Consequently he reduced his field of research to the phenomena in religions living around the origin of Christianity: during the millennia before and the centuries after Christ, in Iran (Avesta), Babylonia and Assyria, Israel, Egypt, Greece and Rome. The required knowledge of speeches, also, is one of the causes that only few (Van der Leeuw, Bleeker) of his pupils did carry on in his line, although many scholars showed interests in the results of his research. Apart from his synopsis The Meaning of Religion, and a just simple Introduction in History of Religion, his publications are mostly restricted to the results of his incidental partial researches, published in the shape of a Communication of the Royal Academy of the Netherlands.

van der Leeuw

The phenomenological approach to religion developed in Gerardus van der Leeuw's Phänomenologie der Religion (1933) follows Kristensen in many respects, while also appropriating the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and the hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey.

For van der Leeuw, understanding is the subjective aspect of phenomena, which is inherently intertwined with the objectivity of that which is manifest. Van der Leeuw articulates the relation of understanding to understood phenomena according to the schema outlined in Dilthey's definition of the human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) as sciences that are "based on the relations between experience, expression and understanding" ("Verhältnis von Erlebnis, Ausdruck, und Verstehen"). Van der Leeuw correlates subjective experience, expression, and understanding with three objective levels of appearing—relative concealment (Verborgenheit), relative transparency (Durchsichtigkeit), and gradually becoming manifest or revealed (Offenbarwerden), wherein the understanding of what is becoming revealed is the primordial level of appearing from which the experienced concealment and expressed transparency of appearing are derived.

Because van der Leeuw, like Kristensen, appropriates Otto’s concept of das Heilige in defining the essential category of religion, the transcendence becoming revealed in all human understanding can be further described as sacred — an overpowering "wholly other," which becomes revealed in astonishing moments of dreadful awe (Scheu) and wonderful fascination. Van der Leeuw argues that this concept of religious dread is also present in Kierkegaard's work on Angst and in Heidegger's statement that "what arouses dread is 'being in the world' itself". Moreover, van der Leeuw recognizes that, although dreadful, Being-in-the-world is fundamentally characterized as care (Sorge), the existential structure whereby Dasein is concerned with meaningful relationships in the world alongside other beings.

Because all experiences disclose concealed (wholly other) transcendence to the understanding, all experiences of Being-in-the-world are ultimately religious experiences of the sacred, whether explicitly recognized as such or not. Human being as such is homo religiosus, the opposite of homo negligens.

It is the task of the phenomenology of religion to interpret the various ways in which the sacred appears to human beings in the world, the ways in which humans understand and care for that which is revealed to them, for that which is ultimately wholly other mystery. Among other great phenomenologists who worked and influenced phenomenology of religion are Kristensen, Henry Corbin, Mahmoud Khatami, Ninian Smart, de la saussaye, Mircea Eliade.
Notes

[2] 45
[3] 43
[4] 141
[5] ibid
[8] Kristensen: 9
[10] James: 144

Bibliography

Further reading
