The Curious Case of the Phenomenology of Religion

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Abstract Phenomenology of religion as a research project has fallen out of favour in the past few decades. Yet discussions about the feasibility and relevance of the phenomenological approach continue. In one way or another most of the current approaches in the study of religion rely on the disciplinary background of the earlier phenomenologies. This article analyses a couple of the more recent proposals that have reconsidered the relevance of the phenomenological approach, aiming to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of these proposals in relation to the goals of the study of religion. Based on this review and analysis of current discussions I argue in the second half of my article that the phenomenology of religion can still serve as an important part of the study of religion and avoid criticisms it previously invited if it is remodelled into an endeavour of ‘typological analysis’ in the sense explained in the second half of this article.

Keywords phenomenology of religion, religious studies, typological analysis, comparison, conceptual tools

In one way or another all contemporary approaches to the study of religion relate to the phenomenology of religion. The most prevalent way is certainly conceptual: many (if not most) of the conceptual tools, their meanings and their supposed universality have been taken from the typological and categorical distinctions of earlier generalized phenomenologies. This is apparent from postmodernist approaches, which strongly oppose the phenomenology of religion, to the modern cognitive study of religion that aims to analyse and explain religion as a general phenomenon by highlighting many of the same characteristics that earlier were central to the phenomenologies of religion. Aside from conceptual tools, there is also the understanding that one should maintain neutrality in
relation to one’s object of study—this was also first formulated and conceptualized in the phenomenological tradition and despite the variety of exact interpretations, is still central to the study of religion. There are many other examples that I could also mention here, but the central point is simple—classical large scale phenomenological treatments of religion are not just something that used to be relevant and influential in the past, but can still be immediately relevant to contemporary discussions.

Yet the phenomenology of religion itself has faded. Whilst in the past ambitious and thorough monographs, which attempted to phenomenologically interpret and categorize religiosity were the norm, now discussion concerning phenomenology has drifted from how to present and compose phenomenologies of religion, to discussions about the possibilities of retrieving or rethinking the usefulness of phenomenology for contemporary research.¹ There are many reasons for this and they hardly need to be repeated in detail here, however put briefly: the interpretative presumptions and conclusions of many phenomenologists have been called into question; the insistence on the *sui generis* status of religiosity has turned out to be problematic and reliant on empirically indiscernible theological positions; completely ignoring the historical situatedness of specific phenomena has resulted in questionable interpretations; and last, it is not entirely obvious what can be learned about specific cases or about religiosity in general by segregating phenomena from their contexts and setting them side by side in isolation. Would not a phenomenology of, for example sacred stones, end with a hermeneutically rather trivial conclusion that they are all stones and they are all considered religiously valuable (and thus, in phenomenological typology—“sacred”) in their respective traditions? There would be very little interpretive or explanatory value in such a conclusion.² Yet, due to the aforementioned reasons, numerous phenomenological understandings underlie the contemporary study of religion and therefore one cannot just ignore phenomenology because of these various criticisms. Owing to this and because the phenomenological approach has always been prominent in Professor Kulmar’s research,³ the problems and inherent

¹ Among others see: Jensen 1993; Ryba 2004; and Blum 2012.
² For more detailed reviews and analyses of the specific arguments presented against the phenomenology of religion see: Ryba 2009; Allen 2005; and Gilhus 1984.
conflicts of the phenomenology of religion and the proposed solutions deserve a fresh look.

As with other fields of research, exact approaches vary quite extensively in the phenomenology of religion as well. At one end of the heuristic continuum, there are the strictly theological and philosophical phenomenologies of religion, and at the other end one could locate the strictly typological phenomenologies of the Scandinavian school. These phenomenologies vary above all in how they relate to the philosophical phenomenology of the 20th century, and how vigorously they emphasise the typological aspect of phenomenological research. This variety in the different ways of doing phenomenology has also brought forth a variety of responses to the question of how to overcome the aforementioned criticisms. Various scholars have considered the main problem of phenomenology to be its lack of a relationship to philosophical phenomenology. This caused Hans Penner in his rather well-known criticism, to argue that a genuine phenomenology of religion remains to be done. Others have also pursued this line of thought, arguing that the aforementioned criticisms of phenomenology can be overcome if one thoroughly rethinks the theoretical foundations of phenomenology in light of the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl. The prevailing line of argument appears to be that if a properly Husserlian basis was adapted, instead of the current rather distant relation, then one could first of all present phenomenologies that are actually phenomenologies in the sense phenomenology is understood in 20th century philosophy, and second one could avoid the pitfalls of relying too much on empirically indiscernible essences and intuitive hermeneutics. Yet this line of argument appears unsatisfactory for several reasons. First of all, as historical studies of phenomenology have shown, the phenomenology of religion is the heir of the earlier 18th–19th century tradition of phenomenology and is only distantly related to 20th century philosophical phenomenology, with the exception of van der Leeuw and Bleeker, but even in their work

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4 For historical background and an overview see, for example: Camilleri 2014; and Janicaud 2000.
5 Among others here I have in mind such phenomenologists as: Widengren 1969; and Ake Hultkrantz, 1970.
6 Penner 1970: 50.
7 For example: Liverziani 1981; Krolick 1985; and Ryba 2009.
Husserl’s philosophy has maintained a relatively superficial position. Second and more importantly, the value of “becoming genuinely Husserlian” is doubtful for the contemporary study of religion. Since the study of religion as a discipline persistently insists on a thoroughly empirical approach, it already advocates rather different goals and methods (and thus a different implicit philosophy) than that of Husserlian philosophy. The adoption of a genuinely Husserlian position could perhaps lead to an intriguing alternative to the current study of religion, but it would not be part of religious studies as we know the discipline today.

A different approach has been taken by Jensen. Following the Scandinavian tradition that understands phenomenology as a strictly conceptual and typological approach, Jensen considers it possible and necessary to retain the conceptual-categorizing aspect of phenomenology to develop a basis for the study of religion in general. Jensen’s analysis perhaps best exemplifies why the contemporary study of religion cannot ever completely escape the earlier phenomenology of religion, as it requires some kind of a generalised conceptual basis to enable comparative studies of religion and thus remain committed to studying the phenomenon of “religiosity”, without fragmenting it into isolated fields of just one geographical location or cultural formation. Much of the current generalizing vocabulary and its contemporary usage in the study of religion originates from the phenomenological approach and for Jensen it can legitimately continue as a way of providing categories and conceptual tools for the study of religion in general. Yet, Jensen’s argument is also somewhat unsatisfactory, for if determining the usefulness of the phenomenology of religion is indeed our main goal, as he himself is willing to admit, it is not at all obvious why one should continue to call such an approach phenomenology, when it has so little in common with how “phenomenology” is commonly understood in the wider Western cultural world. The question thus becomes not so much whether one can continue to study religion phenomenologically, but whether such a strictly typological approach is even worth calling “phenomenology”?

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8 James 1985; Sharpe 1975.
9 It is also doubtful that currently noteworthy problems of generalization and conceptualization could be solved by adapting a more Husserlian philosophical position.
The latest noteworthy piece in this discussion about phenomenology is Blum’s proposal to retrieve phenomenology as a method for the study of religion.\textsuperscript{12} Although paying equally little attention to Husserlian philosophy, Blum sharply differs from Jensen in his understanding of phenomenology as a strictly interpretive and descriptive approach to religiosity. Yet Blum says little or nothing about how phenomenology was predominately comparative, drawing on as many different cultural parallels as one could find. Blum’s version of phenomenology would no longer be about presenting extensive typologies of religious phenomena, but understanding the way people themselves understand the world. However, Blum’s argument in a way invites the same question as did Jensen’s: why still call this approach “phenomenology”?

In a way these various proposals concerning the usefulness of the phenomenology of religion point to a paradoxical situation: one could perhaps develop a genuinely phenomenological approach to religion by taking seriously the way phenomenology is understood in its contemporary usage, but its usefulness for the study of religion would then be of doubtful value. One could simply rethink phenomenology as a purely typological approach that aims to point out different categories and conceptions that could be useful and practically operational for specific case studies, however as noted previously this would be phenomenology in name only. Yet these suggestions seem to be of more value than suggestions that problems and criticisms can be overcome by paying more attention to Husserl. It should be noted however, that all the aforementioned arguments share a unified conviction that phenomenology of religion is possible if one avoids arguing in favour of the existence of phenomenologically identifiable essences (since those would be empirically indiscernible and unprovable, one could not study them scientifically).

This brings me to the suggestion I try to make explicit in this short paper. If one wants to argue that there may be some value in a generalizing typological presentation of various religious facts, then one needs to explain what can be learned from such a presentation. Categorization for the sake of categorization is of little value. In earlier phenomenological research, categorization was seen as a way to distinguish meaningfully and structurally similar elements in different cultural contexts—bring

\textsuperscript{12} Blum 2012.
them together and show through comparison how they all share a similar structure and meaning. An excellent example of this line of argument can be found in Bleeker:

In this process of research the phenomenology of religion pays attention not so much to the historical surroundings of the phenomena, but rather to the ideological connection. That means that the facts are severed from their historical context and that they are combined in such a way that the meaning of these phenomena as such becomes clear and transparent.\(^\text{13}\)

The general idea behind such a typological categorization tends to be that by this separation from context and subsequent comparison, one can reveal the general structure and meaning of religiosity. The persistent problem with such an argument was always that conclusions about the meaning and structure of religiosity depend on the intuitive hermeneutics of the individual scholar and are not open to direct verification or falsification. Leaving this earlier argument aside, the more urgent and relevant contemporary problem is that such an approach towards religiosity assumes the categories one uses as the basis for phenomenological typology and comparison are objective descriptions of the world, which mark the “borders” between different actual and universally present phenomena and thus make it possible to highlight the “joints” that connect separate phenomena and make the structure function as a whole. However, as various studies in the history of ideas, anthropology and conceptual analysis have pointed out,\(^\text{14}\) these kinds of positivist and inductivist ambitions have been flawed and unattainable.\(^\text{15}\) The general categories we use are not representationally realistic descriptions

\(^{13}\text{Bleeker 1959: 98.}\)

\(^{14}\text{The amount of literature on this topic is massive, so here I point to just a few studies as examples of the general discussions and arguments in recent scholarship: Saler 1977; Smith 1996; Fitzgerald 1997; and King 1999.}\)

\(^{15}\text{In his analysis, Jeppe Sinding Jensen presents an excellent summary of this development: “The debate on whether a general and (thus) comparative study of religion was possible and how it could be pursued was in fact debilitated by ontological confusions. Both groups in and around the Phenomenology of Religion would maintain that things compared must somehow be ‘really real’. Thus, an unholy alliance was formed between the metaphysical realism of the religious religionists and the conceptual realism of the positivist, historical scholars (include in this latter group most modernist anthropologists).” Jensen 1993: 115.}\)
of universally present distinctions, but tools to make sense of different forms of human behaviour and beliefs.

Therefore, one cannot justify generalizing typological presentations of religious material as if typological comparison in itself enables one to point out something genuinely relevant about the studied phenomenon. Any comparison of physically similar objects (it can be either “sacred stones”, “altars”, “holy water”, etc.), detached from their cultural, social and historical context will just result in the rather trivial conclusion that they are all physically similar they are all considered valuable, special or precious in one way or another in their specific contexts. Even if one widened this approach and set sacred stones (or altars or holy water) side by side with other typological comparisons (such as understandings of “soul”, “death rituals”, “sacred kingship” or any other common category in phenomenology), then this comparison in itself can only be claimed to reveal (in the words of Bleeker) ideological connections if one presumes that there is a separate cultural universality that we may term “religiosivity”, and that the structural similarities in all different cases of religiosivity are so strong and fundamental that they will cause people to think of sacred stones (or altars or holy water) in ideologically similar ways. Yet, despite over a century of steady work in cultural anthropology and comparative religion, no evidence of such a strong cultural determination has come forth and it is very doubtful whether it could exist at all. However, one could make a structural argument and insist that typological comparisons enable one to point to noteworthy commonalities and patterns that could possibly hint at a cognitive general function or tendency of the human mind common to everyone the world over, which just happens to externalize itself in such a way in various different cultural formations. In this case comparison and the development of typologies would simply become a tool for formalizing hypotheses for a different line of work—the cognitive science of religion.

While this would give typological work meaning and a goal, in itself it would not be enough to justify this kind of work, since it would still have to answer the challenge that its categories are arbitrary and do not represent the world as it is. I suggest that to do this one needs to give up on the prevalent idea that typological categories are realistic representations of existing things (and the many forms of those things). Rather, the categories we use are methodological tools and heuristic models for
drawing attention to different aspects of studied phenomena. Understandings of a natural-supernatural distinction do not universally exist in all cultures in analogous forms, which is also the case for many other categorical distinctions we make use of. Owing to limitations of length I cannot here analyse and explain this extensively, but many excellent analyses already exist.16

To come back to the point I want to make in light of the analysed problems and discussions: the way forward for typological comparisons in the study of religion would be to turn the work processes upside down, metaphorically speaking. What I mean by this is that classic phenomenologies of religion take the universal applicability of its categories for granted and assume that they are all “real” features of the world and then they use the available empirical material as if they are just pieces of a big puzzle that need to be placed into their correct locations. Instead, the phenomenology of religion17 should concentrate on analysing what features or aspects one category or another enables or does not enable us to distinguish. In a way this means that instead of just comparing a pre-existing “mass of facts”, we need to make use of this mass of facts to compare the different ways in which they can be categorized and how such different categorizations draw borderlines in different places. This kind of analysis should then show us what comparative distinctions are available to empirical research depending on which set of conceptual tools we decide to use. Combined with already existing knowledge about the historical and cultural background of the existing categories, this kind of research can lead to a better assessment of the criteria we require to decide whether a category can be used as universal or not. This is the weak point of all the analyses Jensen has presented: while his arguments against postmodernist tendencies to avoid universals and stick to “conceptual nominalism” are solid, he does not really offer a criteria that would explain how one could determine whether one category or another is acceptable, retainable or applicable as universal. Without such a criteria one is lost without a map in no-man’s land between construction-

16 For example: Jensen 2004; Jensen 2001; and Schillbrack 2010.
17 One can of course continue to use old name as I have done in this sentence, but in reality a more accurate name would be ‘typological analysis’ or ‘categorical evaluation’, or perhaps even ‘experimental typology’, although the latter would probably be in conflict with the prevailing, narrower understanding of the word “experimental”.
ist criticisms of all universals and positivist assumptions about the universal application of existing phenomenological categories. Such a situation only causes more confusion, where one scholar deconstructs one category and sets it aside, while eagerly embracing a different universal category. Yet it is clear that through studies of historical developments, any category can be shown to be “a construction”, as no conceptual categories have fallen out of the sky or come to us through revelations. There needs to be a way to assess the usage of categories—while keeping the goals of the study of religion in mind. Otherwise all criticisms and justifications of universals will end up being “true”, but trivially so, since theoretically good arguments exist both in favour and against the usage of universals.

Thus, if instead of merely presenting long typological lists of supposedly similar phenomena and claiming they are similar because of an underlying religious structure (the existence of which no phenomenologist has been able to prove, or present as a falsifiable hypothesis), the phenomenology of religion should set as its goal a comparative assessment of different typological distinctions and their applicability for the study of religion in general. In such a way phenomenology would still be a credible and useful way of studying religion, avoiding all the major problems of previous phenomenologies, and would also avoid becoming merely a tool for sniffing out similarities and thus hypotheses for the more experimentally minded sciences of religion in general, or more specifically for the cognitive science of religion.

It should be noted however, that by taking such an approach, an intriguing and provocative question does come up. Namely, it is not at all obvious that the phenomenology of religion should stick to the classic, cultural and largely derived-from-theology categories that have so far dominated phenomenological and comparative approaches towards religion. For example, in his rather radical proposal, Pyysiäinen argues that the phenomenology of religion should be cognitivized.\textsuperscript{18} What he means by this is simple: since the goal is a cross-cultural comparison, and since deriving categories from specific cultures has inherent and inevitable problems,\textsuperscript{19} the only usable universal features are those of hu-

\textsuperscript{18} Pyysiäinen 2004.
\textsuperscript{19} Yes, it is true that Jensen and (most probably) Schillbrack in their previously mentioned arguments in favour of using universals would very probably disagree with Pyysiäinen, but
man cognition, and thus a phenomenology of religion should borrow its categories from the cognitive science of religion. Pyysiäinen is saying that religious phenomena can be better explained at a psychological level and thus typological categories should be derived from psychology, instead of theology or anthropology, as has been common so far. However, this is also a question concerning levels of explanation. Basically Pyysiäinen is arguing that the conceptual tools need to be derived from the sciences that directly deal with the level one aims to use to explain a phenomenon. Yet this is not an inevitable logical consequence—the level of explanation one aims to reach is not in any inevitable way “married” to the set of concepts used in that given discipline at the current point in time. Pyysiäinen himself has not totally abandoned classical comparative categories either, he merely advocates that one should adapt an additional and to a certain extent alternative set of categories that are supposedly more accurate in their description of worldwide religiosity. To fundamentally counter Pyysiäinen’s argument, one should show how an existing category is able to pick out or differentiate (a) relevant aspect(s) of religiosity that cannot be differentiated through Pyysiäinen’s proposed alternative, and how such differentiation is significant for the study of religion (and thus cannot be ignored). Phenomenology as a discipline of typological analysis can be the way to do this. To reiterate, this would mean that instead of treating the phenomenology of religion as a discipline of typological description of religiosity as it appears in the world, the phenomenology of religion can be the way how to analyse different conceptual options available to us to show what each of them offers, highlights or completely misses. In this case, phenomenology as typological analysis should make use of available empirical studies and conceptual analyses to determine the strengths and weaknesses of Pyysiäinen’s approach.

As a kind of a postscript, it should be noted that by taking this direction I do not mean to say that I consider Blum’s suggestion about retrieving phenomenology as a strictly hermeneutical and descriptive study of religion is wrong or flawed, but that he is not really talking about the phenomenology of religion any more. The phenomenology of
religion as understood in the study of religion (and as exemplified by Chantepie de la Saussaye, van der Leeuw, Eliade, Widengren and many others) is an inherently comparative and typological enterprise. Obviously it has a hermeneutical and philosophical aspect to it, but the generalizing, comparative typologies, were its most noteworthy attributes. Blum’s argument is thus rather about justifying a strictly hermeneutical study of religion, which sets its goal as understanding other people’s religious worldview as accurately as possible. Due to the multiple histories and ambiguous nature of the term “phenomenology”, this could also be called phenomenology (after all everybody is free to label their activities as they wish), but it is very questionable whether it is a helpful or accurate description of the work and goals Blum advocates.

References


