BEYOND BRACKETING: ESSENCE AND INTERNAL COHERENCE AS THE CORE OF RELIGIOUS PHENOMENOLOGY[*]

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Abstract

The phenomenology of religion offers a non-reductive approach to religious studies that seeks to understand religion as sui generis. This approach, besides other features, emphasizes the suspension of presuppositions or, in other words braketing (epoché) to study religions. Building on Husserl's foundational notions of epoché and intentionality of consciousness, major scholars in the study of religion have contributed to the phenomenology of religion. However, the phenomenology of religion faces critical challenges. The most controversial is the authenticity of epoché itself, and it is the strongest objection to it. Critics, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans-Georg Gadamer, argue that a pure suspension of presuppositions is unattainable due to the embodied, historically situated nature of human consciousness and understanding. Many scholars in the study of religion hold similar views. This paper weighs these critiques by using the phenomenological-hermeneutical method and proposes that the essence of religion or "religious worldview" may inherently require approaching religions from within their own coherent worldviews rather than striving for complete bracketing. It makes the point that bracketing makes sense when reductive

approaches to religion are excluded. However, bracketing pre-understanding of ordinary language is not necessary; yet, the special meaning of the concepts in a religion still needs bracketing by necessity. Through comparative illustrations from Buddhism and Abrahamic religions, this study demonstrates that religious worldviews embody phenomenal characteristics and internal coherence that make strict epoché less necessary. Ultimately, the phenomenology of religion needs a balanced view recognizing the limits of methodological idealism or epoché while affirming the irreducibility of religion and its autonomous status.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Epoche, Religion, Husserl, Coherence

Introduction

The phenomenology of religion arose in the early 20th century as a response to reductive academic approaches to religion, such as sociological, psychological, and anthropological methods. In the same way, it is against emerging reductive approaches such as cognitive science. Rooted in the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, the phenomenology of religion treats religion as sui generis. Husserl's method relies on the suspension of assumptions, called epoché, to analyze a phenomenon as it manifests to consciousness. Later on, the scholars of phenomenology of religion, borrowing epoché and intentionality of consciousness from Husserl, developed the field with its distinct features. Key figures in the field—Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart—have contributed to its foundational concepts.

However, the phenomenological method, particularly epoché, faces significant criticism about whether true suspension of pre-understanding and presuppositions is ever possible. This criticism is held in philosophy and the study of religion. This paper explores these tensions by using the phenomenological-hermeneutical method and argues for a balanced understanding that recognizes

religion's internal coherence and phenomenal nature, suggesting that complete bracketing may not be necessary. Therefore, I will firstly provide a brief overview of the phenomenology of religion; secondly, explain epoché; thirdly, provide a brief criticism of epoche; and finally, I state my position that the phenomenological epoché does not apply to religion in the strict sense except to exclude reductive approaches. This is because the essence of religion, being inherently supernatural, superhuman, spiritual, or mythological, fundamentally precludes the necessity of such bracketing.

Phenomenology Of Religion: An Overview

The phenomenology of religion emerged in the early 20th century, rooted in Edmund Husserl's philosophical phenomenology, and is one of the academic approaches to the study of religion. It is a non-reductive approach to religion, treating religion sui generis, without reducing it to sociology, psychology, theology, etc. It stresses understanding religion or religions, how they appear to human consciousness, focusing on meaning, experience, and intentionality. It consciously seeks to bracket (epoché) or suspend presuppositions, focusing instead on the meaning and structure of religious experience and expression.

Edmund Husserl laid the methodological groundwork for phenomenology, emphasizing epoché (bracketing presuppositions) and the intentionality of consciousness. Regarding epoché he stated, "We put out of action the general thesis which belongs to the essence of the natural standpoint, we place in brackets whatever it includes respecting the nature of Being: this entire natural world therefore which is continually "there for us", "present to our hand", and will ever remain there, is a "fact-world" of which we continue to be conscious, even though it pleases us to put it in brackets" (Husserl, 2014, p.110). And regarding intentionality of consciousness, he recommended, "We must go back to the 'things themselves'" (Husserl, 2012, p. xxiii). Major scholars of the

phenomenology of religion built on the philosophical roots of phenomenology and contributed what have become essentials of the phenomenology of religion. Rudolf Otto introduced the idea of the numinous—a non-rational, awe-inspiring experience of the divine. He holds that the numinous is above all a 'mysterium'—something hidden and esoteric, which at the same time is not merely unknown, but rather resists comprehension (Otto, 2021). Otto's thought is foundational in showing how religious experience is unique and irreducible. Gerardus van der Leeuw was a key figure in developing a systematic phenomenology of religion. He viewed religious phenomena as manifestations of "power" that confront human beings, seize, and possess man (Van der Leeuw, 2014). He held that phenomenology is not interested in the 'why' of religious phenomena but in the 'what' and 'how' of these phenomena; therefore, he makes it clear that phenomenology is the understanding of essence through the description of appearances (van der Leeuw, 2014). Mircea Eliade focused on the contrast between sacred and profane space and time, and on hierophanies (manifestations of the sacred). Eliade argued that the sacred manifests in the profane world, creating a "break" or "irruption". On the distinctiveness of the sacred, he points out that man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, he therefore proposed the term hierophany (Eliade, 1959). And on the irreducibility of the sacred, he proclaims that the sacred is a structure of consciousness and it is not reducible to any other (Eliade, 2022). Ninian Smart used phenomenology as a method in his comparative study of religion. He pointed out that the phenomenological approach to religion is concerned with the attempt to understand religious phenomena as faithfully and 'sympathetically' as possible from the point of view of the believers themselves (Smart, 1973). He developed a seven-dimensional model (ritual, myth, doctrine, ethics, social, experiential, material) for analyzing religions phenomenologically. In brief, the following are the characteristics of the

phenomenology of religion: "a comparative, systematic, empirical, historical, descriptive discipline and approach; antireductionist claims and its autonomous nature; adoption of philosophical phenomenological notions of intentionality and epoché; insistence on empathy, sympathetic understanding, and religious commitment; and claim to provide insight into essential structures and meanings" (Allen, 2010, P. 214).

However, the most controversial feature of the phenomenology of religion is the concept of epoché (also called "bracketing"). In the context of the phenomenology of religion, it means the epoché, or "bracketing", of one's own beliefs, biases, and judgments while approaching the study of religion. The idea is to describe religious phenomena "as they appear" to the believer, from an empathetic, insider perspective. In the following section, I provide a comprehensive brief about the concept of epoché, or "bracketing".

Epoché (Bracketing)

Derived from Greek skepticism, where it meant "suspension of judgment", Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, reinterpreted epoché as a methodological tool. He stated, "We must go back to the "things themselves" (Husserl, 2012, p. xxiii). It means a scholar suspends or "brackets" their own beliefs, biases, and theoretical assumptions about religion to understand the religious phenomenon. This method is about letting the phenomenon show itself, rather than interpreting it through one's own framework. The famous scholar of the phenomenology of religion, Gerardus van der Leeuw, recommends on the same lines that we must learn to see what stands before our eyes instead of constructing things behind them. He more directly suggests that the phenomenologist must avoid all historical, psychological, and theological explanations (Van der Leeuw, 2014). Ninian Smart further holds that phenomenology attempts to see religion from the point of

view of the believer (Smart, 1973). In brief, in the phenomenology of religion, epoché is adapted to mean: suspending theological and metaphysical judgments; neutralizing explanatory theories,; focusing on the lived experience which means that the goal of phenomenology is to understand religious beliefs, rituals, myths, and experiences as they are lived and understood by the believer, from their internal frame of reference; and identifying essences/structures which means by comparing bracketed descriptions across different traditions, phenomenologists aim to discern universal or common structures of religious experience.

Questioning the Possibility of Epoché

The strongest argument against epoché is that true bracketing of one's presuppositions is impossible, especially in religion. This objection focuses on the problem of objectivity and neutrality in religion, which is an essential part of the phenomenology of religion. The argument implies that scholars inevitably bring their own presuppositions and biases while approaching the study of religion, even unconsciously.

Therefore, several critics in philosophy and religion argue that it is impossible for any human observer to completely shed their biases, cultural conditioning, and theoretical frameworks. To them, all knowledge is situated and perspectival. For example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty questions the possibility of a purely disembodied or "bracketed" consciousness. He argues that our perceptions are always shaped by our embodied existence and situatedness in the world. He holds the view that the phenomenological bracketing is incomplete without recognizing the embodied, intersubjective nature of consciousness, i.e., our insertion into the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Similarly, philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, influenced by Heidegger, developed philosophical hermeneutics, which fundamentally challenges the idea of a

presuppositionless understanding. He argued that all understanding is inherently interpretive and shaped by our "pre-judgments" or "fore-understandings". His point on consciousness is that our consciousness is historically affected (Gadamer, 1975). Similar views resonate in the works of the scholars of religion such as Donald Wiebe, Robert A. Segal, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Russell McCutcheon. However, this brief overview of the argument is sufficient.

Epoche, Essence, and Coherence of Religion

In the subsequent discourse, there are a few main terms that need to be explicated at the outset. They are essence, coherence, and religious worldview. Essence means the core nature or fundamental quality of something—what makes a thing what it is. It is a quality without which religion would not be religion. Coherence means logical consistency and meaningful connection among parts of a whole. Something is coherent when its ideas fit together, make sense collectively, and do not contradict each other. A religious worldview is a comprehensive framework of beliefs and values through which a religion understands reality, life, and human existence.

After defining the main terms as above, my contention regarding the applicability of the phenomenological epoché to the study of religion is that the essence of religion is inherently supernatural, superhuman, spiritual, or mythological, which by itself fundamentally precludes the necessity of such bracketing. Therefore, any endeavor to understand a religion must proceed from the internal coherence of the religion. However, phenomenological bracketing makes sense when religion is approached by reductive and explanatory methods because they try to reduce the basic fabric and essence of religion to something external to religion. Whereas pre-understanding and presuppositions in the philosophical sense are concerned, they seem acceptable given the fact that religions are preserved in language, and they are to a great extent

understandable. However, this philosophically backed preunderstanding has its own limits because it fails to have a consistent understanding of religious concepts due to the phenomenality of religions. Therefore, rising from an ordinary understanding or bracketing and taking a leap into a religious worldview becomes necessary.

The phenomenology of religion approaches religion as sui generis, meaning it treats religion as inherently unique, as it is. This perspective highlights how the phenomenology of religion differs from other reductive approaches that fail to treat religion as an autonomous subject. Phenomenology of religion thus recommends bracketing (epoché), which involves suspending all presuppositions that might influence our understanding of religion. It leads to two key conclusions: one is that religion should be freed from the reductive methods by which the study of religion is dominated; and secondly, approaching religion without any pre-understanding or presuppositions, which is philosophically opposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

However, when considering the usefulness of epoché in approaching religion, it becomes clear that if the phenomenological understanding of religion as sui generis is maintained, applying epoché as a tool would exclude reductive methods. This epoché (bracketing) then would be a conscious act on the part of the scholar or researcher approaching religion. However, bracketing pre-understanding or presuppositions, which is more fundamental than bracketing reductive methods, proves challenging because, ontologically as Merleau-Ponty argues, we are "inserted into the world", and as Gadamer states, our "consciousness is historically affected". However, regarding both these key conclusions, I think approaching religion doesn't necessarily need epoché while considering its inherent essence and structure.

To illustrate my argument that religion does not need epoché necessarily, given its inherent essence and structure, a brief overview of Buddhism and the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) can concretize my point of

view. Therefore, this claim is based on a basic premise that religion is not mundane but phenomenal, i.e., highly exceptional or extraordinary. This phenomenality of religion brings with it an inherent strangeness to the way we perceive and believe. That is why each religion offers a unique worldview, which is not forged through human experiences but is instead revealed from a specific source. This source, imbued with supernatural qualities, is often revered as the founder of the religion, and their teachings are recorded in sacred scriptures and reflected in their character. In short, this worldview, which religions present, could be labelled as "religious worldview": a comprehensive framework of fundamental beliefs and teachings. This religious worldview, once presented to people and made available while being extraordinary and phenomenal, invites a jump or a leap into its flora and fauna. So, to truly step into this "religious worldview", a person must transport themselves beyond their everyday life, experiences, presuppositions, and beliefs. This transportation into a "religious worldview" is not optional; it is a necessity. It is a necessity in the sense that religious truths and metaphysical claims often remain novel, some of them beyond human comprehension, or without any precedent for comparison. We can best understand the extraordinary and phenomenal nature of a "religious worldview" that substantiates this claim by looking at illustrations from Buddhism and Abrahamic religions.

The phenomenality of Buddhism is present in its teachings and metaphysical claims. I provide here just a few examples. For example, anicca (impermanence), which means all things are in a constant state of flux, arising and passing away, nothing is permanent or static; and anatta (non-self), which means there is no permanent, unchanging, independent self or soul (atman) that persists through time. What we perceive as "self" is a collection of constantly changing physical and mental aggregates (skandhas). In the same manner, metaphysical claims such as dependent origination (Pratityasamutpada) as a

cornerstone of Buddhist metaphysics state that all phenomena arise in dependence on other phenomena; nothing exists independently. Closely tied to dependent origination is Karma, which explains how actions in one life influence future existence. These metaphysical claims make Buddhism phenomenal and extraordinary. A person approaching Buddhism has to enter its worldview; he has to transport himself into it, leaving out his presuppositions about self, identity of things, causation, predestination, and free will. Therefore, an understanding of Buddhism necessitates apprehending these concepts from a Buddhist religious perspective.

The Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) share several fundamental metaphysical claims, but they also diverge significantly in how some of these are understood. Moreover, all three contain metaphysical concepts that are considered ineffable or transcendent. Though the concept of God can be found even in mythologies and many religions of the world, strict monotheism is the absolute cornerstone of Abrahamic faiths. All three believe in one God. The main characteristics and attributes of him are that he is transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent, and a personal god. This special description of God makes these religions phenomenal; a person who wants to approach these religions has to understand God in the sense these religions describe him. On the creation of the universe, these religions teach that God created the universe from nothing (Ex Nihilo), rather than shaping pre-existing matter. Moreover, how God communicates his message and will to people is through prophets by revelation that takes the shape of sacred scriptures. In the same way is their special view on predestination, free will, and moral responsibility. Furthermore, the concept of the afterlife and the existence of heaven and hell have special meaning and understanding in these religions. They affirm the ontological existence of the invisible and the beings not available for public visibility, such as angels and demons. And strikingly beyond ordinary comprehension is their affirmation of the possibility of miracles and divine

intervention in the natural world. These examples constitute merely a few instances of the comprehensive religious worldview affirmed by Abrahamic faiths. To understand this worldview, a person must transcend their ordinary perspective and pre-existing notions. It necessitates a departure from an ordinary stance and re-rooting into a new matrix of interwoven ideas and beliefs.

The second important point is that the apprehension of the essence of religion, which gives the core and fundamental framework of a religious worldview, is also not possible by any pre-understanding or presupposition. The bracketing of pre-understanding becomes necessary as the essence of a religious worldview or a religion is only possible by understanding the authentic meaning of its essentials and components, which, for the purpose of understanding, is only possible by seeking the inherent coherence within the religion. This coherence is possible through consistency, thematic unity, narrative coherence, etc.

This point can be illustrated by the concept and understanding of dukkha (suffering) in Buddhism. In common understanding, suffering is understood by people as a matter of common sense. However, in Buddhism, once used, it has a special meaning, and this meaning can be understood only by thematic coherence in Buddhism. In the Buddhist worldview, dukkha (suffering) is that life in its conventional sense is marked by suffering, discontent, impermanence, and dissatisfaction. This is not merely physical pain, but also includes mental unease, anxiety, and the pervasive sense that things are not quite right. The origin of this suffering (Samudaya) is craving (tanha) and attachment to impermanent things, desires, and experiences. It is rooted in ignorance (avidya) of the true nature of reality. And the cessation of the suffering (Nirodha) is possible by eliminating craving and attachment, leading to a state of liberation called Nirvana. And finally, the path of the cessation of suffering (Magga) is by following the Noble Eightfold Path. It is obvious here that the Buddhist understanding of suffering is

not the subject of common sense; its true Buddhist understanding of suffering is possible only within the coherence of the concept in Buddhism.

Similarly, in Abrahamic religions, the belief system and central ideas are only possible for an authentic understanding by looking into these religions. For example, the concept of God in Islam is fundamentally based on a strict and uncompromising monotheism, known as Tawhid. The key aspects of the concept of God in Islam are that God is absolutely one (Ahad) and unique (Wahid), with no partners, equals, or rivals. This oneness extends to his essence, attributes, and actions. Islam explicitly rejects any notion of God taking on human form or having an incarnation. God is the sole creator of everything ex nihilo (from nothing). He brought the universe into being by his will and continuously sustains it. Furthermore, in the transcendental sense, God is utterly beyond human comprehension, imagination, or limitation. He is not confined by time, space, or physical form. Yet regarding immanence, while being the transcendent God, he is also closer to humanity. His knowledge and power encompass everything, making him ever-present and aware.

Here, it is important to address the philosophical stance on "pre-understanding", "being inserted in the world," and having our "consciousness historically affected". This remains a philosophical challenge to epoché . However, while acknowledging the merit of this philosophical reservation, it once again becomes both necessary and unnecessary to bracket our presuppositions. It becomes unnecessary because religion embodied in its holy scriptures is written in a language that is, for the most part, understandable by people, at least by grammatical interpretation. Because religions are meant to be presented to people so they can follow them. However, bracketing becomes necessary and automatic when the central concepts and the framework of cardinal features of a particular religion are being understood. In this context, the philosophical stance on "pre-understanding" fails to hold.

Conclusion

The phenomenology of religion emphasizes understanding religion as sui generis, and it calls for the suspension of presuppositions (epoché). However, the epoché is the most criticized feature of the phenomenology of religion. The philosophical criticism about suspending presuppositions and preunderstanding is presented by philosophers, including Merleau-Ponty, holding that we are "inserted into the world" and Gadamer holding that our "consciousness is historically affected". Therefore, bracketing "pre-understanding" and "presuppositions" is not possible. Similar views are held by many scholars in the study of religion while criticizing the phenomenology of religion. This paper argues that while epoché is valuable in safeguarding religions from reductive approaches, it becomes less essential when approaching the inherent "religious worldview" of religions. Because religions by their very nature present a phenomenal and often extraordinary reality that invites a "leap" into their unique coherence. As illustrated by Buddhism's concepts of dukkha and the Abrahamic faiths' few foundational concepts, it becomes clear that the cardinal religious concepts transcend ordinary comprehension. True understanding requires apprehending these ideas from within their own religion based on internally consistent frameworks, rather than attempting a complete suspension of all pre-existing notions. Ultimately, a balanced phenomenology of religion should acknowledge the limits of absolute epoché while firmly upholding religion's irreducible and autonomous status. This conclusion suggests that rather than striving for bracketing, scholars should focus on the internal coherence and unique concepts that each religious worldview offers. This approach allows for a deeper, more authentic understanding of religions on their own terms.

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