Problems of Method in the Interpretation of Religion

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The subject for discussion has been defined as "guiding concepts in the study of religion in England, the U. S. A., and Japan," but as it would be impossible to offer a descriptive survey in the time available I should like to advance a thesis which refers incidentally to recent trends and may serve as a basis for discussion.

The thesis has two parts. Firstly, I should like to argue for a limitation of the use of the term "phenomenological" in the study of religion. Secondly, I should like both to distinguish and to correlate the phenomenological study of religion and creative interpretations of religion.

From a religious point of view the first part could be considered the useless part, the second part the useful. This is put in this way because many religious people consider the scholarly study of religion a rather useless blind alley, distracting scholars and students alike from the genuine practice of religion. Creative interpretations of religion on the other hand, which in a broad sense belong to the sphere of "practice," are widely thought to be useful.

It is sometimes said that the distinction between scholarship

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and practice is a product of the western discriminating mind. However, there have been many western religious thinkers who have most intimately related the two, and indeed almost all the great Christian theologians fall into this category. Moreover, the fact that the unity of scholarship (Japanese *gakumon* 学問) and practice (Japanese *jissen* 実践) has often been stressed in the east is itself evidence that here too the distinction has not been unknown at a secondary or preliminary level.

There is indeed a sense in which, and a time at which, such distinctions need to be superseded. However, for the time being it is important to distinguish between thought about religion which is not committed to the promotion of religion (i. e., "useless" thought about religion), and the involved, creative interpretation of religion which is a kind of religious activity in itself. This distinction is particularly important if we are to share a common approach to the understanding of religion while at the same time maintaining some involvement in distinctive religious traditions.

Limitation of the Use of the Term "Phenomenological"

As is well known, the term "phenomenology" came into the study of religion on the continent of Europe, being drawn from the philosophical orientation of Husserl and others. It soon began, however, to take on a specialized use in the study of religion, for example in the writings of G. van der Leeuw, W. B. Kristensen, and C. J. Bleeker. In this context it was freed from the philosophical tradition of phenomenology as such, which has an independent continuing existence. It has

become increasingly clear that if the word "phenomenological" is to be useful in the definition of the methodology of the study of religion, its meaning has to be stated in terms of the requirements of the subject itself.

One of the main concerns of the Dutch phenomenology of religion school was to free the study of religion from the control of Christian theology, which in many cases had, and still has, a distorting influence on the study of religions other than Christianity. The aim was precisely to avoid constructing a theology of religions, however desirable that may also be from the standpoint of Christian theology itself. The question about the ultimate validity of a specific revelation, or about the ultimate nature of God, etc., was to be bracketed off. Presuppositions with regard to such matters were not to control the ongoing procedures of the general study of religion. To a great extent the Dutch writers were successful in this endeavor. However, in the cases of van der Leeuw and Kristensen, the conceptual framework in terms of which they organized the data of their study still showed a strong dependence on the structures of Christian theology. In this respect I have already criticized their work briefly in my book *Comparative religion.*[1] There I tried also to offer a completely neutral conceptual framework for the phenomenological and comparative study of religion, that is, one not at all controlled by the conceptual content of any one specific religion.

Another concern of the Dutch school was the attempt to grasp the significance of a complex of religious data from the

1. *Comparative religion : An introduction through source materials* (Devon : David and Charles, 1972 ; New York : Harper and Row, 1972).

point of view of the believer or participant himself. This was a very important intention and has much in common with the aims of field work in anthropology. On the one hand, the student of religion has to train himself not to advance his own theological views, whether conscious or covert, into his understanding of the data. On the other hand, he has to avoid an easy reduction into the general social and psychological context and to really grasp the meaning of what is going on, in the terms of understanding used by the believer or participant. The same must apply to those who study religion from within an eastern culture. It is necessary to make a sustained effort not to advance arguments favoring Buddhism into an examination of African or European religion. For example, Buddhist apologists often refer disparagingly to Christianity as a "book" religion, as if there were just texts and dogmas to be found and no interior life or sacramental and ethical practice. This leads to a distorted view of Christianity. Of course the Bible as a book is important to all kinds of Christians, but its use and meaning in Christian life are as complex as the role of scriptures in Buddhism. A phenomenological study of Christianity should bracket off any such oversimplified preconceptions, however congenial they may seem for Buddhism apologetics.

These two aims of the Dutch school really belong together, and in my view represent the distinctive value of the term "phenomenological" as applied in the study of religion. They may be jointly defined as the attempt to bracket off presuppositions or potential conclusions about the truth, falsity, value or otherwise of a religion, while at the same time striv-

ing to grasp its significance for those who believe or participate in it. The combination is difficult to achieve, and demands training and discipline. However, it is quite essential for religion to be studied "phenomenologically" in this sense, if the subject is to develop the world-wide validity it ought to have. At this level it is possible for studies of religion to be controlled by external criteria, namely by the accounts given by believers or participants themselves, and the examination and assessment of other scholars. Religion studied phenomenologically, in this sense, is a public subject in its own right. It can be carried on cooperatively by scholars from different countries.

If the term "phenomenological" is useful in the above sense in defining the methodology of the study of religion, it is desirable to exclude other meanings which have been given to it, but which can just as well be referred to by other terms. There are four areas to consider.

"Phenomenology" of religion is often loosely identified with "comparative religion," and the former term has sometimes been preferred on the ground that comparative religion involves comparative evaluation. However, the comparative study of something does not necessarily involve evaluation. Just as the term is used in other fields such as education and law, it may be used with respect to religion provided that it is not taken to entail evaluation. Another point to be made about the term "comparative" is that the phenomenological study of religion (in the sense given above) excludes the study of the correlations between religion and general social factors or general psychological factors. It is limited to the self-understanding of the believers and participants and should not

introduce functionalist explanations which could easily contradict that self-understanding. However, such correlations also form part of the study of religion in a broader sense, and they can also be studied comparatively. For example, it is possible to compare relative deprivation and the emergence of new religions in more than one culture. Hence the term "comparative" has a wider reference than the term "phenomenological." It should be used in the simple sense of comparing comparable sets of data, whether these are being studied phenomenologically or functionally.

Another term used with some frequency is "typology." It means simply the discernment and categorization of recurrent types within a range of otherwise disparate data. Since comparative study also involves a similar operation but covers both phenomenological and functional studies, it might be desirable to reserve the term typology for the designation of types within the data of religion studied phenomenologically. In this case it would not refer to potentially reductionist studies of correlations with general sociological and psychological data. To put it another way, typology would be a sub-section of comparative religion, namely, that part controlled by the criteria of phenomenological study. Thus we could speak of a phenomenological typology of religion, that is, a study which seeks persistent patterns within the data of religion while applying the criteria of strictly phenomenological study as defined above.

The "phenomenology of religion" has sometimes been closely identified with a search for "the essence of religion" (not to be confused with the essence of "a" religion, that is, of a particular religion). Here great caution is needed. The

attempt to define "the essence of religion" is really a higher order activity, a concluding, creative and perhaps evaluative attempt to sum up and restate the meaning of religion as a whole. It is near to theology and its equivalents, and also near to would-be comprehensive and constructive philosophies of religion (as opposed to the analytical philosophy of religion). It is quite different from the attempt to study and understand one religion phenomenologically in the sense defined earlier, and also quite different from typological studies controlled by the criteria of phenomenological study. Indeed, since the attempt to grasp such an essence is a quasi-theological act, it becomes positively inimical to the practice of phenomenological method in the important sense. The problem about "the essence of religion" should be kept as a distinct problem in the philosophical consideration of religion. At the same time, any attempt to solve it must of course be based on phenomenological studies, in the strict sense, and also upon comparative studies.

Finally "the phenomenology of religion" has sometimes been associated with the search for underlying structures of human experience, whether psychological, sociological or cybernetic. One thinks here for example of Jung's treatment of symbols, Eliade's use of archaic religion along Jungian lines, or of Lévi-Strauss' attempt to see mythology as the expression of an underlying code of meaning. This is not the place to argue whether any such theory is correct or not, but it needs to be pointed out that they go beyond the strict sense in which the term "phenomenological" is useful in the study of religion. To state it simply, such theories import modes of understand-

ing which go far beyond the self-understanding of particular believers or participants. Even if it were thought that the latter were not contradicted, it becomes impossible to apply the criteria for strictly phenomenological study given above. The accounts given by believers or participants themselves are simply not of the same order as these far-reaching constructions. Moreover other scholars can scarcely check and assess their validity without leaping into an acceptance of the same presuppositions. In so far as some do just this, schools are formed, and that is a bad sign for a public subject. This is not to say that these approaches to depth structures are not extremely interesting and perhaps in some respects valid. However, the question really belongs to a kind of no-man's-land somewhere between the constructive philosophy of religion, theology and its equivalents, and sheer poetry. It is preferable to distinguish such matters from the strictly phenomenological study of religion as defined earlier.

In sum : the term "phenomenology" needs to be considered very carefully in relation to the methodology of the study of religion. It has meant many things in the past, and is sometimes still used to refer vaguely to all of these things. There may be those who feel uneasy about yet one more definition of this term, yet it is usual in the development of any kind of public knowledge and inquiry for methodological terminology to be increasingly refined. The usage being suggested here is in line with one of the main intentions of all those who have used the term in connection with the study of religion. At the same time by being concentrated on one central and crucial point the term can be used more precisely and confi-

dently. It hardly seems necessary to use the term as a noun at all. To speak of "the phenomenology of religion" is simply to invite all the confusions which need to be avoided. As an adjective or an adverb, however, it has a specific role to play. If the definition given earlier may be repeated : the phenomenological study of religion involves the twin attempt : (i) to bracket off presuppositions or potential conclusions about the truth, falsity, value or otherwise of a religion, and (ii) to grasp its significance for those who believe or participate in it. Religion or religions may be considered in other ways too : theologically, buddhologically, sociologically, psychologically, philosophically, etc. However, our elementary and publicly shared knowledge of religion is based on the phenomenological study of religion defined ascetically as above. In this sense it may take shape as an academically recognizable subject throughout the whole world regardless of the variety of religious traditions found in various countries. At this modest and perhaps, in some eyes, "useless" level, it is possible for knowledge and understanding to be shared. Of course such knowledge is not intended to replace or divert attention from the divergent, inside and inward, "useful" understanding of real religions. From the point of view of a religious person the academic knowledge will appear secondary or at best preliminary, while from the point of view of a non-religious person it may appear superior to the inside knowledge of a particular religion. This, however, is a question which lies outside the scope and method of the subject itself, which may be pursued positivistically by Buddhists, Christians and non-religious persons alike. Success or failure in the subject are defined by the application

of the appropriate criteria, as explained above.

Two frequent and related objections to such an endeavor remain to be noticed. Firstly there is a problem about whether there can be any value-free study of social and cultural phenomena at all. It should be admitted that it is probably impossible to achieve a one hundred percent value-free study of a religion. However, there is an important difference between trying to be value-free and not trying to be value-free. There is a difference between conscientiously seeking to apply the criteria given above and letting one's imagination roam at will. The study of religion will no doubt always be somewhat inexact and subject to the personal interests of researchers. Nevertheless it may be possible at least to approximate the objective by submitting one's grasp of the data to the real evidence available and to the control of other researchers and critics.

Secondly it may be thought that even the (very limited) conceptual apparatus of presuppositions offered here is just another piece of western intellectualism and as such already distorts the field in advance by denying what is most important in religion. However, it is probably a mistake nowadays to think of the western mind as some peculiar isolated piece of mechanics, if indeed it ever was. Not only has modern Europe long been subject to oriental influences, it is an oversimplification to think of it as ever having been entirely independent of them. Moreover it is becoming increasingly clear that aspects of so-called "western" rationality also have their counterparts in eastern cultures. The historical relativism of Nakamoto Tominaga with respect to religion is a clear case in

point.[2] More important than such culture-balancing, however, is the fact that the methodological criteria argued for here themselves take into account precisely the value structure of the religious phenomena in question. Nothing is proposed which would in itself contradict the value structure of any given religion, and the procedure of study submits entirely to the data themselves and to corrective accounts of the data. It is difficult to conceive of a more restrained methodology than this if one is to study anything at all. The question of the possibility of a value-free sociology of religion in the functional sense is much more difficult, because correlational explanations are offered which may indeed contradict the self-understanding and values of the believer or participant. However, *by definition* the problem in this sense does not exist for the phenomenological study of religion.

The Interpretation of Religion

In the end it is the meaning of religions in which most of us are interested. However, in the world-wide context in which we now live it is no longer satisfying to be concerned with the meaning of one religion only. Indeed for a long time in east and west those who interpret religious tradition have often given incidental interpretations of other religions too, usually inaccurate and uncomplimentary. Recently there has been much talk of "dialogue" between religions. This is often friendly, but too often it is simply a matter of fixed doctrinal positions being juxtaposed with each other. It may be that

2. Cf. my article "Aufklärung and religion in Europe and Japan," *Religious studies*, vol. 9 (1973), pp. 201–217.

the emergence of a recognizable and increasingly precise discipline of the study of religion (in the "useless" sense) can offer a new basis for the creative interpretation of religions on a world-wide scale. However, this should not be taken as the aim of the phenomenological study of religion, considered as such, which has no particular aims of this kind and is in an important sense "useless."

There seems to be a possibility of moving on to a joint exercise in interpretation, which would be, not phenomenological, but creative. Phenomenological study and creative interpretation, however, should not be confused. On the contrary it is necessary to distinguish clearly between them. Too often the distinction is not made, and then work which seems at first to be objective becomes clouded over and distorted by various theological predilections. Or else some imaginative conception takes over, such as Eliade's concern for the existential needs of modern man and his attempt to satisfy them with patterns of archaic symbols drawn out far beyond the original context. Eliade's work is interesting, but the distinction between the application of the proper criteria of phenomenological study and the move into creative interpretation is not sufficiently clear.

The necessary distinctions may be expressed as in table 1, in which the vertical columns represent method and the horizontal columns content.

All the horizontal columns may involve comparative work. The function and use of religious symbolism needs to be studied both correlationally with social and psychological factors and phenomenologically. This is because a correlational study

TABLE 1

INTERPRETATION OF ARCHAIC RELIGIONS

CONTENT	METHOD		
	Sociological (anthropological) and psychological studies	Phenomenological (including typological) studies	Creative and evaluative approaches
Function and use of religious symbolism			
Content and meaning of religious symbolism			
General interpretations of religious symbolism			
	Criteria: (a) factual data (b) work of other scholars *N.B.* Conclusions may contradict self-understanding of believers	*Criteria*: (a) factual data (self-understanding of believers) (b) work of other scholars *N.B.* Conclusions must not contradict believers' self-understanding	*Criteria*: No precise criteria *N.B.* Value can only be discerned from later historical perspective

should take some account also of the insider's self-understanding. The content and meaning of religious symbolism as such should be studied phenomenologically. This is a methodologically limited operation (though the field is extensive enough !). Finally, general interpretations of religious symbolism must be

based on phenomenological study, but they inevitably move into the creative and evaluative realm, represented by the third column. The methodological criteria relevant to each type of procedure are indicated at the base of the vertical columns.

These kinds of study are especially appropriate to archaic and intellectually underdeveloped religions. They do not, however, do justice to the historical *interpretative* traditions of the more sophisticated religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and others. For those interested in the relation between the phenomenological study of religion and creative and evaluative approaches to interpretation in such complex cases, two aspects of religion, both of them rather neglected as yet, seem to be especially important.

The first may be conveniently labelled (following van der Leeuw) "the dynamics of religion." Van der Leeuw devoted only a few pages to the subject and C. J. Bleeker also took it up in his volume *The sacred bridge*.[3] The point of "the dynamics of religion" is to see religions not as static doctrinal or symbolic systems but as changing, moving traditions. At this point the preliminary suggestions of the Dutch writers could well be complemented with the perspective of Ernst Troeltsch, who was above all alive to the fact that religions are developing historical traditions moving through changing social contexts. All sophisticated religions experience some degree of tension between the doctrinal norms and formulations which they have inherited and the changing needs of the

3. More details in my article "The transplantation of religions," *Numen*, vol. 16 (1969), pp. 234–239.

times. This results in a constant string of new interpretations, for example, early Buddhism, early Mahayana Buddhism, Tendai Buddhism, Nichiren Buddhism, and present-day interpretations offered by Nichiren-shū, Nichiren Shōshū, and Risshō Kōsei Kai. On the one hand, it is necessary to understand the social context of such developments. On the other it is necessary to understand such developments in a manner which does justice to the various standpoints which emerge along the way. Similarly, in the case of Christianity it is not sufficient to refer to static doctrinal formulations. One must take into account the real experience and living interpretation of the believers themselves. The question is, how is the religion thought to be moving into the present situation ? The dynamics of religion needs to be studied both with respect to social and psychological correlations, and also phenomenologically.

The second aspect to pick up is closely related, and may be termed "comparative hermeneutics," that is, the comparative study of procedures of interpretation. This too must be understood in a historical perspective. In brief, there seem to be similarities between the ways in which interpreters of religion (theologians, buddhologians, etc.) work. For example, they all have some ways of relating their doctrinal tradition to the present state of humanity. If their methods could be studied systematically, yet phenomenologically, it would give a widely acceptable basis of understanding, not controlled by any particular dogmatic position, yet close to the heartbeat of each religion considered.[4]

4. On "comparative hermeneutics" cf. M. Pye and R. Morgan, eds., *The cardinal meaning, essays in comparative hermeneutics : Buddhism and Christianity* (The Hague : Mouton Publishers, 1973).

TABLE 2

INTERPRETATION OF HISTORICALLY ARTICULATED RELIGIONS

CONTENT	METHOD		
	Sociological (anthropological) and psychological studies	Phenomenological (including typological) studies	Creative and evaluative approaches
Dynamics of religion			
Comparative hermeneutics			
Joint interpretation of religious traditions			
	Criteria: (a) factual data (b) work of other scholars *N.B.* Conclusions may contradict self-understanding of believers	*Criteria*: (a) factual data (self-understanding of believers) (b) work of other scholars *N.B.* Conclusions must not contradict believers' self-understanding	*Criteria*: No precise criteria *N.B.* Value can only be discerned from later historical perspective

Both of these aspects should be studied phenomenologically, in the sense defined above; the study should be controlled by the appropriate criteria, that is, by reference to the self-understanding of the believers or participants themselves (which forms the data of the inquiry), and by reference to the parallel studies

and criticism of other scholars with different backgrounds who are dealing with the same materials. If this is done, a basis may be laid for a *shared* attempt to interpret the meaning of complex religions. The relationship between the various activities may be expressed diagramatically as in table 2.

The validity of such attempts at joint interpretation cannot be controlled by precise criteria, as they would be creative and evaluative rather than phenomenological However, they would take place on the basis of a preliminary controlled understanding, and hence would be more likely to represent a consistent move forward—consistent, that is, not merely with the dogmatic postulates of one religious tradition but with the modes of interpretation employed in more than one religious tradition. It is too early to say precisely how such an exercise would work out in practice, but I believe the time has come when the world cannot do without such a joint approach.