

The Phenomenology of Religion

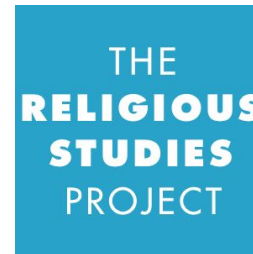
Podcast with James L. Cox (14 January 2012).

Interviewed by David G. Robertson.

Transcribed by Martin Lepage.

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David Robertson: *The phenomenology of religion has been one of the most influential approaches to studying religion in recent decades. To discuss it, we are joined today by professor emeritus James Cox of the University of Edinburgh, who is the author of [An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion](#), a guide aimed at students and the general reader. So Professor Cox, what is the phenomenology of religion?*

James Cox: Well, the phenomenology of religion carries a rather philosophical title because it's rooted in philosophical phenomenology in effect, probably developed out of thinking of the late 19th century and early 20th century, where the study of religions was just beginning to develop in the comparative sense. So, in the late 19th century, for example, when missionaries had gone around to various parts of the world, bringing back tales and stories of other religions than Christianity, it became apparent that scholars and theologians particularly needed to develop some kind of theory about the relationship of Christianity to the other religions. So in the late 19th century, they developed essentially the comparative study of religions and comparison was done fundamentally from a Christian theological perspective; a liberal perspective in the sense that the scholar would begin to compare different aspects of say Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam with Christianity in order to show how Christianity is really the pinnacle of these religions. This developed into a kind of reaction, I should say, by certain scholars as they got into the 20th century, that the study of religion, although very much still rooted in Christian ideas and Christian thoughts, was regarded as something a bit more not just comparative in the sense to show Christianity is superior, but in fact to show how the different religions could be

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compared according to typologies. So, for example, the typology of sacrifice was a very common idea. Sacrifice seemed to be appearing in all religions of the world : in India, in Africa, in Asia and certainly in Christianity with the Eucharist being essential sacrificial meal. Sacrifice became a typology that was compared and then ideas like certain kinds of rituals, life cycle rituals, for example, seem to be universal in all these religious groups. So as comparative study of religion developed, it developed a sort of typological approach. That's one aspect that led into what I should call the comparative study of religions from a less theological perspective than was originally developed in the late 19th century. Then, you have the philosophical development, which is really associated with the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Husserl was, well, the founder, you might say, of philosophical phenomenology. And his problem, that he saw in the intellectual sphere, at the time, was the problem of what he called the natural attitude. That is to say, with the development of science, and what's called positivism, that is, the naïve idea that what we see is exactly what is. And therefore the study of the world is a sort of compartmentalization, a kind of breaking down of the component parts of the world, putting them into certain kinds of categories so that we can study them in a way that is based on observation, being the fundamental tool for what you might call the... justification or... the validation of knowledge. Husserl said the natural attitude displaces consciousness. That is the role of the consciousness, the intentional active role of the consciousness in apprehending reality. What he wanted to do was to set aside or bracket out, he used the term epoché, which is to bracket out [what are] naïve or unexamined assumptions (5:00) about the world. The fact that we're sitting in this room, and I assume it is an objective room, you're an objective person, there are objective photographs or pictures on the wall or window and so on, as if it is just given. But Husserl said no, the consciousness needs to say "okay, let's put this into brackets" and began to think "What kinds of influences affect my consciousness?" So, of course, I have lived in this room for the past thirteen years, I've lived in it, it's been my office for the last thirteen years. I have lots of memories associated with this. Also I've collected loads of books and boxes, which means that the view that I'm having of the room now is different from when I first came here. Or if I look out the window I see entirely different

perspective from what you see looking at me, or I looking towards my filing cabinet, for example. Anyway, the whole point was that one should bracket out these assumptions about the world and begin to understand the relationship between the consciousness and the apprehension of the objective world. Anyway, that's quite a lot of background in terms of how the comparative study of religions came in to play, and then the notion of the philosophical epoché. Now where does this put us then in terms of, say, the early to mid-20th century of the study of religions? Certain scholars, particularly Dutch scholars, for example Gerardus van der Leeuw was one, W. Brede Kristensen who was his teacher, and followed also C. J. Bleeker who was at Amsterdam. These Dutch scholars began to say "Wait a minute! What are the assumptions that are informing the study of religions?" One, we have the theological assumptions, the superiority of Christianity, which I've already talked about. This needs to be bracketed out, we need to set this aside, use Husserl's notion of the epoché. But we also have the scientific interpretation, and the scientific interpretation was largely that we can assign status or priority or value to religions according to an evolutionary scale. So you have lesser-developed religions, such as the primitive, the primal, the animistic religions. And then you have, developing up, more polytheistic religions, and from polytheistic religions, you then move towards the more monotheistic, ethical monotheistic and Christianity being the pinnacle. And some scientists thought, beyond Christianity, then, is science, the end of the evolutionary scale of humanity. So you move out of religion towards science. Well, the phenomenologists, particularly Kristensen and van der Leeuw, but also Bleeker, argued that what should happen in the study of religions is that these attitudes, these assumptions, should also be bracketed out, they should be put in abeyance, they should be suspended, or employ the epoché. So now you have theological priorities, theological gradations of religions being bracketed. You have scientific gradations or levels of religion being bracketed in order to do what? That the phenomena can speak for themselves, which is Husserl's word. "Let the phenomena speak for themselves" and the phenomenologists of religion said "Let the phenomena of religion speak for themselves". And this meant studying, describing, understanding and incorporating the perspectives of believers. So that at the end of the day, the phenomenologists of religion can

say “We have entered into the religious phenomena, including believers. We have attempted to suspend our judgments about their truth or value, their relationship, their gradations, their... sort of priorities of ranking of religion and we have allowed the phenomena of religion to speak for themselves.” Then, you could begin to do the classifications; then, you could begin to say “Alright, now we can begin to identify these typologies, now we can say not gradating them or ranking them but say “How does myth, for example, a cosmogonic myth, operate in Hindu tradition, or Buddhist traditions, or African tradition, or Christian or Jewish or whatever tradition. And this was intended to lead ultimately to understanding religions.

DR: So the phenomenology of religion, if I'm understanding, is essentially a method by which... an inherently comparative method that prioritizes the experience of religion... perhaps you could outline for us how (10:00) you would go about applying this method practically?

JC: Well, yes, okay, I can tell you how I did it when I was doing fieldwork in Zimbabwe. I'll take one example of a ritual that I observed, which was a rain ritual in a chief's region. I went to the ritual, I didn't have a lot of background preparation, because when I went out to the area, I was with the chief's son. He said “We're going to go to attend various rituals which were in the area. But there is an important ritual taking place which was for rain ritual. Now the gist of the ritual was this, that the ancestors, according to the Shona traditions of Zimbabwe, are responsible for providing rain for the community and the larger community in a sense, because it covered quite a wide area. In that year, which was 1992, there was a drought, a terrible drought. This ritual took place at the end of the rainy season, which was unusual. Now, in the ritual, they took some time, about ten or twelve hours, this ritual taking place. But the center of the ritual was the possession of a spirit medium by the chief's ancestor spirit. During this event, the medium became possessed, she became the man, the *doumda* (11:23) spirit, she dressed in traditional attire, with a eagle feather hat and an animal skin skirt, a walking stick, she was a man, she was the ancestor, the man spirit of the chief. At one point in the ritual, I, who was an observer, of

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course I know I wasn't unaffected or not affecting the ritual, she called the chief's family down, underneath the tree and she began talking with them. And she called me down as well at one point, and she said something to me in Shona. I didn't understand precisely what she said, but I clapped my hands in the traditional way, shook her hand, and, in a sense, I was involved in the ritual, not equally with the community that I was there... so what I had to do then, in my own view is that, I think, personally, that rain does not, could not be caused by ancestors. Rain could not be caused by God either. Rain is an atmospheric condition, and in that area, when the what they call the inter-tropical convergence on works that is the warm air from the north and the south meet then rains occur. When they don't converge, rains don't happen. What I had to say, if I was to really understand the ritual in the phenomenological method is to say "Okay, these scientific assumptions I have about how rain is produced need to be bracketed, suspended, put into abeyance, not given up, because I believe that rain occurs according to scientific explanations. But in order to understand what was going on, I needed to put that in brackets and enter into. And in my descriptions, when I wrote about this, I tried to be as descriptive, as impartial as possible, explaining what happened. And then, after describing it, I then tried to interpret it, to try to find certain kinds of connections and meanings to it. And in the end I interpreted it, not so much, you might say, religiously, if you might used that term, but I interpreted it politically and sociologically, to do with the status of the chief and his relationship to the Zanu-PF, Mugabwe's government, and so on. But in other words, I gave an interpretation of it, but only after I had suspended my judgments, described and tried to understand what was going on.

DR: *One of the most interesting aspects for me of the phenomenological method as you describe it in your book is the final stage of eidetic intuition. Perhaps you could describe...*

JC: Yeah that's the most controversial part of the whole method, I think, and this is largely where phenomenology has gone, I think, out of date, and isn't really accepted so much in the sense that the eidetic intuition was intended to be that the scholar of comparative religions... I mean, I've given an example of one

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Zimbabwean ritual. So now I get this ritual, compare this ritual, I look at other Zimbabwean rituals, then I begin to say “Okay certain patterns develop in these rituals, we can see certain things occurring... beer poured as libations to ancestors, and so on; the centrality of ancestors, the idea that ancestors carry messages to higher ancestors, and so on. And you build up this sort of idea of what the sort of Shona religious experience is about. (15:00) Then, you say “Okay, now, how does this compare to rituals, which are rituals, in this case, a crisis ritual, that might occur in an other society?” A crisis ritual, for example, of illness, when somebody is ill, in a Christian sense, and a priest is called, prayers are made to try to effect a cure or a healing within this person. And you say “Okay, now we have two different types of crisis ritual.” Then you build up all the rituals, the myths, the categories, the typologies, the classifications and you begin to say “Well, we can talk about the meaning of cosmogonic myth, in various societies, or crisis rituals or calendrical rituals, or the role of religious practitioners and various, and you begin to say “Well, we can find some general meaning for myth, ritual, practitioner... morality, art, and so on, all these classifications. Then you ask the question “Is it possible, that out of all this comparative study, we can see into the fundamental meaning of religion itself? What is religion about? What do all these comparative studies of religion tell us about the human religious understanding? And here you have different theorists that have developed ideas about that, in the tradition. So, you have Mircea Eliade who’s a famous so-called historian of religions, but is indeed a phenomenologist of religion who develops the whole theory about the sacred making itself known or manifesting itself through what he calls hierophanies. These are mundane, worldly kinds of objects or ideas, it could be a stone, it could be a pool, it could be a person, it could be a book, like Muhammad receives the messages from Allah and produces the Quran, this is a hierophany, the Quran. In other words, Eliade says you can develop a whole theory of religion based on the idea of the dialectic of the sacred. And that’s what I’ve called his eidetic intuition, his essence, his meaning of religion in general, based on his comparative studies. And that’s what the eidetic intuition tries to do. The problem with it is that the further one gets away from contextualized studies, from social, cultural, specific kinds of activities, the generalisations become almost impossible to test. And this

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becomes a problem... and it becomes the kind of idea that there is an essential characteristic of religion which sits some place in the heavens and makes itself known and manifested in all sorts of ways.

DR: *That leads perfectly into what was going to be my next question, then.*

Phenomenology of religion is an essentialist methodology with a lot of connections to people like Eliade and many other really quite unfashionable scholars and approaches and... so phenomenology of religion is a somewhat unfashionable approach. Do you think that that reputation is deserved and what do you think the present and future of phenomenology of religion within religious studies is?

JC: In the sense that Eliade follows, and other people even like Bleeker who said that the central idea of religion or the key-word of religion is the divine... you know, so... you have all these people... for van der Leeuw, it was power. So you find these sort of essential categories that apply everywhere and one gives it kind of a generalized interpretation of what religion is. I think that this has been largely dismissed today, and phenomenologists... there are still persistent phenomenologists... they don't do it in that sense. They don't try to find some universal category into which all religions can then be placed or fitted. That has to be given up. The other problem with phenomenology of religion is privileging the insider's point of view, which has been heavily criticised, for example, [Robert Segal](#) from the University of Aberdeen has criticized it heavily saying that if you privilege the insider's point of view, if you say that you are not going to be critical of it, but simply present it as fairly as possible, then you cut off the scientific ability to actually test or explain events in ways that might contradict the believer's point of view. In other words, for Segal, if you refuse to criticize (20:00) the believer's perspective, you're endorsing it. In that sense there's no difference between that and being a theologian, you might as well be a theologian. Those are the two main criticisms: philosophical essentialism, which cannot be tested and is rooted in some sort of almost platonic ideal; and the other idea that by privileging the insider's, W. Brede Kristensen is famous for saying "The believers were always right. They have to be right." Or Cantwell Smith, who was another phenomenologist of religion, a Canadian scholar,

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argued that the faith is the core of religion, that faith is the... personal faith, which we can never penetrate, and in order to understand religion, one, the scholar, must acknowledge that this personal faith is the core element of religion. And this idea, then, that the believers have the final authority over the interpretation of religion is another problem with the phenomenology of religion. Now, I think that these can be resolved, that there are certain aspects of phenomenology of religion that are still helpful and still quite contemporary. For example, if you say “What is the epoché?”. The epoché can be understood as the scholar, in this case me, becoming aware of my most, well, obvious or... apparent kinds of presuppositions about any religion I’m trying to study. There are lots of assumptions that I make that may not be transparent to my consciousness, like my western... ideas about the way knowledge is constructed and so on. I mean, I could bring these to consciousness as well, in so far as I can. But the point is, it has to do very much with the contemporary idea of self-reflexivity. Where is my starting point? Where am I coming from? What are those presuppositions which inform my perspective? As I just gave the example, I don’t think rain comes from ancestors or from God, [but] comes from atmospheric conditions, that is a presupposition. That is a potentially distorting presupposition from a believer’s point of view. In that sense, by bringing these into consciousness, then knowing that you don’t sit back as some superior, some kind of objective observer who isn’t at all influenced or involved in the whole enterprise of knowledge, then, I think the epoché helps to fit into this. Suspending judgements does not mean that I wipe my mind blank, it doesn’t mean that I’m a blank slate. What it means is that I try to become aware of those presuppositions and potentially distorting assumptions that would influence [my] ability to enter into and to understand what I’m trying to study. So, I think in one sense, self-reflexivity is that. And, secondly, the idea that we’re not producing objective knowledge, that we’re not producing a study of a human community as if that community were capable of being fitted into a scientific laboratory. So, in that sense, I think phenomenology has certain things still to offer. And the other thing is that if you look at the new wave of [cognitive scientists of religion](#). The cognitive scientists of religion, like Harvey Whitehouse, who’s at Oxford, has created categories, universal categories of

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religious behaviour and action, which he says is rooted in the way humans think. Of course, he recognizes cultural specificity, but nevertheless, his sort of distinction between doctrinal and experiential kinds of religious behaviours is very typological, very similar to phenomenological typologies and categories. And I've argued in my book [An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion](#), that the cognitive science of religion has many parallel ways of approaching the study of religion as phenomenology, particularly by trying to understand the way humans think, the way humans behave and putting these into sorts of categories and classifications. One assumption of phenomenology of religion has always been that there's nothing alien to one human to another. In other words, there's nothing human that we cannot understand, because we're all human beings. Even though we may express it in different ways, we may have cultural symbols, which are different. Nonetheless, we can understand something which is human. This is based on the old idea, that... again derived from Husserl, that we can employ an empathy. We're capable of empathizing because we're all human beings. (25:00) And the cognitive science of religion, perhaps in some different ways, but nonetheless is based on the idea that humans all basically think the same, counter-intuitively, when they come to the notion of certain kinds of expressions or certain kinds of experiences of the world.

DR: As always, I could listen to you talk all day, but I think that's a perfect place to end the interview. So I'm going to say thank you very much Professor Cox.

JC: Thank you.

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