

Historical Approaches

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Phenomenology is mostly concerned with the experience of consciousness. This is distinguished from the historical approach to religion in that it didn't attempt to answer the questions of truth, falsity, and the content-based issues that religion surrounds itself with. These were left for the historians to address. How do they do that? How did the historical approach begin? Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [The History of Religious Studies](#)
2. [Science of Religion](#)
3. [Encounters with World Religions](#)

1. The History of Religious Studies

Studying religions as they have emerged, flourished, and changed throughout time has been a preoccupation for millennia, but for this tutorial, the emphasis will be on the 18th and 19th centuries. These centuries were pivotal moments in the establishment of religious studies or historical studies of religion.

Reason was dominant in the Middle Ages, but it was coupled with faith in a way that wasn't a threat to religion. With the breakdown of the monarchies in the 18th century, religion also became dispersed. Europe began a rapid course of secularization or modernization. It began having a non-religious orientation.



DID YOU KNOW

During the Enlightenment in Europe and the time around the French Revolution of 1789, human reason was given special priority. It was applied to many academic disciplines with a new confidence and a new strength. In this enlightened context, religion was now looked at through the lens of science and reason. The challenge for many thinkers during this emerging modernity was to make sense of this new relationship between reason and faith.

2. Science of Religion

The subjective truths of religious experience and romantic political ideals, such as freedom and individuality, converged with new ideas and methods in science that could now explain some of the mysteries of the material world. Many took on the task of using this science as a new method of detached observation of the world to explain it and to present new information and material to the world as knowledge.

Under the umbrella of science, there were new historical approaches to the study of religion. This was appealing to many because the observer could be impartial and refrain from judging the material. One such approach was the **historical-critical study of the Bible**.

Religious events and phenomena in history were studied through the social and physical sciences, philology, or language-based text analysis to verify the presence of religious ideas. It was also used to verify their changes and consistency over time. Similarly, it is used to observe the religious beliefs, practices, and behaviors as they change over time.

During the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, there was a thriving interest in religions of the world. With exploration and colonization in full gear, mostly due to industrialization, Europeans were encountering cultures, languages, and religious traditions that they hadn't experienced as directly before. Translation of religious texts and materials, therefore, became an industry applied to this modern quest for understanding.



TERM TO KNOW

Historical-Critical Study of the Bible

An approach that subjects the Bible to questions regarding its historical truth, internal coherence, and textual accuracy.

3. Encounters with World Religions

So where is religion again? Well, let's look at Christianity in Europe. It was being looked at and compared with other religions that were being encountered in the world, such as the Eastern Taoic religions.

These comparisons could be made objectively using the tools of the scientific method and detached observation. This is significant because both believers and non-believers could adhere to the supposed objectivity of the approach.

This gives a modern study of the Bible new vitality that continues to inform our understanding of Christianity in the world today. This includes how it developed in Europe, as well as how it has interfaced and exchanged with the world at large socially, ideologically, and scientifically. There are many texts available on the overall and in-depth history of Christianity.



SUMMARY

The history of religious studies began a long time ago, but it became a modern discipline during the 18th century at the time of the European Enlightenment. A **science of religion** offered new ways to understand the relationship between faith and reason in this new context of modernity. The tools of

science were, therefore, applied to religion as well, because one could now study, observe, and report impartially, objectively, and without bias. This was particularly appealing for Europeans as they tried to understand the place of Christianity as they had more **encounters with world religions**.

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