

Phenomenology

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson looks at phenomenology. You will get a clear idea of what phenomenology is, specifically as it is applied to the study of religion. You will learn about some specific phenomenologists of religion who had wonderful insight into the universal nature of religious experience. Lastly, you will see how the philosophy of religion is different from other approaches to religion, noting the advantages of each. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Defining Phenomenology
2. Mircea Eliade and *The Sacred and the Profane*
3. Rudolf Otto and the “Numinous”
4. Gerardus van der Leeuw and *Power*

1. Defining Phenomenology

What is **phenomenology**? Maybe you’ve heard the term before. Maybe you’re an expert. Maybe you’re an expert, and you don’t know you’re an expert. Well, in a sense this is true because phenomenology is really about conscious experience on an individual level. Certainly, you’ve had some conscious experiences, and you’ve thought about them a bit. That’s basically what phenomenology is in a nutshell: how things appear to you and considering what reality is experiential.

You’ve probably noticed that the word **phenomenon** is built into the title, phenomenology. It comes from the Greek word “*phainomenon*,” which means appearance. This study of appearances is intentionally distinct from—and doesn’t concern itself directly with—being. That is something that will be defined in a later lesson.

Phenomenology is the science of the experience of **consciousness**. The study of phenomena, appearances. It has been around for hundreds of years or more, but it technically became its own branch, if not a new foundation for philosophy, in the early 20th century in Europe. This occurred primarily through the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

At the same time, phenomenology was being applied to the study of religion to try and make sense of religious experience itself and to add the value of subjective experience to the already rich field of objective historical

studies. Phenomenology of religion studies the many types of experience available to us and the forms they take, such as perception, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, angst, wonder, fear, hope, social activities, et cetera.

Phenomenology of religion, being more interested in the various types of individual subjective experience, is useful because ultimately questions such as “is there a god?” or “is there life after death?” can be put aside. Instead, one explores the manifestations of religious phenomena through the different types of experience available to human reality.

While the content of religious experience—such as a baptism or a bar mitzvah—is important, the focus of phenomenology is really the structure of subjective consciousness, a consciousness that directs itself toward or at an object or an event. The phenomenology of religion doesn’t directly involve itself with the content-based changes of religion over time or their arrival on the historical scene. In some respects, that’s generally left to the historians of religions.



TERMS TO KNOW

Phenomenology

The science of the experience of consciousness; the study of phenomena.

Phenomenon

Any event or experience, pl. “phenomena”.

Consciousness

Awareness, including self-awareness.

2. Mircea Eliade and *The Sacred and the Profane*

The new value and meaning can then be added to the objective element under study. The Romanian phenomenologist Mircea Eliade, who taught at the University of Chicago, studied traditional religious cultures around the world and found certain universal characteristics among them.

Essentially all of them seemed to divide the world of time and appearances into sacred and profane. These societies had individual and collective experiences that were consistently identified as sacred, having some quality of the supernatural. At the same time, they had experiences of the profane, everyday world.

Across cultures and continents, Eliade found that these experiences of the world, this principle of the division between the sacred world and the profane world were given great value, meaning, and significance. These experiences were given this significance because they were not experienced the same way a non-religious person might experience it.



THINK ABOUT IT

How is this meaning arrived at phenomenologically for religious people?



Contradiction, such as love and hate, happy and sad, pleasure and pain, et cetera, is at the heart of the human experience. For the traditional societies that Eliade studied, the combination of opposites (or the coexistence of the sacred and the profane) might suggest an unsolvable dilemma, and this constituted their reality. Any contradiction was partially mediated and integrated by certain subjective experiences, such as imagination, fear, wonder, longing. These emotional truths were given support by the structures of religious society, such as worship ceremonies, sacrifice, burial practices, or marriage feasts.

3. Rudolf Otto and the “Numinous”

Rudolf Otto, a contemporary of Eliade, also identified the presence and significance of the sacred and supernatural in the lives of traditional societies. He used the Latin term “numinous,” meaning the power and presence of divinity, to describe this experience. He also used the terms “mysterium,” “tremendum,” and “fascinans” to describe the subjective experience of the holy. He extended it to the societies and cultures that attributed meaning and provided support structures for such encounters.

These terms reflect the overwhelming mystery of the holy, the otherness that can both attract and repel someone. They reflect the combination of fear and trembling and wonderment at the unknown that is full of beauty and potential.

When you look back to the opposition between sacred and profane, you see now a parallel opposition that is confronted: the utter nothingness of oneself, when set against the power of complete mystery; the divine, or the experience of the divine, which is felt to be entirely real. In effect, some relationship is established between these two elements.

4. Gerardus van der Leeuw and Power

The powerful reality of the sacred was the basis of another phenomenologist’s work, a Dutch founder of the discipline, Gerardus van der Leeuw. In studying primitive societies, he put forth the idea that the sacred was most compelling because it could be found everywhere; it represented power.

In other words, the experience of otherness meant power. Things that were unfamiliar in the world are objects to be confronted, and they manifest some relationship of power.



SUMMARY

Phenomenology is the science of the experience of consciousness or the study of phenomena. Phenomenology of religion as an academic discipline began in Europe in the early 1900s. Its main founders and their contributions were **Mircea Eliade** and *The Sacred and the Profane*, **Rudolf Otto** and “**Numinous**”, and **Gerardus van der Leeuw** and **power**. Eliade and Otto recognized that in traditional

societies the world was divided into the sacred and the profane. The experience of this division between oneself and the other was the basis of religious experience itself. Otto called it the “numinous” experience. Gerardus van der Leeuw identified religious experience for primitive societies based on the experience of power and the confrontation with things overwhelming and unfamiliar that are ever-present in the natural world.

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