

An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion

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Acknowledgements

This book is a thorough revision of my earlier text, *Expressing the Sacred: An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*, published first in 1992 by the University of Zimbabwe Publications in Harare, with a second edition appearing in 1996. I have felt the need for some time to update the book while at the same time retaining its introductory and user-friendly style. I am grateful to Continuum for giving me the opportunity to do this in the present volume. I also want to express my thanks to the University of Zimbabwe Publications, and to its Director, Mr Munani Mtetwa, for giving consent to publish this extensively revised version through a European and North American-based publishing company. In the preparation of the text, the original tables and diagrams were designed by Roger Stringer and Caroline MacNaughtan, who were then in the Publications Office of the University of Zimbabwe. The tables and diagrams have been modified and prepared in the current volume by Valerie Cox, to whom I express my deep appreciation.

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JAMES L. COX

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Preface

Oftentimes when I am at a social gathering, I am asked by a new acquaintance what I do for a living. I answer that I lecture at the University of Edinburgh. Inevitably, the next question follows: 'In which subject?' When I respond, 'Religious Studies', frequently the person replies enthusiastically: 'That's wonderful!' I look perplexed and ask myself, 'Why does it appear "wonderful" to this person that my academic subject focuses on "religion"?' The answer is obvious: many people confuse the scholarly study of religion with the practice of religion. It is for this reason that virtually the first thing I say when I address first year Religious Studies students is something like the following: 'The study of religion is not a religious act!' I then pursue a series of lectures explaining where the academic study of religions fits within scholarly disciplines, emphasizing that it is a field distinct from theology and philosophy, but very much a part of the human and social sciences. I stress that in Religious Studies we focus our attention on communities that claim to respond to revelatory acts from sacred sources, but we never study anything other than the communities themselves, including their histories, beliefs, rituals, myths, scriptures or oral traditions, moral attitudes and religious specialists. In other words, we are concerned with human behaviour and make no comment on alleged divine interventions in the human condition.

This book provides an introduction to studying religious communities in an objective, fair and neutral manner by exploring a critical way of doing this called 'the phenomenology of religion'. As such, it is intended to fill a gap in texts used in introductory courses on religion. Some books concentrate on discussing religion from various disciplinary approaches, but most pay only scant attention to the phenomenology of religion. My argument in this book is that the phenomenology of religion has defined the dominant method in Religious Studies for well over 70 years and still represents a fundamental approach within mainstream thinking among scholars of religion. In the past 20 to 30 years or so, it has come under increasing attack for a number of reasons I discuss in detail throughout the book, but specifically in Chapter 9. My contention is that, despite its detractors, the phenomenology of religion retains an essential place in the academic study of religion and thus needs to occupy a

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principal role in teaching about methodologies in university programmes in Religious Studies.

This book is divided into nine chapters. After defining religion in Chapter 1 and providing historical background to the phenomenology of religion in Chapter 2, I outline the method in Chapter 3 as a step-by-step process. In the fourth chapter, I provide a case study exemplifying the method based on the work of one of my students in the University of Zimbabwe. I then devote the next four chapters to discussing the phenomena of religion by grouping religious behaviour and practices into categories or typologies. In the final chapter, after summarizing the place of the phenomenology and history of religions in the overall academic approach to the study of religion, I address some key objections which have been voiced by leading critics of the phenomenological method. I conclude by suggesting that an important future direction for the academic study of religion can be found in a creative synthesis between the phenomenology of religion and the contemporary scholarly interest in the cognitive science of religion.

At the end of each chapter, I have included a section I have called 'Questions for Discussion'. These are intended to assist students who may be using this book in small group or tutorial sessions by helping them focus on some of the key issues I have raised in each chapter. The questions may also be useful for tutors and lecturers who might use these as a guide for setting essay questions or for providing direction for research projects. The references cited in each chapter are presented as a general bibliography at the conclusion of the book. This, in itself, should provide a rich resource for students who want to delve more deeply into the phenomenological method and its place in the overall study of religion as a human phenomenon.

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In this chapter, I address one of the overriding problems associated with the phenomenology of religion by confronting directly the issue of defining religion, which in itself is controversial since definitions tend to conform to the predetermined aims of the academic discipline which has formulated the definition in the first place, although the definition is usually presented as objective and universal. Phenomenologists generally have defined religion with a two-fold aim in mind: (1) to define religion in a way that does not offend believers; (2) to defend the study of religion against those who would reduce it to an epiphenomenon of other primary areas of investigation, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics or politics.

For phenomenologists, to claim that religion is a subject in its own right, distinct from social, political, economic or other fields of study, required a clear statement as to what it is that makes religion unique. Harold Turner, who taught the phenomenology of religion in the University of Aberdeen in the 1970s and 80s, argued that the focus of the many academic disciplines in the social sciences constitutes the 'milieu' or context into which religion is interwoven, but none of the disciplines on its own can explain religion (Turner, 1981: 1–15). Turner acknowledged, for example, that societal structures influence religious beliefs and organizations, but he also contended that religion influences societal structures. In this sense, the social context into which religion is set is important for students to understand, but religion cannot be reduced to any one of the social factors present in the context. Or, to take another example, when psychologists study religion, they apply techniques drawn from their own area of expertise, but they still study something unique within the milieu, something they call religion, and thus they refer to themselves as psychologists *of religion*. Finding a suitable definition which delineates the field called religion thus for Turner was important to support the fundamental phenomenological assumption that the subject matter of religion constitutes a field of study in its own right and therefore fully justifies the persistence of departments of religious studies in universities and other academic institutions. After addressing the fundamental problem of defining religion, I devote the remainder of this chapter to developing a definition which in the first instance attempts to correct the widespread assumption that phenomenological definitions are ahistorical and theological, and, secondly, to establish the framework for what I mean by religion as I use it throughout the remainder of this book.

Classifying definitions

Various scholars from different fields have suggested sometimes contradictory criteria to determine what can be included or excluded as *religious* phenomena. In the process, they have sought to provide definitions they regarded as providing a 'true' account of what constitutes religion, but on closer scrutiny it soon becomes apparent that the way religion is defined conveys the presuppositions of the one doing the defining. This flaw was noted by phenomenologists, who attempted to develop a methodology that would

neutralize the effects of what they regarded as distorting and biased definitions. I will deal with this in detail when I discuss the phenomenological method, but at the outset, by reviewing a series of simple definitions, it will be possible to demonstrate how the content of the definition betrays prior assumptions contained in the definition itself, and, at the same time, to suggest that severe limitations must be placed on any definition of religion from any source. In order to illustrate this, I refer to a book on the religions of the world by John Ferguson (1978: 13–17), who in the introductory section lists 17 definitions which for purposes of clarity I have organized into the following categories: (1) theological; (2) moral; (3) philosophical; (4) psychological; and (5) sociological.

Theological definitions of religion

Definitions which insist that religion refers to God or supernatural spiritual powers of some sort can be classified as theological. Examples from Ferguson of this type are listed below.

- a. 'Religion is believing in God.' This definition is credited by Ferguson to a schoolboy who offers a commonsense approach to the question, 'What is religion?' The thirteenth-century theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas said something quite similar when he announced that 'religion denotes properly a relation to God' (cited by Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, 1985: 6).
- b. 'Religion is belief in spiritual beings.' This roughly is a summary of the view of the late-nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor. I will discuss Tylor in more detail later, but it is enough to note here that Tylor held that, in its earliest form, religion involved a belief in a hierarchy of spirits from the lower to the most powerful beings.
- c. 'Religion is the life of God in the soul of man.' This comes from the nineteenth-century theologian, W. Newton Clarke. It stresses the two realities of God and the soul, belief in both of which is necessary for religion to exist.
- d. 'Religion is a mystery, at once awesome and attractive.' This statement is derived from the twentieth-century German theologian Rudolph Otto who found the 'essence of religion' in the idea of the holy which he claimed attracts people due to its mystery and its power.

The four examples above can be used to summarize theological definitions of religion as follows:

A theological definition makes the central criterion of religion belief in a transcendent power which usually is personified as a Supreme Being, but sometimes is

conceived as diffused through powerful spiritual beings, or is held to be impersonal as a mysterious, supernatural force.

Moral definitions of religion

Definitions which stress that religion consists of telling its adherents how they ought to live may be termed moral definitions. Examples of this type are:

- a. 'Religion is leading a good life.' This is another commonsense definition and is attributed by Ferguson to a schoolgirl. It simply asserts that to be religious is to be moral without defining what morality entails.
- b. 'Religion is morality tinged with emotion.' This comes from the nineteenth-century British writer Matthew Arnold. It complements the schoolgirl's commonsense answer by insisting that human emotions or feelings must accompany the moral understanding for religion to be present.
- c. 'Religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands.' This is a form of the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant's 'categorical imperative' which contends that there is a moral law which we all 'ought' to obey. Religion exists when that moral law is interpreted as a commandment from God.
- d. 'Religion is a sum of scruples which impede the free use of our faculties.' Ferguson attributes this definition to Salomon Reinach, a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century historian of religions. Although it implies a negative reaction towards religion, it identifies the function of religion as enforcing external laws, attitudes or customs by divine decree and thus can be classified as a moral definition.

The above examples can be summarized as follows:

A moral definition makes the central criterion of religion a code of correct behaviour generally affirmed by believers as having its source in an unquestioned and unquestionable authority.

Philosophical definitions

Although related to theological definitions, philosophical definitions generally describe religion in terms of an abstract, usually impersonal, concept derived on the basis of human reason. Ferguson cites a number of examples which can be placed within this category.

- a. 'Religion is what a man does with his solitariness.' This definition, from the twentieth-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, identifies the abstract notion of solitariness as the fundamental religious dimension within human

existence. Presumably, when one achieves a condition or awareness of the solitary (as opposed simply to being alone or lonely), the individual has achieved a religious experience.

- b. 'Religion is the relation of man to his own being, but as a being outside of himself.' This assertion is related to the nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach's theory of religion as a human projection. It defines religion as existing wherever human characteristics (e.g. love, power, hope, knowledge) are transferred to an imaginary being conceived as outside, yet perfecting, those human characteristics.
- c. 'Religion is ultimate concern.' This famous definition offered by the twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich forms one of the most simple yet basic definitions of religion. For Tillich, religion is a relationship which people hold with that which concerns them ultimately. Obviously, this could be God or spiritual beings, but since it is much broader than this, it conveys an abstract idea which can be embodied in a variety of specific objects, symbols, or concepts.

The three examples cited above lead to the following summary:

A philosophical definition makes the central criterion for religion the positing of an idea or concept which the believer interprets as ultimate or final in relation to the cosmic order and to human existence.

Psychological definitions

Psychological definitions of religion stress that religion has to do with the emotions, feelings or psychological states of the human in relation to the religious object. Some examples from Ferguson are as follows:

- a. 'Religion is the result of seeking comfort in a world which, dispassionately considered, is a terrifying wilderness.' This definition was developed by the twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell. It stresses that due to the misfortunes and sufferings they experience in the world, people seek comfort or consolation in religion. As we will see in our later discussion of Sigmund Freud, comfort and consolation are psychological needs.
- b. 'Religion is some kind of profound inner experience.' Ferguson attributes this definition to another schoolgirl. Since it stresses inner experience, it can be classified as a psychological definition similar to that offered by the nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher who described religion as 'a feeling of absolute dependence' (cited by Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, 1985: 5).
- c. 'Religion is a universal obsessive neurosis.' This definition falls within the viewpoint of the followers of the psychoanalytic school of Sigmund Freud. It defines religion

as a psychological disturbance, one which, although universal, must be overcome if humanity is to attain psychological health.

A summary of psychological definitions is shown below:

A psychological definition makes the central criterion of religion feelings or emotions within people which cause them to appeal to forces greater than themselves to satisfy those feelings.

Sociological definitions

Definitions of religion which emphasize religion as a group consciousness embodying cultural norms or as a product of society in general may be termed sociological definitions. Ferguson's list includes the following which fall within this category:

- a. 'Religion is the opium of the people.' This classical definition constructed by Karl Marx indicates that religion results from the oppression of the masses by those in positions of social or economic power who use the message of religion to keep the oppressed content with their lot in this life in the hope of a just order in the next one. Religion thus plays a sociological function for both the oppressor and the oppressed.
- b. 'Religion is the conservation of values.' This definition is attributed by Ferguson to the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German philosopher Harald Höffding, but it reflects a widely held view of traditional sociologists like Émile Durkheim, about whom I will speak in more detail later, or the twentieth-century anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. Religion, in this view, is described as a conservative force within society which defines the fundamental values of the group and then maintains and enforces those values by an appeal to supernatural powers.
- c. 'Religion is a co-operative quest after a completely satisfying life.' Although this could be viewed as a psychological definition, its emphasis on the co-operative quest places it within the sociological category. Ferguson does not cite a precise source for this quotation, but it sounds quite similar to the definition offered by the contemporary South African scholar Martin Prozesky (1984: 153) that religion is 'a quest for ultimate well-being'. This definition leads to the conclusion that whenever societies seek to attain the most satisfying life for their members, they are exhibiting religious concerns. This is echoed also by the anthropologists William Lessa and Evon Vogt (1965: 1) who define religion as 'a system of beliefs and practices directed towards the "ultimate concern" of a society.'

The above examples suggest the following about sociological definitions:

A sociological definition makes the central criterion of religion the existence of a community of people which is identified, bound together, and maintained by its beliefs in powers or forces greater than the community itself.

Few of the 17 definitions of religion cited by Ferguson can be placed neatly into just one of the five categories described above. Some could be put into more than one such as Rudolph Otto's 'awesome mystery' (theological or philosophical) or Ludwig Feuerbach's perfected human characteristics (philosophical or psychological). Each nonetheless shows clearly the ideological standpoint from which each scholar started. This demonstrates that none of the above definitions *objectively* describes religion; rather, each contains within it sometimes hidden assumptions that serve the interests of those doing the defining. (For a summary of Ferguson's definitions of religion, see Table 1.1.)

Table 1.1 Summary of Ferguson's definitions of religion

Theological definitions

- (a) Religion is believing in God.
- (b) Religion is belief in spiritual beings.
- (c) Religion is the life of God in the soul of man.
- (d) Religion is a mystery, at once awesome and attractive.

Moral definitions

- (a) Religion is leading a good life.
- (b) Religion is morality tinged with emotion.
- (c) Religion is the recognition of all our duties as divine commands.
- (d) Religion is the sum of scruples which impede the free use of our faculties.

Philosophical definitions

- (a) Religion is what a man does with his solitariness.
- (b) Religion is the relation of man to his own being, but as a being outside himself.
- (c) Religion is ultimate concern.

Psychological definitions

- (a) Religion is the result of seeking comfort in a world which, dispassionately considered, is a terrifying wilderness.
- (b) Religion is some kind of profound inner experience.
- (c) Religion is a universal obsessive neurosis.

Sociological definitions

- (a) Religion is the opium of the people.
- (b) Religion is the conservation of values.
- (c) Religion is a co-operative quest after a completely satisfying life.

Substantive and functional definitions of religion

The seventeen definitions provided by Ferguson can also be analysed by dividing them according to two quite different designations: substantive and functional. A substantive definition delineates religion in terms of its content, usually by referring to supernatural entities or transcendental forces. Among Ferguson's definitions, those which define religion as belief in God or in spirits would reflect substantive approaches. Religion can be found when the substantive elements are present; without these, religion does not exist. Functional definitions, on the other hand, define religion operationally as achieving some goal or end, such as meeting psychological needs or providing a cohesive force within society. Those definitions cited by Ferguson, like that proposed by Sigmund Freud, who suggested that religion is an infantile neurosis or that of Émile Durkheim, who emphasized the conservative nature of religion within society, are functional. Both substantive and functional definitions, just like the types of definition based on disciplinary divisions, reveal the presuppositions with which scholars begin their study.

The distinction between substantive and functional definitions demonstrates further how narrowly or how widely the parameters are conceived by those constructing the definitions. Substantive definitions tend to restrict what can be included amongst the phenomena of religion, whereas some functional definitions are so broad as to include almost anything. The most limiting substantive definition is one that defines religion as a belief in God, since this restricts religion to a certain type of theistic belief. Very broad substantive definitions, such as Tylor's reference to supernatural agents, nonetheless stress that religion is defined by the objects of belief and make no reference to the functions of such beliefs. The most general substantive definition on Ferguson's list is the one suggested by Tillich, whereby anything with which an individual is concerned ultimately can be classified as religion. Although substantive definitions can be very broad, functional definitions in their pure form focus on the end result of religion and thus fall into a different category altogether. For example, on Durkheim's definition, communities that are bound together by a central symbol or symbols are defined as being religious on the basis of the function the symbols fulfil within particular societies. This, of course, eliminates any reference to supernatural entities and reduces religion to an operation of society. According to the French

sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger (1999: 76), substantive definitions tend to restrict the study of religions to the mainline, historical religions, such as Christianity, Buddhism or Islam, whereas functional definitions emphasize the dispersal of religious symbols in diverse ways through many avenues that previously would have been considered secular, such as political movements, forms of nationalism, ethnic identity or even allegiance to a football team.

In their introductory textbook on religion, the American scholars, Hall, Pilgrim, and Cavanagh (1985: 9–10) identify four characteristic problems with traditional definitions of religion which can be applied both to the types of definition I have derived from Ferguson's list and to the distinction between substantive and functional definitions. These are: (1) vagueness; (2) narrowness; (3) compartmentalization; (4) prejudice. Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh argue that many definitions are so vague that they do not distinguish the subject matter of religion from other fields of study. As we have noted, this is a failing of functional definitions of religion. The schoolgirl's statement that religion means 'living a good life' might be accused of this fault. Some definitions overcompensate for the problem of vagueness by restricting the subject matter of religion and thus exclude too much from the field of study. This is the major problem of substantive definitions where normally aspects of human experience that do not involve supernatural agents are automatically removed from consideration by the scholar of religion. Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh argue that any definition which explains religion in terms of just one 'single, special aspect' of human life is guilty of compartmentalization. This means reducing religion to one part of life and ignoring its relevance to the totality of human existence. Schleiermacher's definition as a feeling of absolute dependence might do this by reducing religion to a mere psychological condition. Whitehead also might compartmentalize religion by restricting it to the experience of solitariness. A definition which evaluates in the process of defining cannot present an objective picture of what religion actually is. Several examples of prejudicial definitions are found in Ferguson's list. Marx's argument that religion is the opium of the people clearly is biased. So too are Reinach's claim that religion impedes 'the free use of our faculties' and the Freudian contention that religion is a 'universal obsessive neurosis'.

We thus are faced with numerous problems in defining what constitutes the unique subject matter of religion, the primary ones being that the search for a universal definition of religion appears so flawed that it appears doomed to failure and that any definition proposed by scholars betrays a predetermined, sometimes ideological, agenda beneath the definition proposed.

Solutions to the problem of defining religion

A way out of the problem of seeking a universal, all-encompassing definition of religion has been suggested by the Dutch scholar Arie Molendijk, who argues that a definition of religion must be evaluated not according to its 'truth', but according to its usefulness. He thus advocates for an instrumental or what he calls a 'stipulative' definition which aims to 'demarcate the subject in a particular context' (1999: 3). A stipulative definition for Molendijk is a pragmatic one, developed 'for the sake of a specific undertaking' (1999: 9). In the context of defining religion, Molendijk is not looking for a universally applicable definition, but for an appropriate and useful definition that at the same time corresponds to actual usage. This does not mean that a definition must conform to language used by religious practitioners necessarily, but it must be capable of furthering academic clarity while remaining recognizable to wider, non-academic audiences, including those who fit into the definition proposed. Molendijk (1999: 9) notes that a pragmatic approach develops definitions for particular purposes, in service, for example, of legal, political or cognitive ends. Hence, the value of pragmatic definitions depends entirely on their utility in promoting the practical applications for which they are intended.

If we follow this largely utilitarian interpretation, it is possible to identify those human activities which can be called 'religion', and to make assertions about those activities which can be tested empirically. The value of such a definition of religion depends entirely on its usefulness in promoting scientific knowledge. This means that religion cannot be defined, for example, as an experience which God induces in people who are portrayed as responding to an overwhelming power, as proposed by Otto or as a result of seeking comfort in this world, as suggested by Russell. Religion, in other words, cannot be defined by a transcendental referent, as in substantial definitions, nor by its postulated universal aim as suggested by functional definitions, but only in terms of concrete, observable socio-cultural activities, which are rooted in historical and political processes. Any theories about such socio-cultural activities must remain fully testable using well-defined and accepted empirical methods. In other words, any preliminary definition will be a *working definition*, predicated on its usefulness in helping define our field of enquiry by distinguishing it from other areas of academic investigation, and discarded

if it is not useful in a particular context or if it is found to be deficient in the light of scientific testing.

Ninian Smart, who was an influential British phenomenologist during the latter third of the twentieth century, devised a plan for developing just such a working definition of religion. Smart (1986: 46–7; See also, Saler, 2000: x–xv) suggested that students of religion must cease trying to develop precise definitions altogether since we will never be able to place what people have regarded as religious into one common category (theological, moral, philosophical, psychological, or sociological). For example, some theological definitions which insist on beliefs in the supernatural as the essence of religion, as occur in most substantive definitions, will exclude a large section of the Buddhist tradition which regards supernatural beings as irrelevant or even as impediments to attaining religious fulfilment. Yet, almost every book on the world's religions includes this part of the Buddhist tradition as an example of 'religion'. Smart suggests that the way we can overcome the problems inherent in defining religion is to study the religious traditions of humanity in terms of 'family resemblances'. All religions are related despite the fact that some forms of religion seem to have nothing in common with other forms. They are connected just as in a family where distant cousins may look nothing alike and not even know of each other's existence but still can be traced to common ancestors through family inter-connections. Following Smart, we can diagram the inter-connections between the religions as shown on Figure 1.1.

In this diagram, Religion 1 shares nothing in common with Religion 4. If one were looking for a common definition, it would be impossible to find one based on these two examples. But we see that Religion 1 shares two properties with Religion 2 (B and C) and one with Religion 3 (C) whereas Religion 4 shares two properties with Religion 3 (D and E) and one with Religion 2 (D). Through

Figure 1.1 The interconnections between the religions

	PROPERTIES					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Religion 1	X	X	X			
Religion 2		X	X	X		
Religion 3			X	X	X	
Religion 4				X	X	X

a series of connections, therefore, we can relate Religion 1 to Religion 4. In such a way, atheistic forms of Buddhism might form a part of religious studies just as would monotheistic Islam by finding common properties between them, for example, through Vedantic Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. This way of approaching religious studies is not precise and it implies that no universally applicable definition of religion exists or is possible. Nonetheless, Smart's approach is practical since it allows us to adopt a working definition which provides phenomenologists with indicators or general guidelines for a field of study they considered unique in and of itself.

Towards a working definition of religion

In light of their critique of definitions of religion and in view of the problems entailed in obtaining an all-encompassing statement of the meaning of religion, I want to return to Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, who have devised their own definition, which they claim overcomes vagueness and narrowness by being specific and distinct and avoids compartmentalization and prejudice by including the whole of human life without judgement. According to Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh (1985: 11), *specificity* and *inclusiveness* describe the marks of an adequate definition of religion, which they propose as follows:

Religion is a varied, symbolic expression of, and appropriate response to, that which people deliberately affirm as being of unrestricted value for them.

Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh argue that this definition clearly outlines the subject matter of religion without excluding the wide variety of human symbols and conceptions of the unrestricted value. Moreover, they claim that this definition includes the many ways humans practice religion without evaluating any of those practices. Let us look carefully, therefore, at the various components within this definition.

Varied, symbolic expressions. By a symbol, Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh are referring to the ways humans communicate with, conceive and relate to what they value without restriction. Symbols stand for, point to, or represent the actual object to which they are related. They occur in religious language, for example, through the telling of stories, writing of sacred scriptures, uttering

words in rituals, or by delineating confessions of faith. They are also seen in art, music, and dance, in the patterns of a community's social organization, in ritual activities, or in many combinations of these. The historian of religions Charles Long (1986: 2) says that religious symbols 'radiate and deploy meanings' and that they possess enormous power for any believing community.

People. For Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, the term 'people' includes both individuals and communities. Religion thus has something to do with the individual's quest for meaning denoted by such questions as 'Who am I?' 'Where did I come from?' or 'What will my end be?' Such questions are articulated and answered in religion through believing communities as they develop what the scholar of comparative religions Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1964: 168) calls the 'cumulative tradition'. The study of religion, therefore, is not just what individuals do with their solitariness (as Whitehead suggested) but also what communities as a whole do in response to basic human questions.

Deliberately affirm. Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh (1985: 13) argue that religion is a human act which includes a voluntary choice. It is not capable of being reduced to the study of the social sciences alone whereby this act may be explained in terms of sociological functions or psychological needs. 'A person must intentionally embrace, accept, or affirm for him or herself the unrestricted value.'

Unrestricted value. This refers to what the religious community prizes or esteems without limitation. It is the object towards which all the religious symbols of a community point; it embodies fundamental meaning itself. Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh (1985: 16) explain: "Unrestricted value" represents a judgment of importance that includes and surpasses every restricted, temporary, local, or conditional value recognized in the relations constituting human experience.'

Although the Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh definition gets us some distance towards a working definition of religion, it still suffers from some of the very problems they have cited with other definitions. One problem in their definition results from their insistence that religion to be religion requires 'deliberate affirmation', which appears to commit what they call the error narrowness because it excludes religions which seem to place little value on individual choice or personal commitment. Indigenous Religions, for example, generally do not separate religious from non-religious activity. A person is 'religious' simply by being a part of the society. Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh's

emphasis on deliberate affirmation, moreover, may reflect a Western bias (even a Protestant Christian attitude) which stresses that the individual *must affirm* the ultimate in order to be 'religious'. Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh's use of the phrase unrestricted value, although used largely in support of a substantive definition similar to Tillich's, equally may be accused of committing the error of vagueness. Unrestricted value could include almost any human activity such as politics, sports, education, family, scientific and technological research or many other areas of human life which some people regard as being of unlimited importance.

In the remainder of this chapter, and in light of the analysis offered by Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, I want to present my own definition of religion, which I have now revised from my contribution to the a book dealing with definitions edited by the Dutch scholars, J. G. Platvoet and Arie Molendijk (1999: 272) and from my earlier definition which appeared in *Expressing the Sacred* (1996: 15). I follow a line somewhat between Molendijk's 'stipulative' definition and Smart's more general 'family resemblances' model. I also attempt to reconcile the disparity between substantive and functional definitions and in the process try to avoid fitting neatly into any one of the disciplinary classifications I have derived from Ferguson's list. As such, I offer my own definition as consistent with the phenomenological tradition, which has sought to define the subject matter of religion in a way that distinguishes it from other aspects of life for purposes of academic clarity. At the same time, my definition seeks to avoid the error of identifying a timeless, ahistorical 'essence' of religion by firmly situating what I mean by religion within social and cultural contexts. If my definition proves useful as a working definition, it can serve to clarify how the phenomenology of religion can still contribute significantly to academic studies of religious communities in the twenty-first century, while operating practically as an overarching guide for my step-by-step explanation of the phenomenological method throughout the chapters of this book which follow.

A working definition of religion

The first part of my definition of religion takes up the notion of 'people' as used by Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh by restricting the study of religion to 'identifiable communities'. The scholar of religion cannot study individual experiences as religion, unless the experiences are somehow embedded in

shared social constructs that are codified, symbolized and institutionalized in communities. In the case of individuals who testify to intense experiences of an extramundane reality, these can be treated as religion only if the individual incorporates the experiences into the life of an already existing identifiable community, or, as in the case of many charismatic leaders or prophets, forges the experience into a new religious movement comprising a definite group. The term identifiable refers to the requirement that a scholar place limits around communities under study, using sometimes historical methods, at other times defining them geographically, or in other contexts restricting them according to social or cultural criteria. In the end, we must be able to locate, delimit and contextualize the groups about which we are speaking. To this beginning point of a definition, I then refer to what it is that identifiable communities do. I suggest that the most important aspect of what they do can be summarized in two actions: 'to believe' and 'to experience'. Acts of believing designate cognitions, thoughts, ideas, concepts, world-views – in other words, they refer to the way people think. I am arguing that, although specific acts of believing are bound within social and cultural contexts, the cognitive processes of humanity are universal. All humans form concepts around which they order their world and make sense of it. Closely related to thoughts are experiences. In fact, thoughts set the framework for how humans experience the world. If, for example, when I am out walking in the woods, I believe that I am being threatened by an aggressive animal, I will respond naturally with appropriate fear and will be prepared to flee or to defend myself. The experience is dictated by the thought, which, in this case is derived from sense perception, regardless of whether the perception is real or imagined. When applied to religion, thoughts and experiences are very closely connected. Since I am stressing identifiable communities, I am suggesting that the thoughts and experiences of those within the communities, although not identical, may be regarded as similar since the beliefs are largely shared among members of the group. Because experiences are moulded by acts of believing, the scholar can assume that the experiences are also similar, although no one can literally experience what another experiences.

In place of 'unrestricted value', as used by Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh, I have chosen instead the term 'alternate realities'. Identifiable communities, when they are behaving religiously, focus their attention on what they postulate to be alternate realities. The term 'postulate' implies that the scholar does not comment on the truth or falsehood of the alternate realities, but instead focuses on that to which the communities themselves testify. I have chosen

the term 'alternate' to indicate a process of switching between, or going from one to another, as in turns. Beliefs about and experiences of alternate realities refer to types of belief and experiences quite distinct from what we normally believe and experience in the world. When religious communities speak about their alternate realities, they refer to something like a spirit, a god, a power or force that, although clearly occurring in this world and within consciousness, denotes something quite identifiably different from ordinary experience and consciousness. When members of a group participate in a religious ritual, for example, they know that they are relating to what they postulate to be an entity or entities that operate in a time and space clearly differentiated from the time and space they experience normally outside the ritual context. In one sense, they switch their focus from the ordinary to the non-ordinary, or to alternate realities. This is not best thought of as *alternative* realities, as in another, contrasting reality, but as alternate in the sense that for believers the ordinary enters into and experiences the non-ordinary, moving in turns from the one and back to the other. The term 'realities' denotes a multi-dimensional non-ordinary world; it can also refer to the fact that religious communities often experience what is alternate in different ways, and thus may switch between not just one alternate reality but numerous realities.

The term 'realities', moreover, is used in a way that favours the insider's point of view, for whom their objects of religious attention are 'real' in the fullest sense of the term. In my definition, however, I want to insert the term 'postulated' alternate realities to suggest that the believers do the postulating, not the scholar. I also want to add to the term 'alternate realities' the qualifier, 'non-falsifiable', which is a technical concept drawn largely from Karl Popper, an important twentieth-century philosopher of science, who argued that for a theory to be genuinely scientific it must be falsifiable. If any assertions about reality cannot be falsified, they are not subject to empirical investigation. This applies to all theological or metaphysical statements. Popper distinguished between the principle of verification and the idea of non-falsifiability, arguing that simply because something cannot be verified does not make it unscientific in the same way as something does which cannot be falsified. He exemplified this by referring to the statement: 'All swans are white'. Clearly, this statement can be falsified, but to verify it would mean that every swan that populates the planet or ever did populate the planet would need to be checked to be sure they are or were white. Popper (1959: 27) observes: 'No matter how many instances of white swans we may have observed, this does not justify the conclusion that *all* swans are white' (emphasis his). In fact, the

statement has been falsified with the discovery of a species of black swans native to Australia.

Putting the various component parts together leads to a summary of the first part of my working definition of religion:

Religion refers to identifiable communities which base their acts of believing and their resulting communal experiences on postulated, non-falsifiable alternate realities.

This definition is practical since it underscores the fact that scholars of religion cannot study religious experiences themselves, nor the postulated alternate realities, but can only describe the observable social facts surrounding what communities do or say in response to that which they claim to be real. This is because, as the definition stresses, beliefs about and experiences of postulated alternate realities are entirely non-falsifiable. Naturally, the fact of believing certain things or not believing them can be falsified, just as it is possible to falsify whether or not individuals in the community claim to have undergone extraordinary experiences. Analyses can proceed about the connections between belief and experience, and the ways these are expressed in mythic, ritual, legal, artistic or other symbolic ways. It is also possible to outline what types of experiences are most likely to be associated with particular belief systems. Yet, neither the objects of belief nor the alleged extramundane character of the experiences can be studied scientifically. This means that academic work is concerned with what communities postulate rather than the object or objects about which their postulations are made. This also suggests that when communities perform certain actions, affirm particular beliefs, organize social relations, endow particular individuals with positions of importance or engage in types of ritual behaviour, all in relation to their postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities, the scholar of religion describes these as accurately as possible and interprets them fairly. In other words, this definition operates as an instrumental, working definition only, since it sets the parameters within which the study of religion proceeds.

The first part of my working definition clearly is substantive as opposed to functional, in that without acts of believing and experiences of postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities, religion is not present. As we have seen with other substantial definitions, this suffers from two possible objections: (1) it too narrowly restricts the subject matter of religion; (2) it can be classified very broadly as a 'theological' definition. If my contention is correct that

theological statements cannot be falsified, it would mean that, however much I aim to achieve a scholarly definition of religion, I have, perhaps unwittingly, adopted a non-empirical approach by unduly limiting my definition to the necessary presence of a transcendental entity. In order to overcome the objections that my definition is entirely substantial, and hence too narrow, and that it hides theological presuppositions, I need to add a second part to my definition.

Relating the definition to social contexts

The narrowness of substantive definitions of religion has been exposed by the French sociologist, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who challenges one of the major weaknesses of many substantive definitions that scholars of religion must limit their studies to established, institutional religions associated in the West largely with Christianity (See Cox, 2007: 79–85). In modern Western society, she argues, religion has stepped outside its institutional boundaries and has occupied positions more in line with individual tastes and desires. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than through the proliferation of new religious movements in contemporary Western society. According to Hervieu-Léger (1999: 79), contemporary religious movements include a wide range of activities including ‘cults and sects which have recently come to compete with the historical religions, . . . syncretic groups with an oriental influence, revival movements within the organized religions’, each of which aims at ‘the self-development of the individual adherent’ (1999: 79). This suggests that scholars of religion should be including in their study the broad, but loosely defined, effects of religion over wide areas of social life, including political, economic, artistic and scientific interests, and not restricting themselves to studying institutional forms of religion, as might be implied in part one of my definition of religion.

Hervieu-Léger contends further that the contemporary social situation means that religion cannot be defined as a fixed entity, the parameters of which are demarcated clearly for all time. In line with her view that religion and social change are closely interwoven, she argues that religion must be understood by analysing what she calls ‘the mutating structures of believing’ (1999: 84). Yet, she somewhat unexpectedly adds that acts of believing,

whether they occur in the traditional, historic religions or are expressed in their contemporary individualistic forms are always undertaken from within a structure of authority, or what she calls ‘an exteriorly imposed order’ (1999: 85) that responds to a universal human craving for security. In line with a functional approach to defining religion, she contends that individuals seek security in the face of death while societies seek to avoid the threat of chaos or disorder (1999: 86–7). The important issue for defining religion, however, cannot be reduced to a functional explanation, but in each case it depends on how the individual or society legitimates its source of authority for acts of believing aimed at ensuring security. This means that the question confronting scholars is not, for example, could a modern spectator sport like football be considered a ‘religion’, any more than it asks if modern expressions of Christianity, Judaism or Islam can be regarded as religious. What is important in this context is the authoritative source for such beliefs and how this is transmitted from generation to generation. According to Hervieu-Léger, ‘There is no religion without the explicit, semi-explicit, or entirely implicit invocation of *the authority of a tradition*; an invocation which serves as support for the act of believing’ (emphasis hers) (1999: 88). The key indicators of a religious, as opposed to a non-religious legitimation of the heritage of believing, are found in the words ‘transmission’ and ‘authority’. The transmission of a tradition must be accomplished with an overwhelming authority, which establishes a community and makes it entirely distinctive from any other community. Three fundamental components of a definition of religion thus emerge from Hervieu-Léger’s analysis: (1) expressions of believing; (2) the memory of continuity; and (3) the legitimating reference to an authorized version of tradition (Hervieu-Léger, 2000: 97).

These elements clearly apply to the historic religions which have a long tradition that is passed on from generation to generation with an overpowering authority. They can also be fitted into an interpretation of new religious movements, which develop prophets or charismatic leaders so as to provide fresh interpretations of the authoritative tradition and thus affect the way it is transmitted. They, in fact, provide living evidence of the ‘mutating structures of believing’. Nonetheless, prophets, leaders and reformers still relate to the authoritative tradition and frequently justify their reinterpretation on the grounds they represent the ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ tradition. One apparent problem with Hervieu-Léger’s components of religion refers back directly to her references to the individualization or atomization of contemporary quests for security in contemporary Western society. Groups today are formed that

often have a fluid membership, where individuals 'pick and choose' from a wide array of 'spiritualities' available in the marketplace. Seemingly, these do not depend on a community that connects itself to a historic transmission of a legitimating authority. This, however, is only apparent, since such groups retain a postulated link to an authoritative tradition from which they derive the source of their legitimization. As Hervieu-Léger (2000: 87) observes, the antiquity of a tradition is not what gives it authority, although it may give it 'an extra value'. To exemplify what I think is Hervieu-Léger's meaning, I want to cite an example from my own research conducted in 2001 in which I participated in a 'trance dance' sponsored by the Lightgate Learning Center in Thetford, Vermont (See Cox, 2003: 74–82; Cox, 2007: 156–8). This organization, which could in a very broad way be associated with what Hervieu-Léger describes as the tendency of individuals in contemporary Western society to seek their own personal spiritual fulfilment, in its literature described its purpose as providing a 'gateway to enlightenment for body, mind and spirit'. I discovered this organization through a leaflet available in a local supermarket which listed numerous such groups and activities. The brochure I read in advance of attending the trance dance described it as replicating a practice that has 'existed for over 40,000 years'. During the actual ritual itself, after about 30 minutes, a deep male voice was played over a powerful amplifier that announced: 'Trance Dance is 40,000 years old. It has been practised by our ancient ancestors all over the world.' This confirmed to me that, although the Lightgate Learning Center had been established recently and that its leaders formed no part of an institutional 'religion', they nonetheless derived their authority for their rituals by appealing to an ancient tradition which they claimed had been passed on for generations. This act of legitimization clearly was important to the leaders of the Lightgate community as a source of their authority. It is this type of appeal that is replicated within similar groups to which Hervieu-Léger is referring when she speaks about 'exteriorly imposed order' as the key element in defining a religion.

The most compelling criticism of Hervieu-Léger does not relate to her discussion of contemporary movements in Western society, but derives instead from her contention that the distinction between what is religious and non-religious is a matter of degree, since the authority of a tradition must be 'overwhelming' for it to qualify as religion. This is why, for her, loyalty to a football team does not qualify as a religion, since such loyalty does not derive from an authority that unites believers by their allegiance to an all-encompassing authority. In other words, what is religious is determined as a matter of

degree rather than of substance. This would call into question the ability to include many loosely organized movements in contemporary Western society under the category 'religion' since their authoritative transmission often is not 'overwhelming' but moderate; the emotional effects may not be lasting but transient; the power over life most certainly will not be all-consuming but will be split between many competing interests. This leads me to conclude that although Hervieu-Léger's analysis is extremely useful for embedding religion in socio-cultural contexts, it cannot stand on its own, and requires the first part of my definition to indicate unambiguously what we mean by the category 'religion'.

I thus arrive at my completed working definition of religion, which includes the first part of my substantive definition as amended by Hervieu-Léger's socio-cultural analysis:

Religion refers to identifiable communities which base their acts of believing and resulting communal experiences of postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities on a tradition that they legitimate by appealing to its authoritative transmission from generation to generation.

This definition can be tested empirically; it is embedded in socio-cultural contexts and thus is non-theological; it does not seek an 'essence' of religion but is rooted in the practice of identifiable communities. It is both substantive and functional, in that it portrays a content to religion and at the same time focuses on its function as transmitting an authoritative transmission from generation to generation, even if the transmission is merely postulated. As such it meets Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh's criteria of specificity and inclusiveness, while avoiding the prejudicial aspects of their definition by avoiding any normative connotations, as is found in their term 'deliberately affirm'. It also overcomes Hervieu-Léger's lack of clarity when distinguishing the religious from the non-religious as matters of degree, since it is capable of incorporating groups that may be transient on the basis of the substantive element in the definition. For this reason, devotion to a football team is not religious, not because the authority lacks an overwhelming power over the life of supporters (it well could do so), but because it lacks any reference to non-falsifiable alternate realities. According to my definition, no degree of emotional attachment is necessary before experiences within identifiable communities can be regarded as religious. The components of religion are entirely objective and include an identifiable community, its beliefs about and

experiences of postulated non-falsifiable alternate realities, and its traditions that are derived from and centred around an authority that is passed on from generation to generation.

On this accounting, although football is not a religion, atheistic Marxism might be regarded as a religion, since, not only do adherents follow an authority that has been transmitted for generations, but the reality envisaged is alternate, in the sense that it is eschatological and involves a non-falsifiable claim that history will achieve an inevitable utopian conclusion. Of course, this interpretation of Marxism could be challenged on grounds that what it postulates can be falsified by history, and, for some, already has been (Morris, 1987: 41–43: 320–4). Nonetheless, in so far as Marxism attracts adherents whose beliefs and experiences relate to a faith in an ideal world, I would contend that this fits my definition of religion, since the forces that create the inevitability of history's end are entirely non-falsifiable. At the same time, we could argue that Marxism contains the key elements of the Hervieu-Léger definition: groups identify and organize themselves in response to a tradition that is transmitted authoritatively, but in the process of transmission they revise their beliefs in light of present circumstances. It is at this point that Smart's notion of family resemblances might be seen to apply, for example, by noting the close relationship between Marxist theories about an ideal world and the Christian conception of the Kingdom of God. On one reading of Smart, Christianity and Marxism could be regarded as first cousins, if not siblings.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, defining religion is fraught with difficulties, not the least of which results from the fact that definitions are developed to suit the preconceptions of those who have devised the definitions in the first place. We have also noted that attempts to define religion in a 'true' or universal manner suffer from a failure to treat social and cultural contexts seriously. For these reasons, I have opted for a working definition in this chapter which seeks to combine substantive and functional approaches while at the same time retaining an entirely pragmatic and testable formulation. I intend that my definition will provide a useful overarching guide to which the phenomenological method is then applied as a research tool.

The primary aim of this book thus remains – that of outlining a method for the study of religion that can be distinguished from other methods in the

social and natural sciences and one that also remains distinct from theological interpretations. This is precisely what the phenomenology of religion aims to achieve. In order to assess how well it meets this goal, to which I will return in the final chapter, I will need to outline the stages in the method in some detail. Before doing this, however, it is necessary to set the context for the method by providing for the student historical background, since it is important to note that the phenomenology of religion did not develop in a vacuum. Positively, it derived its key elements from philosophy, particularly from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century German phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl, and negatively as a reaction against what phenomenologists regarded as the prejudicial and reductionistic explanations of religion emanating from the social sciences at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. In the next chapter I discuss these important historical influences before turning in the following chapters to outline the stages in the method itself.

Questions for discussion

1. Discuss the differences between functional and substantive definitions of religion.
2. Evaluate the Hall, Pilgrim and Cavanagh definition of religion according to their own criteria. List weaknesses and strengths of their definition. Do the same for Cox's working definition.
3. What does Smart mean by 'family resemblances'? Give examples of how this might apply in the study of actual religions. Does this help us develop a working definition of religion?
4. Of the 17 definitions of religion given by Ferguson, which could fit into more than one classification? List each of your choices under the various categories and then justify your choices.
5. Does religion require a belief in the supernatural to qualify as a religion? How does Cox's use of 'alternate realities' compare to notions of supernatural agents?
6. What is the meaning of Hervieu-Léger's notion of the authoritative transmission of a tradition and how could it apply to loosely organized, non-institutionalized groups common in contemporary Western society?
7. Is it useful to define religion? Give reasons for your answer.

2

Historical Background: Philosophical Phenomenology and the Social Sciences

Chapter Outline

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In this chapter, I identify and analyse two central factors which explain, at least in part, why the phenomenology of religion developed into such a powerful force in the academic study of religions, reaching the apex of its influence by the mid-twentieth century. First, I outline its relationship to philosophical phenomenology in order to prepare in the next chapter for my discussion of how leading phenomenologists adapted key concepts from philosophy to what they considered a method uniquely suited for the study of religion. They used this method to bolster their argument that believers' perspectives should take priority over explanations emanating from the social sciences, which they regarded as prejudicial and reductionistic. Although

in general these two factors – reliance on philosophical phenomenology and reaction against social scientific explanations of religion – accurately account for the historical development of the phenomenology of religion, I want to underscore at the outset two important qualifying points: (1) in many cases the connection between the phenomenology of religion and technical philosophical phenomenology is quite tenuous, since, the main ideas employed in the study of religion were used in a quite straightforward manner; (2) phenomenologists of religion not only reacted against social scientific reductionism, but, in fact, drew some of their key ideas from important thinkers, particularly from the fields of sociology and psychology. I will elaborate further on these points in Chapter 3, but I emphasize them at the outset so that the student is alerted to the fact that the issues associated with a phenomenological interpretation of religion are more complex than might appear on first reading.

What is phenomenology?

Phenomenology, in its twentieth-century form, is a philosophical movement attributed to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Rather than offering descriptions of the nature of reality itself, it provides a method for knowing or investigating the way we know reality. As such, it belongs squarely within the branch of philosophy called epistemology, the study of knowledge. The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty described phenomenology as a 'style of thinking' (cited by Bettis, 1969: 2), by which he meant it is an effort to describe the actual state of affairs as disclosed by the phenomena of the world.

It is important to note that Edmund Husserl did not invent the term phenomenology. Earlier German philosophers, such as G. W. F. Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), employed the term, as did Johann Gottlieb Fichte, writing in 1804, who used it as a tool for interpreting states of consciousness in his book entitled *Facts of Consciousness* (Copleston, 1965a: 53). Later, the German philosopher Hermann Lotze investigated the soul as a phenomenological term and Eduard von Hartmann referred to the phenomenology of religious consciousness (Höffding, 1950: 520–4; 533–7). It is incorrect, therefore, to associate phenomenology strictly with Edmund Husserl. Nevertheless, the way he interpreted philosophical questions influenced almost all later phenomenologies, including the German school comprised,

among others, of Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann and Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger, and the French existentialists including Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Ricoeur and, as we have noted, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Ayer, 1982: 214–33; Spiegelberg, 1982: 7–12).

Husserl began his academic career as a mathematician, writing his PhD thesis, which he submitted in 1882 to the University of Vienna, on a topic related to calculus. After working for a short period in Berlin as a mathematician, he returned to Vienna to study philosophy. In 1901, he was appointed Professor in the University of Göttingen, where he wrote one his most important books, *Ideas: A General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* (English version, 1931), in which he spelt out in detail many of the key ideas in his philosophical method. Before exploring his method for obtaining knowledge, I will discuss briefly three concepts which help explain his overall approach: rigorous science, philosophical radicalism and intentionality.

Rigorous science. Husserl believed that by the early twentieth century science had degenerated into the unphilosophical study of mere facts – what can be known through direct observations (oftentimes referred to as positivism). Scientific enquiry had also become dominated by a related concept called 'naturalism', which explained the world entirely in terms of apparent natural occurrences. Husserl referred to this as the natural attitude, by which he meant accepting the world 'out there' as given, uncritically, as if it is unaffected by the one doing the perceiving. He viewed this attitude as pre-theoretical and naïve, and contended that although it is characteristic of commonsense ways of thinking, it underpins all naturalistic interpretations of the world (Husserl, 1931: 106). The incapacity, and even unwillingness, of science to explore problems of value and meaning because of its confinement to the natural attitude defined for Husserl what he called in a later publication 'the crisis of European Sciences' (1970). Rather than rejecting the natural sciences as legitimate fields of study, he wanted to replace the naïve philosophy at the root of naturalism with 'a rigorous science' based on clearly articulated philosophical methods aimed at examining the role of consciousness in the production of knowledge. One of the major problems associated with naturalism, for Husserl, was that it simply included consciousness as a commonplace part of nature, studying the mind as if it were just another object of empirical investigation and thereby committing the critical error of ignoring consciousness as the foundation for any scientific analysis of the natural world.

Philosophical radicalism. Radical means 'going to the roots'. The roots of knowledge for Husserl begin with the objects or things of perception, what he called the phenomena (from the Greek word *phanos*, meaning 'that which manifests itself'). Although the phenomena comprise the ground for all human concepts, knowledge does not dwell in the things themselves but in the consciousness of the knowing subject. By employing a proper methodological analysis of consciousness, the observer uncovers a correlation between the subjective awareness (the act of perceiving) and the objects perceived (the content of perception). Husserl distinguished these two functions of consciousness with the words *noesis*, which he referred to as the act of thinking, and *noema*, by which he meant what is thought. In other words, a phenomenological analysis goes 'to the roots' of consciousness by examining the experience of thinking while at the same time analysing in what ways thought processes become 'a consciousness of something' (Husserl, 1931: 257; See also, Cox, 2006: 23–4).

Intentionality. Intentionality, which is closely related to Husserl's distinction between *noesis* and *noema*, refers in its simplest form to the subject actively perceiving or apprehending an object. Husserl explained: 'Every presenting refers to a presented, every judgment to something judged' (1931: 256). This implies that one who does the observing does so actively by directing attention towards an object. Perception thus does not consist of a subject passively receiving impressions on the consciousness. To illustrate this point, in *Ideas* Husserl (1931: 130) describes his experience of perceiving a table. As he moves around the table, changing his perspective, Husserl says that he keeps in his mind the one, same unified table. Each changing perception does not create a new table; it remains unchanged throughout the movements of the observer. It is the perception of the table that is in flux. Or, Husserl notes that if he closes his eyes, he has no perception of the table, but when he opens them, the table returns. The table remains unchanged to the consciousness which connects the new perception with the memory of the perception before his eyes were closed. In other words, the observer actively integrates perceptions in the mind with that which is thought about. In this way, the act of cognition is shown as directing subjective intentions towards objects, thereby making them genuinely 'objective' (Smith, 1983: 249–86; Bréhier, 1969: 207–8). Within the framework of a rigorous science and in the light of philosophical radicalism, for Husserl, the notion of intentionality overcame the tendency of positivism to define knowledge as limited to passively observing and describing mere facts as they present themselves to the

consciousness, and it made it possible for the observer to discern meanings within acts of observation.

Husserl's description of the phenomenological method

Husserl defined the phenomenological method as a descriptive theory of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1969: 14). It begins from within the person, the subject, and seeks to move outside the person into an objective description of the world (intentionality). In this process, the assumptions beneath the natural attitude must be questioned and a new way of knowing developed, the purpose of which is to describe the phenomena as they appear and to attain an understanding of them. To accomplish this, two key activities must be executed. First, the observer must perform what Husserl called *epoché* (from the Greek meaning 'to stop' or 'to hold back') (Sharpe, 1986: 224). All thoughts associated with the natural attitude about material things, science, other humans, the sequence and order of events, or any other presuppositions must be suspended or, to use a term Husserl borrowed from mathematics, 'put into brackets'. This is not the same as employing a form of doubting everything, as proposed by the famous philosopher René Descartes in the seventeenth century, but it involves suspending judgements in order that attention can be devoted to the processes of the operations of consciousness. In solving algebraic equations, for example, the mathematician places each component of the formula into brackets and works on solving each problem placed in brackets one at a time in order at the conclusion each limited solution can be applied to resolving the problem of the entire equation. In a similar way, Husserl's use of the *epoché* does not mean that the phenomenologist doubts the existence of the external world, but it entails placing it within brackets, or suspending judgements about it, in order that, like a mathematician, attention can be focused on another part of the equation, in this case, on an analysis of the phenomena of perception as they appear in the individual's consciousness. The effect of this method, according to Husserl, is to establish a new mode of consciousness in which the natural standpoint is put out of play or, as Husserl puts it, performing *epoché* 'bars me from using any judgment that concerns spatio-temporal existence' (1931: 111). By placing in brackets previously held beliefs or assumptions derived from the natural standpoint, the observer allows the pure phenomena to speak for themselves.

The second key activity for the phenomenologist can now occur. The observer performs the eidetic intuition whereby only the essential structures of the phenomena are seen. The eidetic intuition, from the Greek *eidos* meaning form, idea, or essence, allows the observer to see into the very structure or meaning of the phenomena. Intuition suggests that the bracketed consciousness of one who has performed *epoché* is able to apprehend not just particular entities or even universal classes of entities, such as particular bananas and then 'bananahood' (what makes a banana a banana), but their essential meanings as entities and classes of entities. This can occur only when one's preconceived notions are suspended thereby enabling the observer to intuit the meaning of what actually manifests itself in the world. This is why the eidetic intuition is also called the eidetic vision – seeing into the very nature or meaning of what exists in the world (Bettis, 1969: 10). Husserl (1969: 246) explains:

The multiplicity of possible perceptions, memories, and, indeed, intentional processes of whatever sort, that relate, or can relate, 'harmoniously' to one and the same physical thing has (in all its tremendous complication) a quite definite essential style.

This combination of *epoché* and the eidetic intuition is required for the building up of an objective picture of the phenomena of existence. *Epoché* allows the observer to suspend theories of the world built on naturalistic assumptions, what Husserl calls the 'fact world', in order that consciousness, which forms the basis for all knowledge, can be analysed rigorously. In this way, the observer perceives the world as it comes fresh from the phenomena and is able thereby to intuit new realities or at least achieve a more complete understanding of reality than had been attained previously.

Application of the method

Epoché and the eidetic intuition are the primary tools whereby the phenomenologist sees into the structures of existence and thus builds an objective description of the world. As the observer intuits essences and allows the phenomena to speak for themselves, three basic steps occur: (1) naming objects; (2) noting relations; (3) describing processes.

Naming objects. In the condition of the bracketed consciousness, the observer will perceive a variety of phenomena which need to be distinguished from

one another by giving names to them. Although the names are not identical with the phenomena themselves, by naming objects, the observer makes sense of what appears. Hence, we name stones, houses, trees, books and all the other multitude of things which form the phenomena of our experience. Naming the phenomena enables us to speak intelligibly about that which has manifested itself to our consciousness.

Noting relations. We need not only name the objects of the phenomena, we also begin to understand relations between them from very simple to complex concepts. If we watch birds flying, for example, we may just note the relationship between one bird and another. But if we see birds flying quickly and nervously as the skies darken and we hear distant thunder, we will form logical and temporal relations associating the actions of the birds with an impending storm. As we build relations between the named objects, we are forming structures of reality based on our observations of the phenomena themselves.

Describing processes. The observer will also begin to describe processes at work within the phenomena. These include processes like development as, for example, when one sees a plant grow in response to proper amounts of sunlight and water. Processes in history may be observed as each event creates or influences later events. Psychological processes may be described as people go through stages, for example, from fear through anger to remorse.

By naming objects, noting relationships, and describing processes, the phenomenologist claims to build the structure of reality not from presuppositions about the world but from observed phenomena themselves. This is a method of 'getting inside' the phenomena through *epoché* in order to see into the essence of them. Although the beginning point of philosophical phenomenology is subjective, its goal is to describe and understand the world objectively (Merleau-Ponty, 1969: 27–8).

The notions of intersubjectivity and empathy

Because the objectivity aimed at by phenomenology is obtained subjectively, the genuinely scientific results of Husserl's analysis of consciousness can be questioned. If a truly objective picture of the world is to be established using phenomenological methods, it is imperative that the analysis of one's own

consciousness, which is all any individual is capable of achieving under the method, be correlated to other consciousnesses. In other words, if objectivity is to be achieved, the reality of other selves must be established. Husserl was aware of this problem and proposed a solution through the notion of 'intersubjectivity' based on empathetic understanding.

At one level, the awareness of others is no different from any other phenomenon with which the consciousness engages through its procedure of bracketing or performing *epoché*. Yet, persons fall into a different category from normal phenomena since they form part of what Husserl calls 'psychosocial' Objects' (1977: 91). They are experienced as objects of consciousness, but also as subjects in their own right. Hence, as a subject, my cognitions recognize other subjects as also performing acts of cognition. In this sense, they become both *noesis* and *noema*, ones who engage in the act of thinking and at the same time the object of my thought processes. Of course, I cannot enter into the consciousness of the Other and experience the Other's cognitions. Nonetheless, through a process of what Husserl calls 'transcendental "Empathy"', I can enter into the Other's cognitions by cultivating a feeling for them based on my experience of my own cognitions. In this way, according to Husserl, an intersubjective consciousness is established (Husserl, 1977: 92). As a tool of knowing, empathy succeeds because for the knowing subject other selves fall into a category of objects with what Husserl calls 'spiritual predicates'.

For Husserl, the notion of intersubjectivity as the basis for obtaining objective knowledge depended on the assumption that the same world is experienced by all subjects. It is, he says, a 'thereness for everyone' (1977: 92). This sounds very much like the natural attitude, which naively accepts the world just as it appears. Husserl responded to this objection by suggesting when it comes to analysing the cognitions of others a 'peculiar kind of *epoché*' must be performed. Just as occurs in the normal application of *epoché*, other selves are indeed placed within brackets, but in this peculiar state of bracketing the distinction between subject and object is overcome: 'I experience myself as Other' (1977: 93). From the perspective of the natural standpoint, I would be able to imagine myself as ultimately alone, as if every other self in the universe had been destroyed or somehow vanished. This is fundamentally different from what occurs in the bracketed consciousness, where the other is experienced as an 'alter ego', a kind of mirror image of my ego (1977: 93–4). In this sense, I can build up knowledge of the world objectively, since others are also capable of engaging in the same method of bracketing the world and seeing into the essences of the phenomena.

The objectivity obtainable through this method, of course, is only proximate and thus can never be final or exact, particularly when the method is applied to the human sciences. Husserl admitted this when he discussed the application of the method to cultures, which he associated with 'books, tools, works of any kind' and which he further acknowledged have different expressions and meanings within different cultural communities (1977: 92). In the context of this book, we could add to Husserl's list the term, religion, to suggest that when Husserl's analysis is applied practically to the study of religion, the results must always remain incomplete and open to revision. The need for openness to revision, however, does not detract from the method but forms an inevitable part of it. When observers intuit the essence or structure of objects, relations, and processes, their conclusions always remain accountable to the phenomena, including the intersubjective relations between the observers and the practitioners. In other words, the method always calls the phenomenologist back to the source of knowledge, the phenomena themselves. As a result, any eidetic intuition must be tested and revised in the light of the phenomena thus guaranteeing that the essence is not, in the words of J. Hirschberger (1976: 194), 'a mere universal' but a 'self-validating *eidos*'.

Summary and qualifications

As we have seen from our review of the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, the phenomenological method chiefly examines the role of the subjective observer in apprehending the objective world. As a method for knowing, it recognizes that perceptions of the world are limited by and inseparable from the intentionality of the observer. In other words, *epoché* provides a framework for the act of observing. In line with Husserl's criticism of the natural standpoint, Merleau-Ponty (1966: 3–4) cautioned against minimizing the role of the perceiver in the act of perception through his assertion that 'nothing in our experience' corresponds to 'pure sensation'. He offered the following example to demonstrate this point:

Let us imagine a white patch on a homogeneous background. All the points in the patch have a certain 'function' in common, that of forming themselves into a 'shape'. The colour of the shape is more intense, and as it were more resistant than that of the background; the edges of the white patch 'belong' to it, and are not part of the background though they adjoin it: the patch appears to be placed on the background and does not break it up. Each part arouses the expectation

of more than it contains, and this elementary perception is therefore already charged with a *meaning*. (emphasis his)

This example demonstrates that performing *epoché* is intended to promote the active role of the observer in describing phenomena. Nevertheless, it shows that the phenomenon itself provides the source of and criterion for the observations recorded. As such, the method seeks to reduce the impact of pre-judgements so that the observer is able to intuit meanings contained in the phenomena, their relationships and their processes.

The *eidos* or essence of the phenomena in Husserl's philosophical method primarily provides a means for understanding how the observer interacts with the data of experience and thus grasps meaning obtained from the data. This point underscores the fact that Husserl was not writing metaphysics, as if he were seeking to discover a final content or an unchanging universal idea. Rather, his method aimed at disclosing how the consciousness interacts with the phenomena, and thus always stressed that the phenomena themselves provided the final criteria for any interpretation suggested by the observer. Merleau-Ponty (1966: xvi–xvii) underscored just this point: 'The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it: it is inexhaustible.'

Two points in conclusion, therefore, must be underscored: (1) no 'pure' descriptions of the phenomena separable from the subjective observer are attainable, although we can assume that all subjects relate to the same phenomena; (2) no final or universal statement of the essence of the meaning of the world is intended through this method. I stress these two points, since they will need to be kept in mind when we apply philosophical phenomenology to the study of religion.

The social sciences and the development of the phenomenology of religion

In addition to employing key concepts from Husserl's philosophy, phenomenologists of religion developed their methodological approach in order to counter what they regarded as the tendency amongst scholars to 'explain away'

religion by reducing it to functions identified within particular branches of the social sciences. Towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, such explanations were often couched in evolutionary terms, so that religious behaviour could be ranked according to its place within the cultural development of humanity. Although phenomenologists shared with social scientists a commitment to securing 'objective' descriptions of religious practices, they argued that the presuppositions beneath social scientific explanations oftentimes veiled anti-religionist positions based on the notion that religious beliefs result from projections onto supernatural beings that are derived entirely from human experience. The phenomenology of religion, therefore, can be depicted as reacting against three tendencies emerging from social scientific interpretations of religion: the explanation of religious phenomena exclusively in terms of disciplines other than religion itself, such as sociology, psychology or anthropology (social scientific reductionism); the evolutionary assumptions beneath most theories aimed at analysing the development of religion amongst a wide array of cultures; and projectionist theories explaining why religion originated in the first place.

Social scientific reductionism

Reductionism in general refers to the practice of finding explanations for any subject of investigation by reference to a single causative factor or family of related causative factors. When applied to the study of religion, reductionists interpret religious behaviour using theories employed within one specific discipline. This generally has been done by scholars operating within the social sciences. For example, rituals can be explained as fulfilling certain functions in society, such as re-enforcing socially sanctioned relationships between the sexes and between parents and children. Such functions are often related to the patterns observed within of other types of religious belief and practice, and ultimately these are identified as root causes behind the development of religion as a whole. The Dutch scholar, J. G. Platvoet (1990: 20), argues that social scientists have tended to reduce religion to their own discipline because their 'primary field . . . is not the religions themselves'. The psychologist, for example, tends to interpret religious phenomena in terms of emotional needs and may ignore the conscious meaning of religious acts for the believers themselves. In his study of key phenomenologists of religion, George James (1995: 59–60) notes: 'To study religion as purely economic behaviour or as psychosis would clearly be reductive.'

A particularly good example of social scientific reductionism is found in a book by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge who argue that all humans seek rewards and avoid what they perceive to be costs. In some societies the rewards are scarce and unevenly distributed but the costs are many. As a result, humans create 'compensators' based on the belief that 'a reward will be obtained in the distant future . . . which cannot be immediately verified' (1985: 6). Religion thus develops out of a profound dissatisfaction with this world and provides meaning by giving people hope in a future state of bliss, such as the Christian notion of heaven. This reduces religion to a single explanatory factor derived largely on the basis of a sociological analysis. Scholars of religion writing from within a phenomenological tradition contended that such explanations, although not necessarily wrong, distort the meaning of religion for believers and hence cannot be fully scientific.

The anti-reductionist position within the phenomenology of religion was voiced early in the twentieth century by W. Brede Kristensen, who held the Chair of Religion in Leiden University in The Netherlands. In his important book, *The Meaning of Religion*, first translated into English in 1960, Kristensen famously declared: 'Believers were completely right' (1960: 14). By this, he meant that no interpretation of a religion can be accurate if adherents are unable to affirm the underlying meaning beneath a scholar's interpretation. This is because researchers, in Kristensen's words, must be able 'to forget themselves' and 'surrender themselves to others' (1960: 13). This self-surrendering has the effect that the members of the religion the scholar is studying will likewise surrender themselves to the scholar. To implant one's own preconceived notions and biases into the research findings, as is characteristic of reductionism, thus is to contradict the evidence that comes from the believing communities. The sign that a degree of self-surrender has been accomplished is that the researcher gives full credit to the interpretations of the adherents. If a researcher cannot give priority to the testimonies of believers, according to Kristensen, the religion has been described and interpreted in such a way that the religious reality has been negated.

Much later in the twentieth century, Harold Turner at the University of Aberdeen championed the anti-reductionist cause associated with the phenomenology of religion by applying it to his analysis of African religions. Turner (1981: 14) argued that African religions have been particularly susceptible to social scientific reductionism, since most studies of African societies have been conducted by anthropologists rather than by scholars of religion. This has given the impression that 'African religions are no more than social

and psychological phenomena rather than essentially religious and worthy to be professed as the faith of persons.' When this is accompanied by the judgement that African societies are 'primitive', the religions of such societies are misconstrued not only by narrow interpretations, but are victims of prejudicial presuppositions about their low level in the evolutionary development of human cultures.

Biological evolution applied to levels of religious development

Turner not only was reacting against social scientific reductionism, but against the application of Darwinian concepts of biological evolution to the social development of human societies. One of the best definitions of the theory of biological evolution is found in John Allegro's book, *Lost Gods* (1977: 10).

For more than half of its existence, this planet was in no condition to support life. Then, about two thousand million years ago, a combination of climatic and environmental circumstances allowed the formation of a new and wonderful molecular structure that was able not only to reproduce itself, but to store and pass on to its offspring a chemical blueprint that determined its nature and function. Self-regenerating and self-duplicating life had been born. However, since no copying device in nature is entirely exact, once every so often the transmitted code varies slightly from its pattern. The result is a mutation, making the progeny in some way different from its parents. The change might be for the good, perhaps helping the offspring to adapt more readily to a change in the environment, or for worse, depriving it of some faculty and thus threatening the strain with extinction. If the new organism is a success, it will proliferate at the expense of less favoured neighbours, and its novel advantageous features will be transmitted by the revised blueprint for subsequent generations.

With the widespread acceptance of this theory as scientific fact, scholars began to look for parallel developments occurring in cultures, societies and religions. It was assumed that the universal religious tendency in humanity originated in a primitive form and gradually evolved into higher, more advanced expressions. This process is defined clearly by the Welsh scholar, Islwyn Blythin (1988:10).

With the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution extending beyond the boundaries of biology, the search for the essence of religion and the search for the

origin of religion coincided. Man's religion, like his body, was thought to have evolved from inferior to more advanced forms, and there appeared a great interest in primitive religions which were held to contain the earliest aspirations of mankind.

Some key scholars in the history of the study of religions who employed such evolutionary assumptions include Auguste Comte, James G. Frazer, E. B. Tylor, R. R. Marett and Wilhelm Schmidt.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Platvoet (1990: 14) calls Comte 'the father of sociology'. He is best known for his evolutionary thesis which suggests that humans pass through three stages in their mental development: from the theological through the metaphysical to the scientific. The theological stage is the earliest and most primitive in which humans conceive the forces of nature as persons they call gods. This is evident even in monotheistic types of religion which describe the ultimate form of nature as a supernatural being. The metaphysical stage represents a transition whereby the personified gods are replaced by abstract concepts and universal ideas. The final stage is that of positive science in which nature is understood not in terms of personal beings or abstract ideas but through empirical, verifiable and objective laws (Preus, 1987: 109–19).

James G. Frazer (1854–1941). Like Comte, Frazer based his explanation of religion on identifying the sequential stages in human social and intellectual development. For Frazer, the first stage was an age of magic through which humans sought to control or manipulate the forces of nature to attain certain desirable purposes. When magic consistently failed to produce the successful manipulation of nature, it began to be associated with false causation. Magic then gave way to religion which characteristically sought to appease spirits, initially associated with nature, which had the power to help humans achieve their desired ends. As religions developed, the tendency to regard some spirits as independent from natural objects and hence as more powerful than nature spirits emerged in the human imagination. In his discussion of the religious significance of trees, for example, Frazer (1963: 135) described how higher forms of religion develop from more primitive sources.

Instead of regarding each tree as a living and conscious being, man now sees in it merely a lifeless, inert mass, tenanted for larger or shorter time by a supernatural being who, as he can pass freely from tree to tree, thereby enjoys a certain right of possession or lordship over trees, and, ceasing to be a tree-soul, becomes a forest god.

Like Comte, Frazer saw the final stage of human intellectual evolution as scientific thinking, the empirical testing and verification of real causes and real effects according to the consistent laws of nature (Hutchison, 1969: 32–3).

E. B. Tylor (1832–1917). Tylor is famous for his influential theory of animism, which traced the origin of religion to the 'primitive' tendency to perceive living souls (*anima*) in all forms of nature. We have already seen that Tylor defined religion as belief in spiritual or supernatural beings. This belief, for Tylor, originated in dreams and in the observations of how breath goes out of a person at death. In dreams, a person is able to leave the body, travel to far-off or strange lands, speak to the living and the dead, or undergo amazing experiences – all while the body remains inert. Likewise, when a person dies, the body ceases to function. Primitive thinking assumed this was like a dream, where the soul of the person had vacated the body but still possessed life and the ability to influence human affairs. If humans have souls, by extension all objects in nature must have souls. Trees, stones, animals, mountains, pools and every other natural object possess a life-force. This view developed into polytheism which perceived powerful souls in objects and in non-physical spiritual forces. Later, some souls were conceived as being more powerful than others, usually associated with the sky. Sky gods were eventually transformed into one high god leading finally to monotheism, the highest form of religion (Preus, 1987: 139–42).

R. R. Marett (1866–1943). Marett was influenced initially by the writings of Bishop R. H. Codrington, a missionary to Melanesia, a group of islands in the southwest Pacific. Codrington had described the Melanesian belief in an impersonal force or mysterious power which the Melanesians called mana (Tokarev, 1989: 39–42). This force, because it was impersonal, could not be an object towards which people made direct appeals. Rather, either it was with a person conferring skills required to achieve desired ends (such as success in hunting) or it abandoned a person (thus explaining failures and misfortunes). Although mana could not be appealed to, it seemed to operate like a law explaining why the Melanesians created such strict rules called taboos which the people were required to follow. Observance of the rules maintained the positive influence of mana whereas breaking them resulted in misfortune (Hutchison, 1969: 32). Marett argued that the impersonal force observed by Codrington among the indigenous people of Melanesia referred to a general primitive belief which had developed prior to animism in human evolution. Marett called this impersonal force 'pre-animism' or 'dynamism'. Primitive

people experienced fear, respect and wonder at the awesome power displayed in nature, such as is visible in violent storms. This feeling of awe at the personal power of nature, or what Sharpe (1986: 67) describes as the 'uncanny', explained for Marett the roots of religion. It was not until later that humans personified this power first in what Tylor called animism and later by creating gods and finally God (Platvoet, 1990: 16–7).

Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954). Schmidt was a Roman Catholic missionary who held the idea that the original religion of primitive societies was monotheism or belief in one High God. Although he distinguished his position from earlier evolutionary theories, Schmidt's view can be regarded as a kind of evolutionary process in reverse. Primitive beliefs do not begin in lower forms and move to higher ones; rather, the early belief in a High God degenerated over time, as Platvoet (1990: 27) notes, into forms of 'naturism, fetishism, ghost-worship, animism, totems'. Schmidt explained this process by arguing that the High God among the primitives often is described in myths as withdrawing from day-to-day life to the remote regions of the sky. The most common concerns of people, therefore, were relinquished to lesser deities, ancestors and other spiritual beings. This produced polytheism. The great later monotheistic religions have developed out of these lower forms and may be regarded as recovering the original primal vision of belief in one God (Eliade, 1969: 23–5).

The theories of Comte, Frazer, Tylor, Marett and Schmidt reflect a general consensus among early anthropologists and ethnographers that human cultures – including their religions – evolved over time into their current forms. These views clearly predisposed researchers to look for signs of development by studying so-called primitive societies that still existed in their day, for example, in Africa, parts of the Arctic and in Australia. Phenomenologists of religion regarded such presuppositions as predetermining the results of research by beginning with evolutionary assumptions and imposing them on religious data. They saw in Husserl's notion of the *epoché* a way of suspending prior assumptions and forging a method aimed at allowing the phenomena to speak for themselves. I will outline this in the next chapter as I describe the phenomenological method as a step-by-step process, but at this point it is important to underscore that the phenomenology of religion began in part as a reaction against evolutionary theories which by the early part of the twentieth century dominated scholarly interpretations of the origin and development of religion.

Projectionist theories of religion

A third prevailing view against which phenomenologists of religion reacted is what I am calling projectionist theories of religion. These assume that religion developed out of some human need which has been enlarged or projected onto an ultimate being. All forms of the projectionist hypothesis contend that God is created in the human image rather than humans being created in the image of God. One of the earliest and most influential exponents of this view was the nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872). In his important book, *The Essence of Christianity*, first published in 1841, Feuerbach argued that humans are aware of their own finite situation, but long to be infinite. They are familiar with their own imperfections, but seek perfection. They recognize their own restricted knowledge, but want to know everything. They experience powerlessness, but want to become omnipotent. They fail in love, peace and justice, but seek to achieve these ideals. Out of their own finitude, imperfections, limited knowledge, powerlessness and injustice, humans have 'projected' an ideal onto a creature of their own making they call God, who is infinite, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving and the king of justice. Where do these qualities originate? Clearly, they are human ideas resulting from the desire within humanity to achieve them completely. Since humans cannot achieve them completely, they invent the all-perfect Being and project these very human qualities onto this Being. Feuerbach (1893: 12) put it this way: 'Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge.'

This process is called by Feuerbach the anthropomorphizing of God or defining God by reference to human characteristics, which he believed actually harms humanity by alienating people from their true inner selves thereby inhibiting them from maximizing their own best qualities (Feuerbach, 1893: 14). Instead of seeking perfection outside themselves, humans should seek to perfect their own inner selves and their societies. This requires a reversal of the normal ordering of the subject and the predicate. Instead of saying, 'God is love', we are much better to say, 'Love is god'. Rather than affirming, 'God is all-knowing', we should say, 'Knowledge is god'. God must not be the subject of the sentence but the predicate; humans will then be able to foster the very best qualities they already possess within themselves (Küng, 1981: 200–2).

Feuerbach's projectionist theory influenced subsequent studies of religion in many of the social sciences. E. B. Tylor's theory of animism, for example, is based not only on evolutionary theory but also on the idea that humans project

spiritual beings, first imagined in their dream-life, onto all objects in nature. Pettersson and Åkerberg (1981: 97) go so far as to claim that 'Tylor's theory is a completely psychological interpretation'. This is true also of Marett's concept of dynamism which results from a supposed projection of force or power onto inanimate objects. According to Marett, the primitive belief in a dynamic and mysterious impersonal force has resulted from the universal human sense of awe, mystery and wonder in response to the power of nature. Although the projectionist idea has been and still continues to influence the academic study of religions, I want to consider two of the most influential proponents of this view in the twentieth century, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and the sociologist Émile Durkheim.

Sigmund Freud (1865–1939). Freud, who was one of the originators of modern schools of psychoanalysis, wrote widely in the field of religion. One of his earliest contributions concerned the origin of totemic symbols among primitive societies and their relationship to taboos. He posited a universal primitive prohibition against incest and suggested that originally a primeval horde of male sons killed their father because they were jealous of his relationship with their mother (the Oedipus complex). This produced guilt and resulted first in totem animals acting as a substitute for the murdered father (hence, a prohibition against eating the totem) and second in the restriction against incest in reaction to the original sexual advances of the sons towards their mother (Freud, 1938: 189–95). Although Freud's theories regarding totemism and taboos resulted from an interpretation of psychological projections of perceived primitive impulses within humanity, this idea has been largely discredited today. His continuing impact on the study of religion comes from a different application of the projection theory which explains religion as resulting from the human need for comfort against perceived threats, for authority in moral action and for answers to ultimate questions (Freud, 1964: 162).

A recurring theme in all religions addresses the problem of human suffering. Freud believed that this produced the need for comfort evidenced in the religious belief that all pain will cease in a future life. Death, which induces the greatest human fear, is stripped of its power by religion's promise of eternal life. This promise corresponds to a parent's response to a frightened child who awakes at night due to a fear of the dark. The parent comforts the child by turning on the light and announces, 'There is nothing to be afraid of; everything is all right.' This is precisely what religion does when, in Freud's words (1961: 19), it teaches that 'over each of us there watches a benevolent

Providence'. This Providence is projected out of the human need for comfort in the face of life's misfortunes. Religion also authoritatively provides moral rules for its adherents to obey. If these precepts are followed, rewards result; if they are disregarded, calamity occurs. The need for moral laws, just like the need for comfort, has its roots in childhood experience. The same parents who took care of their children by keeping them safe from danger taught them about right and wrong behaviour. When children obeyed, parents rewarded them. When they broke the rules, punishment was meted out. For Freud, this childhood experience is projected onto moral codes and persists as religion. A third function of religion is to provide answers about the nature of reality itself. Although this aspect of religion most closely resembles philosophy and science, religion continues to project childhood needs by looking for answers which can be given from outside and which come with absolute authority. The parent is regarded by a child as an all-knowing source of information about the world. God is the projected parent who 'reveals' truth to the believers in a way far different from philosophy with its emphasis on reason and science through its method of empirical investigation.

Religion for Freud is a neurosis, a psychological malady, because it keeps its adherents permanently fixed in a state of childish illusion rather than allowing them to grow up into mature adults who face life realistically. Healthy adults realize that their parents could not really remove all dangers from life, that they could not dictate moral laws and that they were not infallible sources of knowledge. Any adult who still regards parental authority in the same manner as a child does can rightly be regarded as psychologically disturbed. Religion, however, projects just these infantile illusions onto an all-powerful, supernatural being or beings and thus prevents people from responding to the real dangers and limitations within life in a psychologically healthy way.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917). Platvoet (1990: 17) calls Durkheim 'the most important French sociologist after Comte'. Whereas Freud used Feuerbach's projection theory to explain religious responses psychologically, Durkheim applied the idea in a social context. Durkheim began by making a distinction between the sacred and the profane, which he claimed 'is characteristic of all cultures' and that it 'divides the universe into exclusive departments' ([1915] 1976: 167). The sacred is expressed in any tradition by a 'collective consciousness' which impresses on members of a society rules of respect by making individuals identify completely with the group and thus connecting them with something greater than themselves. By contrast, the profane centres on 'personal preoccupations', 'private existence' and 'egoistic concerns'.

The sacred thus is found in the society; the profane in the merely private and individual. This distinction informed Durkheim's functional understanding of religious beliefs and practices as uniting 'into one single moral community called a church all those who adhere to them' ([1915] 1976: 47).

The most elementary form of religious life (following the title of Durkheim's classic book) can be seen in primitive societies where the sacred is identified most clearly with the clan and its totemic symbol. A clan constitutes the basic social organization of primitive people and a totem is an animal or sometimes a plant or vegetable which represents or symbolizes the clan. The totem is what Durkheim referred to variously as the clan's 'emblem', 'ensign' or 'crest' ([1915] 1976: 113). The clan is united by its sharing of this common emblem. It is not a family in the sense of consisting exclusively of blood relations nor do the members necessarily live in the same location. The clan shares the same rules of respect, follows the same rituals and thus participates in what Durkheim called the same 'totemic cult'. The totem attains its sacred power particularly when the clan comes together or assembles (Preus, 1987: 173–4).

Although the totem is regarded by members of primitive societies as sacred, it stands as the emblem of the clan, suggesting that the clan itself is sacred. The clan, however, is actually a social organization held together by an authoritative tradition expressed in various rules, customs, practices and beliefs. In this sense, society is sacred. One could go so far as to conclude that in the most elementary forms, society is God. The totem, as the objectification of the clan, is venerated and thus the clan actually worships itself. As an object of worship, society obtains god-like or transcendent power by determining for its members, in Platvoet's words (1990: 17), 'their thought, perceptions, behaviour and activities'. In Durkheim's analysis, therefore, the object of worship represents fully a societal projection. Society needs to bind its members together, to create a sense of loyalty, to enforce rules of behaviour and to preserve its values. By projecting itself onto a divine or supernatural reality, society attains absolute power over its members and makes the collective consciousness sacred.

Both Freud and Durkheim followed Feuerbach by locating the source of religion in a human projection which arises out of either individual or social needs. These, of course, represent forms of social scientific reductionism, against which leading phenomenologists of religion reacted. In Freud's case, religion is reduced to infantile desires; in Durkheim, to a social function. Projectionist theories do more than reduce religion to explanations devised

according to the assumptions operating within a single discipline. They actually comment on the state of ultimate reality. Feuerbach's atheism is reflected in Freud's judgement on the illusory nature of religion and in Durkheim's claim that society is its own divine being. Projectionist theories, therefore, begin with the assumption that no transcendent object of religious faith actually exists. As a result, the meaning of religion is explained exclusively in terms of human needs. The phenomenology of religion developed equally as a reaction against anti-religionist projectionist explanations of religion as it did to their related reductionist tendencies.

Theological reductionism

The phenomenology of religion historically bears a close relationship to theology, in that most of the early phenomenologists were members of theological faculties. The motivation of foundational figures in the phenomenology of religion, such as the Dutch scholars, C. P. Tiele (1830–1902) and Pierre Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848–1920), was to separate the comparative study of religion from its traditional association with apologetics in which Christianity was confessed as the one true religion. Both Tiele and Chantepie sought to introduce historical and comparative methods based on factual descriptions of the religions of the world. They believed that ultimately a comparative study of the world's religions would demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over all other faiths, but their methods, ostensibly at least, were based on descriptive material rather than on theological presuppositions (Cox, 2006: 104–7). The early reaction against confessional theology amongst phenomenologists was carried forward later in the movement's opposition to another form of reductionism, what I am calling theological reductionism. Although this has been characteristic of Christian theology, in general, theological reductionism refers to a practice of evaluating every religion by the criteria established by one alone. Religions which emphasize that their beliefs are revealed by God often interpret every other religion in the light of that claim. António Barbosa da Silva (1982: 73) calls this a theologically normative approach where 'its proponent takes one religion as the "true religion" (which is usually his own), and compares it with all other religions regarded as false ones'.

Part of the theological concern that motivated the development of the comparative study of religions, such as that espoused by Tiele and Chantepie in the late nineteenth century, was a direct result of the expansion of Protestant

missions into Asia, Africa and other parts of the so-called non-Christian world. Many nineteenth-century missionaries accepted some of the scientific approaches, particularly the evolutionary thesis, but used them, as did Tiele and Chantepie, to interpret Christianity as the highest form of religion. A good example of this is found in the *Report of Commission IV* on the missionary message, which was written following the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910. The *Report* was compiled by the Scottish theologian, D. S. Cairns, who devoted a section to Tylor's classification of 'animistic religions' interpreted in an evolutionary context. Cairns wrote, for example: 'Among the animistic tribes there is manifested in some cases a rudimentary moral sense and a dim consciousness of sin' (World Missionary Conference, vol. 4, 1910: 27). The assumption behind this judgement is that Christianity possesses a high moral sense and a full consciousness of sin which can be awakened in its primitive form among animistic peoples. The *Report of Commission IV* adds that the monotheism of Christianity appeals greatly to animists. Cairns observed: 'It may seem strange that truths which to us are so elementary, as the unity and omnipotence of God, should come home with such kindling power to the hearts of men' (World Missionary Conference, vol. 4, 1910: 219).

As the phenomenology of religion matured in the twentieth century, it moved away from the intention of some of its theological predecessors to use descriptive material, in the way Cairns did, to show how Christianity fulfils the highest strivings of all other religions. Phenomenologists came to classify this application of the comparative study of religions as much a form of theological reductionism as confessional approaches which began with the a priori assumption that Christianity has received the highest revelatory truth from God. The phenomenology of religion thus can be characterized as reacting against all forms of reductionism, both social scientific and theological, and against any attempt to combine them in which a theological belief (for example, the supremacy of Christianity) is interpreted in terms of pre-conceived scientific theories (animism and evolution). Phenomenology thus should not be depicted as reacting against theology but against theological interpretations of religion that make truth claims. Paradoxically, projectionist theories, which make atheistic assumptions about reality may also be accused of theological reductionism. By making statements about the truth or falsehood of religious beliefs, they evaluate all truth claims in the light of their understanding of what is ultimate. Feuerbach's reversal of the subject and predicate (not God is love, but love is God), therefore, represents a form

of theological reductionism, thereby adding a further dimension explaining why the phenomenology of religion developed in the twentieth century as a non-reductive and at the same time a non-theological method for studying religions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to provide background material necessary for understanding the phenomenology of religion. I have drawn attention to key concepts in the philosophical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, particularly the *epoché* and the eidetic intuition, and then I noted that prevailing interpretations of religion at the end of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century were dominated by social scientific reductionism, many of which employed evolutionary and/or projectionist theories. I have also drawn attention to the growth of the comparative study of religions out of theological faculties and have noted that eventually phenomenologists of religion rejected the use of descriptive material to establish the superiority of one religion over another. In this sense, they also reacted against all forms of theological reductionism, including those that were employed by anti-religionist, projectionist theorists. After having outlined this essential background to the phenomenological movement in the study of religion, I am now ready to turn in the next chapter to outline the components within the phenomenological method itself.

Questions for discussion

1. What is the philosophical meaning of *epoché*? How could it apply to the unexamined assumptions people hold about the world?
2. What is meant by the phenomena? Can you provide some examples of them?
3. Note some relationships you might find between the phenomena you identified in question 2. Do these relationships exist in the phenomena themselves? If not, where do they come from?
4. Is it correct to call phenomenology a method of knowing rather than a comment on reality? Why or why not?
5. Briefly define biological evolution. Does it still influence theories of the origin of religion? Give reasons for your answer.
6. Evaluate the principal phenomenological objections to scientific reductionism, evolutionary ideas and projectionist theories.

7. W. Brede Kristensen argued that studying religion helps one 'grow religiously'. Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. Discuss the following statement: 'Sigmund Freud's interpretation of religion may be correct scientifically, but it is wrong phenomenologically.'
9. What is theological reductionism? How does your answer shed light on the differences between phenomenology and theology?