

The interaction between phenomenology and religion

Phenomenology is an established school of philosophy, European in origins but now worldwide, which emphasizes experience as a basis for understanding the human condition. That proposition may seem self-evident, although there are competing bases for understanding human existence and how we ought to act. One of the interesting developments in recent philosophical debate has been the interaction between phenomenological and religious thought. Indeed, it is sometimes said that phenomenology is becoming more theological, and theological discourse more phenomenological. This essay attempts to tease out six specific implications of this interaction between phenomenology and religion.

The first implication for a phenomenological approach to religion is that this may encourage a wider appreciation of the importance of ecumenism, and of tolerance in matters of belief. If we say that religion is a matter of personal experience, then it is logical to say that there are different forms through which this religious experience may express itself. This tolerance may even serve to assist believers and non-believers to seek commonalities, in that, for instance, both may recognize that the experience of awe and wonder at the universe is something common to all humanity.

A second implication for a phenomenological approach to religion is that this offers a breakthrough in how we approach the vexed task of the interpretation of sacred scriptures. One of the underlying problems associated with the notion of sacred scripture is that we tend to view such documents, which is what scriptures are, as statements of dogma. Although we may derive dogma from documents, the documents themselves represent the experiences of specific peoples and individuals at specific times. Once we recognize this reality, then we have renewed potential for understanding the relevance of these documents, which we may deem to be sacred scriptures, to our experience and situations.

A third implication for a phenomenological approach to religion is a renewed emphasis on social ethics. If we say that human experience is all important, then one implication is that alleviating avoidable human suffering is also of importance, as is the advocacy for social justice which will help achieve this end. Interestingly, this is what seems to be happening in the public face of religion, albeit slowly. Religious communities are increasingly defining themselves by the difference they make in people's lives, and by advocating the rights of those in socially unjust situations.

A fourth implication for a phenomenological approach to religion is also a renewed emphasis on the ethics of care. The ethics of care puts emphasis on the circumstances on the individual, and of caring for the individual, rather than necessarily and inflexibly following the dictates of dogma. Having said that, the two are not necessarily incompatible, as dogma may well emphasize the importance of caring for individuals. In other words, pastoral care, rather than dogmatic correctness, ought to be a priority. This too is something which, I believe, we can discern slowly unfolding in contemporary religious discourse.

A fifth implication for a phenomenological approach to religion is that phenomenology helps us to understand what is happening with religion in society, such as with the global

growth of new forms of spirituality, and the global growth of fundamentalist and charismatic religion. Ostensibly, new forms of spirituality and fundamentalist religion are diametrical opposites, in that one is exploring the new and the other tends to be conservative. Yet what both have in common is an emphasis on personal religious experience, as opposed to an emphasis on formal religious observance and the maintenance of correct dogma, which is how traditional religion is often perceived.

The final implication for a phenomenological approach to religion is that this opens the way to a creation spirituality, one that embraces and celebrates our experience of the world. One of the interesting ramifications of a creation spirituality is that we are more able to celebrate sexuality, in all its diversity and mystery. How we regard the world, and sexuality, has been long a vexed issue for religions, but a phenomenological approach to religion potentially allows us to celebrate a more aesthetic approach to life. Put simply, a phenomenological approach opens the door to understanding a more life-affirming role of religion.

I've tried to phrase the above implications within a faith-neutral context, as is appropriate in a philosophical essay such as this. However, I would suggest, in passing, that if one looks closely at the Hebrew tradition, there is much support for a phenomenological approach. The whole point of the central theonym in Hebrew religion (YHWH, or Yahweh) is that the divine being is so sacred as not to be capable of being objectified - only experienced and worshipped. This tradition is inherited in the world religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, although there's an additional twist in that Christianity claims that the divine becomes known through a specific person.

Does a phenomenological approach to religion necessarily lead to a moral and doctrinal relativism, namely, where all actions and all beliefs are equally valid, merely because these may be represented in the beliefs of a person, or because these actions or beliefs represent the personal experience of an individual? Not necessarily. We may still assert that there are truth statements within religion, which can be subject to scrutiny, and we may reach a conclusion that the truth statements are valid or invalid. However a phenomenological approach ought to encourage a greater humility in statements of dogma, as we realize that our own views are formed and mediated through personal experience.

Our era is often defined as a postmodern one - it's an often misunderstood term, but basically this means that all understandings are now open to question. That's really part of what is happening when we say that we are in an era where the phenomenological approach to religion dominates, or it ought to dominate. However, having all understandings now open to question and debate does not necessarily need to be bewildering, including for people who would describe themselves as people of faith. This can be an era of new discovery, including a new discovery of the relevance of religion to contemporary life.

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