

Emmanuel Odoom
Approaches to The Study of
Religions

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PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

Epoche and Eidetic Vision

In the study of religions, there have been numerous theories that have been propounded and by different scholars with different backgrounds. Some of these theories or approaches include historical, psychological, sociological, phenomenological methods, philosophical and anthropological approaches. One of the most popular and widely used by scholars is the phenomenological method, even though it has shortfalls but it has also been the key player even when using different methods of studying religion. Many other scholars have used this method a way of studying religion and they may include Bleeker, Cantwell Smith, Geoffrey Parinder, Ninian Smart, Mircea Eliade, Joachim Wach, and Van Del Leeuw.

The phenomenological method or approach to the study of religions has to do with studying and recording the observable aspect and those that are available to the human senses. This gives a clearer picture and structure of what a particular religion is since the practitioners are allowed to make claims about their religion. Dealing with religion phenomenologically means being neutral and never taking a side or assuming what should be and what ought not to be. This approach has two principles that were propounded by a philosopher called Edmond Husserl. These principles include Epoche and Eidetic Vision.

EPOCHE (BRACKETING)

Epoche stems from the Latin word 'epocho' which means "I hold back". Also, Epoché is an ancient Greek term which in the Hellenistic philosophy is a specialized term commonly deciphered as "suspension of judgment" yet in addition as "withholding of assent". In the cutting-edge theory of Phenomenology, it alludes to a process of putting aside suspicions and convictions. Sextus Empiricus defines epoche as: "a state of the intellect on account of which we neither deny nor affirm anything. Thus, it is not subject to questions of ultimate truth and therefore these questions must be relegated to the background when using this method or principle. Epoche entreats researchers to suspend verdict concerning the truth, and value of religious and metaphysical issues, claims and entities, and refrain from applying preconceived knowledge, prejudices or any form of biases. From the definition of Empiricus, we neither affirm nor deny anything and that means the

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researcher must and should not be concerned with the validity of claims made by the practitioners. Also, there should be objectivity and fairness without judgement.

Epoche is a bracketing-out of potentially distorting opinions and beliefs. Phenomenology of religion gives primacy to the point of view of the believers and insists that their integrity be respected (Daniel, 2012, p. 132). Ninian Smart referred to this as “methodological agnosticism” and “Bracketing”. This is also been referred to as “methodological neutrality”. Agnostic comes from the two Greek words “ginosko” which means “I know” and “agnosko” which also means “I don’t know”. Bracketing means the student should do away with all preconceived knowledge or notions when he really wants to get to the core of a religion. This will promote objectivity and fairness. According to J. L. Cox, the phenomenologist argues that a non-believer can appreciate the meaning of religion in the believer's own terms because he has suspended his own personal or academic presuppositions by temporarily placing them within brackets (epoche) thus permitting him to cultivate a feeling for the believer's own faith position (empathy).

EIDETIC VISION

Phenomenologists of religion, much like Husserl, feature the need to develop a 'feeling for' the religious people under scrutiny. This emerges from the way that one would not investigate inanimate objects yet individual people, with sentiments and feelings of their own. Sympathy and epoche are accordingly obviously related.

The word eidetic stems from the Greek ‘eidos’ which means “that which is seen”. That is the shape, form or essence. The word eidos was adopted by Husserl from its platonic designation to mean “universal essences”. These essences describe the nature or ‘whatness’ of something or in other words the features of something that makes it recognizable. According to Ninian Smart, in an attempt to grasp the essence of religious phenomena, one must be empathetic and intuitive. According to him, the prime focus is on seeing what the believer sees, trying to enter into the religious realms but not necessarily with endorsement.

There is also the eidetic intuition which according to Van Del Leeuw means interpolating the phenomena into the life of the student. With this, the student must get familiar and understand the religion from personal experiences. It implies that, as a scholar, it is necessary to have first-hand information from personal experiences other than being a scholar who sits in the library to compile notes. Thus, the student or researcher must be part of the religious activities I.e., “entering into the

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religion” and this is the empathetic interpolation. Entering into the religion means the student take part in all religious activities with proper and focused observation (participant observation). Taking part in the religious activities does not mean ‘conversion’ into the religion and that is where there is ‘empathic neutrality’ steps in. In other words, going into the religion involves understanding the feelings of the practitioners but not to share the feelings or get converted to the religion. Putting eidetic vision into use means having upper hand on firsthand information since dependency on secondary sources can be detrimental and might be exaggerated or subjective. It is also important to note that eidetic vision and the principle of epoche go hand in hand and therefore, as one put to use the eidetic vision, epoche should be available and at work.

The Shortfalls

The phenomenological method of studying religion has been one of the most popular and widely used approaches by scholars since it deals with studying the observable aspect of religions. The principle of epoche and eidetic vision are a very helpful tool in the field of phenomenology and the studies into religions. But as there are advantages to this approach, there are also disadvantages to its usage and application.

It is very obvious that when one is able to bracket his faith, preconceived knowledge and notions, there is going to be objectivity in the research. But on the other hand, this principle has shortfalls or weakness. A typical example is that one cannot absolutely bracket his faith. In this context, since every individual was born into a family, with friends and relatives around him and with different religious experiences, bracketing is not absolutely possible. This is because wherever one goes, he carries some emotions, notions and some other past experiences or preconceived knowledge and that is sure and likely to manifest when a student set out to make inquiries about religion. Also, bracketing can be in the shortest possible time but cannot be permanent. Daniel, 2012 explained: “The bracketing out of preconceived ideas represents a noble intention, particularly in the study of African traditional/indigenous religions which have been marginalized for a long time. Nevertheless, the basic concern should be the period for which the suspension of judgement is prescribed. If it is only temporarily, for the period of phenomenological investigation then one is bound to accept it. However, if epoche is taken to mean an almost permanent aversion to questions of truth and value then it is problematic.” Furthermore, the principle of epoche which insists that the believer is always right and the integrity of the practitioners be respected can result

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in the provision and recounting of false information. This can be seen in an instance wherein the African Traditional Religion, the elders are the reservoirs of information about the religion, since the brain forgets, some information provided can be forged by the narrators. Daniel espoused “In such systems, the usual response to questions 'why' is that 'things have always been so'. The experience of age does not necessarily provide answers to the application of symbols to new situations.” Some of the practitioners do not even have thorough knowledge about their religion and this could be detrimental to researchers or students who seek to understand a particular religion.

Phenomenological method of studying religion which comes with two Husserlian principles, Epoche and Eidetic Vision though has some other shortfalls and weaknesses but it has proved helpful and meaningful in religious studies and it calls out to finding and going to the core of religions through empirical studies. This approach ensures that students and or researchers get their knowledge base broadens as they gather new and firsthand information from the practitioners. Talking of religious and cultural tolerance, this approach is best since students get the chance to have participant observation I.e., entering into the religion and practicing with the practitioners of the religion.

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Religions

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