

REORIENTING PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD  
FOR THE CRITICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

by

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## ABSTRACT

The phenomenological method put forth by Edmund Husserl in *Logical Investigations* (1900) made its way into several academic disciplines over the last century. What started as a philosophical method of answering metaphysical and ontological questions was soon adopted by Gerardus van der Leeuw in *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1938), who sought to answer theological questions. Phenomenological methods continue within the field of philosophy, for example those influenced by Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), but are, for the most part, abandoned by religious studies scholars due to the theological trajectory set by van der Leeuw, among others. If, however, the phenomenological method of religion was to model itself after the philosophical approaches, it may become a tool for critical scholars of religion today. I begin with a section highlighting the differences between philosophical phenomenology and phenomenology of religion in order to identify the theological elements which appear in the phenomenological method of religion. By comparing the work of Martin Heidegger and Gerardus van der Leeuw, this section shows how Heidegger's approach is critical of van der Leeuw. Doing so illustrates the ways the philosophical phenomenological method can address the issues of theology found in the phenomenological method of religion. Then, I reference the phenomenological method as it appears in feminist and queer phenomenology in order to further explore the ways the phenomenological method may be critical of previous approaches to "religion."

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my close friend, Maia Wellborn, without whom things fall apart.

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## INTRODUCTION

As academic fields expand and evolve, so too do the methodologies which define them. The phenomenological method introduced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) has permeated fields such as philosophy, religious studies, and women's studies, taking new forms to accommodate the goals of the scholars using it. This method disrupts, among other things, the notion that individuals are able to derive metaphysical truths about the world through objective experience. Phenomenologists' concern with subjective experience proves useful for those seeking to understand how individuals relate to their environments, how experiences shape identity and embodiment, and how empirical observation may be limited. After Husserl published *Logical Investigations* in 1900,<sup>1</sup> two important thinkers—Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950)—used phenomenology from two different perspectives toward two very different ends. Soon their approaches—philosophical phenomenology and phenomenology of religion respectively—were seen as two drastically dissimilar methods. Philosophical phenomenology persists in scholarship today,<sup>2</sup> but phenomenology of religion has for the most part been abandoned by scholars in religious studies

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1. Originally published in German (*Logische Untersuchungen*) as two volumes in 1900 and 1901.

2. These fields being philosophy, feminist, and queer phenomenology.

due to its theological associations.<sup>3</sup> Because both forms of phenomenology maintain the focus of subjective experience in relation to the world, their seeming antagonism is worth exploring. Rather than reinforcing or supporting theological agendas, I propose that comparing and drawing from phenomenological methods across disciplines will demonstrate the productive utility of phenomenology for the academic study of religion. Specifically, the ways in which the phenomenological method disrupts assumptions about the world resembles critical scholars in the field of religion's critique of constructed categories. The phenomenological method's attention to experience can be paired with a critique of essentialist categories derived from that very same method to gain a fuller understanding of the conditions that shape a subject's and society's reality.

I will illustrate this point by closely comparing the phenomenological methods of Heidegger and van der Leeuw, contemporaneous figures who wrote at the same time and drew heavily from the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl.<sup>4</sup> I will focus primarily on excerpts from Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) and van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1938) as representative works for each scholar. Looking closely at their methods, I will highlight the way each thinker differs in his interpretation of "phenomenon." Van der Leeuw opens *Religious in Essence and Manifestation* with a discussion of "Power," which he

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3. Broadly speaking, "theological" may refer to all claims about ultimacy that postulate teleological or transcendental essences. More narrowly and typically, these claims refer to God, the divine or ultimate reality.

4. Husserl began his studies in mathematics. He developed the phenomenological method as a response to the methods being employed in the natural sciences. The emphasis on empirical observation ignored the subjective experiences of the subject—a problem Husserl sought to address.

argues is the basis of religion.<sup>5</sup> “Power” is “attributed to what we regard as the sublime, such as Creation”<sup>6</sup> and “is thought of only when it manifests itself in some very striking way.”<sup>7</sup> When confronted with “Power” a person is overcome with feelings of amazement, fear, or awe.<sup>8</sup> Later in the work, van der Leeuw defines religion as “an ultimate experience that evades our observation, a revelation which in its very essence is, and remains, concealed.”<sup>9</sup> These descriptions of “Power” and “religion” come together to establish religious experiences as distinct from everyday experiences. Religious experiences in *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* can be identified by intense feelings and ability to guide the subject to ultimate religious meaning. This line of thought, which he will use to argue for the existence of God, runs counter to the philosophical phenomenological method, which explains how phenomena can appear to any subject and broadens the definition of phenomena to any experience, no matter how mundane. Heidegger defines phenomena as “*what shows itself in itself*, what is manifest.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike van der Leeuw, he claims there is no preference in what counts as phenomena. If phenomenologists of religion adopt Heidegger’s notion of phenomenon, then religious experiences would not be regarded as something separate or unique from other experiences. Phenomenologies of religion that integrate Heidegger's approach would be seen by critical

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5. Van der Leeuw, 27.

6. Van der Leeuw, 28.

7. Van der Leeuw, 28.

8. Van der Leeuw, 28.

9. Van der Leeuw, 683.

10. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 27.

scholars of religion as complimentary to their work rather than problematic. Using the phenomenological method, scholars in religious studies could consider the role of experience in the critique of the category “religion” rather than the historical and cultural contexts alone.

A comparison of Heidegger’s and van der Leeuw’s phenomenological methods demonstrates that phenomenology can serve as a complimentary tool for scholars in religious studies if it patterns itself more closely to philosophical phenomenology rather than what has been historically understood as phenomenology of religion. I will reference several contemporary scholars whose writings echo this sentiment in order to open doors for new phenomenologies of religion. I then conclude with an examination of phenomenological methods as they appear in feminist and queer phenomenology. Feminist and queer phenomenologists adopted these methods in order to write on concepts pertaining to the experiences of marginalized groups in society. Their approach offers insight into the ways that phenomenology can expand and change according to who is utilizing it.

## SITUATION IN THE FIELD

While the term dates back as far as the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup>, philosophical phenomenology<sup>12</sup> began with the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). He drew inspiration from Descartes' *Meditations* which sought to do away with skepticism in scientific knowledge by "ignoring substance dualism in order to probe more carefully the manner of appearances of entities in consciousness."<sup>13</sup> Descartes helped Husserl lay the foundation of the phenomenological method: to ground objectivity in subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> Like Descartes, Husserl felt this could only be done if scholars turned to experience rather than empirical observation alone.<sup>15</sup> Husserl used these ideas to develop his own method that took Descartes's philosophy further by introducing the concept

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11. Douglas Allen, "Phenomenology of Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, vol 10 (Farmington, Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 7087. There is evidence that the term "phenomenology" appeared as early as 1764 by Johann Heinrich Lambert. Immanuel Kant also wrote extensively on 'phenomena'. For Kant, phenomena consisted of things that appear to the human consciousness and are constructed by the human mind. Then, G. F. W. Hegel sought to disrupt this dualistic thinking and argued that phenomena were "stages of knowledge."

12. John J. Drummond, "Husserl, Edmund," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald Borchert, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. vol 4 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 521-22. Husserl ventured away from his studies in mathematics and developed phenomenology as a way to arrive at scientific and empirical truths. He often referred to phenomenology as a "rigorous science," working alongside observable experiences of the world rather than against them.

13. Dermot Moran, *Introduction to phenomenology*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.

14. Dermot Moran, *Introduction to phenomenology*, 18.

15. Dermot Moran, *Edmund Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 43.

of *epoché*, or bracketing. Rather than ignoring the influence of one's own experiences on their environment, it is necessary to take into account biases, feelings, preferences, interests, and confront the complexities of an unfixed reality. Then, to investigate the phenomenon, one must separate these feelings and perceptions and see the object as it presents itself. In other words, phenomenology involves "looking at objects of analysis by examining how we, in our many ways of being, actually 'constitute' objects."<sup>16</sup> For Husserl, a phenomenon is "any possible object of consciousness,"<sup>17</sup> which means that every subjective experience is worthy of study. This form of thought led to work by philosophical phenomenologists like Martin Heidegger, whose work continues to be read and critically adapted by scholars working in the fields of feminist and queer studies.

Phenomenology of religion draws from Husserl's writings on phenomenology and nineteenth century Christian theology.<sup>18</sup> Scholars in this subfield use the terminology and phenomenological method of Husserl and turn it towards the religious individual and religious experiences. While Husserl and other philosophical phenomenologists deliberately avoided singling out religious phenomena,<sup>19</sup> phenomenologists of religion see this method as a path to

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16. Aaron W. Hughes, "Science Envy in Theories of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, no. 4 (2010): 297.

17. Thomas Ryba, "Phenomenology of Religion," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. Robert A. Segal (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 102.

18. James L. Cox, "The Phenomenology of Religion," in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 401.

19. Heidegger being one of these thinkers. This is because philosophical phenomenologists did not want to give preference to one kind of experience over another.

discovering the meaning of “religion.” Early phenomenologists of religion<sup>20</sup> assumed the existence of a divine being, gave priority to the feelings of religious individuals, accepted their unique experiences as true, and argued that it was possible to arrive at religious truths through introspection.<sup>21</sup> This becomes a problem when attempting to integrate phenomenology of religion into modern scholarship because, “the scholar of religion cannot take a theological stand and address the sacred as an aspect or an agent of a presumed other-worldly reality but must view religious categories as symbolic constructions and representations of human cognition.”<sup>22</sup> Employing the phenomenological method developed by phenomenologists of religion involves not only assuming that religion is a category with traits independent of social and historical conditions, but that religion exists—a belief that is not compatible with secular scholarship in the field of religion.

Phenomenology of religion is often criticized by religious studies scholars because the methods used in phenomenology of religion “created the very religion they purported to study.”<sup>23</sup> Many scholars in religious studies no longer accept that there is a *sui generis* “thing” known as

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20. Douglas Allen, “Phenomenology of Religion,” 7089-93. Notable figures in the phenomenology of religion include Max Scheler (1874-1928), W. Brede Kristensen (1867-1953), and Rudolf Otto (1869-1937).

21. Allen, 7090-92.

22. Veikko Anttonen, “Sacred,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. by Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), 277.

23. Paul-Francois Tremlett, “The problem with the jargon of inauthenticity: Towards a materialistic repositioning of the analysis of postmodern religion,” *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2013): 463.

religion which acts on its own, separate from history, culture, and individual motivations.<sup>24</sup>

Russell McCutcheon, for example, takes issue with the category “religion” because it often leads to the misunderstanding that religion is something outside of cultural and historical influences. Defining “religion” or classifying something as “religious” does not result in understanding the world as it “really is.”<sup>25</sup> For him, studying the category “religion” can act as a kind of sociological tool for understanding why scholars classify religions in the ways they do rather than serving as a way to arrive at truths about different religions. Robert Segal states that the representative texts in the phenomenology of religion work towards “an accurate recording of the irreducibly religious nature of religion for believers.”<sup>26</sup> As a result, these texts neither investigate or suspend their working assumptions, and instead adopt selected elements of Husserl’s method to serve primarily as tool for deriving truths about the nature of religion and/or God. For Segal, “the methods that phenomenology privileged were simply incompatible with real, scientific endeavor.”<sup>27</sup> The key figures and texts associated with phenomenology of religion have therefore been understood by scholars to be leaving several theological presuppositions uninvestigated.

Phenomenology of religion becomes obsolete for scholars in religious studies when “religious” experience is stated clearly as the object of study. The point of these critics can be

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24. William Arnal, “Critical Responses to Phenomenological Theories of Religion,” in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 421-434.

25. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 70.

26. Robert A. Segal, “In Defense of Reductionism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51, no. 1 (1983): 107.

27. Paul-Francois Tremlett, “The problem with the jargon of inauthenticity: Towards a materialistic repositioning of the analysis of postmodern religion,” 463.

summed up as follows: “religion cannot be assumed to be always and everywhere the same but the term remains plastic enough to encompass a range of practices from different times and places.”<sup>28</sup> The problem with phenomenology is it maintains theological meanings with the category of “religion.” Timothy Fitzgerald claims that “phenomenology is fundamentally a form of liberal ecumenical theology”<sup>29</sup> and that “Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade have turned what is basically a theological/metaphysical assumption into a theory of religion.”<sup>30</sup> For Fitzgerald, it is necessary to abandon the term “religion” all together, thus, implicitly arguing for the abandonment of the phenomenology of religion, too.<sup>31</sup>

All of these critics are correct in reading previous work in phenomenology of religion as a project that seeks to identify the essence of religion. While this was true with regard to the texts associated with the phenomenology of religion they chose to read, it is just as problematic to generalize that all texts drawing on the phenomenological methods have the same content, assumptions, and outcomes. For example, philosophical phenomenology and feminist and queer phenomenology may hold productive possibilities for the study of religion. However, this can be done only with the adoption of phenomenological methods that do not assume there is such a thing as “religion” with a transcendent essence that is exclusively unique—this approach may be advanced with help from philosophical, feminist, and queer phenomenological methodology.

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28. Tremlett, 464.

29. Timothy Fitzgerald, “A critique of “religion” as a cross-cultural category,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 9, no. 2 (1997): 91.

30. Timothy Fitzgerald, “A critique of “religion” as a cross-cultural category,” 92.

31. Tremlett, 464.

To address the role of “experience” it is necessary to clarify how the term “experience” is used throughout this paper. One serious concern for scholars in religious studies is the idea of using subjective experiences as starting points for studying certain categories—mainly religion. In Joan W. Scott’s essay, “The Evidence of Experience,”<sup>32</sup> she critiques the idea that experience should serve as the foundation of knowledge about the past. Scott walks through several historical accounts given in light of the experiences of individuals living through events rather than accounts derived by facts alone. Using experience as the primary reference for a historical event leads to assumptions that experience is universal, immediate, and factual when, in reality, it is contingent on the lived reality of the subject.<sup>33</sup> Instead of relying on experiences as evidence for knowledge, the historian should interrogate the systems and discourse that create experiences to analyze how experiences are produced.<sup>34</sup> Scott takes a critical approach to studying experiences as if they can lead to historical truths and, thus, might be skeptical of adopting the phenomenological methods, wherein "experience" is subjected to a different conceptual analysis.. However, the phenomenological understanding of experience does not suggest that studying experiences can somehow lead to objective truths about reality and, because of this, the phenomenological method may still prove to be useful for critical scholars of religion.

“Experience” has many definitions and its meaning has changed since Husserl, Heidegger, and van der Leeuw began writing. Robert H. Sharf identifies two definitions of the term as it is used in the field of religious studies. The first defines experience as something that always refers back to social or political conditions and disregards the notion that experiences

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32. Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991).

33. Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” 777.

34. Scott, 796.

constitute any reality other than that outside of the subject.<sup>35</sup> This is in line with Scott's argument that experiences are products of an external reality and, thus, do not constitute reality in any kind of way. She would go on to claim that they are of little use to the scholar or historian because they only blur facts surrounding historical accounts. The second is the phenomenological definition where experience means "to 'directly perceive', 'observe', 'be aware of', or 'be conscious of.'"<sup>36</sup> This definition, according to Sharf, leads scholars to believe that experience in this context allows for a kind of private, mind-independent reality in which truths can exist. However, a phenomenological understanding of experience avoids both conceptualizations of experience proposed by Sharf.

Scott suggests that one's environment produces experience, but the phenomenological methods are in general agreement that "experience" is the co-constitutive production of a relationship between subjects and phenomena. If this is the case, then the phenomenological approaches to experience are useful for the critical scholar of religion because it is insufficient to rely only on objective facts that appear to act independently of subjective experience. Sharf's primary point is that experience can exist as something immediate to perception but "resists all signification,"<sup>37</sup> in other words, it is valuable in that it constitutes each subject's reality but cannot be used to identify meaning because experiences are not universal.

Sharf goes on to point out the important role experience plays in representing marginalized groups in scholarship. Scholars find themselves in a position of power when it

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35. Robert H. Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7, no. 11-12 (2000): 276.

36. Robert H. Sharf, "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion," 276.

37. Sharf, 285.

comes to defining and employing categories and constructs. They write and speak as though they are able to fully understand the lives and selfhood of others even though these others are not participating in discourse. In order defend “against the tendency to objectify, to domesticate, to silence and eviscerate the other has been to sanction the other’s singular and irreducible experience of the world.”<sup>38</sup> While critical scholars are complicating the constructed categories used by other scholars in religious studies, they may not necessarily consider the importance of studying the experiences of those marginalized by those very categories. The phenomenological method provides an account of experience as something real for every subject that plays an important role in constituting phenomena while also acknowledging the fact that experience is not objective, universal, or sufficient for understanding phenomena. Making room for experience as defined by the phenomenological method thereby provides a complimentary critique of categories such as "religion."

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38. Sharf, 284.

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD IN *BEING AND TIME*

*Being and Time* is widely considered to be among the most influential philosophical texts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the philosophical development and application of the phenomenological methods. In this text, Martin Heidegger focuses on how the phenomenological method may critique ontology. Among the first moves in the text's opening sections is to disregard Husserl's claim that the phenomenological method could be pressed forward by religious questions using his transcendental philosophy.<sup>39</sup> He suggests, "Phenomenology is the way of access to, and the demonstrative manner of determination of, that which is to become the theme of ontology. *Ontology is possible only as phenomenology.*"<sup>40</sup> Husserl's work is implicitly criticized here for not realizing the assumptions at work in his method by not investigating the conditions of ontology, which is among the key objectives for the methods worked out in *Being and Time*. Heidegger uses the term "Dasein" in reference to a mode of analysis "which we ourselves in each case are and which includes inquiry among the possibilities of its being."<sup>41</sup> The analytic of Dasein produces ontological questions that previous philosophical investigations failed to do: to turn towards everyday phenomena, rather than some interiority of a subject, *ego* or *cogito*, as a source of questions. Like critical scholars in religious studies, *Being and Time* proposes a method

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39. Husserl's transcendental philosophy as it appeared in phenomenology acted to move the subject out of the 'natural attitude' by moving beyond empirical observation. These questions often mirrored those posed by theologians because transcendent language is often used to speak about God and the Holy.

40. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 33.

41. Heidegger, 7.

focused on turning towards what constitutes phenomenon as opposed to an object studied as if they are natural categories, for example, the category “religion.”

Heidegger’s method affirms the critiques of phenomenology of religion by recent scholars of religion because he makes a point of discussing phenomena with reference to all experience rather than only religious experience. The primary goal for him is to work to critically reassess Husserl’s adoption of Kant’s famous maxim, “To the things themselves!”<sup>42</sup> The analysis focuses on how the maxim is made up of two components: *phenomenon* and *logos*. To understand phenomenology, one must work through the both concepts. “Phenomenon,” according to Greek definition, means “what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest.”<sup>43</sup> Heidegger identifies two kinds of phenomena: phenomena of semblance and self-showing phenomena.<sup>44</sup> Heidegger’s critique is that the only concern for the phenomenologist are the characteristics of phenomenon that show themselves. In other words, it does not matter how a phenomenon shows itself or if there is a way to determine what a phenomenon of semblance is referring to because the phenomenologist is incapable of grasping that which does not appear directly before her. In Part B concerning the concept of logos, Plato and Aristotle are read to use several definitions of logos that are often associated with “discourse” but actually encompass “reason, judgement, concept, definition, ground, relation.”<sup>45</sup> The argument for Heidegger, then,

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42. Heidegger, 26.

43. Heidegger, 27.

44. Heidegger, 28. A phenomenon of semblance does not show itself, but, rather, “announces itself through something that does show itself.”

45. Heidegger, 30.

is that logos really means “to make manifest ‘what is being talked about’ in discourse.”<sup>46</sup> It is through discourse that one is able to “manifest” the appearing phenomenon in order to understand what the phenomenon shows and talk about it with others. The important point being made here is that the characteristics of a phenomenon are definable only by their ability to be articulated in discourse. In other words, there is no unconditional access to phenomena.<sup>47</sup> The “self-showing” of phenomena appear out of nowhere precisely because they have no prior ontological essence. For Heidegger’s phenomenological method, perception is what is true because it is the only thing one has access to. However, it is essential that the subject understand the limitations of perception and actively try to separate her own assumptions to interpret objects as they appear.

Critical theorists in religious studies make a similar move when studying the conditions that constitute the category “religion.” *Being and Time* also argues that there is value in trying to understand how phenomena appear in a way that does not require grounding in essences. For Heidegger, phenomena that are distinctly religious in nature cannot exist because they imply the existence of an essence of religion. There are issues with discourse and assumed categories but, for Heidegger, because discourse and perception are the only modes of appearing that this method can access, discourse and perception are worthy of study.

Heidegger brings together phenomenon and logos to set up what he means by “phenomenology.” It is not a discipline that goes about making transcendent claims for objective

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46. Heidegger, 30.

47. According to Heidegger, then, there is no way to talk about “religion” outside of discourse. The essentializing claims that van der Leeuw makes about the Holy, Power, and God are problematic because they assume that one can describe that which is outside of direct perception.

experience, for example "history" or "religion," but rather “a science ‘of’ the phenomenon...that grasps its objects in such a way that everything about them to be discussed must be directly indicated and directly demonstrated.”<sup>48</sup> To grasp something phenomenologically is to understand that the conditions of appearance are based in concealment. Its very meaning is tied up in this concealment and individuals can arrive at “truth” only when they rely on their perception of an object—concealed and unconcealed. Heidegger writes,

Essentially, nothing else stands ‘behind’ the phenomenon of phenomenology. Nevertheless, what is to become a phenomenon can be concealed. And it is precisely because phenomenon are initially and for the most part not given that phenomenology is needed. Being covered up is the counterconcept to ‘phenomenon.’<sup>49</sup>

To approach something “phenomenologically,” then, is to start from a place that accepts the concealment of phenomena for all subjective experiences. This means that any proposals about essences are foreclosed by the phenomenological method. The goal is not to describe or define these phenomena as transcendental, but to make sense of the subject’s relationship with phenomena in order to address questions of Being (ontology). Religious studies scholars have good reason to be suspicious of how concealment is discussed by previous phenomenologists of religion, because this is often associated with arguments for God. But the method proposed in *Being and Time* does not try to attribute essences to that which is concealed. Theology makes its way into van der Leeuw’s work—and subsequently phenomenology of religion—precisely because it focuses on the concealed aspect of phenomenon and tried to describe and name it.

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48. Heidegger, 33.

49. Heidegger, 34.

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD IN *RELIGION IN ESSENCE AND MANIFESTATION*

Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950)—like Heidegger—was a key figure in his field. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1938) is still referred to as an example of phenomenology of religion today. Van der Leeuw was a contemporary of Heidegger, citing Heidegger several times in van der Leeuw’s sections on the phenomenological method.<sup>50</sup> While van der Leeuw’s work draws from Heidegger’s philosophy, he “chose as his subject the place and task of the study of religion in Christian theology.”<sup>51</sup> Heidegger and van der Leeuw’s drastically different interpretations of Husserl’s phenomenological method and the fact they were contemporaries make comparing *Being and Time* and *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* an interesting case study for reassessing the usefulness of the phenomenological method for critical scholars in the field of religious studies.

In the section “Phenomenon and Phenomenology” in *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, van der Leeuw lays out the stages of phenomenological discussion: (1) naming something and believing this name is sufficient for understanding this thing, (2) becoming aware that the object does present itself to an individual entirely or directly but is a symbol of some other meaning and must be interpreted by the phenomenologist, (3) bracketing assumptions and seeing the phenomenon only as it appears, (4) clarifying what appears and making connections in order to arrange a structure, (5) recognizing that these practices will lead to an understanding of

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50. Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 676-77.

51. Richard J. Plantinga, “Experience, Expression, Understanding: Gerardus Van Der Leeuw’s Phenomenological Method,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 46 (2011): 88.

reality based in manifest appearances but cannot be mastered because it is “infinitely remote from us and unattainable,” (6) realizing that phenomenology must always change in the face of facts found through philological and archeological research, and, finally, (7) accepting that phenomenology will lead the phenomenologist to objectivity.<sup>52</sup> The key point to highlight here is that the subject recognizes the concealedness of an object while also claiming to be able to arrive at the essence of an object.<sup>53</sup> *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* contradicts itself by taking up Heidegger’s concept of phenomena being both concealed and unconcealed and, at the same time, attributing ontological characteristics to that which is concealed. In *Being and Time*, concealment does not refer to something ontological, but, rather, a condition of appearing. If there is anything “essential” about concealment with regard to phenomena, it is that this is their mode of appearing. To be something, nothing is fully “here” or “there” because the appearance something is a relation, not a stasis. Heidegger’s phenomenological method seeks to explain the conditions of how phenomena appear to a subject, while van der Leeuw attempts to explain the phenomena itself. This is how van der Leeuw is able to work in essentialist, theological claims about religion.

The object of interest for van der Leeuw was religious experience which he regarded as unique from other subjective experiences. He writes extensively on the “Power” present in religious experience that characterizes it as “wholly other, different, out of the ordinary, strange, marked off, *tabu*, *mana*-like, superior, numinous, sacred—or, to sum all of these up in one

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52. Van der Leeuw, 671-78.

53. Van der Leeuw, 676-77.

convenient concept: holy, or Holy.”<sup>54</sup> Van der Leeuw emphasizes what he considers to be the power of religious experience because “in and about his own life man seeks something that is superior, whether he wishes merely to make use of this or to worship it.”<sup>55</sup> As he sees it, there is something inherent in every person to strive towards power and, thus, religious experience, whether they know it or not. He shifts the focus of his method away from all experiences to religious experiences to suggest that “the final ground of understanding does not lie in oneself but in the other (God) who understands from the other side of the boundary.”<sup>56</sup> In van der Leeuw’s methodology, the phenomena of the Holy, Power, and God are required for the subject to arrive at objective truths about reality.

As evidenced by just these brief accounts, Heidegger and van der Leeuw revised and applied their phenomenological methods in drastically different ways towards very different purposes. The essentialist ontology in van der Leeuw’s writing, may be contrasted with Heidegger’s active criticism of the transcendental elements of Husserl’s method. Van der Leeuw embraced Husserl’s transcendental method in order to ask theological questions. Heidegger’s early education took place in Catholic seminary but, after beginning to study with Husserl, “a significant counterforce to his Christian, transcendently oriented convictions began to form.”<sup>57</sup> Heidegger says theology, “obstructs or misleads the basic question of the being of Dasein is the orientation thoroughly colored by the anthropology of Christianity and the ancient world, whose

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54. Richard J. Plantinga, “Experience, Expression, Understanding: Gerardus Van Der Leeuw’s Phenomenological Method,” 88.

55. Van der Leeuw, 679.

56. Plantinga, 102.

57. Charles E. Scott, “Heidegger, Martin,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Donald Borchert, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. vol 4 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 288.

inadequate ontological foundations personalism and the philosophy of life also ignore.”<sup>58</sup>

Through the analytic of Dasein, Heidegger makes clear that the subject must first bracket his or her previous [theological and anthropological] conceptions of being in order to understand its subjectivity. In critiquing the category “religion,” critical scholars are attempting to set aside assumptions about “religion” to gain a better understanding of how the term is conditioned and constructed, a strategy that resembles Heidegger’s use of bracketing to arrive at the conditions of ontology.

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58. Heidegger, 47.

## CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS

Several contemporary scholars of religion see potential adaptations of philosophical phenomenology among the methods of religious studies. Considering the adaptations of phenomenological method in feminist and queer studies will broaden the applications of phenomenology in ways that religious studies scholars might find better suited for a more sociological approach to religion than Husserl's or Heidegger's phenomenological method.

Jonathan Tuckett argues for the integration of philosophical phenomenology into phenomenology of religion. He suggests that a phenomenological method consistent with Husserl's phenomenological method is not only possible but also useful for both philosophers and religious studies scholars. His technique involves using Husserl's phenomenological method to critique phenomenology of religion in order to expose areas of phenomenology of religion that could benefit from philosophical phenomenology. Tuckett points out that in a Husserlian phenomenology of religion informed by a closer reading of Husserl's texts, "religion" is not seen as something with an essence. Rather, "What makes an institution/object/event/phenomenon "religious" is not some enduring characteristic, what makes it "religious" is *who* is engaging/using it."<sup>59</sup> Husserl's method attempts to determine structures and conditions that may be essential to perception, but nowhere does the method postulate essences for objects of perception. Husserl asserts "that the immediate phenomenological experience of an object is

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59. Jonathan Tuckett, "Prolegomena to a Philosophical Phenomenology of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (2017): 32.

constantly changing.”<sup>60</sup> This would mean that religion, if there is such a phenomenon in the Husserlian sense would be studied much in the same way as phenomena according to philosophical phenomenology—as existing only in relation to the subjective experience rather than as an object with a transcendent essence. In this way, understanding Husserl’s method becomes useful for understanding critique the category “religion” in a way aligned with religious studies.

Likewise, Jason N. Blum argues that a phenomenological method exists that is not theological and can help religious studies scholars interpret experience and consciousness from the religious perspective. Interpreting experience and consciousness may be useful to “understand how the religious subject...regards such phenomena and specifically what the meaning and significant of such phenomena are for the subject.”<sup>61</sup> This view of experience and consciousness is not oriented towards understanding the transcendent, but, rather, tries to interrogate the conditions of relationality by which subjects and phenomena come to be understood as “religious.” He states, “the meaning that phenomenology of religion seeks to disclose is not transcendent; it is the meaning encapsulated and expressed in the religious discourse, text, or experience under analysis.”<sup>62</sup> This perspective is similar to those held by critical theorists in religious studies. Instead of attempting to explain religious experiences as if

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60. Craig Martin, “[T]he thing itself always steals away,” (presented at the annual meeting of the North American Association for the Study of Religion, Denver, Colorado, 16-18 November, 2018), 5.

61. Jason N. Blum, “Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 4 (2012): 1031.

62. Jason N. Blum, “Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies,” 1030.

they are inherently religious, the phenomenological method and critical theory in the study of religion contextualize what subjects perceive as religious.

The concept of contextualizing how individuals perceive “religion” as a phenomenon can be carried out by turning to the historical and cultural factors that condition individual experience, what Aaron W. Hughes calls “cultural phenomenology,” which does the work of revising the understanding of the category “religion.” Hughes asserts that religion does not exist separately from the “so-called ‘political,’ ‘economic,’ ‘social,’ and the like” which “further reveals that terms and categories such as the ‘sacred,’ ‘god,’ even ‘time’ itself, are not some substantial things out there.”<sup>63</sup> This is consistent with Tuckett’s reading of Husserl: that religion does not contain an essence. In fact, Hughes directly refers to van der Leeuw when he says that, “All that exists does so as phenomena—not essences, not manifestations—and that they must be understood contextually.”<sup>64</sup> Hughes’ approach to religion may resonate more with scholars of religion due to his focus on history and culture. Tuckett, Blum, and Hughes address the concerns posed by contemporary scholars in religious studies—mainly, in the example of van der Leeuw, that phenomenology of religion assumes that “religion” has an essential quality. Revising a phenomenological method in light of these scholars can help orient the method more toward the historical and cultural factors that condition the category “religion,” an approach that will be more useful to scholars in religious studies.

Husserl’s phenomenological method studies how a phenomenon appears to an individual rather than trying to describe the essence of the phenomenon itself. Heidegger’s phenomenological method continues Husserl’s work, using the perception of phenomena to

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63. Aaron W. Hughes, “Science Envy in Theories of Religion,” 300.

64. Hughes, 300.

investigate ontological questions rather than metaphysical ones. A phenomenological method informed by Husserl and Heidegger may be useful in the study of how “religion” is perceived as a category whose content depends upon the scholar using it. The next section goes further in revealing the ways the phenomenological method can be useful for religious studies scholars. Moving outside of the field of philosophy, scholars in feminist and queer studies have also adopted the phenomenological method to disrupt normative categories and highlight the specific ways experience acts on queer bodies. An analysis of the phenomenological methods as it appears in feminist and queer studies gives evidence that the phenomenological method can adapt to approaches other than those in the field of philosophy.

## FEMINIST AND QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY

The phenomenological method has been applied in a number of other disciplines. Specifically of interest here, feminist and queer phenomenology has applied Husserl and Heidegger's method further, with productive, non-theological results. These contributions are ones scholars in religious studies would do well to take into account before a wholesale rejection of phenomenological method.

In the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) used phenomenology to examine the category "woman" in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). She argues, "that both empirical sciences and philosophy as we know them have systematically neglected wide areas of human experience."<sup>65</sup> According to de Beauvoir, "woman" has been constructed by society and imposed on female identified bodies, where "woman" is treated as if it is a naturally occurring category and guides women's experience from birth.<sup>66</sup> De Beauvoir's philosophy is critical of Husserl's and Heidegger's assumption that experiences are universal. They fail to consider the different elements that condition subjective experiences. Her feminist argument here reveals, "a systematic bias in supposedly general and universal descriptions and

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65. Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a phenomenology of sexual difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 23.

66. This idea can be compared to Husserl's "natural attitude." Labels and constructs like "woman" are "taken for granted" and accepted without question. This results in the subject avoiding metaphysical and ontological questions about experience.

analysis of human experience.”<sup>67</sup> Queer subjects are also left out by early philosophical phenomenologists because Heidegger does not consider the ways embodiment changes for minorities and the marginalized. Thus, feminist theorists such as de Beauvoir demonstrate a way to criticize the phenomenological method while still making productive use of it. De Beauvoir’s critique of the category “woman” as a transcendent, fixed essence is similar to the ways this thesis challenges the category of “religion” in van der Leeuw. She does not reject Heidegger’s phenomenological method, but critically revises it in order to produce an argument about the conditions of relation that make possible the subjective perception of “woman” as well as the phenomenological experience of that category. Husserl and Heidegger laid the foundation for the phenomenological disruption of categories, but their ontological and metaphysical questions often ignored the complexities behind the diverse experiences of phenomena that may be of interest to scholars in religious studies. In this way, de Beauvoir shows how a phenomenological approach to “religion” may avoid essentialism.

Feminist phenomenologists such as Sara Heinämaa and Sara Ahmed use Husserl’s concept of the “living body” to focus on the effects of embodiment on a given subject. “Living bodies” are “vegetable bodies, animal bodies, and human bodies—other people’s bodies as well as our own bodies.”<sup>68</sup> Ahmed uses the “living body” because “the body is ‘here’ as a point from which we begin, and from which the world unfolds, as being both more and less over there.”<sup>69</sup> The “living body” allows Ahmed to study “the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping

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67. Sara Heinämaa, *Toward a phenomenology of sexual difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, 24.

68. Heinämaa, 26.

69. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

bodies and worlds.”<sup>70</sup> Queer and feminist phenomenologists delve deeper into what it means to study the phenomena that constitute these starting points, taking Husserl’s and Heidegger’s work further without slipping into claims about theology or metaphysical essences.

As the phenomenological method finds a place in feminist and queer studies, new questions and theories arise that deepen the ways the phenomenological method may be applied to a variety of topics. Just as de Beauvoir argues about “woman,” so too does Ahmed argue that “experience” is not a transcendent category that may be used without critical analysis across gendered and sexual identifications. Ahmed analyzes the concept of orientation in order to clarify why this is the case. To be oriented involves recognizing the way space acts relationally in order to constitute the phenomenon of the individual. Ahmed states, “If space is oriented, then what appears depends on one’s point of view.”<sup>71</sup> Metaphysical claims are productions of orientation whose relations are born from socially constructed norms that point individuals in predetermined directions. This idea mirrors Hughes’s argument that cultural factors are largely responsible for the experiences and categories present in society. To properly understand orientation, there must first be an understanding of the rules and definitions of direction. Ahmed claims, “The social depends in part on agreement about how we measure space and time, which is why social conflict can often be experience as being ‘out of time’ as well as ‘out of place’ with others.”<sup>72</sup> Boundaries—or, lines—necessitate a designation of what fits within and what lies outside.

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70. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 2.

71. Ahmed, 12.

72. Ahmed, 13.

What Ahmed does that Husserl does not is delve into what it would look like to exist outside of the lines rather than trying only to arrive at truths about the world. She also She offers a deeper consideration of how one's body might influence what needs to be bracketed and how lines effect some bodies more than others. Ahmed may be read to extend de Beauvoir's critique of Heidegger in so far as Heidegger's Dasein—a being that considers its own being—is drastically different for individuals that society labels as 'other.' Ahmed explains why queer individuals outside of societal boundaries are forced to take into account not only what it means to interact with the world, but also how their very identity excludes them from social goods:

The concept of 'orientations' allows us to expose how life gets directed in some ways rather than others, through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. A queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return.<sup>73</sup>

It is only when the phenomenological method is willing to engage how orientation factors into the way subjects encounter phenomena that it can be applicable across social agents and scholarly fields.

Ahmed echoes the 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenological text of de Beauvoir in her task of disrupting norms—or as she refers to them, lines—presented as naturalized categories or essences. Throughout the discussion of orientation, Ahmed importantly highlights how the rigorous application of the phenomenological method involves analysis of disorientation. She writes, “Moments of disorientation...are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground.”<sup>74</sup> It is possible to read disorientation as a part of both Husserl's and

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73. Ahmed, 21.

74. Ahmed, 157.

Heidegger's methods.<sup>75</sup> It is implied that these disruptions influence the subject, but it is unclear how. Feminist and queer phenomenologists take this tool introduced by Husserl and Heidegger and project it back onto the subject and the body. In doing so, they are able to gain insight into how the disrupted norms effect some bodies more than others. Ahmed writes, "disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis. This shows us how the world itself is more 'involved' in some bodies than in others, as it takes such bodies as the contours of ordinary experience."<sup>76</sup> Queer bodies are useful to phenomenology in that frequent disorientation cultivates a space that inevitably results in reflecting on one's own being. Giving attention to relations of disorientation around queer bodies is one method of bracketing naturalized or essentialized categories. Patricia Huntington argues, "Heidegger's genius consists in his revealing how history weds us to limited forms of perception and reflection; his weakness, in his failing to comprehend that social conditions further inform and constrain how a given person views the world."<sup>77</sup> Feminist and queer phenomenologists have found this missing element in Heidegger's philosophy while continuing his mission of challenging ontological assumptions. The work being done by feminist and queer phenomenologists also pushes the phenomenological method out of studying experience and consciousness alone. By writing extensively on constructed categories, disorientation, and embodiment, they can appeal to religious studies scholars who argue that the categories of

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75. Husserl developing the concept of *epoché* as a way of bracketing assumptions and Heidegger's move away from metaphysics to ontology as a way of disorienting his readers.

76. Ahmed, 159.

77. Patricia Huntington, "Stealing the Fire of Creativity: Heidegger's Challenge to Intellectuals," *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger*, ed. by Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2001), 357.

experience and consciousness carry along unexamined assumptions similar to those at work with the categories of “woman” and “religion.”

## CONCLUSION

There have long been fundamental differences between philosophical phenomenology and phenomenology of religion. It is clear why van der Leeuw's method of privileging religious phenomena, attributing an essence to "religion," and trying to integrate theology into scholarship is not useful for critical scholars of religion. *Being and Time* laid the foundation for the phenomenological method to develop in fields of philosophy where phenomenological methods continue to be reworked for new investigations. The primary goal of the phenomenological method, which is presented here as complimentary to critical studies of religion, relies on perception alone, keeping the object of study to what conditions experiences of phenomena rather than the essences of phenomena, and constantly try to disorient naturalized categories. Feminist and queer phenomenologists expand the application of methods developed within *Being and Time* by studying more than just subjective experience. They work to understand how experience acts on a subject in complicated ways such as embodiment and orientation.

De Beauvoir specifically addresses constructed categories in her analysis of "woman." Her goal of disrupting that category is particularly aligned with the recent work in religious studies. The earlier sections of this thesis have demonstrated how the phenomenological methods employed by Husserl, Heidegger, and others approach experience in ways distinct from that of van der Leeuw. For example, Ahmed examines the experience of queer bodies as well as the ways orientation influences experience. These approaches reassess the concept of experience as a function of perception, which is a co-constitutive production of relation amid historically embedded phenomena. The phenomenological method closes off the possibility of naturalizing

claims about the subject-object perception that would allow for the postulation of essences, theorization of ultimate reality and theological reasoning. For these reasons, there is no necessary association of "phenomenology of religion" with methodologically suspect approaches to religious studies. Philosophical, feminist, and queer phenomenological methods are presented in the above are useful additions to the findings among critical theorists of religion. A phenomenological method grounded in philosophical, feminist, and queer phenomenology can complement the critical study of religion due to its non-essentializing goals and disruption of naturalized categories.

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