

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD IN A ZIMBABWEAN CONTEXT: TO LIBERATE OR TO OPPRESS?

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Abstract

This article seeks to investigate the applicability of phenomenological principles in a Zimbabwean context. It outlines the central concerns of the method and illustrates how the Western context has shaped the development of phenomenology. After examining the characteristics of the method, a critical approach is adopted regarding the value of phenomenology with special reference to the study of African traditional religions. In this article it is argued that while phenomenological ideals are appealing, there is need to exercise caution. There is the danger that students might absolutise the method. In addition, a call is made for African scholars of religion to participate in methodological debates. This is necessary in order to avoid the unfortunate impression that it is the prerogative of Western scholars. The article concludes by showing the ambiguous nature of the phenomenology of religion in a Zimbabwean context.

INTRODUCTION

THE POST-COLONIAL DISCOURSE in many disciplines in Africa has been characterised by persistent questioning of the predominant Western categories. This is particularly true of the humanities where the task has been to demonstrate that Western thought-patterns should not be universalised. Such rethinking might be illustrated from African philosophy, although African philosophers are not the pioneers. Against the backdrop of an academic climate where the notion of philosophy is synonymous with Western philosophy, African philosophers have started dismantling this tendency.¹ This pattern has been replicated in other areas like African history, literature, theology and others. Unfortunately, the discipline of religious studies has not engaged in this quest, particularly regarding methodology. This article attempts to undertake the task within the framework of the phenomenology of religion. Can the method be applied in a Zimbabwean context, lock, stock and barrel? Is there need to exorcise

¹ See for example J. K. M. Arthur, 'African philosophers and African philosophy', *African Mind* (1989), I, (i), 26-36.

some Western traits? Can there be a non-Western methodology in the study of religion? All these questions are posed specifically with African traditional religions in mind.²

Before attempting an examination of the applicability of phenomenological principles in a Zimbabwean context, a primary question has to be answered. Is it proper to question the liberating or oppressive qualities of a method? In other words, should we not judge methods of studying religion by their output, whether their application results in greater knowledge of the nature and content of religions? The latter question has received much attention in the Western debates on the phenomenology of religion. The main assumption has been that ways of studying religion are scholarly and therefore the issues of liberation or oppression do not feature. However, Edward W. Said questions this position which arises from the distinction between pure and political knowledge. He argues,

What I am interested in doing now is suggesting how the general liberal consensus that 'true' knowledge is fundamentally non-political (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not 'true' knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organised political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced.³

This is important, particularly in a discussion of the phenomenological method whose over-arching goal is the elimination of all extraneous concerns in the study of religion. Given the popularity of the method amongst students in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy at the University of Zimbabwe,⁴ what are the political implications? While Michel Foucault's notions of knowledge and power have had a revolutionary impact on the social sciences, I use the word 'political' in the broader sense. In this regard I perceive the phenomenological method as having a dual role. Alongside being a method used for the study of religion, it is often presented as an indispensable pedagogic technique. To what extent does it promote or encumber knowledge about traditional religions as forming an intricate part of human religious history? What does the teacher of religion who employs this method seek to avoid and to accomplish? When students follow this method, are they taking upon themselves an oppressive structure

² For a history of the study of African traditional religions in Zimbabwe see G. Ter Haar, A. Moyo, and S. J. Nondo, *African Traditional Religions in Religious Education* (Utrecht, Utrecht University, 1992), 29-51.

³ Said, E. A. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London, Penguin Books, 1995), 10.

⁴ The majority (±70%) of BA (Hons) and MA students purport to follow a 'phenomenological approach' in their dissertations, either entirely or in conjunction with other approaches. This is so despite the fact that the Religion and Research Seminar avails to them other methods of studying religion.

manufactured in the West? What does this do to them and the religion under study? I do not propose to have definitive responses to all these questions. The hope is that out of posing the right questions our quest may be rewarded in the long-term. There is an urgent need to explore the underlying assumptions of phenomenology and investigate how it came into being. In this article I do not make a sharp distinction between the phenomenology of religion and the phenomenological method.

BACKGROUND TO THE RISE OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

There is a tendency to regard the different methods of studying religion such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and phenomenology as timeless. This obfuscates their contextual nature. These disciplines evolved in the Western context in specific political and cultural milieux. An incisive question has been posed: 'How (in what historical and political circumstances) did European and North American scholars come to construct a body of knowledge of 'other' religions?'⁵

As Said illustrates in his work, there is a relationship between knowledge and politics. He maintains:

My argument is that each humanistic investigation must formulate the nature of that connection in the specific context of the study, the subject matter, and its historical circumstances.⁶

The task therefore is to unravel the context which gave rise to the phenomenological method and how this has shaped its concerns.

It is necessary to spell out the intractable problems associated with any effort to discuss the phenomenological method. There are serious questions regarding the existence of such a method and also its character. The often repeated accusation is that there are as many phenomenologies of religion as there are phenomenologists. The use of other terms such as the history of religions, comparative history of religion, comparative religion, typology of religion⁷ further compounds the problem. It is outside the concern of this article to pursue the issue of the exact nature of the discipline and its relationship to kindred sciences. Rather I shall attempt to isolate the central features of the phenomenological method and illustrate how the prevailing context in the West had a decisive bearing on its basic tenets. It is only after such an awareness of the history of the

⁵ William R. Darrow and Richard C. Martin 'Placing Islam' in Juergensmeyer, M. (ed). *Teaching the Introductory Course in Religious Studies: A Source Book* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1991), 80, Note 4.

⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 15.

⁷ da Silva, A. B., *The Phenomenology of Religion as a Philosophical Problem: An Analysis of the Theoretical Background of the Phenomenology of Religion in General and of M. Eliade's Phenomenological Approach in Particular* (CWK, Gleerup, 1982), 17.

method that an evaluation can be made. Even if in the final analysis one may argue for the continued application of the method, consciousness of the ideological assumptions undergirding the method is necessary.

Most writers on the phenomenology of religion begin by placing it within the background of philosophical phenomenology, particularly the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). In discussing phenomenology, etymology is of some value. The term is derived from the Greek word *phainomai* which means 'that which manifests itself'. Phenomenology may therefore be regarded as a study of 'appearances'. However, the concept of 'phenomena' has a long history in Western philosophy and Husserl's idea of 'self-evidence', in which phenomena are taken as given, complicates the problem. The notion of 'phenomena' has a wide range of meanings and has been used by philosophers in diverse circumstances. Rather than debate the etymology, I turn to a discussion of the writer whose application of the term has been largely decisive. Herbert Spiegelberg, writing in what is widely regarded⁸ as the locus classicus of the history of phenomenology, argues that although Husserl remains the central figure in the development of phenomenology, it is not confined to Husserl's philosophy. In this article I focus on three of his central concepts that have found their way into the phenomenology of religion *viz.* *epoche*, empathy and eidetic vision, which will be discussed in this article. Husserl sought presuppositionless philosophy and scientific rigour. He was reacting against the science of the Renaissance which, according to him, had lost a human face. Spiegelberg maintains that 'presuppositionless philosophy' has been misinterpreted as sheer pretence. According to him, 'It is thus not freedom from all presuppositions, but merely freedom from phenomenologically unclarified, unverified, and unverifiable presuppositions that is involved.'⁹

It was this quest for scientific rigour which prompted Husserl to formulate what has now become the phenomenological battle-cry: 'back to the things themselves'.¹⁰

Writing in the early 1900s, Husserl popularised the concept of *epoche*, or bracketing, which is the expunction of preconceived ideas, beliefs and notions. He argued that there was need to cultivate empathy for the object under observation. In other words Husserl was searching for a philosophy which would identify with deeper human concerns. Its ultimate goal was to intuit essences, the eidetic vision. According to Spiegelberg, 'Instead of merely factual relationships, the new "phenomenology" was to study

⁸ Sajama S. and M. Kampinen, *A Historical Introduction to Phenomenology* (London, Croom Helm, 1987), 128.

⁹ Spiegelberg, H. *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 77.

¹⁰ Kruger, J. S. *Studying Religion: A Methodological Introduction to Science of Religion* (Pretoria, University of South Africa, 1987), 17.

essential relationships that could be understood independently of actual cases, empirical or experimental'.¹¹ Husserl's philosophy was to impact disciplines as diverse as mathematics and the study of religion. It is also important for us to note that his phenomenological method has to be understood against the background of the loss of faith in science, his consideration of British empiricism and indeed the history of Western philosophy in general.

FROM PHENOMENOLOGY TO PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

It would be a satisfying undertaking if one could simply move from a discussion of Husserl to phenomenology of religion. Patrick Maxwell makes this telling observation;

The question arises as to the phenomenological approach's precise indebtedness to Husserlian (and post-Husserlian) phenomenologies.¹²

The issue of the nature of the relationship between the two 'phenomenologies' has led to much confusion and misunderstanding. On one hand one finds scholars who insist that if the phenomenology of religion is to retain any respectability it must stay close to its philosophical antecedent. While noting the difference between the two, it is argued that 'founding fathers' of the phenomenology of religion were greatly indebted to Husserlian phenomenology. Efforts to minimize or even obliterate the philosophical aspects are seen as deviations. One such writer who bemoans the separation is J. S. Kruger. He writes,

The heritage of Husserl, still much in evidence in van der Leeuw's work, gradually diminished, and terms such as essence, *epoche* and intentionality are sometimes used without any vital link with their origin.¹³

He sees maintaining contact with philosophical origins as having the capacity to re-invigorate the method. This position is shared by scholars in the science of religion who have a philosophical background and their central concern is that an approach incapable of philosophical reflection is doomed.

On the other hand one finds scholars who seek a clear distinction between the philosophy of Husserl and the phenomenological method. One detects that this position is prompted by the massive criticism against Husserl in particular and philosophy in general. Against claims that phenomenology (in a Husserlian sense) is a rigorous science, the science

¹¹ Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, 93.

¹² Maxwell, P. 'Some reflections on the so-called phenomenological method in the study of religion', *Religion in Southern Africa* (July, 1986), VII, (ii), 15.

¹³ Kruger, J. S. *Studying Religion*, 19.

of sciences, it has been argued, 'As a method, phenomenology has its application within the transcendental sphere and not within the empirical or factual domain.'¹⁴ The feature crucial to science, *viz* inter-subjective testability, has been denied to the method due to its emphasis on intuition. Simply put the question is: How is the 'essence' intuited by scholar A to be communicated to scholar B? Such criticisms are bound to have a profound effect on a method fighting for a place within the science of religion.

One writer who is adamant that phenomenology of religion is divorced from philosophical phenomenology is C. J. Bleeker, who for many years was the Secretary General of the International Association for the History of Religions. He writes, 'In my opinion the phenomenology of religion is an empirical science without philosophical aspirations.'¹⁵ According to him when terms associated with Husserlian phenomenology such as *epoche* are used, they are handled only in a figurative sense. He insists that when he refers to phenomenology of religion he has in mind something 'which differs totally from the philosophy of Husserl'.¹⁶ Although Husserl influenced phenomenology of religion, there is no consensus regarding the relationship between the two approaches. I shall return to this issue when placing the phenomenology of religion in a Zimbabwean context.

Having looked at divergent views concerning the method, the question of what phenomenology of religion is still remains unanswered. Like all other disciplines (the so-called 'hard sciences' included), the issue of a precise definition is a difficult one. I have already hinted at the difficulties and Eric Sharpe confirms this with the observation that 'even the scholars who use the term and claim to apply this method to their work, are not always sure as to its precise definition'.¹⁷ For the purpose of this discussion, I am dependent on Maxwell's identification of at least three basic ingredients of the phenomenological approach.

According to him the first and most well-known is 'the suspension of verdicts concerning the truth, value or validity of religious and metaphysical issues, claims and entities'.¹⁸ This is the *epoche* and is clearly related to Husserl's concept. Phenomenologists of religion emphasize the need to abstain from judgement and the removal of prejudice when studying other religions. 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

¹⁴ da Silva, *The Phenomenology of Religion as a Philosophical Problem*, 43.

¹⁵ Bleeker, C. J. *The Sacred Bridge: Researches into the Nature and Structure of Religion* (Leiden, Brill, 1963), 7.

¹⁶ Bleeker, C. J. 'The relation of the history of religions to kindred sciences', *Numen* (1954), I, 147.

¹⁷ Sharpe, E. 'Some problems of method in the study of religion' *Religion* (1971), I, 11.

¹⁸ Maxwell, P. 'Some reflections', *Religion in Southern Africa*, (July 1986), VII, (II), 17.

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).¹⁹

This brings us to a second ingredient which entails 'doing adequate justice to the (inner) meaning of the believer's religion as well as the (external) factual details and chronological ramifications'.²⁰ Phenomenologists of religion, much like Husserl, highlight the need to cultivate a 'feeling for' the religious persons under investigation. This arises from the fact that one would not be studying inanimate objects but fellow human beings, with feelings and emotions of their own. Empathy and *epoche* are therefore clearly related. Chris Arthur puts the interrelatedness of these basic concepts in the following way:

Empathy simply means attempting to put yourself in another person's shoes so that you can see what the world looks like from there, and *epoche* is designed to help you do this without all sorts of prior judgements getting in the way; it is a bracketing-out of potentially distorting opinions and beliefs.²¹

Phenomenology of religion gives primacy to the point of view of the believers and insists that their integrity be respected.

The third ingredient identified by Maxwell involves 'making use of an appropriate degree of evaluation'.²² This is closely related to the phenomenological claim of 'irreducibility'. Phenomenologists of religion consistently argue that religion is unique, a discipline in its own right and should not be reduced to sociology, psychology or any other discipline. While the so-called 'uniqueness' is never clearly explicated, the concept of irreducible religion has a crucial role in the phenomenology of religion. The following observation summarizes this position, 'One of the most important tasks of the phenomenology of religion is said to be, to describe religion in such a way that its "uniqueness" can be preserved and not "reduced" to anything else.'²³ This idea of the *sui generis* nature of religion is the one which lends weight to the argument that since religion is unique, one needs a special method to study it and that the phenomenology of religion is such a method.

To these three basic positions one might add that the phenomenology of religion regards itself as separate and distinct from theology. Due to its

¹⁹ Cox, J. L. 'Methodological considerations relevant to understanding of African indigenous religions' in J. G. Platvoet, J. Cox and J. Olupona (eds.) *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects* (Cambridge, Roots and Branches, 1996), 156.

²⁰ Maxwell, P. 'Some reflections', *Religion in Southern Africa* (July, 1986), VII, (II), 17.

²¹ Arthur, C., 'Some remarks on the role and limitations of the phenomenology of religion in religious education', *Religious Education*, (Summer/Fall, 1995), XC, (II/IV), 451.

²² Maxwell, P. 'Some reflections' *Religion in Southern Africa*, (July 1986), VII, (II), 17.

²³ Silva, da. *The Phenomenology of Religion as a Philosophical Problem*, 71.

emphasis on understanding the believer's point of view, it has been accused of being a crypto-theology. Nevertheless most phenomenologists of religion maintain that there should be a clear separation. While theology tends to be confessional and is rooted in a particular religious tradition, phenomenology of religion claims to be scientific and hence regards itself as not having a hidden religious agenda.

The features described above largely account for the body of writings on religion which may be regarded as 'phenomenological'. As noted earlier, there is no unanimity regarding the use of the term and its relationship to other ways of studying religion, particularly the history of religions. This has led to exasperation, with some even calling for the jettisoning of the term altogether. Charles Davis writes,

In brief, the term 'phenomenology of religion' has no clear meaning and is better dropped because of misleading associations. It could be kept simply to refer historically to a number of writers who have used it, particularly the group in Holland with Kristensen, Van der Leeuw and Bleeker.²⁴

Given the plethora of the problems, it is still necessary to attempt an evaluation of these principles in a Zimbabwean context.

APPLICABILITY OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES TO ZIMBABWE

The phenomenology of religion has been subjected to massive criticism by Western social scientists. Amongst its foremost critics one must count Donald Wiebe,²⁵ Robert Segal²⁶ and Ivan Strenski.²⁷ The contentious areas include the claim of neutrality, the idea of irreducible religion and the allegation that phenomenology of religion is theology in disguise. The issues are important but for this article I shall pursue the latent political implications within the phenomenological principles. To this end I shall engage with these theoretical criticisms to the extent that they impinge on the study of African traditional religions. This task shall be attempted by selecting a feature of the phenomenological method, account for its rise and then question whether the Zimbabwean context justifies the wholesale application of the principle.

²⁴ Davis, C. 'The reconvergence of theology and religions studies', *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion*, (1974-75), IV, (iii), 215.

²⁵ See for example Wiebe, D. 'Disciplinary axioms, boundary conditions and the academic study of religion: Comments on Pals and Dawson', *Religion* (1990), XX, 17-29.

²⁶ See for example Segal, R., *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1989).

²⁷ Strenski, I. *Religion in Relation: Method Application and Moral Location* (London, Macmillan, 1990).

Epoche

Epoche, the need to hold one's prejudices in abeyance, needs close scrutiny in a Zimbabwean context. M. F. C. Bourdillon argues that there is need for judgement in the study of religion. He insists, 'Perhaps the notion of *epoche* has now passed its usefulness. It too easily lends credence to the delusion that you can eliminate your own personal bias when you try to understand other people.'²⁸ It is crucial to identify the political motivations for the posture of *epoche* in its historical application. Theologians like G. van der Leeuw and W. B. Kristensen, pioneers of the phenomenology of religion, were quickly attracted to the concept of *epoche*. Klaus Klostemaier brings out their motivation, 'it permitted them to "suspend" their faith without denying it, to "bracket out", for the time being, christian dogma to which they were bound as professors of theology in church-related faculties without rejecting it, to be open and uncommitted as phenomenologists while maintaining their allegiance to a particular tradition.'²⁹ It can be seen therefore that the notion of *epoche* in the academic study of religion evolved in a specific historical context.

The bracketing out of preconceived ideas represents a noble intention, particularly in the study of African traditional/indigenous religions which have been marginalised 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. There is need to inculcate in students a questioning spirit. Education, including religious education, should ultimately empower students. This entails cultivating a critical attitude regarding issues. In the study of the indigenous traditions there is need for an accurate description of the various features. To refuse to consider questions of value, as is in vogue in postmodernism, is to renege the academy. The absence of a vantage point from which to view reality should not be a justification for accepting all truth claims. In Zimbabwe scarce resources preclude the luxury of 'truth for its own sake' hence the need for a critical stance. Translated on the political platform, a state of perennial bracketing of opinions can easily foster an attitude of docility and facile acceptance of issues. This is a potential disaster for a developing nation. In this instance *epoche* might have an oppressive role.

²⁸ Bourdillon, M. F. C. 'Anthropological approaches to the study of African religion', in J. Platvoet, et al (eds). *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects* (Cambridge, Roots and Branches, 1996), 148. Also 'Studying thy neighbour: Reflections on participation', *Anthropology and Humanism* (1997), XXII, (II), 150-158.

²⁹ Klostemaier, K. 'From phenomenology to metascience: Reflections on the study of religions' *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion*, (1976-77), VI, (vi), 555.

In calling for a critical approach, I however do not subscribe to Martin Prozesky's suggestion that scholars of religion are justified in the reformulation of religion. He argues that evading the responsibility of the evaluation of religion results in the marginalisation of scholars from the phenomenon. For him some people in religious studies could actually contribute to the transformation of religion, 'in making that contribution these people would move from being critics to creators of religious meaning'.³⁰ This would result in the scholar moving from being an observer into an engaged reformer. While teaching certainly involves a particular order of values, it seems to me to be taking matters too far when scholars of religion actually become creators of religious meaning. Teaching and studying religion is like walking on a tight-rope and striking the right balance is important. The question haunting the teacher of religion is one regarding which coat to put on: he or she can be the professor, detached and impersonal or he or she can be the guru, cultivating faith in the students.³¹ The issue of whether scholars should help in forming religion however needs further debate. The traditional escape route has been to insist that judgements on religion can be made by the teacher of religion in his/her private life. While one accepts that the lecture halls of a university are entirely an inappropriate place for articulating one's religious agenda (or lack of it), the private/public dichotomy is itself questionable. In the study of indigenous religions there is always need to raise the question of whether or not the alleged superiority of 'world religions' over 'local' religions is justified. There will always be creative tension between one's beliefs and his/her encounter with religious phenomena.

While my thrust thus far has been to highlight the potentially limiting nature of *epoche* in a Zimbabwean context, the popularity of the concept implies that it has some liberative power. This is particularly true regarding the study of local religions which have been in the shadow of Christianity for a long time. *Epoche* potentially equips the African student to approach the religions without the Christian spectacles which have proved quite dominant. In this instance the phenomenological method provides an invaluable starting point. In the study of traditional religions, 'unlearning' is important, particularly during the first year when most students cannot associate the notion of religion with indigenous traditions. Nevertheless, Frank Whaling's comments on *epoche* and empathy bring another political turn. He asks,

³⁰ Prozesky, M. 'Is there a place in religious studies for the criticism and reformulation of religion?' *Religion in Southern Africa* (Jan., 1985), VI, (1), 79.

³¹ Mclelland, J. C. 'The teacher of religion: Professor or guru?' *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion*, (1972-73), II, (1), 225-234.

To what degree, in spite of the concern for *epoche* and *Einfühlung* fostered by the phenomenological approach, do Western scholars feel that it is they who must research and interpret the religion of others for others?³²

Endorsing the believer's point of view

What is the educational value of accepting the dictum that 'the believer is always right'? This is a central feature of the phenomenological method. While it enables the student to perfect the art of listening and respecting other people's points of view, the long-term effects might be detrimental. To begin with, not all believers have a critical knowledge of their religion. This is particularly true of traditional religions where elders and sacred practitioners are regarded as reservoirs of knowledge. 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. Further, respondents might also be unaware of the range to which religion may be manipulated for political or economic ends. Instead of merely cataloguing believers' responses, it is necessary that one examines how, for example traditional religious figures such as Nehanda and Kaguvi were used by the nationalists to invent and solidify nationalist identities in the face of potentially crippling tribal loyalties. Respondents might be unaware of how politicians might appeal to African culture to further their own agendas, as was the case in the one-party state debate in the mid-eighties. Indeed, the examples could be multiplied to illustrate how researchers need to go beyond the obvious.

In a study of indigenous religions it is folly to limit oneself only to that which appears: what is left out is equally important (I am not implying that traditional religions are unique in this). It would therefore be naive to assume that the phenomena will manifest themselves to the researcher. If we take the example of a burial, it becomes clear that gathering at the grave-yard and laying down the corpse is a culmination of a series of rituals. It is crucial that the researcher should investigate these. However, giving primacy to the conscious meaning of religion for the believer remains an important injunction because it gives voice to those for whom others have acted as spokespersons in the past. In this instance 'The believer is always right' liberates indigenous religions from the clutches of external interpreters. Nevertheless, the popularity of many anthropological works, such as Bourdillon's *The Shona Peoples*³³ shows that an 'outsider' can successfully present the 'other'. This however, only endorses and reinforces

³² Whaling, F. 'Introduction' in Whaling, F. (ed). *Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 117.

³³ M. F. C. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1987).

the phenomenological plea that the religions of others be studied with sensitivity and be accurately presented. It would appear therefore that anthropological and phenomenological interests converge. This, however, lies beyond the scope of this presentation.

Irreducibility

Is the notion of irreducible religion desirable in Zimbabwe? This question is a crucial one and has a definite bearing on the future of religious studies. Before attempting a response to it, it is necessary to unravel how it came about. As a late nineteenth century discipline, the phenomenology of religion found it necessary to insist on an identity separate from theology, as outlined earlier. According to James Cox,

Phenomenology also reacted against three principal tendencies found historically within scientific approaches to religious studies: the explanation of religions phenomena exclusively in terms of disciplines other than religion itself such as sociology, psychology or anthropology (scientific reductionism); the evolutionary assumptions behind most theories concerning the origins of religions; and the projectionist explanations of religion.³⁴

Ostensibly therefore, there was need for a method which would do justice to religion as a distinctive area of human expression. However, the continued insistence that 'religion' cannot be subsumed under sociology, psychology and other disciplines ensues from another motivation. Writing in an American context, William R. Darrow argues,

It is probably better to read this firm differentiation as a piece of American civil religion made necessary politically to secure religious studies safely within academia.³⁵

In Zimbabwe irreducibility remains crucial and liberative especially regarding traditional religions. An application of social scientific strategies easily leads to a dismissal of these religions. It is easier to be reductionist with traditional religions than with the so-called 'world religions' because of the tendency to regard the former as 'group-tied' and because of the prevailing attitude of regarding them as a fertile testing ground for lofty academic theories. Harold Turner warns,

To confine methods of study to those of the social and behavioural sciences is not to avoid these problems, for, as Dr Gaba has pointed out, restriction to these studies may unwittingly create the impression that

³⁴ Cox, J. L. *Expressing the Sacred: An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Harare, University of Zimbabwe, 1992), 43.

³⁵ Darrow, W. R. 'The "Introduction to religion" course: The Template', in Juergensmeyer M. (ed.) *Teaching the Introductory Course in Religious Studies: A Sourcebook* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1991), 16.

African religions are no more than social and psychological phenomena rather than essentially religious and worthy to be professed as the faiths of persons.³⁶

This is however not to absolutize one method in the study of traditional religions. It is merely to insist that these constitute a world-view in their own right and should not be 'explained away' as is often the case in the social sciences. This is not, however, to accuse all writers in the social sciences of 'reductionism'.

Emphasizing the integrity of particular religions may also safeguard traditional religions from theological reductionism. This remains a possibility in a nation which is largely Christian and where the chances of the scholars of religion being committed Christians is quite high. Arguing that every religion be understood in its own right prevents the tendency to view traditional religion in a manner which ascribes negative connotations to the term 'traditional'. In this instance the traditional religions are regarded as belonging to the past and as failing to withstand the twin forces of modernisation and urbanisation. A greater danger however, lies in the fashionable interpretation of traditional religions as being a preparation for the Christian gospel. This is to deny them an independent right to exist and represents theological reductionism.³⁷ While the notion of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of religion is attractive and 'politically correct', I felt that the idea of regarding a religion in its own terms represents a key ingredient.

TOWARD NON-WESTERN METHODS?

Having assessed the need for the central phenomenological concepts in a specific context, there is need to reflect on the difficult question of how phenomenology of religion in Zimbabwe might relate to its Western heritage. Like the African philosopher, the phenomenologist should not appropriate uncritically philosophical issues not relevant to his or her immediate needs. One possible way forward is to attempt an African cultural hermeneutics in which African cultural realities are given prominence. While the history of hermeneutics shows it as a thoroughly Western undertaking, this should not discourage the African scholar. Western concepts can still be tackled in the light of one's context. An example of such a successful project is how Black and American

³⁶ Turner, H., 'The way forward in the religious study of African primal religions' *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XII, (iv), 14.

³⁷ Cox, J. L. 'The classification "Primal religions" as a non-empirical Christian theological construct', *Studies in World Christianity: The Edinburgh Review of Theology and Religion* (1996), II, (I), 35-56.

philosophers have appropriated existentialism to analyse their own condition of blackness in a racist world.³⁸

It should be said, however, that such rethinking of methodological questions and investigating how certain Western concepts evolved should not be taken to extremes. Bandyng about 'African methodologies' may only serve to magnify the perceived 'otherness' of Africa. While postmodernism celebrates difference and questions the existence of a centre, it is itself a discourse in need of careful scrutiny. It is perfectly legitimate to question how applicable certain facets of a method are and to try to account for how they came into being. Nonetheless, to clamour for a non-Western methodology in the study of religion already assumes a centre and periphery. Klaus Klostemaier writes,

Part of the unsatisfactory character of the 'science of religions' may be due to the fact that in its development it has, so far, employed almost exclusively Western methodologies: it may be time to integrate into it Eastern methods as well as materials.³⁹

Instead of abandoning methods and philosophies simply because they are Western, it seems more profitable to engage in exercises similar to the one undertaken here. It cannot be denied that Western cultural discourse has had an indelible impact on all former subjects. To apply all this to the phenomenology of religion in Zimbabwe would mean recognising the history of the method, noting how extraneous forces impacted on its development and evaluating whether particular concepts are helpful during a specific historical epoch. By doing this there is a chance of doing justice to the methodology without necessarily universalising it. Is this a failure of nerve? This is a large question which needs further reflection.

Before concluding this discussion, there is need to discuss the paucity of material by African scholars of African traditional religions on methodology. The general impression is that discussion of methodological issues is the preserve of Western scholars of religion. Writing in a West African context, Friday Mbon maintains that those African students who have written on methodological issues are motivated by Western concerns and offer a guilty response to Western challenges. He writes,

Sometimes one gets the impression that behind that compulsion lies the desire on the part of African scholars to be in methodological tunes with the times, and thus to appear fashionable and acceptable in the contemporary academic world.⁴⁰

³⁸ Gordon, L. R. (ed.) *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York, Routledge, 1997).

³⁹ Klostemaier, K. 'From phenomenology to metascience', *Sciences Religieuses / Studies in Religion*, (1976-77), VI, (v), 560, Note 27.

⁴⁰ Mbon, F. M. 'Some methodological issues in the academic study of West African traditional religion' in Platvoet, J. et al (eds.) *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects* (Cambridge, Roots and Branches, 1996), 173.

While he quickly moves on to dilute this stinging remark, the matter remains important. It would appear that there is a division of labour where African scholars 'get on with the job', do the spade work and furnish data for Western scholars, who systematize and organise this raw data. One would have no problems with this if there had been no unstated assumptions. Given the high value accorded to being systematic and rational in the West, what are the implications? To leave reflection to others is to condemn oneself to perpetual servitude. Nevertheless, it is also correct to note that there is need to strike a balance between methodological issues and gathering data on religion. One cannot go on sharpening the knife; there comes a time when one has to cut.

It has to be admitted that the situation in Zimbabwe demands that more attention be paid towards empirical investigation of religion than on methodology. While considerable material on local religions has been uncovered, much more remains unearthed. Although this article has focused specifically on an application of phenomenological principles to African traditional religions, the radically plural religious climate of Zimbabwe holds even greater promises for the method. Researchers have tended to concentrate on the dominant religions like Christianity and traditional religions and to a lesser extent, Islam. However, Zimbabwe is home to numerous other religions like the Baha'i Faith, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism and others. It is here that the phenomenology of religion, perhaps more than any other method, can make a significant contribution. One hopes that this task will be undertaken so that we could have a fuller picture of the religious situation in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have outlined how there has been a shift in many disciplines in Africa concerning the Western heritage. Applying this questioning spirit to the phenomenology of religion and the study of African religions, I traced the background to the rise of the method and illustrated how external circumstances largely influenced the direction of the movement. I also highlighted the serious difficulties associated with any attempt to define what phenomenology of religion is by showing contending views regarding philosophical phenomenology. With the assumption that there had to be some unity in the diversity, I identified, following Maxwell, three main characteristics of the method. In an effort to be contextually relevant, I attempted an evaluation of these characteristics within the Zimbabwean context. I have to admit that the topic proved ambitious. It is not possible for one to characterise a whole method as being either liberative or oppressive. One finds aspects that are more applicable at a particular time than others. Indeed, it became clear that paradoxically, a concept

may engender both possibilities, depending on the angle from which one approaches it. *Epoche* and accepting the believer's point of view were portrayed as potentially retrogressive although they have a liberating capacity. *Epoche* denies the need to assess institutions. Endorsing the believers' point of view avoids a critical approach to religious issues. The insistence that a religion should not be reduced to anything else was endorsed as offering promise to African religions. A brief discussion on the need for African scholars to take seriously methodological and philosophical questions was also undertaken.

As noted in the introduction, this article does not purport to have definitive responses to questions regarding the necessity of moving beyond Western methodologies. The approach adopted in this article is, one hopes, a critical and yet cautious one. There are complex issues at stake. One can only hope that more writers will come up to illustrate how formerly oppressed people can charter their own intellectual destiny. If this is not done, Wole Soyinka's criticism will stand, 'African intellectualism in general, and therefore African attitudes to race and culture, have failed to come to grips, with the very foundations of Eurocentric epistemology.'⁴¹

⁴¹ Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976) 136.