

Religious Experience and Phenomenology

KIM E. KNIBBE AND ELS VAN HOUTERT

Groningen University, Netherlands

Religious experience and the experiential dimension of religious practice have come to constitute a fruitful area of inquiry for anthropology. Phenomenology has been of key importance in developing anthropological approaches to study the experiential side of religion and continues to inspire new developments in this area. Key authors in the anthropology of religion, such as Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, have drawn on the phenomenological school in philosophy to think through the ways in which humans experience the world, constitute their lifeworlds, and theorize how religious experience emerges. Furthermore, since the late 1980s, several prominent anthropologists have drawn on phenomenology to create fresh approaches to and representations of subjects that are of interest to the anthropology of religion, such as ritual, witchcraft and sorcery, healing, and religious experience. This trend was partly a reaction to structuralism but scholars were often also prompted to draw on phenomenology as an inspiration when confronted with phenomena that seemed to have no place in Western scientific and secular understandings of the world.

To some extent, the influence of phenomenology, particularly in studying phenomena usually found under the umbrella of the anthropology of religion, has involved an epistemological project to find a nonreductive way to understand such phenomena. Phenomenological anthropology has created pathways both into how people come to experience these phenomena as real, as well as into the ways the anthropologist, as an embodied subject, comes to understand people's lifeworlds.

It is important to note that anthropological approaches to religion based on phenomenology are quite different in both aim and method from the phenomenology of religion as it has been developed within the field of religious studies. In certain crucial ways, anthropological interpretations of phenomenology also part ways with the aims of the German philosopher Husserl and some other phenomenologists. In recent years, several new modes of inquiry into religious experience have started to develop, some drawing on phenomenology but also drawing on the anthropology of the senses and the "material turn."

Source

Ever since the founding of the social sciences, the experiential dimension of religion has received attention, leading to important theoretical contributions that are drawn on in the anthropology of religion to this day: Émile Durkheim's notion of effervescence, Max Weber's exploration of charisma, William James's explorations of

The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Edited by Hilary Callan.

© 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2018 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1929

religious experience, and the work of Victor Turner on liminality and *communitas*. More sustained attention to religious experience and the experiential dimension of religious practice has often drawn on the phenomenological school. This school has had an enduring influence on how religious experience and the experiential dimension of religious practice are conceptualized, studied, and understood. Especially since the 1980s, a group of anthropologists have explicitly drawn on phenomenology to develop new approaches to religion leading to a body of work that, although divergent, can loosely be labeled as phenomenological anthropology. Key concepts in this body of work, which in some cases have also entered the mainstream of anthropology, derive from the phenomenological school in philosophy: *intentionality* and *bracketing* (or *epoché*), *embodiment*, and *lifeworld* (*lebenswelt*).

Phenomenology became an important school in philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century, starting with Edmund Husserl and followed by well-known philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paul Sartre, and Alfred Schütz.

According to Husserl (1859–1938), our perception of reality is not simply triggered by the outside world but constituted in our consciousness. By directing our consciousness to the world (*intentionality*), we apprehend things always in particular instances. For Husserl, this implied that things in themselves are unknowable through direct observation because we always experience them through our concepts and ideas, relating them to previous memories (*retention*) and future expectations (*protention*). Husserl metaphorically refers to the notion of a horizon representing our entire temporal and spatial perspective. The occurrence of awareness after we are confronted with an experience is related to this overarching horizon. This means that we objectify any new experiences so that we can identify subsequent experiences without having to reconsider their identity. This is called the *natural attitude*—that is, our “taken-for-granted” (or “cultural”) perspective through which we interpret the world around us.

The aim of the phenomenological method, according to Husserl, was to develop insight into the essences of things and thus to go beyond the natural attitude. The phenomenological method he developed consisted first of the phenomenological reduction: to look at things without prejudice, leaving behind theoretical consideration. The more precise term of *epoché*, or bracketing, is more often used in anthropology: turning the attention to the *object as experienced*, withholding any judgment as to the true nature of this object or even whether it really exists. The next step Husserl envisaged was *eidetic reduction*, an exercise of the imagination that involves varying the properties of the phenomenon under investigation. Thus, one can eliminate everything that is unnecessary for an object to continue being itself, identifying its inalienable properties and thereby arriving at the essence of the “thing itself.” This step is usually ignored in anthropological interpretations of phenomenology. However, in the *phenomenology of religion* as developed in religious studies, this step did play an important and, in later years, much criticized role (as will be seen later in the entry).

Current anthropologists who explicitly draw on phenomenology most often refer to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61). He ascribed an important role

to the body as the medium that engages or connects the consciousness with the perceived *pre-objective* world, the world as it is perceived before being objectified in our consciousness. The pre-objective experience of the world should not be confused with a “precultural” or “direct” experience of the world, of a presumed essential nature of things. It is important to note that he was talking about the *lived* body (*leib*) not the physical body (*körper*), as Husserl had distinguished the two. Out of this emphasis on the lived body came the important concept of *embodiment*. Referring to the embodied character of our perceiving and experiencing the world around us, embodiment became one of the most important concepts in current phenomenological anthropology.

Alfred Schütz (1899–1959) has also played an important role in introducing phenomenology to the social sciences in general and anthropology of religion in particular. He especially developed the concept of lifeworld, as constituted by taken-for-granted perceptions, routines, interactions, and events. Both Geertz and Turner drew on his work to conceptualize the ways people constitute their lifeworlds and the role of religious symbols, ritual, and religious experience in these processes (Throop 2003). Schütz has also contributed much to conceptualizing the workings of consciousness in relation to time. According to him, most behavior is in fact prephenomenal; without motive, goal, or recollection. Once we become aware of our experiences being part of a “flow of duration,” we become conscious of our experiences and start reflecting on them. Thus, the past is part of the present in the sense that our reflection on experience is dependent on our awareness of time.

For Schütz, the understanding of the social involves both the perspective of the actors and of the observer. Here, Schütz distinguishes himself from other phenomenologists by including an analysis of society and conventional discursive ideas of knowledge. This approach made phenomenology an important influence on the school of sociology of knowledge (Michel Foucault among others).

Phenomenological approaches in the anthropology of religion

The anthropology of religion often studies topics whose reality is denied or considered doubtful in secular Western understandings, such as possession, sorcery, shamanism, healing, and other phenomena that assume the active agency of entities that are considered supernatural. To some extent, phenomenological approaches in anthropology were an epistemological project that challenged Western commonsense understandings as well as reductionist scientific approaches by taking seriously the idea that these phenomena are experienced as real. In other words, anthropologists drawing on phenomenology did so in order to plead for an “epistemological humility” and critique conventional empiricist ideas of science that require an explanation of such phenomena in terms alien to the lifeworld in which they occur.

More specifically, during the 1980s, anthropologists started to draw on phenomenology in a reaction against structuralist approaches, emphasizing the messiness and

emergent character of daily life. They criticized structuralists and symbolists for valuing “representation over presentation, or discourse over felt experience” (Desjarlais 1992, 250–51), reifying their own theoretical abstractions. In contrast, these authors pleaded for a way of doing anthropology that did not seek to transcend lived experience by using distancing theoretical and methodological language and analytical tools to consolidate a disembodied “scientific” authority in order to reveal underlying mechanisms governing people’s behavior outside of their own awareness. In their turn away from a reductionist theorizing of human experience, they pleaded for a “radical empiricism,” following in the footsteps of William James, an attention to “things as they are,” as they appear to our consciousness in our everyday understanding of the world.

Key authors drawing on phenomenology are Thomas Csordas, Michael Jackson, Paul Stoller, and Robert Desjarlais. There is an important area of connection and overlap, particularly in the work of Csordas and Desjarlais, with developments in medical anthropology around Arthur Kleinman. Via the subject of religious healing and other ways in which religious practices intervene in physical and mental wellbeing, the anthropology of religion and medical anthropology share a domain of inquiry. In both medical anthropology and in the anthropology of religion, authors have drawn on phenomenology to criticize the Cartesian mind–body split that underlies many mainstream approaches to these subjects.

In the work of Csordas in particular, phenomenology and attention to religious experience and healing go hand in hand (Csordas 1990, 1994). Through his work on charismatic Catholics and how they perceive the Holy Spirit as an active part of their life, he came to formulate embodiment as a “new paradigm for anthropology” (Csordas 1990, 19). In his view, the aim is to study “the embodied process of perception from beginning to end rather than the reverse. ... If our perception ends in objects ... the goal of a phenomenological anthropology of perception is to capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins, and, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture” (Csordas 1990, 9).

Thus, he analyzes the experience of demonic control or the Holy Spirit from its beginnings as a spontaneous embodied sensation or moment of confusion experienced during a service and the subsequent objectification of this moment as the experience of a demonic influence or the healing power of the Holy Spirit. It is important to note that the “pre-objective” sensation later identified as either demonic or healing should not be seen as “precultural” since these spontaneous sensations, in Csordas’s view, emerge out of a shared habitus. Furthermore, the process of objectification is a social process, undertaken in a group and in consultation with, in this case, a pastor.

His work represents one of the most consistent elaborations of phenomenological theory in anthropology: whereas other authors draw on phenomenological work and other philosophers eclectically as sources of inspiration, Csordas outlines in detail how phenomenology influences his conceptualization of the self as an “orientational process” (Csordas 1997). His main concern is not so much to go beyond a reductionistic approach but to develop a way to open up the “black box” of how religious healing actually works. His conclusion, based on a phenomenological analysis, is that it works through imaginal practices of the self engaged through religious practices. He

developed several concepts to unpack how religious healing becomes therapeutically effective, such as “somatic modes of attention” and “imaginal performance” (Csordas 1997). Although his focus is on healing, Csordas’s work has influenced others to approach religious experience as an embodied phenomenon.

Similarly, other phenomenologically inspired anthropologists view the body and the senses as fundamentally culturally (in)formed. This means that the embodied nature of fieldwork, particularly where it involves practices that involve what would be considered “supernatural,” is another active area of reflection. Reflections on the anthropologist as a participant often draw on Merleau-Ponty, emphasizing embodied being in the world as the starting point from which to generate an intersubjective understanding of new lifeworlds. In order to learn how people come to experience the world in a certain way, an anthropologist must become an “apprentice,” often in the literal sense. Participation, developing intensive engagements with people and sharing the physical, tangible worlds in which they dwell, is seen as the basis for anthropological understanding. Thus, anthropologists come to partly embody the same ways of being in the world and apprehending this world as the people they study, becoming—in the words of Desjarlais (1992, 19)—a “hybrid.”

Aside from Merleau-Ponty’s work on the body, the concept of bracketing (*epoché*) described earlier has been an important source of inspiration. Several authors state that anthropologists should have a *negative capability* when approaching phenomena that defy Western reason. This is a term used by Keats to describe the difference between Coleridge, who rejected anything his imagination threw up that he could not justify intellectually, and Shakespeare, who simply let himself be carried along by his imagination. Similarly, the anthropologist in engaging with different lifeworlds should let him or herself be carried along. Through bracketing, the “reality” of what is studied is not questioned; rather, anthropologists aim to become part of the intersubjectively created world in which possession, sorcery, rituals, and religious experiences may occur.

The most explicit reflections on the discrepancy between the perceived reality of such phenomena and the denial of their reality in Western thought can be found in the work of Paul Stoller (Stoller 1989, 1997a, 2009; Stoller and Olkes 1987). During his long-term fieldwork among the Songhay in Niger he became fascinated by sorcery as it was practiced there and became an apprentice to a sorcerer. After his teacher died he suffered from a physical paralysis that seemed to be the result of malevolent sorcery and he felt forced to abandon his lengthy fieldwork in Niger, turning to fieldwork with West African migrants in New York.

Whereas the “embodiment approach” of Csordas offers an explanation of how people can come to experience such phenomena as real, opening up a way to understand this experience to those who do not share a belief in their efficacy or existence, Stoller leaves matters unresolved, staying close to the phenomenological method of simply attending to things as they appear to our consciousness. This approach ties in with the stated aim of Michael Jackson in the introduction to an edited volume on phenomenological anthropology to shift attention from causes to consequences, from logic to use (Jackson 1996). As an example Jackson refers to discussions of the rationality of witchcraft: this

question, according to him, is of less importance than an examination of what witchcraft does in people's lives.

Although the emphasis on experience, including that of the anthropologist, has been criticized as individualizing and even solipsistic, phenomenological anthropologists always emphasize intersubjectivity as the basis of both the ways people experience their world and the ways an anthropologist can come to understand this experience. An important contribution to the notion of intersubjectivity, which has also been developed in other anthropological strands, came out of the emphasis on embodiment and the senses. This means that conceptualizations of intersubjectivity are taken beyond the level of verbal exchange and involve the consideration of how movements, pathways, tastes, smells, and sensations are part of the pre-objective ways of being in the world, part of the habitus that allows for the immediate understanding of the world without conscious reflection on the particular meaning of things (Stoller 1989).

Drawing on phenomenological sources has also led to important critiques of interpretative, structuralist, and symbolic anthropological approaches to religion and a renewed emphasis on ethnographic work. A common point of departure for such critiques is formed by the integration of the embodied nature of perception and the reproduction of culture and the inchoate pre-objective nature of much of everyday experience. For example, rather than assuming that structure generates and structures behavior, Jackson argues for an approach that emphasizes the dialectics between the "thrownness" of individuals on the one hand (the fact of being born into a world that is not of one's own making, with cultural rules and structures that are given) and, on the other hand, the ways one comes to creatively, every time anew, embody these structures and rules (Jackson 1989, 34). In statements such as these, the influence of existentialism and pragmatism alongside phenomenology show themselves.

Phenomenological approaches have also led to new and more dynamic insights into classic anthropological categories such as ritual and possession. Phenomenological reflections on Kuranko ritual in Sierra Leone led Jackson to become dissatisfied with his earlier, more structuralist interpretations and to put forward a new understanding of ritual as a "disruption of bodily habitus during which people can act out the possibilities of behaviour they embody but normally cannot express" (Jackson 1989, 129). Similarly, Stoller's work on possession shows how the imagination and colonial memories are all part of possession as an embodied, collectively created practice that acts on particular problems and enacts different possibilities.

Another way in which phenomenological anthropology has opened up new directions is in style of ethnographic writing, often focusing on an evocation of lifeworlds rather than analysis or developing theory. Through their confrontation with phenomena that go beyond the commonsense understandings of the world in secular Western worldviews, phenomenological anthropologists have felt compelled to experiment in their ethnographic representations of people's experience. Stoller has done this through writing an "ethnographic novel" on his experience as a sorcerer's apprentice, as well as through memoir-like writings (Stoller 1997b, 2009; Stoller and Olkes 1987). Another example is his ethnography *Fusion of the Worlds*, where only the introduction refers to theoretical concepts while the book itself is aimed at evoking a lifeworld in which possession is not only possible but also a way of life (Stoller 1997a). Jackson has

also developed an evocative, sometimes poetic style of writing ethnography, where the emphasis is not on creating a coherent narrative but rather on sometimes disparate experiences and the ways people make sense of them, or not, exemplified in the book *Minima Ethnographica* (Jackson 1998).

Where phenomenological anthropologists explicitly indicate their subject matter as religious experience, such experience is seen to emerge out of moments of (existential) crisis and uncertainty, (mental) suffering, and illness (Desjarlais 1992), a confrontation with the “radical other” and lack of control (Csordas 1990), a “penumbral” state of being in between what can and what cannot be known (Jackson 2009), or the familiar and unfamiliar (Stoller 2009). In reflecting on such moments of crisis and uncertainty, these authors develop a more existential, philosophical anthropology that attempts to uncover universal dynamics in how humans perceive, make sense of, and act on the world.

An important departure from some phenomenological authors in philosophy is that in phenomenological anthropology the aim is not to come to an insight into the real nature or essence of things after the epoché, as was Husserl’s intention, but rather to understand and evoke in writing and art how the embodied being in the world of different peoples takes place, what it gives rise to, and how it challenges conventional rationalistic views of what it means to be human.

Phenomenology in religious studies

This restraint toward developing any final statements on the nature of (religious) phenomena is also of crucial importance in distinguishing between phenomenological approaches in anthropology and phenomenological approaches in the field of religious studies. While in the social sciences, and in particular in anthropology, phenomenology has become primarily associated with the study of ways humans experience the world and constitute their lifeworlds, in religious studies phenomenology was taken up with the goal to uncover universals in religion in order to arrive at “essences.” Through the study of the diverse ways people historically and in different places apprehended different aspects of religious phenomena, it was thought that one could arrive at the abstract and universal qualities of phenomena scholars variously named the “sacred,” “numinous,” or “wholly other” thought to be the subject of religious experiences.

The three most famous phenomenologists in religious studies were Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), and Mircea Eliade (1907–86). Phenomenology in religious studies differs from phenomenology in anthropology in its goal and also in its method: these scholars mainly used religious documents as their primary resources. This approach took “religion” to be a universal category. In contrast, the study of (religious) experience in phenomenological anthropology departs from an understanding of all such categories as emerging out of cultural, embodied, and historically situated experience. Where anthropologists do refer to the “radically other” or the unknown, they do not refer to it as an object which can be known but rather

as an ever-shifting domain which lies just beyond human experience, control, and knowing, which humans try to apprehend and delineate in various ways (e.g., Csordas 1997, 5; Jackson 1998, 119). In other words, they see this “otherness” not as a universal phenomenon whose essence can be determined through studying it in its various instances but rather as a function of human experience.

Critiques

Phenomenological approaches to religion have endured criticism within the field of religious studies, to the extent that certain authors (such as Mircea Eliade) cannot be quoted anymore without heavy caveats. The phenomenological study of religion within anthropology, however, has received less criticism on its fundamental points of departure, method, or concepts. Rather, critics have expressed concern that the emphasis on experience comes at the cost of bringing into view the political, economic, and other historical processes that create, bring into being, and constrain people’s lifeworlds. Although phenomenologically inspired anthropologists often state that their focus on lived experience enables a rehabilitation of the knowledge and experience of marginalized people, it is still unclear how a critique of power is possible if one aims not to transcend the lived experience by linking with other domains of knowledge (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008). Furthermore, from within phenomenological anthropology, Desjarlais has criticized the category of experience as a term that brings with it a burden of expectation of a certain interiority and self-monitoring that has emerged out of a European history and is bound to a certain class (Desjarlais 1997).

Other critiques mention the lack of comparison between different settings and have pointed out that the underlying conceptual premises of people regarding selfness and otherness and the senses are neglected. Furthermore, there is often the critique that phenomenological anthropology focuses on the private, subjective experiences of people, including the anthropologist, and does not study communal experiences. Finally, the representative strategy of “evoking lifeworlds” can also be argued to constitute a particular kind of authoritative, all-knowing, anthropological narrator perspective, so often critiqued in the wake of the “writing culture debate,” despite the inclusion of the anthropologist in the narration of most phenomenological anthropologists.

Recent developments

Religious experience and the experiential side of religion remain an important area of inquiry. Recent work by Birgit Meyer and other anthropologists engage with the ways media are instrumental in shaping religious experience, bringing together approaches from media studies, aesthetics, and the anthropology of the senses. This has evolved into a sustained attention for the materiality of religion and how the senses are engaged in religious practice, explored in the journal *Material Religion*.

Other new approaches to religious experience take their inspiration from phenomenology but take this into new directions. While the generation of anthropologists who turned to phenomenology in the late 1980s and the 1990s did so to justify their attention to the irreducibility of lived experience and its embodied character, current work emphasizes *cultural logics*. An influential strand is the one pioneered by Tanya Luhrmann, studying how God, and the supernatural, become real in people's minds. A recent publication that exemplifies the comparative nature of this new approach gives an account of the expectations people have about how the mind works, how the supernatural can be perceived, and how they influence the actual experiences people report, comparing Thailand with the United States with the help of a large survey in addition to long-term qualitative research (Cassaniti and Luhrmann 2011). By studying the role of the senses as reported by people themselves in the experience of the supernatural, the researchers found that there are important differences in the way the self and the mind are conceptualized: in the United States, the mind is seen as something private and impenetrable; in Thailand, the mind is seen as permeable and capable of emanating destructive energies when not properly focused. This approach differs in both style and in emphasis from others mentioned in this entry: rather than deploying a poetic, evocative writing style, the presentation is structured and builds up to clear conclusions in a more mainstream manner. Furthermore, the emphasis is on the mind and cognitive structures rather than on embodiment, noting how embodied experiences are categorized as either part of the self or originating outside the self; located in the mind or located in the body. This work links up with psychological studies on theory of mind and mentalizing processes and overlaps with the subdiscipline of psychological anthropology.

Phenomenological approaches are also taken up by several younger scholars such as Ehler Voss, describing mediumistic healing in Germany, and Maria José de Abreu, studying charismatic Catholicism in Brazil.

SEE ALSO: Buddhism; Charisma; Christianity; Color; Consciousness; Consciousness, Altered States of; Cosmologies; Environmental Cognition; Foucault, Michel (1926–84); France, Anthropology in; Frobenius, Leo (1873–1938); Geertz, Clifford (1926–2006); Gender and Christianity; Intuitive and Reflective Cognition; Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1908–2009); Lienhardt, Godfrey (1921–93); Liminality and the Liminoid; Materiality; Medical Anthropology; Mental Representations; Mind–Body Reasoning; Myth; Phenomenology of Space and the Environment; Philosophical Anthropology; Psychology; Religion and Cognition; Religion and Embodiment; Religion, Health, and Wellbeing; Spirit Possession; Theory of Mind, Development and Cross-Cultural Variation in; Turner, Victor (1920–83)

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

-
- Cassaniti, Julia, and Tanya Marie Luhrmann. 2011. "Encountering the Supernatural: A Phenomenological Account of Mind." *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 2 (1): 37–53. doi:10.3167/arrs.2011.020103.

- Csordas, Thomas J. 1990. "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology." *Ethos* 18 (1): 5–47.
- Csordas, Thomas J. 1994. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Csordas, Thomas J. 1997. *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Desjarlais, R. R. 1992. *Body and Emotion: The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Desjarlais, R. R. 1997. *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood among the Homeless*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 1989. *Paths toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 1996. "Introduction." In *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*, edited by Michael Jackson, 1–50. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 1998. *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jackson, Michael. 2009. *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Relatedness, Religiosity, and the Real*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Knibbe, Kim, and Peter Versteeg. 2008. "Assessing Phenomenology in Anthropology." *Critique of Anthropology* 28 (1): 47–62.
- Stoller, Paul. 1989. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stoller, Paul. 1997a. *Fusion of the Worlds; an Ethnography of Possession among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stoller, Paul. 1997b. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stoller, Paul. 2009. *The Power of the Between: An Anthropological Odyssey*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stoller, Paul, and Cheryl Olkes. 1987. *In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Throop, C. Jason. 2003. "Articulating Experience." *Anthropological Theory* 3 (2): 219–41. doi:10.1177/1463499603003002006.