

Living the Epoché: A Phenomenological Realism of Religious Experience

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Is religious experience real, or is it merely a social construct that some scholars of religious studies project onto others? Tim Murphy (2010) argues in support of the latter claim in his critical analysis of the phenomenology of religion in *The Politics of Spirit: Phenomenology, Genealogy, Religion*. More specifically, he claims that the phenomenology of religion is basically a Eurocentric enterprise, and thus also, *mutatis mutandis*, Christocentric, ethnocentric, racist, and logocentric. Insofar as they project their biases about religion, culture, humanity, and reason onto others, phenomenologists inquiring into religion say more about their prejudices as investigators than they do about the actual phenomena they purport to study. To overcome those biases, Murphy proposes a postcolonial, poststructuralist approach based in genealogical methods of Nietzsche and Foucault. Murphy considers such an approach more effective at accounting for the diverse ways people orient themselves to the power relations categorized in modern European culture as “religion.” While there is much value in Murphy’s work for critically analyzing power relations and welcoming cultural differences, his account does not adequately represent the role of the *epoché* in the phenomenology of religion. As a practice of holding one’s own biases and prejudices in suspense or restraint, putting one’s own perspective in brackets so as to welcome phenomena on their own terms, the phenomenological *epoché* indicates how phenomenologists of religion overcome the centrisms in which their perspectives are situated and welcome otherness and difference. Poststructuralist and postcolonial affirmations of otherness (i.e., alterity) are not in opposition to phenomenology in this regard. Rather, they can be understood as extensions of the phenomenological *epoché*. Murphy is right to point out the importance of overcoming various centrisms in religious studies (e.g., ethnocentrism,

Christocentrism, and logocentrism), but he does not recognize that the phenomenology of religion already accounts for this problem. Indeed, it accounts for otherness perhaps more radically than some postcolonial and poststructuralist theories, which tend to involve constructivist frameworks that focus less on the real existence of actual others and more on criticizing the ways in which otherness is appropriated into systems of knowledge and power.

I claim that the practice of the *epoché* can facilitate a realist interpretation of religious experience. The *epoché* makes it possible to welcome the alterity of other religions, other ethnicities, other ways of knowing, other people, and indeed, every other. Insofar as this suspense welcomes the alterity of real others, it can support ethical and political gestures of hospitality across cultural differences. To elaborate on this point, I discuss the use of the *epoché* in the phenomenology of religion articulated by the Dutch philosopher and historian Gerardus Van der Leeuw. I show how this intersects with the ethics of alterity in the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas. While Levinas is a phenomenologist, he is also a prominent influence on Jacques Derrida, whose method of deconstruction has been highly significant in the development of poststructuralism and postcolonialism. Levinasian philosophy thus provides a good example of the continuity between phenomenology and those latter modes of thought. I conclude by explicating some ways that the *epoché* facilitates a phenomenological realism that is hospitable to the alterity others' experiences of the sacred.

Suspense

Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion follows in the Dutch tradition of phenomenology of religion that began with Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye in the late nineteenth century (James 1995). A crucial difference is that Van der Leeuw includes insights

elaborated by Husserl and Heidegger. While Van der Leeuw works with Husserl's sense of the *epoché*, he is also deeply indebted to Heidegger's hermeneutics. Like Heidegger, Van der Leeuw embraces the hermeneutic conception of experience (*Erlebnis*) developed by Wilhelm Dilthey. The significance of Dilthey's notion of experience for Heidegger is evident in the latter's discussion of "factual life-experience" (*faktische Lebenserfahrungen*) in his 1920-21 lecture course on the phenomenology of religion (Heidegger 2004). Factual life-experience can be described as a bivalent unity of presence and absence, in other words, combination and separation, or identity and difference. A similar dynamic is at work in Van der Leeuw's concept of experience. Van der Leeuw (1963, 676) articulates the relation of understanding to phenomena according to the schema outlined in Dilthey's argument that the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) are based on "relations between experience [*Erlebnis*], expression [*Ausdruck*] and understanding [*Verstehen*]." Van der Leeuw correlates subjective experience, expression, and understanding with three objective levels of appearing—relative concealment, relative transparency, and gradually becoming manifest or revealed. The primordial level of phenomenal appearing is the understanding of that which becomes revealed. Upon reflection, this level of the phenomenon's becoming manifest is rendered transparent and opaque: transparent insofar as the meaning of the phenomenon can be expressed; opaque insofar as the meaning of the phenomenon is concealed in the strangeness and difference of the experience that is being interpreted.

Van der Leeuw describes different experiences of systems of meaning or "types" (673). Such types can be described differently according to different contexts, and they could include types of sacred people (e.g., priest, king, saint, mystic), sacred objects (e.g., altars, trees, fetishes, buildings), sacred actions (e.g., purification, divination, prayer), etc. The basic type or structure of

religious meaning is the structure of the sacred. Along these lines, Van der Leeuw adopts Rudolf Otto's (1958) concept of the sacred in defining the essential meaning of religion, as the sacred names the concealment which becomes revealed in experience. The concealment of the phenomenon is the wholly other, *mysterium tremendum*. Insofar as all phenomena un-conceal concealment, all phenomena can be described as appearances of the radical alterity of the sacred. Human existence is thus always already engaged with the sacred, which is to say, human being is *Homo religiosus*, the antithesis of *Homo negligens* (Van der Leeuw 1963, 680). In other words, "all understanding, irrespective of whatever object it refers to, is ultimately religious: all significance sooner or later leads to ultimate significance" (684). A phenomenological interpretation of religion is thus not a matter of abstract theories and methods that would perpetuate the hegemony of sameness and suppress that which is other, different, or strange. Rather, phenomenology of religion for Van der Leeuw is a practice of engaging the radical alterity of every phenomenon and avoiding neglectfulness. It is the "true vital activity" of humanity: "standing aside and understanding what appears into view" (676). Phenomenology is the way in which humans understand the mysterious other as it is simultaneously concealed and becoming manifest in experience. The phenomenology of religion thus aims to descriptively translate all types and meanings of religious experience into communicable discourse without effacing the radical alterity of that which becomes manifest in such experience. For Van der Leeuw, the attitude of restraint is a fundamental part of phenomenological interpretation, because it holds discourse back and keeps it from obscuring or assimilating the phenomena under investigation.

In George James' (1995, 231) overview of the main proponents of a phenomenology of religion, he notes that Van der Leeuw's use of the term *epoché* has "little to do with its meaning

in Husserl's thought." Murphy (2010, 228) makes a similar point, arguing that, although Van der Leeuw "does invoke the *epoché* as a restraint upon phenomenological activity, his conception of that restraint in no way, finally, resembles Husserl's." James is more correct than Murphy's hyperbolic "no way," yet even James is understating the Husserlian significance of Van der Leeuw's *epoché*. Both Murphy and James associate Husserl's *epoché* with an idealist notion of bracketing the being of the world to assess the contents of consciousness. To be sure, that is not entirely incorrect. Husserl's focus on clarifying the subject-object (noesis-noema) structure of intentionality tends to elide any analysis of the real existence of what becomes manifest within intentional consciousness. Nonetheless, Husserl's *epoché* is not simply idealist. There is a realist aspect to it.

For Husserl, the *epoché* signifies the bracketing that puts in suspense or restraint assertions about the world, particularly judgments based in the natural attitude, which is the basic standpoint or situation of human beings (Husserl 1969, 101-110). Merleau-Ponty (1998, vii) summarizes this conception of the *epoché*, noting that this phenomenological method "places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them." The natural attitude includes any naturalist interpretations of the world, including rationalism, empiricism, and positivism, but the natural attitude is not merely the attitude of naturalists. It is not only a theoretical attitude. It is more existential. It is the situation by which the self is "set in relation to a world," which is "a *world of values*, a *world of goods*, a *practical world*" (Husserl 1969, 103). With the *epoché*, phenomenologists restrain their own existential situations, holding back judgments so that their discourse lets phenomena show themselves as phenomena. This is not simply an idealist abstention from making claims about the real world. Suspending the natural attitude does not mean abstaining from any judgment about the real world. Metaphysical

theories of reality (i.e., the realness of the real) need to be held in suspense; however, such suspense does not entail that one refrain from affirming the existence of the real. Husserlian restraint is a practice of holding oneself in suspense to better understand the correlations whereby real existence becomes manifest to consciousness.

‘The’ world has not been lost through the *epoché*—it is not at all an abstaining with respect to the being of the world and with respect to any judgment about it, but rather it is the way of uncovering judgments about correlation, of uncovering the reduction of all unities of sense to me myself and my sense-having and sense-bestowing subjectivity with all its capabilities. (Husserl, qtd. in Zahavi 2003, 46)

The restraint (*Zurückhaltung*) of Van der Leeuw’s *epoché* does not seek a constitutive transcendental ego, and still further it “implies no mere methodological device, no cautious procedure,” but is the basic operation of human existence insofar as it is concerned with the real world (Van der Leeuw 1963, 675). Van der Leeuw’s *epoché* is like Husserl’s insofar as it attempts to understand correlations between oneself and the real world. The difference between them is that Van der Leeuw emphasizes the ubiquity of the *epoché*. Whereas Husserl elaborates a methodological approach to the *epoché*, Van der Leeuw views suspense as a constitutive characteristic of any attempt to understand what becomes manifest in experience. “Understanding, in fact, itself presupposes intellectual restraint” (684). Understanding is always already holding itself back so as to welcome that which becomes revealed in the appearing of phenomena.

In short, Van der Leeuw views the *epoché* as a fundamental characteristic of concrete human existence, and not as an abstract methodological instrument. Edith Wyschogrod (2000, 75) describes a similar “concretization of the *epoché*” in the work of Emmanuel Levinas: “Bracketing is no longer an instrument invented for understanding consciousness in its primordially but a fundamental structure of human existence.” In other words, with his

“prereflective mode of living the Husserlian *epoche*,” Levinas “brings the *epoche* into the life world itself.” Levinas is also similar to Van der Leeuw insofar as both of these thinkers work with phenomenology as a way to account for different manifestations of the human relation with the radical alterity of the wholly other, which infinitely exceeds the limits of any object, any phenomenon, or any totality. Like Van der Leeuw, Levinas describes religion in terms of this relation with alterity. “We propose to call ‘religion’ the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality” (Levinas 2002, 40). Furthermore, the alterity of the other is ethically compelling. Ethical responsibility emerges in the relation of “the one-for-the-other,” which is a “face to face” relation characterized by the “substitution of the same for the other,” whereby the alterity of actually existing others irrupts in one’s own phenomenological horizon (Levinas 1998, 26; 2002, 39).

In light of the senses of phenomenology expressed by Van der Leeuw and Levinas, one can see how phenomenological inquiries into religion work with the *epoché* in attempting to restrain one’s own presuppositions and let what others experience as sacred appear in its irreducible alterity. It is impossible to comprehend another’s experience of the sacred at all without already having some presupposed understanding of the sacred. From the presuppositions of one’s existential situation, one can experience others, but without further restraint the radical alterity of these experiences becomes subsumed into one’s own presuppositions. With further restraint, one can proceed to understand others’ experiences without effacing their alterity. In restraining oneself so as to interpret what others experience as sacred, one cannot completely restrain oneself without suspending the very hermeneutic context that makes it possible to interpret others’ experiences. This is the limit of understanding, the limit of phenomenology, the limit that marks the encounter with radical alterity. At this limit, the other’s experience of the

sacred appears as other. Van der Leeuw notes that, at this limit, understanding loses its name and can only be considered as “becoming understood” (*Verstandenwerden*), such that “the more deeply comprehension penetrates any event, and the better it ‘understands’ it, the more evident it becomes to the understanding that the ultimate ground of understanding lies not within itself, but in some ‘other’ by which it is comprehended from beyond the frontier” (683). The other is ultimately “a secret which reveals itself repeatedly, only nevertheless to remain eternally concealed” (680).

The task of any phenomenology of religion is not simply to interpret appearances of religious experience, but to disclose the limit where appearances break up and concealment breaks through. At the limit, others’ experiences of the sacred appear in their irreducible alterity. Extending a Levinasian sense of alterity to include all others, Derrida (1995, 82-87) articulates this point in terms of a “play of words” that contains “the very possibility of a secret that hides and reveals itself at the same time within a single sentence”: *tout autre est tout autre* (“Every other (one) is every (bit) other”). This provocative French palindrome suggests that every particular other (*tout autre*) is completely other, wholly other (*tout autre*), and vice versa, the wholly other is every single other. Simply put, the phenomenology of religion enacts the *epoché* in an explicit attempt at holding oneself back so as to welcome the other as other, to welcome others’ experiences of the wholly other in all of their otherness. As John Caputo (2000, 42) observes, this welcoming of the arrival of the other (Derrida’s “*l’inventions de l’autre*”) is a common commitment of many inquiries in hermeneutics and deconstruction. It is this same welcoming of alterity that led Wyschogrod (1981) to suggest that hermeneutics and deconstruction are particularly helpful approaches for studying religious phenomena across

cultural differences. Phenomenology, hermeneutics, and poststructuralist methods like deconstruction restrain the structures of discourse so as to not obscure the alterity of the other.

Realism without Reality

The details of Van der Leeuw's appropriation of the *epoché* are most evident when reflecting on what it is that Van der Leeuw considers particularly important to restrain. James (1995, 233) notes that Van der Leeuw puts three aspects of religion into brackets: 1) any reality behind the appearance of the phenomenon, 2) any developmental or evolutionary progression of history, and 3) any judgments that consider alien religious phenomena to be spurious or degenerate. All these aspects of religion must be held in abeyance to understand the phenomenon as such—as another's experience of a disclosure of alterity. Unrestrained, interpretations of religion will likely posit assertions and make judgments about phenomena in such a way as to obscure and efface the other. Brief explications of the three interpretative stances that Van der Leeuw brackets will help clarify how phenomenological interpretations can speak of real experiences of the sacred while holding in abeyance any metaphysical, developmental, or judgmental assertions about the reality of the real.

1) Similar to Heidegger's (1962, 60) argument that there is nothing "behind" what shows itself in the appearing of phenomena, Van der Leeuw (1963, 675) argues that phenomenology "is concerned only with 'phenomena', that is with 'appearance'; for it, there is nothing whatever 'behind' the phenomenon." This follows from Van der Leeuw's separation of phenomenology from theology and philosophy, which are concerned with the metaphysical truth underlying appearances. Accordingly, Van der Leeuw does not claim that phenomena are manifestations of Platonic Ideas or of a Kantian thing-in-itself (*Ding-an-sich*). This also means that Van der Leeuw

brackets the structures that empirical scientists posit as an underlying reality, such as the position of some physical and social scientists who claim that the world is primarily random material events of which human consciousness is merely an emergent phenomenon or epiphenomenon (677). This does not mean that the *epoché* involves abstention for any acknowledgement that religious experiences are real. It involves abstention from empirical and metaphysical theories of an underlying reality constitutive of the real.

In restraining all propositions about true structures under or behind phenomena, Van der Leeuw holds back the violent tendency of discourse to assimilate the incomprehensible other to the words and categories of understanding. Derrida views the *epoché* similarly, arguing that such restraint is respectful to “sacred mystery,” respectful to that which “ought to remain intact or inaccessible, like the mystical immunity of a secret” (Derrida 2002, 85-86). The restrained holding of the *epoché* is part of an “entire semantic family” involving varieties of “holding” (*tenir*), including tending, attending, pretending, extending, intending, and these different ways of holding can welcome the visitation of the other (85, 360). Accordingly, Derrida associates this restrained “holding” with hospitality—a gesture of welcoming that invites the arrival of that which is beyond all welcoming apparatuses. Hospitality is a matter of letting oneself “be swept by the coming of the wholly other,” which is to say, “to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken” (361). Derrida is drawing here on the phenomenology of Levinasian ethics. Indeed, Levinas (2002, 27) seeks to “present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality.” Hospitality is “the one-for-the-other in the ego,” which means “giving to the other the bread from one’s own mouth” and “being able to give up one’s soul for another” (Levinas 1998, 79). For Derrida, this hospitably restrained welcoming of the unapproachable other is an instance of deconstruction. Indeed, deconstruction is the very event of hospitality: “deconstruction is

hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than ‘its other,’ to an other who is beyond any ‘its other’” (Derrida 2002, 364). With the hospitable suspense of the *epoché* comes the possibility of speaking of a “universal structure of religiosity”—a structure that allows different names for the sacred to be translated into one another without effacing the alterity of the sacred and without reducing the sacred to any particular name, including names like “sacred” and “other” (86). “It is in the *epoché*,” for Derrida (2005, 47), “that faith appears. The only possibility of faith is in the *epoché*.”

2) An important interpretive structure that must be restrained in a phenomenology of religion is that which posits any developmental progression for the history of religions. In bracketing the question of history, Van der Leeuw “does not deny the historicity of what appears,” but holds historical theories in suspense (James 1995, 233). In this respect, Van der Leeuw classifies phenomena according to apparent types and chronological succession without reducing these phenomena to any historically antecedent causes or origins. An example of a developmental account of religion that Van der Leeuw puts into brackets is Hegel’s account of religion as a dialectical progression toward knowledge of Absolute Spirit, wherein magic and the other natural religions and native traditions are imperfect realizations of human freedom in Absolute Spirit, whereas Christianity appears as the most thoroughly realized religion (Hegel 1968, 262-65).

Bracketing evolutionary accounts does not make phenomenology anti-evolutionary. For in the preface of his work, Van der Leeuw (1963, vi) says that his “phenomenological comprehension of history” avoids any arguments for or against evolutionary theories of history. Thus, Van der Leeuw considers evolutionary *and* anti-evolutionary theories of the history of religion, but not as conclusive statements about the reality of religion. He considers these

theories only insofar as they manifest some of the various ways in which the history of religions can be understood. For instance, Van der Leeuw notes that while he finds Christianity to manifest the peak in the development of religions, he is aware that this peak would not necessarily appear for a person of another religious background, such as a Buddhist, who would most likely interpret the history of religions in terms of Buddhist theories and practices (646). The phenomenologist is not concerned with who is “right” but rather with understanding how each interpretation has meaning for those who hold it.

3) In bracketing theology, Van der Leeuw is bracketing the question of truth with respect to God—the object of theological inquiry. God is not a phenomenon, “at least not so that we can comprehend and speak about him” (687-88). Bracketing theology thus entails that one not evaluate phenomena exclusively in terms of one’s own religious history. James (1995, 52-57) notes that this “a-theological” approach to the study of religion is common among phenomenological investigations of religion. Derrida (2002, 57) argues that the a-theological aspect of the *epoché* is particularly important because of its potential for “liberating a universal rationality and the political democracy associated with it.” Through the restrained discourse of the *epoché*, it is possible to express a structure that is hospitable to all varieties of religious phenomena, a structure that Derrida calls a “universal structure of religiosity”—a structure that would allow “global translations” of the various names associated with religion, the sacred, the other, God, Brahman, Buddha-nature, etc. (86). Such a universal structure could help provide political representation for all religious phenomena, and it could do so without excluding the different appearances that people of other faiths and other nations experience of this structure. Moreover, this universal structure is peaceful, hospitably welcoming the other rather than waging a war and effacing the other. Thus, Levinas (2002, 21-23) equates war with totality, whereas

peace is based on the relation with radical alterity, which breaks up all totality. In this sense, the practice of the *epoché* facilitates a discourse on religion that supports the sort of ethico-political relations conveyed in the peaceful gestures of interfaith dialogue and international diplomacy.

Even when rigorously practicing the *epoché*, one's own experience "can never be freed from its own religious determinateness" (Van der Leeuw 1963, 646). It is the task of phenomenology to restrain one's own religious determinateness as completely as possible, reaching the limit where it becomes apparent that one's own understanding is incomplete and that "the ultimate ground of understanding lies not within itself, but in some 'other' by which it is comprehended from beyond the frontier" (683). The impossibility of complete restraint can be described as "the possible/impossible hospitality," which is possible insofar as one can welcome the other, but simultaneously impossible insofar as one cannot invite the other without, at least to some extent, appropriating or assimilating the other into one's own habitation and horizon of expectations (Derrida 2002, 408). With hospitality, the other is present in one's own horizon precisely as that which cannot be assimilated into one's own horizon. To develop a restrained interpretation of religion, Van der Leeuw restrains any judgments or assertions about whether what he sees "has its roots in any ultimate 'reality,'" and as a Christian, he relegates such issues to theological inquiry (Van der Leeuw, *Religion* 646). This does not mean that he refrains from considering religious experiences to be real. It means he refrains from pronouncing on that in which the ultimate reality of the real consists. While Van der Leeuw admittedly interprets other religions from the perspective of his own religious history, he indicates the limit where his own horizon encounters the alterity of others' religious engagements.

To interpret the sacred in such a way as to recognize and respect the alterity of others' experiences of the wholly other, one can enact restrained hospitality and hold back the

presuppositions that contextualize whatever words and concepts are used to interpret the appearances of the other, including words like “God,” “Yahweh,” “*śūnyatā*,” and “*Dao*,” but also words and concepts that might seem universally translatable (e.g., “religion,” “wholly other,” “sacred,” “*mysterium tremendum*”). To allow sacred phenomena to appear as such, one must welcome the real existence of the other and restrain all assertions, judgments, and prejudices about the reality of what is becoming revealed. To enact the hospitable restraint of the *epoché*, one does not need to practice phenomenology, hermeneutics, or deconstruction, or any particular school of thought or mode of analysis. What Heidegger (1972, 82) says of phenomenology also applies to the *epoché*: “it can disappear as a designation in favor of the matter of thinking whose manifestness remains a mystery.” A hospitable interpretation lets itself be overtaken by the alterity of others’ experiences of the wholly other. Theories and concepts about the *epoché* and the phenomenology of religion ultimately disappear as they welcome the arrival of real others.

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