PART I

Methodological Perspectives on African Religions

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

CHAPTER 1

Methodological Views on African Religions

James L. Cox

When I first began lecturing in the University of Zimbabwe in 1989, I noticed after a few classes that students had warmed to a method of studying African Traditional Religions that drew on concepts derived from the phenomenology of religion. In fact, my students became so enamored with the phenomenological method in the study of religion that often they wrote in their essays that phenomenology is *the* way; some said the *only* way, to study religions, particularly African religions. I now explain this overwhelmingly positive response by Zimbabwean students to the phenomenological method by the fact that many had been pupils in mission schools, or at least were active Christians, who had been taught that the indigenous religion of their ancestors was demonic and that they should have nothing to do with traditional rituals. When they began to see that for academic reasons they should suspend such judgments, even if they maintained them personally, and should employ empathetic techniques to gain an understanding of any religion they were studying, it was as if a veil had been removed from their eyes, and they could view their own religious and cultural practices in a new light.

I refer at the outset to my Zimbabwean students because their experience of studying their own cultures using a basic understanding of phenomenological principles underscores at a deeper level two inter-related methodological questions I wish to consider: 1) What, if anything, can the phenomenological method, which has been much maligned in scholarly writings over the past twenty years, offer to contemporary understandings of African religions? 2) In light of the phenomenological method in the study of religion, as "insiders" to their own cultures, do African scholars have an inherent advantage over non-African researchers of African religions? The first question focuses on the phenomenology of religion in general and the second considers a phenomenological interpretation of the relative value of "insider" discourse. These questions relate to the study of all African religions, but I have chosen to exemplify my responses in the latter part of this article largely in terms of indigenous beliefs and practices. Before

The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions, First Edition. Edited by Elias Kifon Bongmba.
© 2012 Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Published 2012 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

I turn to these considerations, however, I need to outline the key principles underlying the phenomenology of religion and respond to some of the most persistent criticisms levelled at it by scholars of religion.[1]

The Phenomenology of Religion

The three most important concepts found within the phenomenology of religion are *epoché*, empathetic interpolation and the eidetic intuition. Derived from the philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century German philosopher Edmund Husserl, the term *epoché* was used by Husserl to suspend all judgments associated with what he called the natural attitude (which naively assumes that what is observed tells us all there is to know about the world) such as material things, science, other humans, and the sequence and order of events. All the things we take for granted about what we perceive as real, to use a term Husserl borrowed from mathematics, must be "put into brackets." In solving algebraic equations, for example, the mathematician places the various components of the formula into brackets and works on solving each problem placed in brackets one at a time so that, at the conclusion, each limited solution can be applied to resolving the problem of the entire equation. In a similar way, although Husserl did not use the *epoché* to doubt the existence of the external world, he suspended judgments about it so that, like a mathematician, attention could be focused on another part of the equation, in this case, on an analysis of the phenomena of perception as they appear in the individual's consciousness. The effect of this method, according to Husserl, was to establish a new mode of consciousness in which the natural standpoint is put out of play or, as Husserl put it, performing *epoché* "bars me from using any judgment that concerns spatio-temporal existence."[2] By placing in brackets previously held beliefs or assumptions derived from the natural standpoint, the observer allows pure phenomena to speak for themselves.

Following Husserl, phenomenologists of religion advocated a method of bracketing out or suspending a researcher's previous ideas, thoughts or beliefs about the truth, value or meaning of any religion under study. Phenomenologists wanted to observe the phenomena of religion as they appear, rather than as they are understood through opinions formed prior to their being observed. This means suspending *personal beliefs* and withholding judgements on *academic theories* about religion. A leading advocate of the method was the Dutch phenomenologist Gerardus van der Leeuw who followed closely Husserl's philosophical rejection of the natural attitude. Van der Leeuw described *epoché* as a tool to ensure "that no judgment is expressed concerning the objective world, which is thus placed 'between brackets'."[3] He explained that this requires the scholar to observe "restraint" by allowing only the phenomena that appear to manifest themselves, rather than the observer relying on presuppositions about what lies "behind" appearances.[4] In van der Leeuw's understanding, performing *epoché* should not be regarded as an effort to remove the observer from interacting creatively with the phenomena. The mind in its bracketed consciousness is not a blank tablet but, based on Husserl's rendering of the term intentionality, is employed precisely to enable the observer to interpret the phenomena as they appear, liberated from naïve or unchallenged assumptions. Because it eliminated potentially distorting biases, for van der Leeuw, *epoché* enabled the observer to attain understanding of the subjective nature of religion (its internal structure) and its objective meaning (its broader connections).

Another important phenomenologist of religion was W. Brede Kristensen, under whom van der Leeuw studied in Leiden University. Although his major work in English on theory and method in the study of religion, *The Meaning of Religion*, was not published until 1960, seven years after his death, his influence within the study of religions during the first half of the twentieth century was considerable.[5] Despite the fact that he did not employ the term *epoché* in *The Meaning of Religion*, Kristensen began by insisting that the scholar must call into question any interpretation of religion that is potentially offensive to believers. He argued that a genuinely scientific understanding occurs only when the scholar is able to see through the viewpoint or perspective of adherents, since believers understand their own religion better than anyone from the outside ever could. In order to gain an insider's perspective, the scholar needs to suspend widely accepted presuppositions about the origin and meaning of religion. Kristensen believed that evolutionary theories in particular predisposed the scholar to evaluate religions from the outside and thus, in the words of Eric Sharpe, "to have been responsible for inducing scholars to pass premature judgment on material they had learned to understand only in part."[6] By applying evolutionary assumptions to religion, the outside researcher produces an entirely biased interpretation to which believers could never accede. Kristensen concluded: "All evolutionary views and theories . . . mislead us from the start."[7] Van der Leeuw later used Husserl's term *epoché* to reinforce Kristensen's emphasis on the authority of believers to interpret their own religion.

A second key concept in the phenomenological method is what van der Leeuw called "sympathetic interpolation," which he defined as "the primitively human art of the actor which is indispensable to all arts, but to the sciences of the mind also" adding that "only the persistent and strenuous application of intense sympathy . . . qualifies the phenomenologist to interpret appearances."[8] The British phenomenologist of religion, Ninian Smart, preferred the term empathy to sympathy, which he explained, following Husserl's notion of intentionality, enabled the observer to recognise "a framework of intentions" among the believers.[9] Intentionality, for Smart, not only required the active involvement of the researcher but also included the acts of a believing community (what it intends by its myths, rituals, and symbols), which must be apprehended by the observer if genuine understanding is to be achieved. The twin processes of using empathy and interpolating what is experienced into terms the researcher can comprehend defined for Smart how intentionality operates in a dual manner: first, by enabling the scholar to access the meaning of the religious life and practices for adherents and then by making sense of them intentionally in terms of the researcher's own culture.

The Canadian scholar of comparative religions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, argued forcefully for this approach. In his popular book, *The Faith of Other Men*,[10] subsequently re-printed under the title *Patterns of Faith around the World*,[11] Smith provided examples of empathetic interpolation by selecting key symbols which he used to help interpret to outsiders the meaning of faith for adherents within four different religious and cultural traditions: Hindus, Buddhists, the Chinese and Muslims. For Hindus, Smith identified the central symbol as the Sanskrit expression "*tat tvam asi*," which he translated into

English as “that thou art.”[12] This terse statement points towards a deep religious truth affirming the identity of the individual soul (*Atman*) with the universal world spirit (*Brahman*). Smith explained that for Hindus “the individual self is the world soul” and thus “each one of you reading this book” is “in some final, cosmic sense, the total and transcendent truth that underlies all being.”[13] Smith interpolated this difficult and seemingly contradictory idea for the western mind by suggesting that in the areas of art, morality, and theology people in European cultures, steeped as they are in Greek thought, seek a correspondence between what they appreciate esthetically, do morally or believe ultimately and what *really is* Beautiful, Good, and True. The unity sought between what the individual experiences and what is universal is familiar to the western mind and thus interpolates empathetically what has often appeared enigmatic for westerners within the Hindu tradition. Smith does the same in the Buddhist tradition by describing a boys’ initiation rite practiced in Burma called the *Shin Byu* ceremony,[14] within the Chinese tradition by exploring the significance of the *Yin-Yang* symbols of opposition and complementarity,[15] and for Muslims by explaining the *Shahadah* or testimony of faith, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.”[16] In each case, Smith draws from the everyday experiences common in western culture to help westerners gain an appreciation for and an understanding of what otherwise might appear incomprehensible, strange or even wrong in other religious traditions.

Ninian Smart exemplified this process when he asked his reader to consider the life and behaviour of Adolf Hitler, who for most people represents a historical figure with whom it would appear impossible to empathize or to cultivate a feeling for.[17] Smart asks, “Does it mean that I need to be a Hitler-lover to understand him?” In one sense, Smart answers this question affirmatively: “If we are indeed to get into his soul we have to drop our preconceptions, and treat Hitler as a human being who had his own thought world.” This involves following him “through his Austrian childhood and relationship to his father and dear mother; through his scholastic failures and outcast status in Vienna; through his years in the trenches fighting in France.” In other words, Smart calls on us to treat Adolf Hitler as a human being, but, he adds, “All this is strictly *empathy*, ‘getting the feel of’.” Empathy, he argues, does not require a person to condone Hitler’s actions or approve “in any way the rightness of his creed.” Smart concludes: “So we can still deplore his deeds once we have understood them.” This example shows that for phenomenologists of religion it is always possible to cultivate a feeling for anything human in order to induce understanding. Under the procedure of *epoché*, it is irrelevant whether or not scholars of religion are able to endorse the beliefs and practices of the communities they are seeking to understand.

A third key component in the phenomenological method is at the same time probably the most controversial: the eidetic intuition. Again, this idea is obtained from Husserl who used the phrase, which he derived from the Greek *eidos* meaning form, idea, or essence, to see into the meaning of the phenomena encountered while in the state of bracketed consciousness or *epoché*. By the eidetic intuition Husserl meant that the observer is able to apprehend not just particular entities or even universal classes of entities but their essential meanings as entities and classes of entities. This can occur only when one’s preconceived notions are suspended, thereby enabling the observer to intuit the meaning of what actually manifests itself in the world. Husserl explains:

> The multiplicity of possible perceptions, memories, and, indeed, intentional processes of whatever sort, that relate, or can relate, "harmoniously" to one and the same physical thing has (in all its tremendous complication) a quite definite essential style.[18]

For Husserl, the combination of *epoché* and the eidetic intuition were required for the building up of an objective picture of the phenomena of existence. *Epoché* allows the observer to suspend theories of the world built on naturalistic assumptions, what Husserl calls the "fact world," in order that consciousness, which forms the basis for all knowledge, can be analyzed rigorously. In this way, the observer perceives the world as it comes fresh from the phenomena and is able thereby to intuit new realities or at least achieve a more complete understanding of reality than had been attained previously.

An important and influential figure in the academic study of religions throughout the latter third of the twentieth century was Mircea Eliade, who occupied the Chair of the History of Religions in the University of Chicago from 1958 until his death in 1986. Eliade's writings cover a wide range of topics from Shamanism to Australian Aboriginal Religions, but his chief contribution to theory and method resulted from his hermeneutical approach to the study of religions, an approach I have argued elsewhere is fully consistent with the phenomenology of religion.[19] I am calling Eliade's interpretation of the meaning of religion a prime example of what I mean by the eidetic intuition, although Eliade did not explicitly use the term, nor did he directly rely on Husserl in his writings, although clearly he was aware of Husserl's understanding of the *eidos*.[20] Nonetheless, Eliade constructed a general theory of religion which he believed applied in all cultural and social contexts, and thus can be regarded as providing a statement about the universal essence of religion.

For Eliade, the key word that helps the scholar unlock the meaning of religion is the "hierophany," the manifestation of the sacred, which locates for the religious person (*homo religiosus*) points of orientation around sacred centers. Eliade contended that the sacred is unknown and unknowable in itself, but is revealed through manifestations in profane space and time.[21] Hence, hierophanies are mundane, worldly objects which become the avenues for making known to humans what otherwise would remain utterly incomprehensible. As such, these manifestations, the hierophanies, constitute the subject matter of the history of religions. In his important book, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Eliade explained that hierophanies reveal a "paradoxical coming together of sacred and profane, being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming."[22]

In what is arguably his most influential book outlining his theory of religion, *The Sacred and the Profane* (which significantly carries the sub-title, "The nature of religion"), Eliade asks his reader to imagine a time when there were no hierophanies, no sacred intrusions in space and time.[23] He calls this the chaos created by a profane homogeneity, where everything is the same, where no points of orientation can be located.[24] This is equivalent to being lost, where a person cannot identify any familiar landmarks and experiences utter despair and hopelessness as a result. In like manner, for the religious person, homogeneity, the inability to detect sacred points of orientation, results in a sense of absolute meaninglessness and total chaos. In the mythic beginnings of history, when space and time were undifferentiated, for religious people, the sacred manifested itself creating meaningful points of orientation. Stories about these primordial hierophanies are told within different religious traditions in their cosmogonic myths, which in turn are re-enacted in rituals.

Because religion primarily is about orientation, certain symbols recur in various forms throughout the world and across history. These primarily have to do with cosmic centers, which connect the layers of the world, the upper levels reaching to the heavens and hence to the gods and the lower levels extending to the foundations of the earth. As such, stories about the sacred are often associated with the sky and are symbolized by mountains, trees, birds, the sun, and the moon. Ritual attention frequently is focused around the symbols, which are transmitted in the myths, and thus rituals transport the religious community repeatedly into a time of beginning when the world was "founded." This explains why for Eliade hierophanies, as told in myths and re-enacted in rituals, provide the key concept for interpreting religion universally.[25]

It should now be evident from my description of the key elements in the phenomenology of religion that, as a method, it aims to promote understanding of religions in particular and of religion in general. Its techniques also attempt to bridge the gap between the subject and the object of religion, the observer and those that are observed, by drawing on common human ways of thinking which can be translated into multiple cultural contexts and individual inter-subjective experiences. The phenomenology of religion also seeks to alert the scholar to potentially distorting biases and unexamined assumptions (both personal and academic) in order that these do not predetermine the outcomes of research in advance.

Criticisms of the Phenomenological Method and a Rebuttal

During the period from around 1950 to 1980, the phenomenology of religion, including its application to historical studies in Eliadean terms, was probably the dominant method employed by scholars of religion. Since 1980, a mounting critique of the method has occurred, which has undermined its influence and, in the view of many contemporary writers, has made it irrelevant to contemporary studies of religion. If this consensus holds, of course, the questions with which I began this article investigating the application of the method within African religions are anachronistic. I want to counter this position by arguing that the declaration of the death of phenomenology is premature and that it provides still a cutting-edge approach to the study of religions with implications for new understandings of African religions. Before discussing the African context, however, I must rehearse some of the principal objections to the phenomenology of religion and respond to them briefly.

One of the main criticisms of phenomenology centers on its claim that by using empathy it can enter into specific religious contexts in order to gain a universal understanding of religious typologies and more generally on the basis of typological comparisons to ascertain the meaning of religion. According to the scholar of Hinduism Gavin Flood, this is a problem that the phenomenology of religion inherited from Edmund Husserl, who maintained that the individual consciousness is at the same time both particular and universal. The individual consciousness operates under the limitations imposed by being an individual consciousness, but at the same time it assumes a universal form of rationality. In other words, in Husserl's view, the observer, although particular and individual, asserts a common understanding of the world with others, or obtains intersubjectivity, through empathy. In the phenomenology of religion, this same process operates when the subjective observer, in this case the scholar of religion, is able to penetrate into the inner meaning of religious facts. This, according to Flood, has resulted in the overriding emphasis among phenomenologists on subjective states, conveyed in terms of numinous experience, faith, or inner enlightenment. Flood argues that this can be seen clearly in the case of Eliade, where religion is construed in terms of the observer's ability to feel "as if" one were religious by entering into the mind of the religious person. For Flood, this turns the study of religion into a study of the structure of the religious "consciousness" because it is wed to the idea it imported from Husserl that "assumes the universality of the rational subject . . . who can, through objectification, have access to a truth external to any particular historical and cultural standpoint."[26]

In response to Flood, I would emphasize the word "interpolate," the second part of van der Leeuw's phrase, "sympathetic interpolation." Sympathy (or empathy), considered by itself, can been regarded as an entirely subjective tool that depends on the ability of the individual observer to "enter into" or "cultivate a feeling" for that which otherwise would appear unusual, bizarre, or alien to one's own understanding. For example, in his discussion of Australian Aboriginal cultures, Tony Swain has argued that "it is easy to be deluded into believing we have gained an empathic understanding of other people's religious life, when in fact we have merely seen ourselves reflected in their culture."[27] Nonetheless, as Smart demonstrated in his example of Hitler, to interpolate suggests that we insert consciously our own experience into the experience of the other on the assumption that nothing human ultimately is alien to other humans, since everywhere humans think alike, although the way thoughts are expressed culturally and socially differs dramatically. For this reason, it is possible to use one's own experience as an interpretative tool to gain an understanding of the experience of another. That is, one can interpolate out of one's own cultural setting meanings that help the student of religion, as an outsider, understand what occurs in another, seemingly alien, cultural context.

In one sense, Flood's objection cannot be answered since consciousness is accessible only to the one performing acts of consciousness. This means that the process of interpolation, which is based on the assumption that other minds operate in roughly the same fashion as one's own, cannot be tested. It is based on a "feeling for" the other and resulted in Husserl's attempt to overcome solipsism (the view that the individual consciousness is all that can be known to exist) through an alleged intersubjectivity between independent minds. In a like manner, phenomenologists of religion secure understanding of religious practices with which they are unfamiliar by appealing to a common humanity. In other words, even though the eyes of faith are denied to the scholar of religion, it is possible to imagine what it would be like to possess a vision based on faith.

Although solipsism can never be disproved, it remains an untenable philosophical position since a theory of knowledge can never proceed without the assumption that other minds experience the world in similar ways.[28] For this reason, Husserl can hardly be faulted for asserting common patterns of human thought which can be ascertained through assumed intersubjective experiences. In a like manner, the phenomenologist of religion takes for granted that religious people have shared ways of expressing their beliefs and practices, understanding of which can be penetrated through a combination of empathy and interpolation. This means that the phenomenologist often refers to numinous experiences or, following Eliade, describes the longing of the religious person to be as near the sacred as possible in time and space, through myths and rituals.[29] These represent scholarly interpretations generated by a careful analysis of data, but at the same time ones that are provoked by a subjective empathy. Such interpretations give insight into how the religious mind operates, or better, how the mind operates when it perceives the world religiously. So, in one sense Flood is correct when he argues that the phenomenologist of religion conceives the world by projecting the numinous experience of the believer onto the data. This is done nonetheless in the interests of objectivity, that is, to disclose the way the religious mind functions as part of a shared human way of thinking, but which at the same time is expressed in multiple ways in specific social and cultural contexts.

This leads to a second major criticism levelled at the phenomenology of religion. Phenomenologists of religion repeatedly insisted that religion exists as an entity in itself, or as a classification *sui generis*, which requires specific methodological tools unique to its subject matter that are quite separate from any operating within the social sciences. For example, in his book on Australian religions, Eliade commends the work of the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner precisely because Stanner "protests against the general notion that a study of totemism, magic, and ritual exhausts the understanding of primitive religion."[30] He then cites with approval the anti-reductionist position of Stanner, whom he commends for criticizing "the fallacious presupposition 'that the social order is in some sense causal, and the religious order secondary and in some sense consequential'."[31] It is the fervent anti-reductionist stance of most phenomenologists that has brought charges from many scholars that the phenomenology of religion is ideologically based and therefore more akin to theology than to genuine scientific disciplines.

Following this line of thinking, Robert Segal of the University of Aberdeen has launched a stinging criticism of the phenomenology of religion.[32] In particular, Segal has attacked Eliade for confusing the study of religion in its own right with religious faith and thus of moving out of science into theology. Segal accuses Eliade of adopting a faith stance through his contention that the central component in religion is the sacred that believing communities apprehend through hierophanies. As we have seen, Eliade, and others writing in the phenomenological tradition such as Kristensen and van der Leeuw, insisted that all interpretations of religious beliefs and practices must be expressed in terms believers themselves can affirm, or at the very least in language that does not offend religious communities. Segal counters that by subjecting academic interpretations to the believers' own authority, the scholar of religion not only describes the perspectives of adherents but actually endorses them. In Segal's words, this position forces phenomenologists of religion to abandon *epoché* by affirming that "the conscious, irreducibly religious meaning for believers is its true one, which means at once its true one for them and its true one in itself."[33]

A similar appraisal of phenomenology has been proposed recently by Paul-François Tremlett, an anthropologist and lecturer in the Open University in the UK. Like Segal, Tremlett's chief offender is Mircea Eliade, whose primary aim in all his academic writings, according to Tremlett, is to restore authentic meaning to a world, which in modernity has deviated from its original, primordial spiritual orientation, defined by Eliade as seeking to be as near the sacred as possible. Tremlett suggests that Eliade's mission is consistent with the phenomenological aim as a whole, which abandons its claim to "value-neutrality by allowing certain assumptions about the reality or truth of the sacred to structure [its] mode of enquiry."[34] This is consistent with Segal's charge that the emphasis within the phenomenology of religion on preserving a religious standpoint requires phenomenologists actually to endorse that standpoint. This view is confirmed, according to Tremlett, by Eliade's analysis of sacred space which "founds, establishes and fixes the world, giving it meaning and moral content." He adds: "Modernity is for Eliade a kind of pathological condition marked by alienation, loss, relativism, amnesia and ultimately nihilism."[35] This leads to Tremlett's conclusion that the phenomenology of religion is not only value-laden but based on an ideology, the purpose of which "is to make a contribution towards the re-awakening of humanity's essential spirituality in order to re-enchant the world."[36]

These negative assessments of the anti-reductive stance of phenomenologists, although in many ways compelling, in my view are rendered less persuasive by their oppositional or dichotomous way of thinking. Both Segal and Tremlett insist that the scholar of religion either adopts the perspective of the non-believing social scientist and interprets religion necessarily as an outsider by giving no priority to a believer's own point of view, or the scholar, in the phenomenological tradition, acts like a believer and endorses the religious perspective as an insider. I have argued against this dichotomous view in previous publications by suggesting that the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of language demonstrated that oppositional thinking does not provide the only, or indeed the best way, for understanding relationships in the world.[37] Following Wittgenstein, as he was interpreted by the theologian David Krieger, I contended that just like games we play in everyday life, we can move into and out of various methods in the study of religions without contradiction.[38] In order to play a game, one must abide by the regulations of that game, but when one plays a different game, the operable rules vary. We cannot apply the rules of one game to another nor arbitrarily change the rules of a game, but we certainly can understand more than one game at once and know how to play many games well. When this analogy is applied to the study of religions, to argue that a non-believer cannot suspend personal judgments by using alternative methods to enter into the viewpoint of another is like saying we can never learn to play a different game from the one we know best and play regularly.

Certainly, Segal and Tremlett are correct in their judgment that the interpretations of religious communities employed by phenomenologists of religion differ from those employed within specific social scientific disciplines, but this neither invalidates the phenomenological method nor disparages the tools used by the other social sciences. It is like playing more than one game and understanding that different rules apply to each. The aim of the phenomenology of religion is to promote understanding in ways that can be affirmed by believing communities but certainly not in confessional terms which would be employed by members of those communities as genuine insiders. The interpretations promoted by phenomenologists must speak to the academic community and must be able to withstand rigorous scholarly scrutiny. Where they do not, they require modification or, in some cases, rejection. In this sense, phenomenologists are playing by the same rules as other social scientists. Yet, by limiting their interpretations to theories that encourage understanding of a religious community in terms acceptable within the community, phenomenologists adhere to a self-imposed rule within a discipline devoted exclusively to the study of religion. This method does not dictate to other disciplines in the social sciences what interpretations are permitted or feasible. This is like playing a game that, although related to other games, operates according to its own rules. Only dichotomous thinking prohibits the scholarly community from playing by many rules. In this sense, it is Segal and Tremlett who unduly restrict the freedom of interpretation in a scientific sense by their unwavering commitment to dualistic thinking.

Implications of Phenomenology for the Study of African Religions

If I am correct, the phenomenology of religion remains an important method for studying religions and by extension for studying African Religions. Yet, some points can be made specifically about applying the method in Africa, and thus I return to the two central questions with which I began this article: What, if anything, can the phenomenology of religion contribute to contemporary understandings of African religions? In light of the phenomenological method, as “insiders” do African scholars possess an inherent advantage over non-African scholars of African Religions? I address the first question by exemplifying the value of *epoché* as a technique to limit what I regard as one of the most distorting assumptions made by scholars of African religions, the claim that African indigenous peoples have always and everywhere believed in a Supreme Being. I respond to the second question by subjecting “insider” discourse to a brief analysis in light of “empathetic interpolation.” In the end, I argue that interpretations of the meanings of African religions, the phenomenological eidetic intuition, must be accountable to the data while at the same time avoiding the naïve assumption that the facts present themselves to the observer in a “pure” form.

One of the first critiques leveled by an African at western interpretations of African Indigenous Religions was introduced into scholarly debates some forty years ago by the Ugandan poet, philosopher, and anthropologist, Okot p’Bitek, in his now classic book entitled: *African Religions in Western Scholarship.*[39] P’Bitek opened the tenth chapter of his book, which he called “Hellenization of African deities,” with the following words: “When students of African religions describe African deities as eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, etc. they intimate that African deities have identical attributes with those of the Christian God.”[40] He closes the same chapter with an indictment of such conclusions, which he labels “absurd and misleading,”[41] by referring back to the same attributes: “African peoples”, he writes, “may describe their deities as ‘strong’ but not ‘omnipotent;’ ‘old’ but not ‘eternal;’ ‘great’ not ‘omnipresent.’[42] P’Bitek was critical of western missionaries, like Edwin W. Smith, who edited the highly influential book, *African Ideas of God*[43] and E.G. Parrinder, whose book *African Traditional Religion* at the time did perhaps more than any other to interpret African belief systems in simple terms to western audiences.[44] P'Bitek, however, was most scathing in his appraisal of African Christian apologists, like Parrinder's student, E.B. Idowu, and J.S. Mbiti, whose books written in the 1960s and early 1970s, p'Bitek believed, undermined the pride Africans had in their own religions and cultures by making them acceptable only insofar as they conformed to Christian values.[45]

The writers who were subject to p'Bitek's stinging critique must be seen in part at least as trying to correct prior degrading descriptions of African religions as "fetishistic," "tribalistic", and "primitive." Edwin W. Smith, as a missionary, for theological reasons was concerned to demonstrate that the universal African belief in God testified to the fact that God had been active in Africa before missionaries brought the message of Christ to them.[46] So, the notion that Africans universally believe in God must be seen in its historical context and for the theological assumptions contained within it. Nonetheless, I would contend that the assumption that Africans have always believed in God is now even more widespread than it was when p'Bitek so damagingly exposed the faults with this idea. Part of this can be explained by the continued popularity of Mbiti's writings, especially in Africa, but other more recent publications have spread the same idea. For example, the African scholar of religions, Jacob Olupona, refers in the introduction to his edited volume, *African Spirituality*, to the wide variations within African myths and the deities they portray, but concludes nevertheless that they all "yield images" of the Supreme Being.[47] Or, In his article on "Christianity" in John Hinnells' widely read *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, in line with the widespread notion that the Supreme Being throughout Africa was a withdrawn High God, the historian Andrew Walls maintains that "the coming of Christianity was less bringing God to the people than bringing God near."[48] And, in a book prepared to introduce the study of African Traditional Religions into the secondary school curriculum in Zimbabwe, the editors, Gerrie ter Haar, Ambrose Moyo, and S.J. Nondo assert: "The indigenous religions of Zimbabwe share a common faith in the existence of a Supreme Being who is believed to be the Creator and Sustainer of the universe."[49] Further, quite recent evidence that academics today are perpetuating the notion that Africans believe universally in a High God is found in two highly acclaimed books written by respected scholars of African history and religions, one co-authored by Jean Allman of the Centre for African Studies in the University of Illinois and John Parker of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and the other by David Westerlund of Sodertorn University College in Stockholm. I will deal with the Allman and Parker book first.

In their volume entitled *Tongnaab: the History of a West African God*, published in 2005, Allman and Parker describe the primary aim of their study as challenging the widespread notion that African Indigenous Religions only entered history when they encountered Christianity and Islam or when they were affected by the slave trade, colonialism and eventually African nationalism. They observe: "Too often scholars have privileged the processes of conversion to Islam and Christianity as the central historical dynamic of African religion, thereby consigning indigenous belief to the realm of unchanging tradition."[50] In order to counter this idea, the authors trace the history of Tongnaab, a deity found in northern Ghana in the Tong Hills amongst the Tallensi ethnic group. This emphasis on historical change, of course, makes the question, "Who is Tongnaab?" extremely difficult to answer, but Allman and Parker contend that local people still believe that Tongnaab "was embedded in the rocky heights of the Tong Hills before the emergence of mankind" and that "Tongnaab—like the ancestors—is generally perceived as a readily accessible refraction of the withdrawn High God, Naawun."[51] I find this conclusion remarkable in light of the overall analysis of the book. The authors appear, perhaps unwittingly, to confirm the widespread notion that the African Supreme Being, after having created the world, withdrew from it. The present deities, including autochthonous beings, are refractions of the Supreme Being. This fits nicely into a Christian interpretation of African Indigenous Religions, whereby God is seen as the source of all things, and is superior to any lesser gods. In the end, the deities that receive the bulk of ritual attention are reduced to acting as mediators between the people and God. That the authors rather uncritically re-enforce this view suggests that, although they have attempted to rescue African Indigenous Religions from a time warp, in the case of the Supreme Being at least, they have fallen into the very trap they have so assiduously sought to avoid.

David Westerlund, even more explicitly than Allman and Parker, presents God as an integral part of African cosmology in his book *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, published in 2006. Westerlund, who is a highly respected international expert in the history of religions, examines the understanding of disease causation amongst five ethnic groups: the San of south-western Africa, the Maasai of southern Kenya and Northern Tanzania, the Sukuma of north-western Tanzania, the Kongo, the majority of whom today live in the province of Lower Congo in Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Yoruba of Nigeria. In his study, Westerlund discusses what he calls beliefs in "supra-human" beings in each of these groups and seems unconcerned about employing the word God as part of his descriptions about such beings.[52] Amongst the San, he discusses "heavenly beings" and describes God as creator, suggesting that various names used to designate the Supreme Being normally are associated with the sky.[53] He follows this with a chapter on "God in Maasai thought", and, although he qualifies belief in the Supreme Being by admitting that not all Maasai believe in God, he argues nonetheless that "God is associated particularly with the heavenly realm, yet he is not identified with it. He may also be said to be omnipresent."[54] The Sukumu, who are a Bantu speaking people, place a heavy emphasis on ancestors, but Westerlund adds, "When people invoke ancestors, they often invoke God as well."[55] Amongst the Kongo people, Westerlund notes that the name of the Supreme Being or God the creator is Nzambi. "It signifies someone who is higher, stronger, more powerful than other beings; it also denotes something incomprehensible and mysterious, or, in short, divine."[56] And, of course, following the many studies on the Yoruba, Westerlund observes that the most important names for God are Olodumare and Olorun, which point to the Yoruba belief that God is Creator, "the Supreme Being who is immortal and unchanging."[57] It is important to note that Westerlund is fully aware that Christian and Islamic influences have elevated the notion of God above that which may have existed several hundred years ago. Yet, the fact that, in each case, he draws attention to the local word for God or the Supreme Being, seems to assume that every African people has some idea of a Supreme Being or God and which generally can be translated into terms commensurate with Christian (or Islamic) notions of a Creator.

In each of these cases, I am arguing that what began as a theological idea in the writings of Smith, Parrinder, Idowu, and Mbiti has now become uncritically accepted and incorporated into works that are not written for theological purposes. It is at this point that the use of the phenomenological *epoché* becomes most relevant. By employing the technique of *epoché*, a scholar is able to suspend such judgments or at least develop a healthy suspicion towards them. Part of the analysis which follows, of course, will necessarily need to frame the question concerning the African belief in God historically, since to study African Indigenous Religions today cannot avoid taking into account the long contact such religions have had with Christianity and Islam and at the same time take cognizance of the impact of Western educational, political, and economic influences. Since African societies were oral, tracing a universal belief in a Supreme Being historically is problematic, but insight from linguistics, archaeology and early accounts of contact with African societies written by explorers, ethnographers, and missionaries can provide some tools for drawing conclusions. The important point is that the phenomenology of religion calls on the researcher to challenge uncritical assumptions, just as Husserl challenged the "natural attitude." In this way, on many topics related to the study of African Indigenous Religions, but particularly on the largely unexamined notion of the ubiquitous belief in God, the scholar seeks to limit potentially distorting biases and base conclusions on the data, which then can confirm the original theory, modify it, or lead to entirely new interpretations.

The second important contribution the phenomenology of religion can make applies much more generally to the "insider/outsider" discourse in the study of African religions. The African scholar, as an "insider," according to a phenomenological analysis, has no inherent advantage over non-African "outside" researchers. This is because the method of empathetic interpolation emphasizes that humans all think alike, and that it is possible to gain an understanding of cultures other than one's own, if a proper attitude based on *epoché* is employed and if the time and skills for attaining understanding are cultivated. From a phenomenological perspective, the interpretation that scholars, African or not, give to the data never simply replicates the language of believers nor even necessarily uses concepts derived from their cultural settings. This is evident in the terminology employed by phenomenologists, such as Eliade's concept hierophany. Believers would not use such technical language to describe the way the sacred is known in their traditions, but if the meaning of the term was understood by them, it certainly would not be offensive. This suggests that the scholar of religion, by using empathy, whilst interpolating what is unfamiliar in terms of one's own cultural and social background, can enter into any cultural setting and provide a sound academic interpretation of what might at first sight appear incomprehensible, strange, or bizarre. This process is intended, as van der Leeuw argued, to overcome the division between the subject and the object in the study of any religion. It does not, however, guarantee that the interpretation provided by the scholar is accurate; it simply affirms that accurate interpretations are open to all scholars regardless of their social or cultural backgrounds.

On this point, it is important to emphasize that the eidetic intuition proposed by any scholar must remain accountable to the phenomena themselves. If the interpretative structure of meaning is incapable of being tested in the data, it must be rejected. Eliade provides a case in point. As we have seen, some of Eliade's fiercest critics have accused him of basing his conclusions on a personal pre-commitment to the value of a religious view of life. Thus, even if Eliade's interpretations of religion proved inoffensive to believers and demonstrated an acute sympathy towards religious communities, that would not ensure that his interpretation of the essence of religion is correct. In fact, in his discussion of Eliade's interpretations of Australian Aboriginal Religions, Tony Swain argues that Eliade's emphasis on the sky as a symbol of transcendence is not confirmed by the data.[58] The point stressed by the phenomenology of religion on this question thus is two-pronged: following the method of empathetic interpolation, the meanings scholars assign to the data must in theory be capable of being affirmed by "insiders" within the religious communities under study and such interpretations must be capable of being tested by recourse to the phenomena on which the eidetic intuition is based.

Conclusions

My review of the continued relevance of the phenomenology of religion for the study of African Indigenous Religions, and more broadly, for all religions in Africa, is critically important for two reasons. One has to do with academic integrity, and the other touches on ethics in academic research. I have made the first point repeatedly throughout this article when I have contended that a defining task of scholarly research is to question and, where appropriate, to challenge, widely accepted assumptions by showing the underlying presuppositions that inform them. On the second point, the phenomenology of religion insists that African Indigenous Religions in their many forms should be studied in their own right, and not as a preparation for Christianity or as a base on which all religious beliefs are constructed. If we accord other religious traditions the dignity of studying their histories, oral or written traditions, rituals and beliefs in their own right and not as a subset of another tradition, then it appears, on grounds of academic fairness alone, that we ought to do the same with traditions whose records are largely oral and presentational, sometimes small scale and largely kinship orientated. This is precisely what Okot p'Bitek intended, when near the end of his book he concluded: "The aim of the study of African religions should be to understand the religious beliefs and practices of African peoples, rather than to discover the Christian God in Africa."[59] I regard this as thoroughly consistent with phenomenological principles and why I contend that the phenomenological method continues to make a constructive contribution to the academic study of religions in Africa.

Notes

1 For my complete discussion of the phenomenological method and its critics, see James L. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 48–72; 151–64.

2 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas. General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, translated by W.R.B. Gibson (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1931), 111.

3 Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, translated by J.E. Turner (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1938), 646.

4 Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 675.

5 W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, translated by John Carman (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960).

6 Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1986), 228.

7 Kristensen, *Meaning of Religion*, 13.

8 Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 675.

9 Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 54.

10 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Faith of Other Men* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1972).

11 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Patterns of Faith around the World* (Oxford and Boston: Oneworld Publications, 1998).

12 W.C. Smith, 1998, 35–48.

13 W.C. Smith, 1998, 37–8.

14 W.C. Smith, *Patterns of Faith*, 49–62.

15 W.C. Smith, *Patterns of Faith*, 77–90.

16 W.C. Smith, *Patterns of Faith*, 63–76.

17 Ninian Smart, "Scientific Phenomenology and Wilfred Cantwell Smith's Misgivings," in *The World's Religious Traditions: Current Perspectives in Religious Studies*, ed. Frank Whaling (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1984), 264.

18 Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, translated by D. Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969 [1929]), 246.

19 James L. Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2006), 183–7.

20 Mircea Eliade, *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 36.

21 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, 1987 [1959]), 9–13.

22 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996 [1958], 29.

23 Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 20–4.

24 Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 29–32.

25 Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 63–4. See also, Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), 5–12.

26 Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology. Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), 108.

27 Tony Swain, *On "Understanding" Australian Aboriginal Religion* (Bedford Park, South Australia: Australian Association for the Study of Religions for the Charles Strong Memorial Trust, 1985), 8.

28 Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll, *Philosophy. Made Simple*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1986), 146.

29 Mircea Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 43.

30 Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions. An Introduction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), 196.

31 Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions*, 197. See also, W.E.H. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2009).

32 Robert Segal, "In Defense of Reductionism," in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader*, ed. R. McCutcheon (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), 139–63

33 Segal, "In Defense of Reductionism," 143.

34 Paul-François Tremlett, *Religion and the Discourse on Modernity* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 30.

35 Tremlett, *Religion and the Discourse on Modernity*, 47.

36 Tremlett, *Religion and the Discourse on Modernity*, 47.

37 James L. Cox, "Not a New Bible but a New Hermeneutics: An Approach from within the Science of Religion," in *"Re-writing" the Bible: the Real Issues*, eds. I. Mukonyora, J.L. Cox and F.J. Verstraelen (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1993), 103–23; James L. Cox, "Methodological Considerations Relevant to Understanding African Indigenous Religions," in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects*, eds. J. Platvoet, J. Cox and J. Olupona (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996), 162–70; James L. Cox, *Rational Ancestors: Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998), 94–7.

38 David J. Krieger, *The New Universalism: Foundations for a Global Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 110–18.

39 Okot P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970). Reprinted as *African Religions in European Scholarship* (New York: ECA Associates, 1990).

40 P'Bitek, *African Religions in European Scholarship*, 80.

41 P'Bitek, *African Religions in European Scholarship*, 80.

42 P'Bitek, *African Religions in European Scholarship*, 88.

43 Edwin W. Smith, *African Ideas of God: A Symposium* (London: Edinburgh House Press).

44 Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1954).

45 E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare. God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: S.P.C.K., 1970).

46 Edwin W. Smith, "Introduction," in *African Ideas of God: A Symposium*, ed. Edwin W. Smith, 34. Smith writes: "When the Christian missionary comes with the Good News of God revealed in Jesus Christ as loving Father—whatever else in his teaching they find it hard to accept, this [belief in God] at least they readily take to their hearts."

47 Jacob K. Olupona, "Introduction," in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Crossroad, 2000), xvi.

48 Andrew Walls, "Christianity," in *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 147.

49 Gerrie ter Haar, Ambrose Moyo and S. J. Nondo, *African Traditional Religions in Religious Education. A Resource Book with Special Reference to Zimbabwe* (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 1992), 7.

50 Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab. The History of a West African God* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 6.

51 Allman and Parker, *Tongnaab*, 44.

52 David Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation. From Spiritual Beings to Living Humans* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 6.

53 Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, 43–4.

54 Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, 67–8.

55 Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, 89.

56 Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, 118.

57 Westerlund, *African Indigenous Religions and Disease Causation*, 124.

58 Swain, *On "Understanding" Australian Aboriginal Religion*, 7–8.

59 P'Bitek, *African Religions in European Scholarship*, 111.