

Phenomenology, Spirituality and Religion: Defining a Problem

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The claim that phenomenology has something to contribute to the study of religion is not new. “Phenomenologies of Religion” have been around almost from the beginning of ‘religion’ as a unique field of inquiry (see, for example, [Kristensen 1960](#)). Additionally, while phenomenology as a method has somewhat fallen out of favor in contemporary religious studies, the relationship between phenomenology and religion remains a flourishing source for re-imagining religion in Continental philosophies of religion, where phenomenology—explicitly or implicitly—is used to reconceive of the divine and its relationship to the empirical world (see, for example, [Lacoste 2004](#); [Caputo 2006, 2018](#); [Kearney 2010](#); [Marion 2012, 2016, 2017](#)). The basis for this re-imagining is a matter of great debate, both philosophically (most famously in [Janicaud 2000](#)) and religiously (for example, [Falque 2016, 2018](#)). The main hypothesis of this Special Issue is that spirituality is the missing element that helps us better understand phenomenology, religion, and the relationship between them.

Given the increase in people who self-identify as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) in North America, the clarification of spirituality is a pressing concern for the empirical study of religion. However, it is not one that empirical study can clear up for itself. Without a clear sense of what is meant by the category of ‘spirituality’, it is difficult for it to be studied clearly, and so we must first address such conceptual questions as: is spirituality equivalent to religion, as when ‘spiritual experience’ and ‘religious experience’ are used interchangeably? Is spirituality (or spiritual experience) one particular element of religion? Is spirituality in opposition to religion, as the nomenclature of ‘spiritual but NOT religious’ might suggest? While these questions that must be answered conceptually before they can be explored empirically, the empirical uses of the terms ought not to be separated entirely from their philosophical and conceptual clarifications.

It is here that phenomenology has something to offer. As a branch of philosophy that is concerned with ‘lived experience,’ phenomenology is dedicated to bringing to conceptual clarity the categories and means by which we experience the world. That such a method might be usefully applied to the study of religion was the impulse behind Otto, van der Leeuwen, Eliade, and several of the other earliest scholars of religion (see [Otto 1923](#); [Eliade 1958, 1959](#); [Van der Leeuw 1967](#)). However, recent scholarship has raised questions about just how phenomenological these ‘phenomenologies’ of spiritual or religious experience have been ([Gschwandtner 2019a, 2019b](#)). That is, the type of phenomenological analyses at work in the study of religious and spiritual experiences tend not to be rooted in the most up to date or philosophically rich accounts of phenomenology, and it remains to be seen how contemporary philosophical phenomenology¹ might alter how we perform a phenomenology of spiritual or religious experiences.²

However, this is not simply a one-way alteration. While phenomenology might be a useful method for clarifying the relationship between spirituality and religion, accounting seriously for the role of spirituality within phenomenology also yields us new, philosophically richer accounts of phenomenology itself ([DeRoo 2019, 2022](#)). That is to say, the spiritual nature of phenomenology—dependent, at least in part, on a particularly phenomenological understanding of spirituality—remains an under-studied aspect of phenomenology that promises to yield new insights into phenomenology, as both a



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method and a tradition/Stiftung. As a historical tradition, phenomenology is normally tied back to the work of Husserl, as spirituality is a major (though under-thematized) element of his work. However, the invocation of a “phenomenology of spirit(uality)” here necessarily brings to mind Hegel, as another approach to the phenomenology of phenomenality (as Canullo discusses in her paper in this Special Issue). Accounting for the influence of Hegel on phenomenology allows us to appreciate a new understanding of the relationship between transcendental and empirical conditions that a phenomenological philosophy can provide (as Formisano’s analysis of Henry’s relation to Hegel makes clear in his contribution). Paying attention to spirituality as a significant philosophical theme therefore helps us clarify the nature of the phenomenological enterprise itself.

This, in turn, enables further clarification of the phenomenological method. Methodologically, paying attention to the role of spirituality clarifies the transcendental nature of phenomenology as necessarily tied to materiality, politics, and history (as the papers by Miettinen and Vecino in this Special Issue make clear). In this regard, ‘transcendental phenomenology’ is revealed, not as an exit from ‘applied’ or ‘empirical’ phenomenology, but as the unique contribution phenomenology can make to empirical scientific studies. In this regard, spirituality reveals what makes the early ‘phenomenologies of religion’ unsatisfactory as phenomenology—namely, their being insufficiently transcendental—in ways that are also suggestive of what a renewed phenomenology of religion might be able to offer to the study of religion. More precisely, this clarification of phenomenology by way of a clarification of the phenomenological account of spirituality enables us to see new ways of utilizing phenomenology to make sense of religion as an expression of a more phenomenologically primordial spirituality.³ This, in turn, enables us to see religious practices as expressing particular religious traditions in a transcendently significant way. This can help provide a newer, more phenomenologically attuned account of religious ritual (as Connelly’s contribution suggests), but also of a spiritually attuned account of religion more broadly (as Peruzzotti’s and Delay’s papers in this special issue suggest). This, in turn, calls for further reflection on, and clarification of, the relationship between particular religious phenomena as they are experienced in the lives of everyday people, religious traditions, religion itself (whatever that term may mean), and spirituality.

The contributions of Gschwandtner and Simmons provide such clarifications, while showing us how thinking of religion in light of spirituality opens broader questions about the relationship between phenomenological philosophy, philosophy of religion, and the empirical study of religion. John D. Caputo’s contribution shows how explaining religion as an expression of a deeper spirituality that is constitutive of experience itself sheds new light on his “event-al” account of religion. While that account has been accused of being opposed to actual religious practice and traditions (see [Simmons and Minister 2012](#)), Caputo has always fought against this charge. The phenomenological language of spirituality examined here provides him a new way of making his case, as follows: “radical” or “event-al” religious thought constantly points to the deeper, phenomenological sense of spirituality that structures all experience, including the experiences that we have traditionally called “religious”.

In this sense, we are reminded again that religion can be understood, phenomenologically, as an expression of spirituality that necessarily occurs within particular religious traditions and that necessarily give shape to our experience of particular religious phenomena. Additionally, this is the case even for purportedly ‘secular’ things, which are thereby shown to be necessarily spiritual in a way that, while it may not be traditionally religious, is nevertheless not not-religious either (as Cibotaru’s analysis of *qi* in Chinese Martial arts and Bowen’s analysis of work make clear). Hence, a notion of secular or non-religious spirituality emerges as a meaningful term, one that calls for a radical re-examination of the relationship between secularity and religion as it is traditionally understood. In this sense, the field of application that is open to the empirical study of religion is greatly expanded without losing a meaningful sense of ‘religion’ (cf. [Schilbrack 2013](#)) when religion is understood as an expression of the more phenomenologically basic category of spirituality.

Hence, paying attention to a phenomenological account of spirituality seems to alter our traditional understanding of religion, but does so in ways that are consistent with the lived experience of actual religious practitioners and not simply in ways that are based on the colonizing imagination of Western religious scholars (see the critiques of religion from, e.g., Asad 1993; Balagangadhara 1994; Masuzawa 2005).

The overlap of phenomenology, spirituality, and religion is therefore not simply additive—adding new matters for scholarly consideration alongside already well-established considerations—but transformative. Phenomenology, especially in the unique account of the transcendental that it provides, is seen differently when viewed through the lens of spirituality, even as spirituality is viewed differently when viewed phenomenologically and not simply religiously. Additionally, the study of religion is also transformed when approached in the light of a spiritually aware phenomenology; it is opened to a transcendental dimension for empirical actions and rituals that yields a new level of meaning for religious phenomena, while simultaneously calling for further philosophical reflection on the relationship between religious phenomena, religious traditions, and religion as an expression of spirituality. The work offered in this Special Issue is an attempt to begin to address and clarify some of the potential to be found in thinking phenomenology, spirituality, and religion together. In doing so, it announces a new problem, or ‘issue’, that calls for further work and reflection—a spiritual phenomenology of religion and, perhaps, a ‘religious’ (in a sense that also includes the secular within it) phenomenology of spirituality.

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Notes

- ¹ On the distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical uses of phenomenology, see (Zahavi 2019).
- ² For one attempt to try to account for this, see (DeRoo 2021).
- ³ For an initial exploration of this question, see (DeRoo 2020).

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