# INVESTIGATING THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL SCIENTIFIC METHODOLOGY IN THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGION: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the phenomenological scientific methodology in the study of religion, to ascertain its origin, development, and application from an Islamic perspective. Its goal is to identify the methods used in the study of religion by phenomenologists and then analyse them in the light of Islam, its sources, and the writings of selected Muslim scholars. The study employs both descriptive and analytical methods. The focus of discussion is on (1) the phenomenology of religion, its genesis and meaning; (2) the key characteristics of phenomenological scientific methodology in the study of religion; and (3) analyzing its two key concepts, i.e., the epoché and the eidetic vision from the Islamic point of view. It is argued that studying phenomenological techniques from an Islamic perspective enables researchers to recognise both the negative and positive aspects of the methodology and to understand this area of study more effectively when conducting religious studies. This paper concludes that, although there are strong refutations against the phenomenological scientific methodology of

comparative religious studies from an Islamic perspective, it also has an acceptable level.

**Keywords**: Phenomenology; scientific methodology; Islamic perspective; epoché and eidetic visions; comparative religion.

### Khulasah

Makalah ini bertujuan mengkaji metodologi saintifik fenomenologi dalam kajian agama bagi mengenal pasti asal usul, perkembangan dan aplikasinya dari perspektif Islam. Objektif utama adalah untuk mengenal pasti kaedah yang digunakan oleh para ahli fenomenologi dalam kajian agama, seterusnya menganalisisnya berdasarkan pandangan Islam, sumber-sumber utamanya serta karya-karya ulama terpilih. Kaedah deskriptif dan analitikal digunakan dalam kajian ini. Fokus perbincangan tertumpu kepada: (1) fenomenologi agama, asal-usul dan maksudnya; (2) ciri-ciri utama metodologi saintifik fenomenologi dalam kajian agama; dan (3) analisis terhadap dua konsep utamanya, iaitu *epoché* dan *eidetic vision* daripada sudut pandangan Islam. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa penilaian terhadap teknik fenomenologi dari perspektif Islam membolehkan para penyelidik mengenal pasti aspek positif dan negatif metodologi ini serta memahami ruang lingkupnya dalam kajian agama. Makalah ini merumuskan bahawa walaupun terdapat penolakan yang kuat terhadap metodologi saintifik fenomenologi dalam kajian perbandingan agama menurut Islam, terdapat juga aspek yang boleh diterima dalam batas tertentu.

**Kata kunci**: Fenomenologi; Metodologi Saintifik; Perspektif Islam; *Epoché* dan *Eidetic Visions*; Agama Perbandingan.

## Introduction

People's understanding and interpretation of their relationship with the unseen, which is presented diversely, is considered a reality that has engaged them at all times of

their history to work out by both the experience and the practical method of experiment to find a better way for cooperation and coexistence.[1] In such situations, different religions and systems of belief were established based on people's commitment. To avoid conflicts and hostility among their followers and promote peace and harmony, the emergence of the study of religion as a separate body of knowledge became necessary. Therefore, the scholarship of comparative religion was introduced to study religions by focusing on the methodical examination of the world's religious doctrines and beliefs, themes and activities, which would facilitate an honest and loyal comparison between religions on specific points.[2]

Muslim writers such as Ibn Nadim, al-Biruni, Ibn Hazm, Ibn Taymiyyah, Abu 'Isa al-Warraq, al-Faruqi, Ahmad Shalabi, Abu Zahrah and al-Fattah were among the intellectuals who have significantly contributed to the field of comparative religion, including theology and philosophy. Through the works of Max Muller, Edward Burnett Tylor, William Robertson Smith, James George Frazer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Rudolf Otto, social scientists in the 19th century took a deep focus on the scientific study of religion. Comparison has been an important feature of this field since the early days of scholarly study of religion. It has been applied in various ways, articulated, praised, and criticised in heated theoretical discourses. Therefore, it is known that the understanding of approaches of comparative methodology in the scientific study of religion(s) could be essential when dealing with various religions and their teachings.

The issue of how to deal with different religions and what approaches should be used in their study has remained

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[1] Frank Byron Jevons, *Comparative Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), 1.

[2] Kedar Nath Tiwari, *Comparative Religion* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2014), 1.

a puzzle to many scholars of the science of religion (*religionswissenschaft*) for many centuries. This led to the formulation of important methodologies, including historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological, and phenomenological approaches, used in the study of religion, which are partially based on the focus of each approach. The comparative study of religion uses "different kinds of techniques or tools for the collection of data (i.e., methods in a narrower sense, discourse analysis, content analysis, document analysis, philology, hermeneutics, historiography, phenomenology, surveys, etc.)" [3] Each methodology has made significant contributions to the scientific study of religion. Phenomenological scientific methodology emphasises the believer's standpoint. [4] It avoids the difficulties of idealism and realism by desiring to approach an *eidetic* vision of religion (understanding of essence as it is) by suspending one's judgment or *epoché*. Irrespective of some criticisms about this methodological approach, it remains one of the most influential ways in the scientific study of religion.

Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, William Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus Van der Leeuw are considered among the leading phenomenologists in the scientific study of religion. Nevertheless, Walbridge and Ataman argue that al-Biruni (who lived in the 11th century) was one of the foremost scholars who applied anthropological and phenomenological methods to the study of religion.[5] Al-Biruni's approach to religion is an

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[3] Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2014), 34.

[4] Matt Stefon, "Phenomenology of Religion," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed 31 January 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/phenomenology-of-religion.

[5] John Tuthill Walbridge, "Explaining Away the Greek Gods in Islam," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59(3) (1998), 389-403. doi:10.1353/jhi.1998.0030; K. Ataman, *Understanding Other*

excellent early model of inter-religious, inter-cultural, and inter-civilisational dialogue that seeks to promote harmonious coexistence within a highly polarised religious and cultural context. Such an attitude ensures better engagement among different religious adherents.

Works on the critical analysis of the phenomenological scientific methodology in the study of religion are limited due to the attraction of this approach and its role in the modern-day context. To the best of researchers' knowledge, the works on the phenomenological scientific methodology can be divided into two types. Firstly, works that describe phenomenological methodology and its historical development in general. The research on *What is Phenomenology of Religion? (Part I): The study of Religious Phenomena*[6] is an excellent effort of this type. It explains the notion of the phenomenology of religion with its structural improvements.

Similarly, the work on the *Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Religion: A Historical Perspective*[7] deals with comprehensive details on this subject. It aims to describe the phenomenological approach to the study of religion from a historical perspective to ascertain the origin and development of this methodology. Besides, it discusses the key argument of the phenomenological approach, which contains the suspension of value judgment that was previously held about that religion by taking a neutral stance to understand what is studied. Another research on *Religion,*

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*Religions: Al-Biruni and Gadamer's Fusion of Horizon* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008).

[6] Christina M. Gschwandtner, "What is Phenomenology of Religion? The Study of Religious Phenomena," *Philosophy Compass* 14(2) (2019), e12566.

[7] Emeka Ekeke & Chike Ekeopara, "Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Religion: A Historical Perspective," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 44 (2010), 266–274.

*Phenomenology Of*,[8] emphasises three key functions of the phenomenological method in the study of religion, namely:

1) *Descriptive function* that tries to identify the essence of religion in empirical phenomena,
2) *Analytical function* that uses explicit methodologies to develop accounts of phenomena; and
3) *Social function* that deals with accounts of religious phenomena related to worldly manifestations.

The second type of work critically evaluates the discipline from the perspective of the scientific study of religion. *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*[9] has offered sharp critiques of the phenomenology of religion and recommended its dismissal as a method for the study of religion. The article on *Retrieving the Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies* [10] suggests that phenomenology of religion may be reinterpreted and thereby retrieved as a viable and defensible method for religious study. Although these works have made significant contributions to the scientific study of the phenomenological approach, they have failed to analyse the phenomenological methodology from an Islamic perspective. Therefore, the objective of this study is to critically evaluate the notion of phenomenological scientific methodology in the study of religion from the Islamic perspective.

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[8] John R. Hall & Joshua D. Hayes, "Religion, Phenomenology Of," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (n.p.: Elsevier, 2015), 344–347, https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.840398.

[9] Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (London New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2014), 333-345.

[10] J. N. Blum, "Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80(4) (2012), 1025–48, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfs080.

The phenomenological scientific methodology is considered one of the most important approaches in the twentieth century for the study of religion. Even though it provides knowledge of the art of religious communication and understanding, the main content of the phenomenological method is debatable in Islam. Therefore, this research paper aims to investigate the phenomenological scientific methodology in the study of religion from the perspective of Islam, its sources, and the writings of selected Muslim scholars. It discusses the genesis and meaning of the term "phenomenology of religion," the early writings on the phenomenology of religion, the most distinctive characteristics of this methodology, and the Islamic perspective. A library-based qualitative method is employed throughout the study. It includes the content analysis method, which focuses on the materials from journals, books, written reports, and other materials adopted by the researchers.

## The Origin and the Meaning of the Term "Phenomenology of Religion"

Various works contribute to the historical description of the phenomenological scientific methodology in the study of religion. Hence, to understand the phenomenology of religion and its core components, it is necessary to observe the genesis of this term and its meaning by tracing the origin, formation, and development of the word "phenomenology" and the term "phenomenology of religion."

The term "phenomenology" denotes the discipline of phenomenology that focuses on the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Firstly, it emphasises the "phenomena", which means appearances of things that appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, or the meanings these things have in our experience. Secondly, it studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view. Therefore,

phenomenology as a field of philosophy must be distinguished from, and related to, the other main fields of philosophy; ontology (the study of being or what is), epistemology (the study of knowledge), logic (the study of valid reasoning), and ethics (the study of right and wrong action).[11]

Phenomenology is commonly understood as a movement or as a disciplinary field in philosophy, in the history of philosophy. The historical movement of phenomenology is a philosophical tradition introduced in the first half of the 20th century by prominent philosophers, including Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others. The movement valued the discipline of phenomenology as the proper foundation of all philosophy - as opposed to ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology.[12]

The term "phenomenology" was first coined by the Swiss-German mathematician and philosopher Johann Heinrich Lambert in 1764 from two Greek words whose combined meaning was, "the setting forth or articulation of what shows itself." He used this term in his reference to the "illusory nature of human experience to develop a theory of knowledge that distinguished truth from error".[13] On the other hand, Immanuel Kant, who was Lambert's contemporary, also used the term twice, which he laid the basis for its growth, "when he separated things as they seem to us (which he called phenomena) from things as they are (which he called noumena)."[14]

Furthermore, George W. F. Hegel was another scholar who used the term phenomenology in his *Phenomenology*

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[11] David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018), Edward N. Zalta ed., accessed 10 July 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology.

[12] Smith, "Phenomenology".

[13] Moreau, "Phenomenology of Religion," 248.

[14] Moreau, "Phenomenology of Religion," 249.

*of the Spirit*, in 1807, where he argued that "phenomena
were actual stages of knowledge progressing evolutionarily
from raw consciousness to absolute knowledge"[15] instead
of a split of Kant's phenomena. So, to Hegel, the science by
which absolute knowledge is obtained through observing
the forms in which people's minds appear to them was
called "phenomenology".

Edmund Husserl, who "sought to give philosophical
foundations to a generally intuitive non-empirical approach
of phenomenological methodology," [16] asserts that the
"*epoché*" theory, which deals with placing metaphysical
questions aside and observing phenomena in and of
themselves, is a great contribution to phenomenology. He
has attempted to situate philosophy on a descriptive and
empirical basis in this philosophical contribution. The
principle of the "*eidetic* vision" is another principle
implemented by Husserl, which is derived from the Greek
"*eidos*", denoting: (1) "that which is seen," as form, shape,
and essence; (2) "Seeing what the believer sees-trying to
enter the thought-world of … [religion], but not necessarily
with any acceptance (or criticism)."[17]

The term "phenomenology of religion" has its origin
in the "phenomenological movement" as a way of study
focusing on religion(s).[18] This term is believed to have been
coined by P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye in his *Lehrbuch
der Religionsgeschichte* (*Handbook of the History of
Religion*), which was first published in 1887. He aimed to
bring together and describe common themes across several

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[15] Moreau, "Phenomenology of Religion," 249.

[16] Moreau, "Phenomenology of Religion," 250.

[17] Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1979), 8.

[18] K. K. Young, "From the Phenomenology of Religion to Feminism and Women's Studies," in *Methodology in Religious Studies: The Interface with Women's Studies*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 17.

religions, what he called "groups of religious phenomena", such as sacrifice, prayer and the object of worship, through which the diverse manifestations of religion(s) are emphasised.

In this sense, "the phenomenology of religion" means the scientific approach to the study of religion(s), emphasising the standpoint of the believer. [19] Firstly, phenomenologists listen to the claims of practitioners of a particular religion, and secondly, they employ a neutral methodology in their evaluation process. The phenomenology of religion has been discussed by great influential phenomenologists, such as Max Scheler, Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, William Brede Kristensen, Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Friedrich Heiler, C. Jouco Bleeker, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart, who contributed significantly to the development of this methodology. However, Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, William Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus Van Der Leeuw have been recognised as leading thinkers and scholars in the phenomenological approach to the scientific study of religion.

**Early Writings on the Phenomenology of Religion**

Numerous scholars contributed to the description of the phenomenological scientific methodology in the study of religion. Among the scholars, some of them were involved in and developed the methodology at an academic level. So, this section intends to describe some of the main early scholars and their writings on the phenomenology of religion.

Firstly, Chantepie de la Saussaye coined the phrase "phenomenology of religion" in his work *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (1887–1889; translated as Manual of

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[19] Stefon, "Phenomenology of Religion", 250.

the Science of Religion, 1891).[20] It is believed that the work
of Chantepie de La Saussaye gave the outline of
phenomenology in the scientific study of religion. His study
discusses two main fields, namely, the nature and
manifestation of religious phenomena.

Another major influential figure in the
phenomenology of religion was William Brede Kristensen.
He was strongly inspired by the work of Chantepie, which
led him to undertake extensive research in the field of
religious phenomenology. Although in his lifetime he did
not publish any books or written documents on religious
phenomenology, his lecture materials from the University
of Leiden were later revised and published in 1960 as *The
Meaning of Religion*.[21] James clarifies that Kristensen, like
Chantepie, believes that phenomenology seeks the sense of
religious phenomena. The meaning Kristensen wants to
explain is "the meaning that religious phenomena have for
the believers themselves."[22]

Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1890–1950) was another
prominent phenomenologist and theologian. When looking
at the life, career, and thought of Gerardus van der Leeuw,
he was a prolific Dutch historian of religions and Christian
theologian. He is conventionally credited with putting the
phenomenology of religion "on the map." He was the
person who gave a broader sense of the term
phenomenology of religion in his *Phenomenology der
Religion* as the phenomenological approach to the study of
religion evolved. In his book, namely, *Comparative*

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[20] P. C. De la Saussaye, *Manual of the Science of Religion*, trans. B. S.
Fergusson (London: Longmans Green, 1891).

[21] W. Brede Krisrtensen, *The Meaning of Religion Lectures in the
Phenomenology of Religion*, trans. John. Carman (New York:
Springer-Science Business Media, B.Y. 1960).

[22] G. Alfred James, *Interpreting Religion: The Phenomenological
Approaches of Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, W. Brede
Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw* (Washington: Catholic
University of America Press, 1995), 144.

*Religion*, Eric J. Sharpe writes that "between 1925 and 1950, the phenomenology of religion was associated almost exclusively with the name of the Dutch scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw, and with his book *Phanomenologie der Religion*."[23] Especially notable among the many influences van der Leeuw's phenomenology was highly influenced by the writings of the German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) on hermeneutics and the concept of understanding (Verstehen). According to Eric J. Sharp, Gerardus van der Leeuw's book, the term "the phenomenology of religion" has gradually developed a certain vogue, and indeed now occupies in a few quarters the kind of position once held by the older term "comparative religion".[24]

## Characteristics of the Phenomenology of Religion

The two methodological ideas that have become fundamental to the phenomenology of religion are *epoché* and *eidetic* vision, both ideas were borrowed from Husserl and employed by van der Leeuw in *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. *Epoché* is derived from the Greek verb *epoché* (I hold firm) and has come to mean the suspension of judgment or the exclusion from the mind of one's presuppositions.[25]

Another principle that Husserl introduced is the principle of "*eidetic* vision." The word "*eidetic*" is from the Greek *eidos,* denoting "that which is seen", thus form, shape, and essence. Smart describes that *eidetic* vision is the capacity to grasp the essence of religious phenomena through empathy and intuition. This empathy, he further explains, is "a kind of warm distance." To him, the focus is on "seeing what the believer sees-trying to enter the thought-world of … [religion], but not necessarily with any

[23] Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 2003), 229-230.

[24] Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 221.

[25] Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 224.

endorsement (or criticism)." [26] It is remarked that phenomenology has characteristics relevant to the scientific study of religion. The following three are the main attributes of the phenomenological approach in the study of religion.

1. The descriptive nature: The first is that the phenomenological approach in the comparative study of religion is descriptively oriented. This implies that they are not concerned with evaluative decisions, but they pursue "accurate and appropriate descriptions and interpretations of religious phenomena." [27] These include rituals, symbols, prayers, ceremonies, theology (written or oral), sacred persons, art, creeds, and other religious exercises, whether corporate or private.

2. Comparative and systematic approaches: In a restricted sense, the second aspect of the phenomenological study of religion is comparative. There is widespread agreement that a very general approach to classifying and systematizing religious phenomena is the phenomenology of religion, and a general consensus that a comparative approach is used by this method. Different phenomenologists clearly describe their phenomenological approach as the equivalent of comparative religion. Since the importance of data is emphasised by phenomenology, it becomes crucial that the more data is introduced into the work, the more possible significance the analysis would have.[28] Although significance can be best found in data using comparative approaches, the phenomenologist does not attempt to list or characterise similar practices across adverse religious traditions to rank them from best to worst.

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[26] Smart, *The Phenomenon of Christianity*, 8.
[27] Moreau, "Phenomenology of Religion," 225.
[28] Moreau, "Phenomenology of Religion," 225.

3. The Antireductionism Method: The phenomenologist
   of religion avoids reductionism. Reductionism is a
   method whereby scholars try to reduce and even
   underestimate religious phenomena in purely
   sociological, psychological, anthropological,
   economic, or environmental terms. Such reductions
   according to Moreau, "ignore the complexity of the
   human experience, impose social values on
   transcendental issues, and ignore the unique
   intentionality of the religious participant. Therefore,
   Phenomenologists do not seek a bird's eye view but
   …a worm's eye view."[29]

**Discussion and Analysis from the Islamic Perspective**

Applying the methods of the phenomenological approach
in the scientific study of religion draws similar conclusions
about religion and embodies equal decisions. Although the
phenomenological approach has some significant features
among other methodologies, which can be traced from the
works of Ismail Raji al-Faruqi [30] and al-Biruni. [31] Yet, it
seems extremely problematic according to the Islamic
worldview at a foundational level. There are dual stands on
the approach Islamically that reject the foundational
controversial root of the ideal, *evidetic* vision and *epoche*
while accepting the overall objective that aligns with
Islamic basic principles and the legacy of Muslim scholars.

According to Walbridge and Ataman, al-Biruni is one
of the foremost scholars who applied anthropological and
phenomenological approaches to the study of religion. [32]

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[29] Moreau, "Phenomenology of Religion," 225.

[30] Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics: A Historical and Systematic
Analysis of its Dominant Ideas* (Montreal: McGill University Press,
1967).

[31] Edward Sachau, *Alberuni's India: An English Translation of al-
Biruni's Kitab al-Hind* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2002).

[32] John Tuthill Walbridge, "Explaining Away the Greek Gods in
Islam," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59(3) (1998), 389-403; K.
Ataman, *Understanding Other Religions*.

However, certain aspects of said Western anthropological and phenomenological methods differ from al-Biruni's framework, particularly in terms of epistemological implications. It is known that the phenomenological approach emphasises the "articulating of what shows itself." This is similar to what al-Biruni practised in his research on Hindu and other religions. It refers to the illusory nature of human experience in an attempt to develop a theory of knowledge that distinguishes truth from error.

Similarly, al-Faruqi in his doctoral dissertation, *Christian Ethics,* began the discussion of Comparative Religion by bringing the importance of disengagement[33] which is one of the most important characteristics of the phenomenological approach. However, the contemporary and holistic phenomenological approach in the scientific study of religion has contradictory components with Islamic values. In Islam, the study of other religions does not necessarily mean that scholars must be neutral toward their faith. So, Haslina argues that the fundamental courses of Islam, such as the ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, Uṣūl al-Dīn and Kalām, Fiqh and Uṣūl al-Fiqh, along with supporting courses such as Firaq, Muqāranat al-Adyān, Maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah, and Qawāʿid al-Fiqhiyyah, found that suspension of judgment is impossible as all these sciences require them to make 'judgment'.

It is difficult for a Muslim student of Comparative Religion to treat his religion as a mere phenomenon, as his conviction in Islam is not simply by carrying out the five pillars of Islam. His conviction of *iman* (faith) necessitates affirmation of the heart, confession with the tongue, and

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[33] Disengagement is also known as the suspension of judgment. Such an approach was inspired, adopted, and advanced by the Western Phenomenological School and propagated by Gerardus Van der Leeuw der (1933).

action by the limbs.[34] Indeed, committed people, be their commitment to religion or ideology, can never be completely neutral because they already have preferences for this or that. Kamar Oniah says that it is necessary to be firm in our own religion while at the same time reaching out to learn about other people's religions.[35] Consequently, it is essential to analyse and evaluate several significant and polemic characteristics of the phenomenological approach from an Islamic perspective.

## Undermining the Divine Aspect

The new methods implied in the modern scientific study of religion had expelled the relation or the connection between the divine and religion, or at least degraded the heavenly aspect of religion. Sharpe stated that the anthropological study of religion is heavily motivated by the theory of evolution, which was brought by Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century.[36] From the psychological point of view of religion, according to Freud's study of religions, it just confirms the atheism hypothesis because he accepts that religious ideas do not originate from God or gods. Based on this belief, in 1927, Sigmund Freud published his famous work, The Future of an Illusion, which clearly states that religious beliefs are illusions that people very much want to be true, although they are not.[37]

According to Jacques Waardenburg, the sociological study of religion recognises religion as "a society in a projected and symbolised form."[38] Therefore, sociologists

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[34] *Kalam and Its Relevance in the Muslim Scholarship of Religion: An Integrated Approach*, ed. Haslina Ibrahim (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2019), 3.

[35] Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman, *Religion and Pluralistic Co-Existence* (Malaysia: IIUM Press, 2010), 116

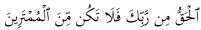[36] Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 95.

[37] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 38-43.

[38] Jacques Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 301.

propose that religion should be studied in response to social needs and reality. Similarly, the phenomenology of religion emphasises the need to become attentive to what is given in experience. Phenomenological reflection involves active openness and a deeper kind of attentiveness to how religious phenomena appear or are given to us in experience.

Over the decades, the phenomenology of religion has become much broader, more self-critical, and more sophisticated in recognising the complexity, ambiguity, and depth of our diverse modes of givenness.[39] Kant argued on phenomenology that it is not possible to have true knowledge of the transcendent (noumena), according to him, it is only possible to gain knowledge through knowing the immanent (phenomena) of human experience.[40] It views religion as comprising diverse components and studies these components across various religious traditions to gain some understanding of them without concerning the divine aspect or degrading the heavenly aspect of religion.

Therefore, this idea contradicts Islam and is contrary to al-Biruni's phenomenological approach, too, since he never undermines the divine aspects of Islam. However, understanding and examining religion or religious traditions through experiential aspects undermines the divine element of religion. Analysing religion by isolating god from the essence of religion is not an accurate method of studying religion, as God is the most vital aspect in most religions, if not all, to connect humans with divinity. It is mentioned in the Quran as follows:

ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ فَلَا تَكُن مِّنَ ٱلْمُمْتَرِينَ

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[39] Douglas Allen, "Phenomenology of Religion," in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2005), 205.

[40] Moreau, *Phenomenology of Religion*, 249.

Translation: "The truth is from your Lord, so do
not be among the doubters."

Ali 'Imran, 3:60

The verse indicates the divine aspect of the religion. In
another surah, Allah says:

فَإِن كُنتَ فِي شَكٍّ مِّمَّا أَنزَلْنَآ إِلَيْكَ فَسْـَٔلِ ٱلَّذِينَ يَقْرَءُو

نَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبْلِكَۚ لَقَدْ جَآءَكَ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكَ فَلَا

تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْمُمْتَرِينَ

Translation: "Now, if you are in doubt
concerning what We have revealed to you, then
ask those who have been reading the Book
before you. It is the truth that has come to you
from your Lord, so do never become one of
those who doubt."

Yunus, 10:94

It is noticed that these Quranic verses clearly explain
what the truth is and where it comes. However, the
phenomenological approach undermines the divine aspects
and because of that, the ontological distance between the
divine and human in Islam, suggests that this perspective
can challenge the divine aspect by focusing on human
experience rather than divine presence. This is mentioned
as the "greatest ontotheological distance" and the nature of
God's communication. [41] Therefore, this contradicts the
Islamic worldview, and it is undoubtedly undermining the
divine aspect of the religion. Hence, the phenomenologist
only depends on human experience to trace the truth or
evaluate it.

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[41] Valerie Gonzalez, "Phenomenology of Quranic Corporeality and
Affect: A Concrete Sense of Being Muslim in the World," *Religions*
14(7) (2023), 827.

## *Eidetic* Vision: Descriptive and Multiple Roles

Two procedural principles that have become central to the phenomenology of religion, are *epoché* and *eidetic* vision. The principle of "eidetic vision", which explains "that which is seen", thus form, shape, and essence, compels to play entirely descriptive and multiple roles.

This *eidetic* vision paves the way to play either a merely descriptive or multiple roles or both. It becomes impossible for any scholar of religion to be "detached observers who 'sit out' on the performance in the interest of amassing data in some objective, detached way. Indeed, for many students, even being part of the phenomenon, assuming the dual role of researchers and practitioners, is a common scenario."[42]

In the view of human circumstances and limitations, the arguments on the phenomenology of religions, that it is solely descriptive can be seen as almost impossible. Every individual, even a phenomenologist, has what can sometimes be called secret motives that drive data, and analytical methods, and it is reflected during the presentation of results. In some works, phenomenologists have been seen as crossing the boundary from description to assessment. By all accounts, crossing such boundaries is a necessary way to demonstrate what it means to be part of a human being with a religious identity, culturally and historically. Once one becomes a participant as an observer, he immediately becomes part of the phenomenon studied. Therefore, it becomes impossible for any scholar of religion to be a detached observer who 'sits out' on the performance in the interest of amassing data in some objective, detached way. In Islam, it is said in the Quran,

<div dir="rtl">

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَٰهُ ٱلسَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

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[42] Chryssides. G. D. & Geaves, R., *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 231.

Translation: "We showed him the right path
whether he would be grateful or ungrateful."

Al-Insan, 76:3

It is explained in the Quranic exegeses very clearly
that, "Verily We have guided him to the way, We have
pointed out to him the path of guidance by sending
messengers [to mankind], whether he be grateful, that is to
say, [whether he be] a believer, or ungrateful (both
[*shākiran* and *kafūran*] are circumstantial qualifiers
referring to the direct object; in other words, We have
pointed out to him in both presupposed states, whether his
gratefulness or his *unthankfulness*; *immā* is used to list the
'states').[43] Similarly, it is mentioned that "(Lo! We have
shown him the way) of faith and disbelief, good and evil,
(whether he be grateful) accepting faith (or disbelieving) it
is also said this means: We have shown him the way to be
either grateful or ungrateful."[44]

In Islam, the position regarding belief is quite explicit.
Adherents of the faith are faced with a clear choice: either
to embrace belief in the principles of Islam or to reject it.
There is no allowance for a middle ground or ambiguous
stance when it comes to *ʿaqidah,* which refers to the articles
of faith that every Muslim is expected to uphold. This
binary perspective emphasises the importance of making a
definitive commitment to the fundamental beliefs of Islam.
The Quran says,

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[43] Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Maḥallī & Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd
al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, 1st ed (Cairo:
Dār al-Ḥadīth, n.d.), 781.

[44] ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās, *Tanwīr al-Miqbās min Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās,*
attributed to him and compiled by Majd al-Dīn Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad
ibn Yaʿqūb al-Fīrūzābādī, edited by Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-
Marʿashlī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1992), 495

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ ءَامَنُوا۟ ثُمَّ كَفَرُوا۟ فَطُبِعَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ

لَا يَفْقَهُونَ

Translation: "That is because they believed,
then they rejected Faith: So, a seal was et on
their hearts: therefore, they understand not."

Al-Munafiqun, 63:03

This warns against a wavering stance in faith,
reinforcing the necessity of a firm commitment to *'aqidah*.
That's why Allah says:

وَقُلِ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ فَمَن شَآءَ فَلْيُؤْمِن وَمَن شَآءَ

فَلْيَكْفُرْ إِنَّآ أَعْتَدْنَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ نَارًا أَحَاطَ بِهِمْ سُرَادِقُهَآ

وَإِن يَسْتَغِيثُوا۟ يُغَاثُوا۟ بِمَآءٍ كَٱلْمُهْلِ يَشْوِي ٱلْوُجُوهَ

بِئْسَ ٱلشَّرَابُ وَسَآءَتْ مُرْتَفَقًا

Translation: "Say, "The truth is from your
Lord": Let him who will believe, and let him
who will, reject (it): for the wrong-doers We
have prepared a Fire whose (smoke          and
flames), like the walls and roof of a tent, will
hem them in: if they implore relief, they will be
granted water like melted brass, that will scald
their faces, how dreadful the drink! How
uncomfortable a coach is to recline on!"

Al-Kahf, 18:29

This verse underscores the explicit choice between belief
and disbelief, with clear consequences for each.

The phenomenological approach is limited to a merely
descriptive position, which compels the researcher to play
dual or multiple roles, and it contradicts Islamic values. So,
the descriptive role brings the phenomenologist to play
multiple roles and it is very difficult to maintain the essence

of one's role as it is, according to Islam, and thus is only
possible for the person who upholds the agnostic position,
who does believe, but can't be sure, and believes that there
are no ways to prove it or disprove it. Therefore, this
descriptive role and multiple roles are almost impossible
according to Islam.

The phenomenology of religion has been criticised for
identity and critical nerve failure because of eidetic vision.
Scholars who use this approach are accused of playing a
role that is no more than a reporter, repeating the
unconfirmed claims of insiders while invoking
methodological agnosticism as a justification for doing so
and this is totally against the Islamic teaching as al-Quran
says:

لَآ إِكْرَاهَ فِي ٱلدِّينِ قَد تَّبَيَّنَ ٱلرُّشْدُ مِنَ ٱلْغَيِّ فَمَن
يَكْفُرْ بِٱلطَّٰغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ فَقَدِ ٱسْتَمْسَكَ
بِٱلْعُرْوَةِ ٱلْوُثْقَىٰ لَا ٱنفِصَامَ لَهَا وَٱللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

Translation: "Let there be no compulsion in
religion, for the Truth stands out clearly from
falsehood. So, whoever renounces false gods
and believes in Allah has certainly grasped the
firmest, unfailing handhold. And Allah is All-
Hearing, All-Knowing."

Al-Baqarah, 2:256

Hence, religious neutralism and the construction to
play two or more roles in the same situation are made
impossible by repeating unverified information like a
reporter or storyteller, which is against the above passage
of the Quran.

### *Epoché*: Empathy and Imitating

The word *epoché* is 'derived from the Greek *epeché*, which
means "I hold back". Indeed, it means the suspension of
judgment, the exclusion from one's mind of every possible

presupposition.[45] Sharma observes a further dimension, and he links *epoché* to empathy. He argues that *epoché* not only involves suspension of one's belief but "involves active participation in the experience, which is being encountered, imaginative by pre-existing or superimposed ideas, beliefs, presuppositions, or suspicions." [46] So, according to a different interpretation, the *epoché* aims to suspend our various theoretical presuppositions. What we have to bracket is our preconceived ideas, our habits of thought, our prejudices and theoretical assumptions.[47]

It is said that the value of *epoché* is only accepted with qualification. The reason for qualifying *epoché* is that it is surrounded by limitations. One of the most ardent critics of *epoché* is Segal. He writes:

> "Phenomenologists invariably neglect to explain how to practice *epoché*. To prescribe the suspension of bias is one thing. To achieve it is another. Until the actual means of ridding oneself of all biases gets explained, the *epoché* must remain only a hopeless ideal."[48]

In the Islamic view, it is impossible to hold back one's religious background as mentioned in al-Quran, "We showed him the right path whether he would be grateful or ungrateful." [49] Therefore, holding back one's truth or suspension of judgment is temporary and limited; it cannot be followed at an unrestricted level.

Another most dangerous issue of the *epoché* in the phenomenology of religion from the Islamic point of view

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[45] Chryssides & Geaves, *The Study of Religion*, 231.

[46] A. Sharma, *To Things Themselves: Essays on the Discourse and Practice of the Phenomenology of Religion* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 232.

[47] Dan Zahavi, "Applied Phenomenology: Why it is Safe to Ignore the *Epoché*," *Continental Philosophy Review* 54 (2021), 259-273.

[48] RA. Segal, *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 19.

[49] Al-Quran, 76:3.

is that leads to many conversions to the religion the scholar is studying because of his empathy and trying to have the experience of the religion studied on his own. According to Van Del Leeuw, empathy means interpolating the phenomena into the life of the student. With this, the student must get comfortable and understand religion from individual experiences. It means that, as a scholar, it is necessary to have first-hand information from personal experiences, rather than being a scholar who sits in the library to gather notes. Thus, the student or researcher must be part of the religious activities, i.e., "entering into the religion," and this is the empathetic interpolation.[50] Getting into the faith means the scholar participates in all spiritual activities with proper and focused observation (participant observation). Taking elements within the religious activities does not mean 'conversion' into religion and this is where 'empathic neutrality' steps in.

For Muslims, this full participation in religious practices, such as theology-related matters, some rituals and acts of worship may be very difficult as it is against the fundamental teachings (*'Aqidah*) of Islam. So, the empathy of the phenomenological approach in the study of religion with this kind of restricted manner cannot be achieved at a considerable level and total participation. This is because a Muslim who studies other religions using the phenomenological method may find it difficult to engage in some rituals of such a religion to avoid unnecessary conditions and judgments; hence, this imitation is not allowed in Islam.

In Islam, it is narrated from Ibn 'Umar (RA) that the Prophet (PBUH) said: "He who imitates any people (in

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[50] Kasomo Daniel, "The Applicability of Phenomenology in the Study of Religion," *International Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences* 2(5) (2012), 130-137.

their actions) is considered to be one of them."[51] Various
scholars, including al-Munawi, al-Qari, and Ibn Taymiyyah
have discussed the hadith. The hadith emphasises that
outward imitation in dress, behaviour, and customs can lead
to an association with the imitated group, whether in virtue
or sin. Scholars interpret it as a warning against adopting
the distinct practices of non-Muslims, wrongdoers, or even
righteous individuals if done for superficial reasons. Ibn
Taymiyyah argues that the hadith implies the prohibition of
imitation in religious or symbolic aspects, citing similar
Quranic principles on allegiance.[52] The reliability of the
hadith is debated, with scholars such as al-Sakhawi and Ibn
Hajar offering varying assessments of its authenticity, but
its moral and legal implications are widely acknowledged
in Islamic jurisprudence.

The Prophetic narration informs that whoever imitates
disbelievers, or sinners by engaging in any of their peculiar
traits, such as their creeds, acts of worship, or habits,
becomes one of them. This is because outward imitation of
them leads to inward imitation. In fact, imitation of any
people indicates admiration of them, and it may result in
loving, respecting, and inclining toward them, which may
also prompt a person even to imitate them inwardly and in
their worship - Allah forbid.[53] Al-San'ani said:

> Translation: "This hadith shows that whoever
> resembles or imitates the disbelievers, or who
> frequently *bid'ah*, then he is among them (the
> same as them). In which he imitates what is

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[51] Abū Dāwūd, Sulaymān ibn al-Ashʿath al-Azdī al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī
Dāwūd*, ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ & Muḥammad Kāmil Qarābillī, 1st
ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Risālah al-ʿĀlamiyyah, 2009), vol. 6, 144, Hadith
4031.

[52] Ibn Taymiyyah, *Iqtiḍāʾ al-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm li-Mukhālafat Aṣḥāb al-
Jaḥīm*. Beirut: Maktabat al-Fiqhah, n.d.), vol. 1, 270, as found online
via Madrasa al-Fiqha: " وقد احتج الإمام أحمد وغيره بهذا الحديث ... {وَمَن يَتَوَلَّهُم
مِنكُمْ فَإِنَّهُ مِنْهُمْ}." alathar.netar.lib.efatwa.ir+1ketabonline.com+1

[53] Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, vol. 6. 144, Hadith 4031.

specific for them, like clothing, their ride or action."[54]

In the hadith, warning against imitating the people of disbelief and immorality.[55] It is remarked from the above discussion that the phenomenological approach and the phenomenologist in the scientific study of religion accept the *epoché* concept, which brings an empathetic situation and forces one to imitate other religious practices even though those are against the Islamic limitations and Shari'ah boundaries.

The following table explores the concepts of *eidetic* thought and *epoché,* illustrating how these ideas can lead to unrestricted interpretations of time and a form of religious neutralism. This approach, often characterised by a categorised structure known as hierocracy, stands in stark contrast to the teachings found in the Quran and hadith, as well as the broader Islamic worldview. These contradictions raise important questions about the compatibility of such ideas with Islamic principles.

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[54] ʿAbd Allāh ibn Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān, *Minḥat al-ʿAllām fī Sharḥ Bulūgh al-Marām*, 1st ed. Saudi Arabia: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1427–1435 AH), vol. 10, 157-158

[55] Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ et al., supervised by ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, 1st ed. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 2001), vol. 9, 123, Hadith 5114.

Table 1: Islamic perspective on *eidetic* vision and *epoché* that
brings repeating unconfirmed data, religious neutralism, and
hypocrisy

| Notion | Quranic & Hadith Evidence | Islamic View |
|---|---|---|
| **Repeating Unconfirmed Data** | "*O ye who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest ye harm people unwittingly, and afterwards become full of repentance for what ye have done.*"[56] "*And pursue not that of which thou hast no knowledge; for every act of hearing, or of seeing or of (feeling in) the heart will be enquired into (on the Day of Reckoning).*"[57] | Islam warns against spreading unverified information as it can lead to confusion and harm. Believers must verify the information before repeating it. |
| **Religious Neutralism (Playing Dual or Multiple Roles in Religion)** | "*And cover not Truth with falsehood, nor conceal the Truth when ye know (what it is).*"[58] "*Those who conceal Allah's revelations in the Book, and purchase for them a miserable profit, - they swallow into themselves nought but Fire; Allah will not address them on the Day of Resurrection. Nor purify them: Grievous will be their penalty.*"[59] | Islam does not permit blending contradictory religious views. Faith requires sincerity and a firm commitment to Islamic teachings. |
| **Imitating: Hypocrisy (*Nifaq*) and Its Consequences** | "*Of the people there are some who say: "We believe in Allah and the Last Day;" but they do not (really) believe. Fain, would they deceive Allah and those who believe, but they only deceive themselves, and realise (it) not! In their hearts is a disease; and Allah has increased their disease: And grievous is the penalty they*" | Hypocrisy is condemned in Islam and considered a serious sin. Islam emphasises clarity in faith - wavering between belief |

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[56] Al-Quran 49:6.

[57] Al-Quran 17:36

[58] Al-Quran 2:42

[59] Al-Quran 2:174

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *(incur), because they are false (to themselves).*"[60] It was narrated from Abu Hurairah that: The Messenger of Allah [SAW] said: "*The signs of the hypocrite are three: When he speaks, he lies; when he makes a promise, he breaks it; and when he is entrusted with something, he betrays (that trust).*"[61] | and disbelief is unacceptable. |

## Religion as a Human Phenomenon

Scholars in the anthropological study of religion confirm that religion is developed by humans.[62] Similarly, the psychologist's perspective on religion embeds religion as a totally human creation. Specifically, religion is the creation of human psychology confined in a sphere of illusion. Sigmund Freud, in his book *The Future of an Illusion,* concluded that individuals who adhere to faith are in an illusion and have an ill character.[63] The sociology of religion established 'sacred' as a major element in religion, they perceived the 'sacred' from the human perspective. Similarly, phenomenologists are also convinced that religious experience is achieved only through human phenomenon. It is known that religion must be treated as an encompassing way of life.

Thus, studying religions is to consider the whole system, unlike "Western phenomenologists" who limit religion to the elements of 'sacred' and 'holy' which are experienced through human phenomenon, hence this contradicts the Islamic worldview. As a result of this kind

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[60] Al-Quran 2:8-10

[61] Aḥmad ibn Shuʿayb al-Nasāʾī, *Sunan al-Nasāʾī*, with commentary by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and marginal notes by Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Hādī al-Sindī, 1st ed. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijārīyyah al-Kubrā, 1930), vol. 8, 116, Hadith 5021.

[62] Carl Olson, *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion: A Selection of Critical Readings* (USA: Thomson Wardsworth, 2003), 12.

[63] Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 65-71.

of interpretation of religion, the understanding of religion
originated from human perceptions. The Quran says:

إِنَّ ٱلدِّينَ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْإِسْلَٰمُۗ وَمَا ٱخْتَلَفَ ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ

ٱلْكِتَٰبَ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْعِلْمُ بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ

وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ۝

> Translation: The Religion before Allah is Islam
> (submission to His Will): Nor did the People of
> the Book dissent there from except through
> envy of each other after knowledge had come to
> them. But if any deny the Signs of Allah, Allah
> is swift in calling to account.
>
> Ali 'Imran 3:19

This verse affirms that true religion is from Allah, not a
human construct.

The weaknesses of the phenomenological school were
discussed by al-Faruqi and most of all his criticisms can be
summarised as follows: (1) Judgment is needed, based on
meta-religion, he stressed that suspension is only
temporary; (2) The desirability of judgment, religion is not
merely a scientific fact, but a life fact a more respectful
approach. Religious meaning must be lived to be cognised;
and (3) Possibility of judgment, the common genre of meta-
religion is different in surface but merely common to the
essence.[64] It raises concerns about applying Western
philosophical frameworks to Islamic studies, indicating that
such approaches can be problematic.[65]

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[64] Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam and Other Faiths* (Leicester: The Islamic
   Foundation, 1998), 172-183.
[65] Gonzalez, "Phenomenology of Quranic Corporeality," 827.

## Al-Biruni and al-Faruqi: Reconciling or Rejecting Phenomenology in the Study of Other Religions?

The role of phenomenology in the study of religion has been widely debated, particularly in the context of Islamic scholarship. While some scholars view it as a valuable method for fostering interreligious understanding, others criticise its potential for relativism and the suspension of absolute truth. The key phenomenological principles - *epoché* (suspension of judgment), *eidetic* vision (descriptive analysis), and objectivity - have been approached differently by Muslim scholars. Al-Biruni and al-Faruqi stand out as significant figures in this discourse, with contrasting yet complementary perspectives on how Islam engages with the study of other religions.

Al-Biruni and al-Faruqi are important figures in the discussion about how Islam views other religions from a phenomenological perspective. They have different views, but they also complement each other. So, it is necessary to evaluate the phenomenological approach according to the Islamic worldview and how it can be traced to scholars like al-Biruni and al-Faruqi, who have been considered Islamic phenomenologists and unique figures of comparative religion. It is said that al-Biruni was the first phenomenologist who had an exceptional methodology and approach to looking at other religions. In his book *Tahqiq ma li al-Hind min Maqulah Maqbulah fi al-ʿAql aw Mardhulah* [66] (known as Kitab al-Hind of al-Biruni) announces himself as a dispassionate scholar who seeks to study other religions as they are. In his introductory comments, he says:

> "This book is not a polemical one (*laysa al-kitāb, kitāba ḥujaj wa-jidāl*) … My book is

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[66] Abū al-Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, *Taḥqīq mā li al-Hind min Maqūlah Maqbūlah fī al-ʿAql aw Mardhūlah*. Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1403H).

nothing but a simple historic record of fact (*wa
innamā huwa kitāb ḥikāyāt*)."[67]

Similarly, al-Faruqi, who has been considered an
Islamic phenomenologist reconstructed and redesigned the
approach considering the Islamic values. [68] These
dispassionate attitudes are a major reason to consider both
of them as distinguished scholars and religious historians in
the field of comparative religion. To understand how these
two scholars applied phenomenological approaches to the
scientific study of religions, as well as their limitations and
the objective form from an Islamic perspective, it's
essential to analyse their views. The following Table 2
interprets both scholars' phenomenological approaches
within the framework of Islam.

Table 2: Al-Biruni and al-Faruqi Approaches

| | | *Epoché* | *Eidetic* Vision | Objective |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Meaning** | | Suspension of Judgments (Empathy and Imitating) | That which is seen (Describing and Multiple roles) | Neutrality in Studying Religions |
| Islamic Scholars as phenomenologists | Al-Biruni | Did not focus on merely criticising any religion by using the Islamic text | Describe the phenomenon according to those believers' stand, without engaging in polemics and playing a single role through observation | To make a good interreligious understanding |
| | Al-Faruqi | Suspension of judgment is only temporarily possible, but cannot be permanent | Describe the phenomenon with analysis according to those believers without | To make good interreligious dialogue to find the truth |

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[67] Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, 7.
[68] Al-Farūqī, *Christian Ethics*, 1.

|  |  |  | engaging in polemics and playing a single role through observation |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Islamic Worldview | Non-Acceptance level | Holding the suspension as long after knowing the truth from the false. & Imitating and adopting the practices or beliefs that are totally against the Islamic teachings because of empathy | Describe the phenomenon without analysis and playing multiple roles through observation | To make all religions on an equal level or prefer to promote religious pluralism |
|  | Acceptance level | It is temporarily possible and if the truth is confirmed without a doubt, it is necessary to accept and evaluate. & Imitating and adopting are accepted if it is not totally against the teachings of Islam (E.g., Meditation, Visiting and staying at religious places) | Describe the phenomenon with analysis and playing a single role through observation | To make a good understanding and engagement between different adherents to protect from religious conflicts |

According to Table 2 above, al-Biruni focused on
describing religion and its teachings according to believers'

perspectives without engaging in polemics or taking a single role through observation. His objective was to promote good interreligious understanding by studying and describing different religious beliefs without bias. Findings al-Biruni's methods have proven that researchers are not necessarily required to dispose of their religious identity and commitment to faith, while simultaneously achieving objectivity and accuracy. Al-Biruni's approach to understanding others may be seen as a remarkable early model of interfaith, intercultural and inter-civilizational dialogue seeking, eventually, to promote a harmonious co-existence within a highly polarised cultural and religious context.[69]

On the other hand, al-Faruqi believed that the suspension of judgment can only be temporary and should ultimately lead to accepting and evaluating the truth. He also emphasised describing phenomena with analysis according to believers' perspectives without engaging in polemics or taking a single role through observation. Al-Faruqi, in his doctoral dissertation, Christian Ethics, began the discussion of Comparative Religion by connoting the importance of disengagement. He complained that previous books written by the West were filled with imposed standards from the authors into religions. Thus, these books represented misinterpretations of religions. For him, in studying religions, one must step out of his own presuppositions and values to step into those religions that one wishes to study.[70] Therefore, Haslina argues that being objective, al-Faruqi acknowledged the positive aspect of the phenomenology of religion, especially in substituting the theological and philosophical methods in the study of

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[69] Nurhanisah Senin et al., "Understanding The 'Other': The Case of al-Biruni (973-1048 AD)," *International Journal of Ethics and Systems* 35(3) (2019), 392-409.

[70] Al-Faruqi, *Christian Ethics*, 1.

religion. [71] Al-Faruqi's objective was to promote good interreligious dialogue and foster understanding between different religious traditions.

The Tabel 2 indicates that there are degrees of acceptability and non-approval for *epoché* and *eidetic* vision in the framework of Islam. The Islamic worldview with the non-acceptance level in the context of *epoché* and *eidetic* vision involves suspending judgment even after knowing the truth from the false. This is against the idea of "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong."[72] This stance is characterised by empathy towards different beliefs and practices, leading to adopting them despite conflicting with Islamic teachings. The approach is focuses on describing religious phenomena with total engagement in analysis or taking on multiple roles, aiming to promote religious pluralism and equality among all faiths.

In actuality, Islam completely opposes John Hick's religious pluralism.[73] In contrast, the acceptance level in the Islamic worldview entails temporarily holding the suspension of judgement until the truth is confirmed without a doubt. Once the truth is established, it is necessary to accept and evaluate it based on Islamic teachings. This level also involves the acceptance of imitating and adopting practices from other faiths that do not contradict Islamic principles, such as meditation or visiting religious sites. The approach to describing religious phenomena with analysis and playing a single role through

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[71] Haslina Ibrahim, *Exploring Religious Pluralism: Christian and Muslims Responses* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic and Strategic Studies Institute, 2016), 93.

[72] Al-Quran 2:256

[73] Akeem Olayinka Kazeem & Fatmir Shehu, "Analyzing John H. Hick's Religious Pluralism and Its Implications from Islamic Ethical Perspectives," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 13(2) (2023), 178-194.

observation aims to facilitate understanding and engagement between different religious adherents, fostering mutual respect and dialogue to build bridges of harmony and cooperation.

**Conclusion**

The scientific study of religions concerning modern Western scholarship originated and evolved from efforts towards developing rational and motives of human nature. To prevent all the shortcomings in the previous methodologies of investigating religions, the phenomenological method as a whole is introduced. It is a method to avoid the difficulties of idealism and realism by desiring to approach an *eidetic* vision of religion (understanding of its essence) by suspending one's judgment or *epoché*. Irrespective of criticisms about this methodological approach to the study of religion from the Western perspective, it still remains one of the most influential approaches in the field of the academic study of religion.[74] However, according to Islam, studying religion under this kind of comprehension, in reality, is not the study of religion by itself; rather, it is merely the study of the connection between humans and God or the connection between humans and what they have perceived as their God.

The phenomenology of religion has faced criticism for failing to address identity issues and for attempting to equalise religions. Even though the principles of *epoché* and *eidetic* vision are a beneficial tool within the discipline of phenomenology and the research into religions, however as there are benefits to this technique, there are also negative aspects to its usage and application according to the Islamic worldview. In Islam, scholars who use this

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[74] Neal DeRoo, "Phenomenology, Spirituality and Religion: Defining a Problem," *Religions* 12(12) (2021), 1114, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel1212111

approach are accused of playing a role that is no more than
a reporter, repeating the unconfirmed claims of insiders
while invoking methodological agnosticism as a
justification for doing so. So, it is clear that this approach
undermines the divine aspect of religion and makes religion
a human phenomenon. Similarly, the *eidetic* vision and
*epoché* play a merely descriptive role or multiple roles and
imitate religious experiences without limitation,
respectively. *Usul al-Din and Kalam*, as foundational
frameworks for the study of religion in Islam, present a
considerable challenge for contemporary Muslim scholars,
who are tasked with negotiating the complex interplay
between fidelity to classical methodologies and the
integration of modern epistemological approaches, like
phenomenology. Therefore, it is suggested that despite this
phenomenology methodology having very significant
features that do not contradict Islamic values, it is necessary
to know the problematic area and issues of the approach
according to the Islamic worldview.

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