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Historical and Phenomenological Approaches to the Study of Religion

Ferlin Anwar,¹ Arfan Nusi,² Ainun Wonopati,³ Nada,⁴ Muhamad Afdan Olii,⁵ Rafli Sintubu⁶

^{1,2,3,4,5,6}IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo

¹anwarferlin27@gmail.com, ²arfan_nusi@yahoo.com, ³ainunwanopati@gmail.com,

⁴nada@gmail.com, ⁵muharfan@gmail.com, ⁶raflisintobu@gmail.com

Abstract:	This article discusses historical and phenomenological approaches in the study of religion, with emphasis on the development of phenomenology of religion, its relation to historical inquiry, and methodological debates after World War II. The discussion shows that historical approaches contextualize religious expressions in their particular traditions, while phenomenological approaches classify and interpret religious phenomena to reveal recurring structures and meanings. The article also reviews the growth of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) as an international forum that shaped debates on the methodology of religious studies. The paper concludes that the two approaches are complementary rather than mutually exclusive: historical analysis supplies particular data and contexts, whereas phenomenology organizes those data into broader patterns of religious meaning.
Keywords :	historical approach; phenomenology of religion; religious studies; methodology;
Author Correspondence Email :	anwarferlin27@gmail.com

Introduction

The main subject of every scientific inquiry into religion is religious facts and their expressions. In relation to this, the phenomenology of religion is tasked with classifying and grouping a wide range of data in a particular manner, thereby obtaining a comprehensive view of the contents of religions and the religious meanings they contain. Religious actions and beliefs in every religion indeed show certain similarities with the actions and beliefs found in other religions. The history of a religion leads only to an understanding of its particularity, whereas the phenomenology of religion presents a systematic view of religious phenomena. The aim of the phenomenological approach to religion is not to compare religions as large, separate units, but rather to identify the facts and phenomena encountered in different religions, collect them, and study them in space. Religion always interacts with social change, conflict, peace, modernity, secularization, pluralism, and globalization. Therefore, contemporary phenomenology

needs to read religion as an experience that is always connected to historical and social contexts. DeRoo argues that phenomenology continues to contribute to religious studies because it can clarify the relationship between lived experience, spirituality, and religion, although this approach needs to be renewed so that it does not fall into an overly abstract search for the essence of religion¹

In the study of global religions, one of the main tasks of researchers is to understand religion as a phenomenon concerning nature, humanity, and transcendence. Ninian Smart views religious studies as a broad field because religion appears in various dimensions, such as doctrine, myth, ritual, experience, ethics, institutions, and materiality. This perspective shows that the study of religion cannot be limited to the internal aspect of faith, but must also consider its contribution to the humanities. Religious studies help explain how human beings construct meaning, form identity, manage conflict, maintain solidarity, and interpret cosmic reality.

Contemporary phenomenology is also important because the concepts of religion, faith, and spirituality are increasingly debated. Gschwandtner shows that the terms faith, religion, and spirituality do not always have clear boundaries in religious studies, theology, sociology, and anthropology of religion² his indicates that scholars of religion must be careful in using analytical categories. Religion does not always appear in the form of formal institutions, but also in personal spirituality, communal experience, ritual practice, and the search for life's meaning. In plural societies, phenomenology also helps us understand interreligious encounters. Cibotaru explains that phenomenology can be used as a descriptive method to understand the structure of experience in interreligious dialogue, especially the tension between openness to the other and loyalty to one's own identity.³ Moreover, Nordlander shows that the phenomenology of religion can help interpret experiences of the sacred amid the modern crisis of meaning.⁴ In a world often understood in secular and rational terms, phenomenology provides space to examine how human beings still experience, long for, and interpret the sacred. Therefore, classical and contemporary phenomenological approaches remain important because they can bridge historical facts, religious experience, and the human need to understand the meaning of life.

Historical Development of Phenomenology of Religion

With regard to its operational definition, the phenomenology of religion can be understood as an approach that seeks to interpret religion through the ways in which it manifests itself in experience, symbols, rituals, language, consciousness, and the forms of life of its adherents. In this sense, the phenomenology of religion does not merely attempt to explain religion as doctrine, but also as a reality experienced and interpreted by human beings within a particular historical space. Therefore, the historical development of the phenomenology of religion should be understood as a long process that moves from the philosophy of consciousness toward a more interdisciplinary study

¹ Carlos Miguel Gómez Rincón, "Diversity and Interpretation: Toward a Pluralist Realist Description of Religious Experience," *Religions* 12, no. 10 (2021): 848, doi:10.3390/rel12100848.

² Christina M. Gschwandtner, "Faith, Religion, and Spirituality: A Phenomenological and Hermeneutic Contribution to Parsing the Distinctions," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): 476, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070476>.

³ Michael D. Barber, "Pragmatic Encroachment, Phenomenology, and Religious Experience," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (2022): 669, doi:10.3390/rel13070669.

⁴ Daniel Rueda Garrido, "A Phenomenology of Religious Forms of Life: The Glorification of the Divine and Self-Interest," *Religions* 16, no. 11 (2025): 1429, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16111429>.

of religion. Within the Husserlian tradition, phenomenology begins with an effort to understand the relationship between subject, world, nature, and spirit. Vecino emphasizes that the problem of spirit and nature in Husserl's phenomenology is closely related to the foundations of the human sciences, because human experience cannot be reduced merely to naturalistic explanation.⁵

In its early stage, the phenomenology of religion developed as an attempt to suspend normative judgments concerning the truth or falsity of religious doctrines. The principle of *epoché* was used so that researchers would not immediately impose theological, ideological, or positivistic prejudices upon the object of study. However, this suspension does not mean that the researcher removes religious meaning from the experience of believers. On the contrary, phenomenology seeks to discover how religion appears as a living structure of meaning in consciousness, action, and social practice. In this context, ritual becomes an important space because it connects the body, symbols, consciousness, and transcendent experience. Connelly shows that religious practice, through symbolic and material involvement, can shape consciousness of metaphysical and transcendent reality⁶

The development of the phenomenology of religion also cannot be separated from criticism of the tendency to treat religion as an overly private experience. Contemporary phenomenology rejects this reduction by emphasizing that religious experience always has an intersubjective dimension. Peruzzotti, through her reading of Jean-Louis Chrétien, explains that spiritual experience cannot be confined within individual subjectivity, because it is formed through the relation of call and response, communication, the body, and community.³ Thus, religion is not merely an inner expression, but also an experience shaped by language, response to the other, and involvement in tradition⁷

Historically, the phenomenology of religion has also undergone an expansion of its object of study. While in the classical period the main focus was placed on essence, basic structure, and typology of religious experience, in the contemporary period the focus has increasingly shifted toward the dynamics of manifestation, invisibility, and the limitations of language in explaining religious experience. Canullo shows that phenomenology can interpret spirit as something that does not appear like an object, yet remains present in a way that is inconspicuous and cannot be fully objectified.⁴ This view is important because many religious phenomena do not always appear as empirical objects, but are present in consciousness, ethical response, prayer, memory, and life orientation.⁸

Furthermore, the historical development of the phenomenology of religion is also marked by dialogue with the French philosophical tradition, especially Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Emmanuel Levinas. Formisano emphasizes that French phenomenology pays attention to the relationship between phenomenality, life, and religious attitude, especially in its effort to understand experiences that are not easily grasped by rational-objective categories.⁵ From this perspective, the

⁵ María Celeste Vecino, "Nature, Spirit, and Spirituality in Husserl's Phenomenology," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): 481, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070481>.

⁶ William L. Connelly, "Ritual and Thought: Spirituality and Method in Philosophy of Religion," *Religions* 12, no. 12 (2021): 1045, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121045>.

⁷ Francesca Peruzzotti, "Human Spirituality: Jean-Louis Chrétien and the Vital Side of Speech," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): 511, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070511>.

⁸ Tekeng, A., & Ibrahim, S. (2025). The Dynamics of Contemporary Islamic Thought: Between Traditionalism and Reform in the Context of Globalization. *Jurnal Ilmiah AL-Jauhari: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Interdisipliner*, 10(2), 201–210. <https://doi.org/10.30603/jiaj.v10i2.7554>

phenomenology of religion is no longer understood merely as a method of classification, but as a way of interpreting the depth of human experience before the transcendent.

In its further development, the phenomenology of religion entered into debate with theology, philosophy of religion, anthropology, and the social sciences. Dahl and Rolfsen emphasize that the relationship between phenomenology and theology remains productive because phenomenology opens the possibility of returning to the “things themselves,” namely religious experience before it is fixed into a conceptual system.⁶ However, this openness must still be maintained so that it does not turn into an uncritical theological claim. Therefore, contemporary phenomenology of religion needs to preserve a balance between the description of experience and historical-critical analysis.

Recent directions in the phenomenology of religion also emphasize that religion appears as a *form of life*. Rueda Garrido explains that religious life can be understood through the subject’s deepest motivations, habits, ritualization, relationship with community, and orientation toward the divine.⁷ Thus, religion is not merely a system of belief, but a pattern of life that shapes the way human beings understand themselves, their world, and their relationship with God.

Based on these developments, the phenomenology of religion can be positioned as an approach that continues to undergo renewal. It emerged from the philosophy of consciousness, developed within the study of religions, and now moves toward a more reflective inquiry into the body, community, history, ritual, spirituality, and transcendence. DeLay shows that the modern debate on being “spiritual but not religious” demonstrates that the boundary between religion and spirituality has become increasingly complex.⁸ Therefore, the phenomenology of religion remains relevant for interpreting changes in religious experience in contemporary society, provided that it is used critically, historically, and openly toward the plurality of religious experiences.

Historical and Phenomenological Approaches in Religious Studies

According to Edmund Husserl, phenomenology should be understood as a rigorous philosophical discipline that seeks to limit, clarify, and complement purely psychological explanations of mental processes. Phenomenology does not merely describe subjective states, but investigates how consciousness is structured and how objects, meanings, and experiences are given to consciousness. In this sense, phenomenology became a method that could be applied not only to psychology, but also to various fields of human inquiry, including art, law, ethics, culture, and religion. Within the study of religion, phenomenology became important because religious phenomena cannot be reduced simply to doctrines, institutions, or historical events. They must also be understood as experiences that appear within consciousness, ritual practice, symbolic expression, and lived human existence. Contemporary discussion of Husserl’s phenomenology shows that his thought remains relevant for examining transcendence, openness, and the possibility of religious experience as a meaningful mode of human existence⁹

Kristensen argues that the phenomenology of religion functions as a complement to historical and philosophical approaches. However, his understanding of phenomenology has a specific purpose.¹⁰ For him, the main task of phenomenology is to classify religious data systematically in order to describe the religious character of

⁹ Bruno Cassara, “Phenomenology and Transcendence: On Openness and Metaphysics in Husserl and Heidegger,” *Religions* 13, no. 11 (2022): 1127, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111127>

¹⁰ Tekeng, A., & Ibrahim, S. (2025). The Dynamics of Contemporary Islamic Thought: Between Traditionalism and Reform in the Context of Globalization. *Jurnal Ilmiah AL-Jauhari: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Interdisipliner*, 10(2), 201–210. <https://doi.org/10.30603/jiav.v10i2.7554>

humanity. Phenomenology seeks to reveal the essential and typical elements of religion. This task is primarily descriptive rather than interpretive. In this regard, phenomenology becomes a necessary prerequisite for philosophical reflection on the essence of religion. Similarly, historical research discovers particular data within specific religious traditions, and without such historical data, phenomenological inquiry would have no concrete basis. Recent studies on French phenomenology of religion also show that phenomenological discourse can be used to describe religious phenomena while still maintaining the irreducibility of phenomenology as a philosophical method.¹¹

In his address on *Religionswissenschaft* at the opening meeting of the American Society for the Study of Religion in 1959, Erwin R. Goodenough expressed concern that the science of religion was still at a developmental stage and had not yet achieved a common methodology that scholars could share. More than two decades later, the question remained whether scholars of religion had come closer to such a shared methodological foundation.¹² During the following decades, calls for methodological clarification became increasingly prominent. Numerous papers, monographs, and conferences were devoted to methodological questions, while new theories and methods in religious studies continued to emerge. Contemporary methodological debates confirm that the study of religion cannot rely solely on empirical or historical access; it also requires phenomenological reflection in order to do justice to the distinctive features of religious experience¹³

According to Mariasusai Dhavamony, understanding a religious phenomenon involves empathy toward the experiences, thoughts, emotions, and ideas of others. However, such understanding is not obtained by reproducing another person's emotions or thoughts in an imitative way. To understand religious experience does not mean to mystically penetrate another person's inner life. Knowledge of another person's belief is indirect and must be inferred from observable expressions, behavior, works, rituals, narratives, and other available data. This point is important because phenomenology of religion must avoid both reductionism and uncritical subjectivism. Recent work on empathy and religious experience shows that religious understanding is often embodied, socially mediated, and shaped through ritual interaction, symbols, bodily expressions, and communal meaning-making¹⁴

History, as a human science, studies a sequence of particular and irreversible expressions. Later expressions are cumulatively influenced by earlier ones. Therefore, the historical approach seeks to understand religious expressions by relating them to their historical contexts, while at the same time understanding those contexts through the expressions themselves. This process is mutually dependent: religious expressions can only be understood within their contexts, and historical contexts can only be reconstructed through the expressions, sources, and traces that remain. In contemporary religious studies, the social-historical method emphasizes the importance of primary and

¹¹ Yanbo Zheng, "The Call and Response in the French Phenomenology of Religion," *Religions* 13, no. 9 (2022): 858, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090858>.

¹² Ibrahim, S., & Khaerul Asfar. (2024). The Position of Women in the Dynamics of Modern Tafsir: Study of Tafsir Al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir by Muhammad Tahir Ibn 'Ashur. *Jurnal Ilmiah AL-Jauhari: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Interdisipliner*, 8(2), 259–272. <https://doi.org/10.30603/jiaj.v8i2.5204>

¹³ Fabian Völker, "Methodology and Mysticism: For an Integral Study of Religion," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 161, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020161>

¹⁴ Fernando Carlucci and Daniel De Luca-Noronha, "Empathy and Umbanda," *Religions* 15, no. 8 (2024): 982, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080982>

secondary sources, analytical interpretation, and the placement of religious phenomena within broader social and cultural contexts¹⁵.

Contemporary Development of Historical and Phenomenological Approaches

Contemporary studies of religion show that historical and phenomenological approaches can no longer be understood as two methods that operate separately from one another. Rather, both should be positioned as complementary approaches in examining the complexity of modern religious life. The historical approach emphasizes the importance of context, social change, continuity of tradition, institutional dynamics, and the construction of meaning within a particular period of time. Meanwhile, the phenomenological approach seeks to understand how religion is experienced, lived, and manifested in consciousness, rituals, symbols, texts, the body, community, and everyday life. Thus, contemporary religious studies cannot rely solely on historical facts; they must also open space for understanding the meanings that live within the experiences of religious adherents.¹⁶

In methodological terms, the main difficulty in contemporary religious studies lies in the question of whether all methods have equal standing or whether each method is relevant only to particular objects and research aims. This issue is important because religion is a multidimensional phenomenon. It can be studied as a belief system, a social institution, a ritual practice, a spiritual experience, a political construction, a cultural heritage, or a source of collective identity. Therefore, a single approach is often insufficient. Recent studies on religiosity and spirituality show that global religious studies still face problems of geographical bias, the dominance of Western approaches, and the tendency to treat Christianity and Western institutional models as general standards for understanding other religions.¹⁷

Systematically, religious data in the study of religions can be analyzed through two layers. The first is the historical-descriptive layer, which includes data concerning figures, texts, institutions, events, doctrines, and social changes that shape a tradition. The second is the phenomenological-interpretive layer, which includes experiences, symbols, affects, perceptions, and meanings lived by religious subjects. These two layers should not be rigidly separated. A ritual, for instance, has a history of formation, but it also possesses experiential power felt by its practitioners. A sacred text has a process of revelation, transmission, and codification, but it also has phenomenological effects in reading, listening, internalization, and the formation of religious identity. Gonzalez shows that the study of the Qur'an cannot be viewed merely as a discursive tradition, because religious experience also involves affect, sensation, and non-linguistic dimensions in the search for divine knowledge

Contemporary developments also show that hermeneutics has significantly influenced the phenomenological approach. Hermeneutics is not only concerned with the technique of interpreting texts, but also with how human beings understand the world, the self, and religious experience. In religious studies, hermeneutics helps explain how texts, traditions, and experiences never appear as raw data, but always enter a

¹⁵ Laura Kathryn Jurgens, "Understanding Research Methodology: Social History and the Reformation Period in Europe," *Religions* 12, no. 6 (2021): 370, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060370>

¹⁶ Patricia Snell Herzog, David P. King, Rafia A. Khader, Amy Strohmeier, and Andrew L. Williams, "Studying Religiosity and Spirituality: A Review of Macro, Micro, and Meso-Level Approaches," *Religions* 11, no. 9 (2020): 437, doi:10.3390/rel11090437.

¹⁷ Laurens ten Kate and Bram van Boxtel, "Introduction: Cultural and Religious Pluralism in the Age of Imaginaries," *Religions* 14, no. 9 (2023): 1190, doi:10.3390/rel14091190.

process of interpretation. Moore argues that the development of affect theory, non-representational theory, and assemblage theory has challenged two important concepts in biblical hermeneutics, namely interpretation and representation.¹⁸ This shows that contemporary religious studies no longer ask only “what does the text mean,” but also how texts, bodies, affects, contexts, and readers shape the process of meaning-making.

The historical-critical approach remains important because it protects religious research from overly general and ahistorical claims. Through this approach, researchers can trace the origins of concepts, institutional transformations, power relations, and social dynamics that influence religious traditions. However, the historical-critical approach is not sufficient if it is not complemented by phenomenological sensitivity. A religious event is not only a historical fact, but also a reality experienced by a community. Therefore, contemporary religious studies require a balance between document analysis and the understanding of lived experience.

Religious pluralism also shows the importance of integrating history, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. In plural societies, religion is studied not only as an internal doctrine, but also as a public practice that interacts with education, politics, identity, interreligious dialogue, and social life. Sabetta emphasizes that the postmodern era is marked by structural religious pluralism, in which the public dimension of religion again becomes an important theme in modern society.¹⁹ Thus, contemporary historical and phenomenological approaches must be able to read religion as a tradition rooted in history as well as an experience continually negotiated in the public sphere.

Based on the discussion above, the contemporary development of historical and phenomenological approaches shows an increasingly interdisciplinary methodological direction. The historical approach provides factual and contextual grounding, while phenomenology provides access to the meaning of religious experience. Hermeneutics then bridges the two by showing that both facts and experiences always require a process of interpretation. Therefore, contemporary religious studies must avoid methodological reductionism. Religion should be understood as a historical, phenomenological, symbolic, social, and interpretive reality that continuously changes in accordance with the dynamics of society.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, historical and phenomenological approaches play an important role in the study of religions because they offer complementary perspectives. The historical approach helps researchers understand religion through its context of emergence, development, social transformation, institutional dynamics, and continuity of tradition over time. Meanwhile, the phenomenological approach focuses on how religion is experienced, interpreted, and manifested by its adherents through rituals, symbols, spiritual experiences, religious consciousness, and everyday practices. Thus, religion cannot be understood merely as doctrine or historical fact, but also as a lived experience that continuously develops within social and cultural contexts.

Contemporary developments show that religious studies require a more interdisciplinary, critical, and open approach to the plurality of religious experiences. Phenomenology should not be understood narrowly as a description of inner experience detached from history, while history should not be reduced to a chronology of events without considering the meanings lived by religious actors. The integration of historical, phenomenological, and hermeneutical approaches enables religious studies to examine religious traditions more comprehensively: as historical realities, subjective experiences, social practices, and interpretive processes. Therefore, these two approaches remain relevant for understanding religion in modern societies marked by pluralism, globalization, secularization, and interreligious encounters.

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