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Phenomenology remains a controversial method in the academic study of religion. With its roots in philosophical phenomenology and a long history of various definitions and applications, it is a difficult term to summarize and defend. Nevertheless, this is precisely the goal of James Cox in these two recent books. Generally speaking, he aims to define the phenomenology of religion, provide a step-by-step protocol for students to apply it, suggest its limits as an academic method, and respond to some of its major criticisms. All this he attempts while working with material drawn from several indigenous religions in Zimbabwe (e.g., Shona, Ndebele, Khalanga).

The intended audience for *Expressing the Sacred* is the undergraduate student, and consequently this book has significant strengths, but also weaknesses. It is a readable and well organized introduction to the major concepts and characteristics of phenomenology. Working with well-known sources (Husserl, Eliade, Smart, W. C. Smith, etc.), Cox first builds a “working definition” of religion. He writes, “religion is a varied, symbolic expression of that which people (the I-We) appropriately respond to as being of unrestricted value” (15). Most of the book is then devoted to describing how classic phenomenological notions such as *epoche*, “empathetic interpolation”, and “eidetic intuition” can be applied to religion. Altogether, Cox identifies thirteen steps in his method, including: “describing the phenomena”, “naming the phenomena”, “affirming the sacred as the structure of religious consciousness”, “seeing into the meaning or essence of religion in general”, and testing the validity of this “intuition” by determining whether adherents of a religious tradition will endorse it. In the end, the author suggests that “the essential meaning of religion is summarized in the following statement of eidetic intuition: every religion seeks to achieve and to maintain trust in the unrestricted value” (154). Trust is the central idea here, for Cox claims religious people...
are “seeking or enjoying” such trust “through myths, rituals, sacred practitioners, art, scripture and morality” (154)—through, that is, what he understands to be the basic categories of religious phenomena around the world.

These are bold and controversial claims, and the author seems to recognize them as such, but unfortunately he fails to assuage the critical reader’s concerns. Too many serious questions remain unanswered throughout the text. While it is true Cox admits that phenomenology has limits, that for example “epoche cannot be performed perfectly, empathetic interpolation is prone to misunderstanding, maintaining epoche may distort the phenomena from a believer’s point of view, and the eidetic intuition never offers a final or complete understanding of religion” (57), nowhere does he spell out how these limitations might be overcome. Regrettably, he does not suggest why phenomenology, given its numerous limitations, is not fatally flawed and why the reader should not abandon it in favor of its “reductionistic” competitors.

Cox’s advocacy of phenomenology is weakened further by his failure to defend several key concepts. For example, he claims that “eidetic intuition” provides the observer with an “understanding” of the “meaning or essence” of “religion in its own terms”. Yet with a number of problematic ideas within it, this is an assertion that requires a great deal of argument and support. The reader might ask, How exactly does one “intuit” with confidence? What is the nature of the “understanding” gained through this method? Is it legitimate to equate “meaning” with “essence”? What is the status of this essence? Must meaning be singular, real, true? Why should the scholar’s understanding of religion be in religious terms, or in terms that would “not offend” religious adherents?

In light of more recent discussions about the value of phenomenology, this book would have benefitted from more explicit attention to these questions, or at least a more focused argument in support of the basic assumptions of phenomenology. Perhaps the book’s introductory-level audience warrants its simple presentation of the phenomenological method without rigorous attention and response to its critics, but as such the book does not make a significant contribution to the widespread debate over the legitimacy and value of the phenomenology of religion. Instead, it makes for a nice illustration of phenomenology in action with all its advantages and insufficiencies exposed for view.