PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION AND THE STUDY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

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The phenomenology of religion has come under increasing attacks within the academic study of religion in Western Europe and North America. Scholars such as Donald Wiebe (1999: 4) have charged that the phenomenological approach to the study of religion is in fact theology in disguise. Timothy Fitzgerald has boldly asserted that “[p]henomenology of religion is conceptually and institutionally dominated by ecumenical theology” (2000: 20). Frank Whaling (1995: 20) also admits that the fundamental principles of the phenomenology of religion have been sharply attacked. The limits and possibilities of the phenomenology of religion have come under intense scrutiny (Dupre 1992). Although some proponents of the phenomenology of religion have emphasised its positive contributions to the study of religion (Sharma 2001: 275-279), the method has lost its stature in religious studies in Western Europe and North America.

Phenomenology of religion, however, continues to be popular in the academic study of African Traditional Religions (also referred to as African indigenous religions in this article). Many African scholars recommend and apply phenomenological principles in their researches into the indigenous religions of Africa. Emefie Ikenga-Metuh contends that the phenomenological method “may after all prove to be the solution to the problem of methodology of African Religions” (1984: 151). Jude Agwu also maintains that the phenomenological method is ideal in an African context since it “calls for a new approach to the concretely experienced phenomenon” (1995: 7). Some dissertations and theses submitted to departments of Religious Studies in Africa utilise aspects of the phenomenology of religion in their descriptions and interpretations of indigenous religions.

The popularity of the phenomenology of religion in the study of African Traditional Religions and its decreasing profile in Western religious studies constitutes a significant methodological challenge. Why has the phenomenological method gained currency in the study of indigenous African religions? What are its relative strengths and weaknesses in an African context? Who are some the leading Western and African scholars who have employed the phenomenological approach in their
researches on African Traditional Religions? Is the phenomenology of religion an effective approach in the specific context of African Traditional Religions?

In this article I trace the ascendancy of the phenomenology of religion in the study of African Traditional Religions. I will approach the foregoing questions by briefly describing how the academic study of African Traditional Religions has suffered from prejudice and theological reductionism. I will then turn to methodological pronouncements in favour of adopting phenomenological principles, as well as attempted applications within researches into African Traditional Religions. I will also highlight some of the dominant criticisms facing the adoption of phenomenological tools in the study of African indigenous religions. Overall, this article is an attempt to summarise the achievements and challenges facing the phenomenology of religion in the study of African Traditional Religions. Through an examination of phenomenological works by European and African scholars, the study seeks to highlight the status of the method in the academic study of African Traditional Religions.

1. The need for phenomenology of religion in the study of African Traditional Religions: An overview

Before undertaking an analysis of why phenomenology of religion became popular in the study of African Traditional Religions, it is important to outline the key features of this particular method. As Arvind Sharma (2001) has noted, phenomenology of religion has attracted a lot of scholarly attention. While there is debate regarding its overall character, it is possible to isolate its central tenets. These include the concept of bracketing, where the researcher is encouraged to refrain from evaluating religion, cultivating empathy, accurately naming and describing religious phenomena and avoiding all forms of reductionism. Various writers within the phenomenological tradition have applied these concepts in their efforts to understand religion (Flood 1999).

Phenomenological principles have been designed to enable scholars to study the religions of the world in their plurality, without paying attention to questions of truth. The concept of bracketing has been used to empower researchers to refrain from evaluating religious traditions. It is a technique that calls upon scholars to concentrate on directly observable phenomena of religion, without allowing the issue of values