

WESTERN METHODOLOGY TO STUDY RELIGION  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO COMPARATIVE RELIGION

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**Abstract**

*The systematic study and comparison of religions have traversed a long path since Max Muller wrote Comparative Mythology in 1856. Muller had predicted about the 'Science of Religion' (Religionswissenschaft) as the 'Science' that is based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important religions of mankind. Such an approach was developed in contrast to the reductionist tendencies as found in the anthropological, sociological and psychological theories put forward by the scholars as E. B. Tylor, James Frazer, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud, etc. The process of studying religions comparatively implied the understanding and appreciation for the religious phenomenon without passing any judgement on the religion studied. In the succeeding pages we will be discussing and analysing the approach and method known as phenomenological method in the study of religions. Such a method is a modified or revised form of comparative religion methodology as was envisioned by Max Muller in the 19th century.*

**Keywords:** *Religionswissenschaft, Phenomenology, Epoche, Empathy, Faith*

**A. Introduction**

Many scholars from diverse disciplines employed various approaches and methodologies to unravel the mystery of religion. Indeed, the serious and systematic study of religion took place in the 19th century when Enlightenment reinforced humans to search for the cause of everything existential. A number of intellectuals began to believe in their reasoning capability so much so that they devoted their time and energy to investigate the phenomenon of religion that was hitherto hardly scrutinized as such. As a result, a galaxy of scholars from Europe and the West presented their findings about religion, and introduced their theories, that we came

across in our first chapter. The application of Darwinian biological evolution model to the interpretation of religious development was greatly apparent in such theories. In other words, the development of modern religious form was thought as an evolution from primitive religious forms.

However, quite distinct from such approaches, a new parallel perspective on the phenomenon of religion cropped up, that instead of forming a general theory of religion, essentially explored the commonalities, resemblances and similarities, and differences among different religions. Such a new approach came to be known as comparative study of religion or comparative religions, religious studies or *Religionswissenschaft*. Such an approach is opposed to the reductionistic tendencies as found in the anthropological, sociological, psychological theories put forward by scholars like Tylor, Marx, Frazer, Freud, etc. The initiation of comparative study of religions is attributed to many factors responsible; one being the questioning of the long lasted Western bias towards the religions other than Christianity. One must remember that certain scholars as Rudolf Otto had declared Christianity as the highest and the most complete form of religion, thereby subordinating rest of the religions to that of Christianity. Thus, the changes [when religions other than one's own were studied] that occurred in the study of religions were the move away from viewing religions through Western eyes. Earlier certain anthropologists from Europe and the United States had tended to explain non-Christian religions through the Christian lens. Later scholars however grew more familiar with other cultures and religions, compelling them to analyse the religious phenomena within broader framework. It is in this connection that James Waardenburg says that the central task of comparative religions was/is the 'understanding of other religion'. Kuncheria Pathil, an Indian theologian, observes that the beginning of the contacts of the West with Islam coupled with the revival of classical antiquity in Renaissance with its aftermath of humanism fueled the study of non-Christian religions. Besides, the geographical discoveries of the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, with their consequent colonial and missionary conquests, further aided in the study of religions of alien

lands and peoples.<sup>1</sup> S. Radhakrishnan attributes the development of the science of comparative religion to two factors: the publication and the study of the sacred books of the East and the growth of anthropology.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, cultivated in a systematic way first in Germany, the technical term, *Religionswissenschaft* (*comparative study of religion*) in German refers to the academic Study of religions distinct from Theology. The new discipline originally introduced by Friedrich Max Muller (1823–1900) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it established itself as an academic discipline in German universities. The English rendering of the word *Religionswissenschaft* proved controversial to the German for the term *Wissenschaft* refers to both sciences and humanities. As for Max Muller he used the English form ‘science of religion’ but was not followed in this direction. Afterwards the translations such as ‘comparative religion’ or History of religion garnered more success. Germans, however, display their anonymity with such terms as well owing to their selectivity. Each of such terms is for them typical of one or another sub-discipline of *Religionswissenschaft*, which itself covers all of them. In the German Universities, it is common to subdivide *Religionswissenschaft* into two main branches, one being *Religionsgeschichte* (history of religions), and the other as *systematische Religionswissenschaft*. The former deals with the development of different religions along with their doctrines in the past and the present. The later is more concerned with the systematization and theorisation of the diverse religious data. It is the second branch to whom belong the sub-disciplines like ethnology of religions, geography of religions, phenomenology of religion, and Psychology of religion.

The systematic study and comparison of religions has traversed a long path since Max Muller wrote *Comparative Mythology* in 1856. Muller had predicted about the ‘Science of Religion’ (*Religionswissenschaft*) as the ‘Science’ that is based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important, religions of mankind. He optimized that the cultivation of such a science

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<sup>1</sup> K. Pathil, “Scientific Study of Religions: Some Methodological Reflections”, *Journal of Dharma*, vol. xxi, No. 2, April –June, 1996, p.163

<sup>2</sup> Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, *East and West in Religion*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1933, London, p.13,

is demanded by those whose voice cannot be disregarded. Its title, though implying as yet a promise rather than fulfilment, has become more or less familiar in Germany, France, and America; its great problems have attracted the eyes of many inquirers, and its results have been anticipated either with fear or with delight. It becomes therefore the duty of those who have devoted their life to the study of the principal religions of the world in their original documents, and who value religion and revere [sic] it in whatever form it may present itself, to take possession of this new territory in the name of true science, and thus to protect its sacred precincts from the inroads of those who think that they have a right to speak on the ancient religions of mankind, whether those of the Brahmans, the Zoroastrians, or Buddhists, or those of the Jews and Christians, without ever having taken the trouble of learning the languages in which their sacred books are written.<sup>3</sup>

The efforts of Max Muller bore fruits and in the succeeding years comparative study of religion garnered great currency and the discipline was introduced as the branch of the non-normative study of religions that promised to investigate the similarities and differences between various religions or religious phenomena empirically and scientifically, so as to arrive at the comprehensive understanding of its object, besides determining the various interactions and exchanges among religions i.e. how they relate and influence each other.<sup>4</sup> The process of studying religions comparatively implied the understanding and appreciation for the religious phenomenon without passing any judgement on the religion studied.

In contrast to the philosophy of religion, comparative religion did not come with any set of rules that could be employed or applied to pronounce a judgement on the truthfulness of any religion. It simply acted as a non-normative discipline. It is because of such characteristic that this science is considered in the area of phenomenology for it only analyses the phenomena just as they represent themselves, situate them in their contexts (each religion being the context in itself), bring out the importance of each theme in a given religion and then compare or

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<sup>3</sup> Muller, Friedrich Max, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, Longmans, Green and Co, 1873, pp.34-35

<sup>4</sup> New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. XII, 1966

contrast it with similar themes found in other religions.

The parallel premises in different religions do not forcefully imply influence and dependence; the perceptible similarities may obscure reflective differences and outward differences may conceal important similarities. Thus, the chief among the tasks of comparative religion is to equip students with a sensible approach to consider the similarities and differences found in the religions. For some as perennialists, the important task of the comparative study of religions is to locate a principle of unity that may harmonize and balance the claims and counter-claims of warring religions into unity. In the succeeding pages we will be discussing phenomenology of religion as the most popular method/approach in the field of religious studies as was envisioned by Max Muller in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ismail Raji al-Faruqi praised the phenomenological method to the extent that he termed it as the highest achievement in the academic study of religion till his times.

## **B. Phenomenology of Religion**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Chantepie de la Saussaye, one of the famous religious scholars from Netherlands [the natives of Netherlands are referred to as Dutch], applied the term phenomenology to the study of religion. The method aimed to describe the religious beliefs and practices. It did not pass any judgement over the particular religious beliefs and practices. It applied the technique that gained a considerable popularity—*epoche*.i.e. ‘the suspension of belief’ and the ‘bracketing’ of the phenomena under analysis. The idea of the *epoche* is imported from the philosophy of German thinker Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), regarded as the father of phenomenology. The formula of *epoche* occupies the central and pivotal place in the phenomenology of religion.

The term *phenomenology* refers first as the effort to describe religious phenomena in a fashion so that that the beliefs and attitudes of the adherents of different religions under examination are brought to fore, however, without either endorsing or rejecting the beliefs and attitudes of the religions studied. The modus operandi of *epoche* or ‘bracketing’ thus signifies that one should forget and

suspend one's own belief that might commend or conflict with what is being investigated. The term *phenomenology* further points to the endeavour wherein the typology, or classification of religious phenomena like religious activities, beliefs, and institutions is devised.

The emergence of such a neutral description on the subject of religion through the course of phenomenology arose in modern times as a reaction to 'committed' accounts of religion that held the stage for decades together and even still exist among those who treat religion from a theological point of view. Think for example of Christian theologian; he sees a particular historical phenomenon as providential. This is understood as far as the standpoint of faith is concerned. However, the whole historical process itself needs to be probed 'scientifically' by sifting out the evidences, employing the techniques and formulae of historical analysis and other scientific methodology.

The historical investigation forms one of the important features of phenomenology of religion. The committed accounts or conservative positions of religion are likely to generate conflicts. The scriptural accounts of events may often boggle a secular historian who doubts the authenticity of miracles in religion for example. The study of religion may thus generate a reflexive effect on religion itself; the example being that of Christian Theology, that has been deeply affected by the entire question of the historicity of New Testament.<sup>5</sup>

Patrick Maxwell has identified three basic ingredients of phenomenological approach that can be identified as *epoche*, empathy, and evaluation. The first and the most well-known i.e. *epoche* signifies the suspension of the decree concerning the truth, value or validity of religions, and metaphysical issues. Phenomenologists of religion strive not to indulge in pronouncing their judgement about a particular religion. They rule out the prejudice when studying other religions. Empathy as the important component of the method means to experience the feelings of religious adherents. It requires putting oneself in another's shoes so that one watches how

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<sup>5</sup> Smart Ninian, Segal, Robert, Study of Religion, [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com), retrieved on 09-03-2017

the world looks like from there. Phenomenology of religion gives primacy to the point of view of believers and insists that their integrity be respected.

The third ingredient identified by Maxwell involves— ‘making use of an appropriate degree of evaluation’. This closely relates to the phenomenological assertion and claim of ‘irreducibility’. Phenomenology of religion constantly advocates for the uniqueness of religion. It argues that religion is unique and discipline standing on its own. It cannot be reduced to sociology, psychology or any other discipline. Owing to such a *sui generis* nature of religion, it is argued that since religion is unique, one needs a special method to study it and phenomenology of religion claims to be that particular method.<sup>6</sup>

C. Jouco Bleeker, Mircea Eliade, and many other exponents of the phenomenological method persist on the position that they use an empirical approach free from a priori suppositions, hypotheses and judgements. Such an empirical approach, they believe is ‘scientific’ and ‘objective’, for it begins by collecting religious documents, interpreting the religious phenomena by describing just what the empirical data reveal and testified. In fact, it is almost the general claim of the Phenomenologists that their discoveries of essential typologies and universal structures of religions are based on empirical inductive generalizations.

In the upcoming pages we would be introduced to some prominent phenomenologists of religion through whose works we may arrive at the better understanding of phenomenology of religion in particular and comparative religion in general.

### C. Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye

Chantepie de la Saussaye (1848-1920), was a Dutch-born scholar. The student of theology, Chantepie secured his doctorate from the University of Utrecht in 1871. He taught history and philosophy of religion at the University of Amsterdam from 1878 to 1899. Afterwards he went to Leiden to render his teaching services in

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel, Kasomo, The Applicability of Phenomenology in the Study of Religion, International Journal of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences (Pdf), pp.3-4,

theology till he retired from the service in 1916.<sup>7</sup>

Chantepie happens to be the first person to employ the term 'Phenomenology of Religion'. In his famous *Manual of the Science of Religion* (1891), Chantepie defines the phenomenology of religion as a method for classifying and comparing religious beliefs and practices which would produce a new discipline, falling mid-way between the history of religions and the philosophy of religion.<sup>8</sup> Chantepie deems phenomenology of religion mainly as a method to craft typologies out of the gigantic stuff produced from historical and ethnographic studies. He depicts religious cults, and customs, expressed in rites and rituals as the richest matter for the phenomenology of religion.<sup>9</sup> Chantepie admits that every religious act is heralded by a thought or a dogma. He however argued that it is doctrines that often attempt to explain rituals. For this reason, the phenomenology of religion, although concerned with religious doctrines, must regard ritual customs as more stable than doctrines. According to him, rituals take us back to the most remote times, whereas the doctrines tend to adapt themselves to fresh needs. Religious sentiments that Chantepie considered as the inner states of the religious person pave way to the outward expressions of religion. Such inward states vary as per the historical periods, social groupings and individual predispositions. Since religious sentiments cannot be observed directly by the scholar, the most important outward expression of a religion is found in its rituals, which, because they are practical, show how the religious person desires in religion... and attainment of certain benefits.<sup>10</sup>

Chantepie defined religion as "a belief in superhuman powers combined with their worship." However, for Chantepie religion everywhere directs attention to "the living God who manifests Himself among all nations as the only real God." Chantepie affirmed the universality of natural revelation, Chantepie like Cornelius Petrus Tiele (1830-1902) [a Dutch historian and one of the pioneers of

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<sup>7</sup> Gale, Thomson, Encyclopaedia of Religion (Online), 2005, [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com)

<sup>8</sup> Chantepie de la Saussaye, Pierre Daniel, *Manual of the Science of Religion*, Tr. Beatrice Coyer Ferugusson Longmans, Green, 1891, P.67

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, P.69

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.90



*Religionswissenschaft*] separated the science of religion from confessional theology, the latter being confined largely to a study of the special revelation of God in Christ (AS). This meant that for scholars to understand religion scientifically, they must note variations in the human responses to God, compile them historically and classify them for comparative purposes according to phenomenological typologies. Chantepie was actually seeking for the unity of religions amidst the variety of its forms.

#### **D. W. Brede Kristensen**

Kristensen was born in Norway in 1867. Receiving his doctorate from the University of Kristiania in 1896, Kristensen succeeded to become the professor of phenomenology of religion at Leiden University in 1901. He held the chair till his retirement in 1937.

Kristensen wrote *The Meaning of Religion*. In the work he qualifies phenomenology's way of working as the grouping of characteristic data, thereby making phenomenology a systematic discipline. The phenomenologist must organise and classify religious beliefs, cult activities and ritual performances according to characteristics which correspond as far as possible to the essential and typical elements of religion. This way, the chore of phenomenology becomes such that it illustrates man's religious disposition.<sup>11</sup> This interpretation of Kristensen as a method for identifying and locating the religious typologies prompted scholars to organise the vast diversity of human religious beliefs, behaviours and practices into orderly and systematic typologies for comparative purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Kristensen labelled the phenomenology of religion as, "the systematic treatment of the history of religion". This amounts to say that the chief job of phenomenology of religion is to classify and categorise the plentiful and widely differing data in such a way that a general view of their religious content, and values is obtained. One should not confuse such a general approach with the condensed

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<sup>11</sup> Kristensen, W.B., *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Religion*, Tr. J.Carman, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, P.8

<sup>12</sup> Cox, James L., *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion*, p. 108

history of religion but equaled to the systematic survey of the data.<sup>13</sup>

Kristensen argued that the study of religion assuming the name of ‘science’ should conform to the researcher’s conclusions remaining fully empirical and testable. In this direction, a clear methodology was needed to ensure that empiricism. There were such basic elements of Kristensen’s approach that later became synonymous with the phenomenological method in the study of religion.

Kristensen started by clarifying the relationship between the scholar of religion and the adherents within religious communities; discussing what constitutes the objective and subjective knowing. He however introduces intuition as a key hermeneutical tool. Kristensen predicts controversies in the study of religions as the insider-outsider problem, the issue of self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher and the problem of identifying and ascertaining the meaning within the religious data.

Kristensen attaches the absolute priority to the perspectives of believers, arguing that the adherents understand their own religion better than anyone from the outside ever could. This however lands a religious scholar in an unusual dilemma quite unlike the research in other disciplines. See for example, the researcher is required to fairly represent a religion i.e. fully realizing the sentiments and interpretations of the religious community. In other words, the practices of the community have to be presented from their own standpoint. However, a scholar cannot be expected to enter sufficiently enough into a religion of which he or she is not a part to appreciate it as a believer does. Every believer one must know views his/her own religion as a unique, autonomous, complete, absolute reality, and mostly incomparable. The solution to this problem, says Kristensen requires not the researchers literally becoming believers in the religions they are studying. One cannot become a Muhammadan [Muslim] when he tries to understand Islam, and if one could, his study would be at an end: we should ourselves then directly experience the reality, says Kristensen.

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<sup>13</sup> Kristensen, W.B., *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Religion*, Tr. J.Carman, 1960,p.01

The first and foremost technique that Kristensen advocated to overcome the problem of understanding from the inside i.e. from believers point of view is ‘empathy’ or an ‘indefinable sympathy’.<sup>14</sup> By such terms, he meant that a scholar attempts to relive his own experience that which is ‘alien’, through ‘an imaginative re-experiencing of a situation strange to him.’ This would engage the mind of the researcher in an act of representation, however without replicating the actual religious experience itself. Kristensen tries to acknowledge that the ‘existential’ nature of the religious data is not disclosed by research’.

‘Empathy’ that Kristensen refers to involves more than playing acting for it is nearly impossible for a scholar of religion to employ such a technique without having some personal experience of religion. We should make use of our own religious experience in order to understand the experience of others.<sup>15</sup> This entails that the prime way to overcome the distance created by being an outsider is not to convert to the religion one is studying, but to employ one’s own religious sensibilities to attain a feeling for how adherents experience and understand the absoluteness of their own religion. The use of empathy intensifies the personal faith of the researcher, since, Kristensen asserts, ‘when religion is the subject of our work, we grow religiously.’<sup>16</sup>

Kristensen argues that the most glaring prejudice that has been imposed on the study of religions has resulted from the application of Darwinian biological evolution to an interpretation of religious development. Such a widespread idea has misrepresented and distorted the perspectives of the believers. Kristensen cautions the scholar of religion of such implications and other biased evaluations of religious data. He urges a scholar to refuse from using such techniques as interpretative tools. Kristensen maintains that when one gives some thought to the implications of evolutionary theory [applied to religion], the distorting bias beneath its postulation becomes clear.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid,6-10

<sup>15</sup> Ibid,7-10

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 10

### E. Roderick Ninian Smart

One of the most influential religious scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roderick Ninian Smart, was born in Cambridge, England in 1927. Having his doctorate from Oxford, Smart published his dissertation –*Reasons and Faiths: An Investigation of Religious Discourse, Christian and Non-Christian* (1958). In 1967 he became the founding professor of religious studies at Lancaster University and continued his services till 1982. Smart wrote extensively on religion. Some of his renowned books are: *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (1969), *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (1989), *A Dialogue of Religions* (1981), *Philosophers and Religious Truth* (1964), *The Philosophy of Religion* (1970), *The Phenomenon of Religion* (1973).<sup>17</sup>

Smart was a fierce advocate of comparative religions. Entertaining the religious pluralism, he exclaimed that the primary purpose of the academic study of religion is to 'broaden people's knowledge and understanding of the multicultural and multi-religious world.'<sup>18</sup> Smart has the credit of contributing to the development of the phenomenology of religion in four main ways which are significantly popular: a) he increased the popularity and accessibility of the philosophical concept 'epoche' through his theory of 'methodological agnosticism' b) he organised classical phenomenological typologies into the dimensions of religion c) he addressed the long standing problem of defining religions by employing Wittgenstein's family resemblances analogy d) he added and incorporated the secular worldviews within the academic study of religions, however with confusing religion with secularism.

In his *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge* (1973), Smart postulated that in the field of religious studies, the scholar of religions for methodological purposes refuses to comment on the realities proposed by religious communities. Not only this the scholar is also expected to avoid posing any questions about truth or value, meticulously. The 'methodological agnosticism' of Smart seems the other version of Husserlian *epoche*. By methodological agnosticism, Smart meant simply

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<sup>17</sup> Gale, Thomson, [Encyclopaedia of Religion, Smart, Ninian](http://www.encyclopedia.com), 2005, [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com)

<sup>18</sup> Smart, Ninian, *A Dialogue of Religions*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1981, p.02

that 'we neither affirm nor deny the existence of gods.'<sup>19</sup>

Smart set out to clarify the meaning of methodological agnosticism for which however he required the concept of the 'dimensions' of religion. Demonstrating in an example as the Anglican Eucharist, he referred to the doctrinal, mythic and ethical dimensions, which helped him clarify the difference between an appearance, expression, and manifestation of the focus of faith. Smart listed the dimensions as the ritual, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, the social and the experiential. The idea of dimensions can be first witnessed in *The Religions of the Mankind written in 1977*. Later Smart reproduced and clarified his use of the dimensions in many of his subsequent works especially with respect to secular worldviews.

It shouldn't be forgotten that Smart employed the concept of dimensions in support of his lifelong contention that religion needs to be understood beyond the doctrinal aspect which is normally interpreted as a belief in God or gods, that for long dominated the traditional Western approach to the study of religions. Instead of adhering to that conception of religion, Smart prioritised religion as multidimensional and organic. For him religion acts a six dimensional organism, typically containing doctrines, myths, ethical teachings, rituals and social institutions animated by religious experience of multiple shades.<sup>20</sup>

In 1989, Smart raised the dimensions of religion from six to seven. All these dimensions were explained in more than in the book, *The world's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*. In the work he termed 'ritual dimension' as the 'practical dimension'. In fact, he gave every dimension a double-barreled name or in other words, a dual classification. The ritual dimension refers according to Smart not only to formal or explicit rites of religion but equally to the practices that develop spiritual awareness or ethical insight, such as yoga in the Buddhist or Hindu traditions.<sup>21</sup>

The experiential and emotional dimension falls in the second category of Smart.

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<sup>19</sup> Smart, Ninian, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, New York, The Seabury Press, 1973, p.54,

<sup>20</sup> Smart, Ninian, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, Glasgow, Collins Fount, p.31

<sup>21</sup> Smart, Ninian, *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge,1992, pp.12-13

It points to the emotions and experiences of men and women, which an outsider must resort to enter for the purpose of understanding. The narrative or mythic dimension becomes the third category of Smart. He calls this aspect, the story side of religion— both historical and quasi-historical narratives, about great founders of religion like Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Nanak and various myths as regarding the mysterious primordial time when the world was in timeless, eternal dawn.<sup>22</sup>

The doctrinal and philosophical dimension comprises the fourth category of Smart. It is the one that buttresses the narrative dimension. Doctrines are referred to as beliefs by Smart as typified in the Christian notion of the Trinity. The concept of Trinity resulted from the meeting of early Christianity with the great philosophical tradition of the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>23</sup> In the fifth category comes the ethical and the legal dimension of religion. Few religions as Islam and Judaism, ethics is expressed in legal formulations prescribing how believers are set their behaviour to; other traditions though placing less importance on law yet display an ethic which is influenced and in fact controlled and regulated by the myth and the doctrine of the faith.

Finally, Smart records his last two categories: the social and institutional and the material both of which are proportional to the incarnation of religion. Smart exclaims that as every religion is embodied in a group of people, a student and the scholar of religion requires to its functioning among the people. This involves diverse levels of organisation, such as hierarchical systems or forms of democratic governance. The description of institutions however, requires an examination and analysis through which we would come to know their relationship with the wider society of which they are part of. The material dimension that Smart also labels as the material or artistic dimension signifies the expressions of religion in the form of buildings, artistic works or even natural facet of the world like plants, rivers, mountains, seas or trees.<sup>24</sup> The religions like Islam, Judaism and Protestant

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp.13-15

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp. 16-17

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp.17-20

Christianity that have a disdain towards the material representations, still sometimes express themselves artistically. This can be seen in the art of calligraphy, and in the Qur'anic script itself in case of Islam and through the symbols engraved on pulpits or a communion table in case of Protestant Christianity.<sup>25</sup>

The seven dimensions constructed by Smart not only have a dual name but each dimension links with the other. It reveals the enormous breadth of the concept of Smart. Offering the case of Buddhism, he argues that the doctrine of impermanence is a central belief; however, it is expressed within the ritual or practical dimension. Philosophical reflection abets meditation while meditation in turn helps the individual experience the force of the doctrine personally. The construction and conception of the seven dimensions, Smart concludes, is to make the provision of 'a balanced description of the movements kept the human spirit lively, and have occurred to shape up the society, without neglecting either ideas or practices'.<sup>26</sup> Throughout his influential *World's Religions*, Smart applies the dimensional analysis to each religious tradition or sub-traditions and then interweaves it within historical accounts.

#### F. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000)

Wilfred Cantwell Smith was born in Toronto, Canada in 1916. Earning a doctorate in Islamic Studies in 1948, he began to teach at McGill University, Montreal in 1949. At the University, he founded the Institute of Islamic Studies. In 1973, he founded the Department of Comparative Religion at Dalhousie University in Canada. He wrote sufficiently on Religion. His notable works include *The Meaning and End of Religion*, *Islam in Modern History (1957)*, *Towards a World Theology (1981)*.<sup>27</sup>

The concept that Smith holds high for understanding a religion is 'personal faith'. It cannot be defined, but yet it constitutes the 'locus of religion'.<sup>28</sup> Smith

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 327

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>27</sup>Gale, Thomson, [Encyclopaedia of Religion](http://www.encyclopedia.com), [Smith, Wilfred Cantwell](http://www.encyclopedia.com), 2005, [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com)

<sup>28</sup> Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, *The Meaning and End of Religion, A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, New York, Mentor Books, 1964, p.168

maintains that the concept of religion, as it is depicted in the Western academic circles, has come from a process of reification, transforming the living and dynamic faith to an objective system of beliefs, values and practices. This view pervades throughout the contents of *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Smith narrates how in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, owing to the genesis of comparative study of religion, Western scholarship began to treat living faiths as if they were inert, monotonous systems, the contents of which could be outlined under self-contained headings, such as Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Mohammedanism, Confucianism, Taoism and so on. This was the direct consequence of the application of so-called laws of nature. The Western Enlightenment had impressed upon the thinkers that the laws of nature are applicable to human behaviour as well. Humans were treated as objects and their institutions were largely analysed according to the similar principles of objectification.<sup>29</sup>

The understanding of religions as total, self-contained systems of belief and practice is a relatively recent invention in human history, believes Smith. This has resulted mostly from Enlightenment thinking as mentioned above. Smith notes that in the Roman era, the Latin term *religio* communicate an adjectival meaning than a nominative one. It is so that one can see in the ancient Rome, '*religio*' referring to the sacred places, or devout people, that which was 'secondary to persons or things rather than things in themselves'.

Even the Early Christianity constituted itself as a community of faith that marked a certain attitude towards life and the transcendent, distinguished by the qualities like piety, reverence, devotion, with implications for 'every aspect of the believer's life including moral, social, intellectual, and ritualistic as well. Later, the Latin *religio* was employed in the church as a term to allocate ritual observances as well as the structural organisation, the *ecclesia* [the assemblage]. This shift carried with it the sense of creating boundaries between true and false, right and wrong. However, it was not true and false belief that mattered the most, says Smith; it indicated more as Worshipping God in a true way as opposed to worshipping false

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.50



deities.<sup>30</sup>

Smith pleads his case by bringing in the attitude of St. Augustine towards religion. Augustine had declared religion as ‘a vivid and personal confrontation with the splendour and love of God’. It was later under the influence of the reformer, John Calvin that the term ‘Christian Religion’ was used with more incidence and frequency. This however could be misunderstood easily, in the opinion of Smith. According to him, Calvin’s institutes pointed more towards ‘instruction, instituting, and setting up’ and not to ‘an explicit institutional phenomenon, or an abstract system.’ Even for Calvin, instruction in the Christian religion promoted the ‘sense of piety that steers a man to worship’. It is fascinating that only after the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the term religion began to be used for the Christian religion that ultimately recognised Christianity as one of the major religions among other world religions. This all became a reality through the reification process of faith, observes Smith. The argument of the Smith based on the review of Roman and Christian history rest with the remarks that religion in the West ‘referred to something personal, inner, and transcendently oriented phenomenon, traditionally; the nearest equivalent concept in modern English at the most can be conceived of that of ‘piety’.<sup>31</sup>

Through his whole argumentation W.C. Smith brought the relationship between theology and phenomenology to the fore. This can be illustrated from the fact that he termed the modern concept of religion as a reified form of faith, dismissed the belief as a proof of a secularising tendency in Western scholarship, and stressed upon the religious scholar to become the part of the subject matter of religious studies. On the other hand, His general and vigorous emphasis on the significance of appreciating and understanding the transcendent element in religion offers an impression that for him all religious traditions act as different paths that make devotees to apprehend the transcendence and the transcendent.

Smith did not contrast between the transcendence; for him transcendence is same for every religious denomination. At times his approach appears more

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp.23-29

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp.31- 37

theological with the fact in view that at the back of faith lies an ontological reality. Such an approach seems the outcome of his liberal Christian background.

In 1959, Smith encourage and emphasized on a radical form of empathy in consonance with the phenomenological contention that human is unfamiliar to his fellow human, but signaled that a scholar must possess personal faith so as to forge a dialogical study in religion. This also signaled the impact of orienting the religious studies from the science of religion towards inter-faith dialogue.

Smith argued that one cannot study religion from vacuum. It is all about studying religion from alongside or from within i.e. being member of some religious group. Whenever a student in the present times recognises himself as member of becoming of some group, even is in the process of becoming, world-wide-and interfaith.<sup>32</sup> The publication of *Towards a World Theology* in 1981 further substantiated the aim of Smith. He expressed his wish that his ambition is to make Christianity participate in the total life of mankind i.e. the intellectual, religious, the economic and the political life. Smith asserted that this invitation of his extends to others; and all are invited to do so Jewishly, Islamically, Buddhistically, or whatever.<sup>33</sup>

The emphasis of Smith on the principle of ‘empathy’ in favour of the religious person and his resentment towards the reductionist approach of positivistic science makes him a sound phenomenologist. His efforts were directed to sponsor understanding that may begin with the scholarly community, and then extended to the religious communities in general. In this respect he followed the broad phenomenological principles.

He considered religion by attributing it a structure with personal faith at the core and focused towards a transcendent object and expressed with dynamism in the human history through typological categories. Smith however distinguished himself from other phenomenologists in that he embraced the theological perspective. Among the prominent phenomenologists of Northern America, Smith stands last but most influential. The most important and hot debates in religious

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<sup>32</sup> Cox, James L., *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion*, T & T Clark International, London, New York, 20016, P.203

<sup>33</sup> Smith, W C, *Towards a World Theology*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 198, p.129

studies was generated through his writings. He generated centres around the accusation that the category 'religion' is a Christian theological construct; and it is befitting to drop that term for the future prospects of religious studies.

Smith had declared religion as an ambiguous term that needed to be broken down into major components. The first is what he called as religious experience or faith that forms the internal dimension of religion. This aspect is of immediate concern to religious practitioners and professionals. The second constituent of religion is what Smith calls labels of cumulative tradition i.e. the external dimension—scriptures, ritual practices, morality, law, literature, myth, art and architecture, doctrines, family and community, the political order, and the like. This external aspect of religion is visible to everyone, despite diverse religious background or faith commitment. The cumulative tradition of religion matures and changes throughout the annals of history. That aspect of religion can be documented, explained, debated, and interpreted.<sup>34</sup>

## G. Conclusion

The comparative religion methodology grew out of a necessity i.e. to address the diversity of religious forms and beliefs. While it became increasingly difficult for the scholars to arrive at the truth of any particular religion or religious denomination, they turned on to the simple description and formulation of typologies of religious data available to them. While it turned complicated to gauge the truthfulness of doctrines and beliefs, a group of scholars beginning from Germany and Netherlands focused more on manifestations of religion; the ritual being the object of study. Thus, phenomenology stood as a parallel perspective to that of reductionist approach and theological approach.

To carve out a place for the phenomenology of religion, phenomenologists identified classification of the study of religion into prescriptive and descriptive approaches. For them, Religious communities define their faith and practice in an

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<sup>34</sup> Ernst, Carl W., *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, New Delhi, Yoda Press, p.51

authoritative fashion, judging what is appropriate and inappropriate from their perspective. It is up to them to prescribe the authentic or true way to follow their teachings. It is not the duty of outsiders who may be interested in a particular religious tradition to make these prescriptive decisions. Instead, they have the ability to describe what has taken place in descriptions to be fair-minded and respectful, and that they should in some measure take account of the views of practitioners of that religion. But in many instances where there are deep disagreements within a religious tradition, outside scholars and commentators have a limited role. It would be inappropriate, for instance, for a Hindu scholar to take sides on the issues of the Protestant Reformation— to decide, for instance, that either the Pope or Martin Luther was correct. While particular Christian communities may find it necessary to take sides on this dispute, it is absurd for someone who has no stake in the matter to attempt to decide, which the authoritative interpretation is. That would be a prescriptive rather than a descriptive move, and a misguided one at that. What is appropriate for the scholar is to explain what was at stake in this momentous conflict. By explaining the significance and importance of the arguments and the actors, the scholar is able to illuminate the history of religion in a way that both insiders and outsiders should be able to appreciate.<sup>35</sup>The phenomenology of religion thus satisfies itself at the level of describing the similarities and differences of religions both organised and un-organised without attempting to arrive at the truthfulness or falsity of any religion. The phenomenologist in particular and the comparative religionist in general thus recognise the autonomy of each religion where the practitioners of that particular religious denomination are in a better position to know the authenticity of their religious beliefs and practices. Above all the approaches/methods preceding phenomenology of religion were designed to ascertain the origin, history, function, prospects of the religion; the latter however aimed to come to terms with the diversity and multiplicity of religious characteristics; raising the battle cry, “back to the things themselves”, observing and stating the manifestations of objects only. The task then shouldered by the phenomenology is

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 52-53

to bring such diversity to a visible and intellectually compelling order. Phenomenology came up with the shift away from the normative standards to the descriptive portrayal of religious data.

Phenomenology of religion however recognises some transcendental element or some Ultimate Reality as is reflected from the works of the above phenomenologists. The phenomenology of religion further reveals that people have opted and continue to resort to various routes towards the sacred or supernatural. Phenomenology studies all religions in equal preposition i.e. it recognises the same thread running down the organised religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and unorganised religions like the religion of Tribal Africans and Australian Aboriginals.

Phenomenology of religion is a comparative, systematic, empirical, historical, and descriptive discipline. It is anti-reductionist and autonomous in nature. It adopts the philosophico-phenomenological idea of intentionality and epoche. It lays greater stress on the value of empathy and the systematic understanding of religious denominations. It claims to provide the insights into the essential structures and the meanings of a particular religious tradition.<sup>36</sup>

While all is said about the achievements of phenomenology of religion as a religiously sympathetic method, it nevertheless leaves least or no scope for evaluation of the religion under study. It aims not at the identification of historical and cultural aberrations occurring among religions, thereby avoids the critical scrutiny of religious denominations.

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<sup>36</sup> UNESCO, Phenomenology of Religion, p.17, [www.interculturel.org](http://www.interculturel.org), retrieved on 26-12-2017

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