Re-thinking the Phenomenology of Religion in the van der Leeuw tradition for the twenty-first century

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Criticisms of claims that the academic study of religion constitutes a discipline in its own right largely have been based on methodological arguments centred around the assertion that ‘religion’ cannot be separated from plural sources of knowledge derived from the social, cultural, economic, political or a variety of other factors that comprise human communities. As scholars in the study of religions sought to separate the ‘science’ of religion from theology and from the social sciences during the first half of the twentieth century, the phenomenology of religion, particularly as it was developed and articulated by Gerardus van der Leeuw, was seen as providing a unique methodology for the study of religion as a category sui generis. During the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the phenomenology of religion has largely been dismissed by Religious Studies’ scholars as quasi-theological and essentialist, relegating foundational figures like van der Leeuw to history. In light of Gerardus van der Leeuw’s central place in the phenomenology of religion up until the middle of the twentieth century, this panel reconsiders the relevance of the phenomenology of religion in the van der Leeuw tradition for contemporary methods in the study of religion and as such analyses if, and how, phenomenology might continue to contribute to academic studies of religion as part of a plurality in methodological approaches.

Individual Papers

Empathy: The Divide between Phenomenology-of-Religion and the Phenomenological Movement

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Abstract: In the history of “phenomenology” Gerardus van der Leeuw holds perhaps the most important place for “phenomenology” as it has been pursued in Religious Studies. Van der Leeuw’s work is the first attempt to converge two otherwise separate and independent inventions of “phenomenology” – the phenomenology-of-religion and the Phenomenological Movement. However, on one key topic van der Leeuw diverged from the Movement and it is this that I argue has led to their deepest divergence, a divergence which has largely led to an exclusion of the Movement from Religious Studies altogether. Van der Leeuw’s consideration of “empathy” has informed subsequent phenomenology-of-religion and determined how both proponents and opponents alike have understood “empathy” as it is expressed in the Movement. Building on recent work on Husserl and other members of the Movement I argue that there is a drastic difference in the way in which empathy is understood and utilised by the Movement in contrast to van der Leeuw’s version. Whereas “empathy” as understood by the phenomenology-of-religion has led to some trenchant criticism I suggest that “empathy” as it is understood by the Movement is far more suitable as a methodological device in the study of religions.
The Cognitive Science of Religion as a Re-expression of van der Leeuw’s Phenomenology of Religion

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Theories linked with the cognitive science of religion are now capturing a major interest amongst scholars who formally and deliberately dissociate themselves from theological interests while maintaining a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of religion. This corresponds in part to the traditional aims of the phenomenology of religion as articulated by Gerardus van der Leeuw to study religions non-theologically, since ‘God’ cannot form the subject matter of an empirical science, and, at the same time, to avoid reducing religious phenomena obtained from any singular disciplinary explanation. Van der Leeuw’s typological schemes for classifying religious phenomena also find parallels in the writings of numerous scholars associated with the cognitive science of religion, such as Harvey Whitehouse. This leads to the conclusion of this paper that the phenomenology of religion in the van der Leeuw tradition, as re-expressed through key ideas in the cognitive science of religion, continues to play a central role, although often unacknowledged or unrecognised, in defining a constitutive methodology for the study of religious communities, their histories, beliefs and practices.

A Study on the Acceptance of G. van der Leeuw’s Phenomenology of Religion in Korea

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In Korea there are two major trends in the study of religions: theory-emphasis and tradition-emphasis. Seoul National University, a national university, represents the education of theories and Sogang University, a Jesuit university, emphasizes various religious traditions. In spite of this difference, faculty members of the two universities have accepted the methods of G. van der Leeuw in the study and teaching of religious studies. His works were translated and his methods are still being taught. In 1991, Professors Yun Yee-heum (1940-2013) of Seoul National University translated three chapters of G. van der Leeuw’s *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (1963) into Korean. The complete translation doesn’t appear until now. Professor Kim Yeong-dong of Presbyterian College and Seminary is translating the whole book. They both emphasize the importance of van der Leeuw’s phenomenological approach to religion in order to understand modern cultures. In 1995, Professor Son Bong-ho of Seoul National University and Professor Keel Hee-Sung translated G. van der Leeuw’s *Inleiding tot de Phaenomenologie van den Godsdienst* into Korean. In 1996, Professor of Chung Jin-hong paid attention to the function of cultural criticism in van der Leeuw’s works and in 2010 I compared van der Leeuw with Mircea Eliade in terms of their differences of phenomenology. In this paper, I will examine how van der Leeuw’s works have been accepted in Korea by evaluating different views of Korean scholars. In the 21st century, his insight is still persuasive and effective in the study of Korean religions.

The Neophenomenology of Jacques Waardenburg

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This presentation is a result of my PhD studies, which focus on the scientific activity of J. Waardenburg. At the present time, Jacques Waardenburg belongs to the most well-known researchers and theorists of religious studies. He is recognized in the field of phenomenology of religion, methodology of religion and but he is also the founder of many publications in the field of Arabic studies, history and the contemporary world of Islam. Jacques Waardenburg is often called the "father of neophenomenology". He suggests that the main task of phenomenology in 'new style' should be analysing 'intentions' and 'subjective meanings'. From his point of view, every religious phenomenon should be seen as 'expression' or 'specific manifestation' of human intentions (dreams, aspirations, ideals). In this case, the accent is moved from the religious phenomena to human consciousness and intentions lying at the base of religious phenomena. In his way he solves the problem of meaning of religious phenomena that have always been considered the most important thing in the phenomenology of religion. This method could be the basis for secular religious studies and theological constructions, and could be a solution to the 'crisis' in phenomenology.