

The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach

Author: Moojan Momen

Publisher: Oneworld Publications, Oxford, 1999, 626 pages

Reviewer: Christopher Buck

Moojan Momen's *The Phenomenon of Religion* is a phenomenology of religion not to be confused with Ninian Smart's Phenomenon of Religion.¹ Note the distinction between the terms, phenomenon and phenomenology. Both derive from the Greek root, *phainomenon*, meaning, "that which appears." Add the suffix, *logos*, which means "reflection." The phenomenology of religion is a methodological approach to the academic study of religion, influenced by the philosophical phenomenology articulated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). It is the complement of the history of religions. Together, the history of religions and phenomenology of religion comprise what was once called the "science of religion" (German, *religionswissenschaft*) and, later, "comparative religion," the preferred term now being the academic study of religion, also known as religious studies. (The problem with the latter term is that it is somewhat misleading in that, while the object of study is "religious," the methodology is not.)

As a "reflection" on religious "appearances," the phenomenology of religion is a branch of the academic study of religion that focuses on religious phenomena, or observable data. It is informed by several sub-disciplines, such as the psychology of religion, anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, and the philosophy of religion (Momen surveys these in Chapter 3, "Theories of Religion," 52-83). Religions are not, however, reducible to purely sociological or psychological explanations, according to phenomenologists. Their investigations are purely descriptive rather than explanatory, although the phenomenological method, on comparative grounds, may discover underlying structures, patterns, and universals in human religious experience. While phenomenology of religion opposes reductionism, and accepts the cognitive consistencies of religious "appearances," it is not theology (a normative, metaphysical approach from within a particular worldview), although phenomenology has certainly been accused of being a covert theology in making overt ontological claims that core religious phenomena may be manifestations of the Sacred. A classic in the field is Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950), *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933, tr. as *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*). Conscious or not of writing within this tradition, Momen has chosen a title for his book that resonates with the phenomenology of religion.

The goal of the phenomenology of religion is to attain what Husserl termed "eidetic vision" (from Plato, the Greek word *eidos* signifying the "inner essence" of a phenomenon). Eidetic vision is the intuitive apprehension of essence of a phenomenon. This is achieved through the use of two methodological tools. The first is the exercise of *epoche* (Greek, "to hold back"), or suspension of judgment, in which phenomenologists "bracket" the biases of their own interpretive stances. In so doing, they are able to employ a second methodological tool, *empatheia* (critical empathy), by which they can "enter" into religious phenomena. This has led to the relatively dispassionate, rather than confessional, teaching of religion at universities. The myth of objectivity having now been exposed, the phenomenology of religion typically synthesizes what anthropologists have termed the *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) approaches, as a constraint on the

¹ London: Macmillan, 1973.

subjectivity of each. This ideal complementarity was structurally put into practice when the great Canadian historian of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (mentioned on p. 82), established the Institute of Islamic Studies at Montreal's McGill University, in stipulating that half of the students should be professing Muslims, while the other half should be non-Muslims. With respect to the emic/etic dichotomy, Momen discloses his own orientation: "The present writer's inclination is to view both approaches as necessary" (81). Here, the Bahá'í Faith is represented, not as an Abrahamic faith (as many readers might have expected), but as a New Religious Movement (NRM). Placed in this category, the author circumvents the problem of strenuous objection by orthodox Muslims who privilege Islam, historically and salvifically, as the "last" world religion. To place the Bahá'í Faith on a structure par with Islam is, at this point, a move that is theologically freighted by an implicit truth-claim and one that is sure to be interpreted by academics and Muslims alike as motivated by apologetic (Bahá'í) interests.

As such, *The Phenomenon of Religion* is the first serious phenomenology of religions to be contributed by a Bahá'í scholar, apart from specialised studies by other Bahá'í academics. (In so saying, I do not think that Momen conceived of his book as a phenomenology of religion in the strict sense, because he is also interested in psychological [even biological] as well as sociological theories of religious phenomena – reductionistic approaches that phenomenologists tend to oppose. In terms of his philosophical orientation, Momen seems to be inclined towards relativism.) *The Phenomenon of Religion*, therefore, is not a work of Bahá'í studies. The reader may well ask, if this is so, why does a review of Momen's book appear in the pages of the *Bahá'í Studies Review*? The answer is to be found in the way Momen has integrated Bahá'í studies within the broader scope of religious studies. As the author himself states: "In the course of writing this book it soon became apparent that, to keep it to a reasonable size, examples for every statement could not be given from all the many religions of the world. Therefore a selection was made of six key religions. From the religions of the Abrahamic or monotheistic Western tradition, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were selected; from the Eastern, Indian line of religions, Hinduism and Buddhism; and as a representative of the new religious movements, the Bahá'í Faith" (7).

The title of Momen's book, *The Phenomenon of Religion*, is a little confusing, because the author also speaks of "religious phenomena" (4) in the plural. Momen explains the sense in which he employs the term "phenomenon": "Religion, as a human phenomenon, is founded on the basis of what is described as being the experience of the 'holy' or the 'sacred'" (21). So begins Chapter One. After surveying world religions and theories of religion in Part I (19-83), the author employs a three-dimensional approach in his phenomenology. Experiential, conceptual, social descriptions of religion comprise Parts II (85-181), III (183-297), and IV (299-527) of this four-part volume. I find that Momen weights experiential and social dimensions of religion almost to the exclusion, at times, of the conceptual.

After speaking of a "relationship between human beings and a transcendent reality" as "the central experience of religion," Momen notes that: "The study of religion becomes possible when a further factor is introduced: when this central experience finds some form of expression. The minimal level of this expression is language – when a mystic describes his or her experience, for example. Other expressions of religion include doctrinal formulations, stories and myths, rituals, religious hierarchies and

administrative structures, popular religious forms, art, music, architecture and so on” (2). For this review, I would like to inventory some of the topics that Momen covers, using a paradigm for the phenomenology of religion as a framework of analysis. This paradigm is of my own devising, although the basic dimensions derive largely from the work of Ninian Smart. The paradigm below includes most of the items Momen has listed above:

Doctrinal Dimension (*metaphysics, philosophy of religion*)

- **Cosmology** (cosmogony/theodicy): An entire chapter (8) is devoted to “The Nature of Reality” (185-212), one of the strongest chapters in the book. Cosmogony is covered in “Time, the Origins and End of the World” (207-11), which I found to be underdeveloped, as cosmogony is typically a foil for sociogony and moral order. The first creation narrative of Genesis, for instance, exalts the Sabbath to such a degree that God himself “rests” on the seventh day, in observance of the Sabbath! The Zoroastrian cosmogonic myth is paradigmatic of moral choice. However, the section on theodicy, (literally, the “justice of God,” but referring to any doctrine of the origin of evil), “Evil, Sin and Suffering” (213-225), presents a sophisticated and useful typology of theodicy, with a sidebar on the ontological dualism of “Zoroastrian Cosmology” (217).
- **Anthropology** (soul/consciousness/purpose): Chapter 9, “Suffering, Sacrifice and Salvation” (213-41), begins with an overview of the human predicament (including the problem of theodicy), which any salvation offer has to address. In the logics of any salvation- or liberation-based religion, the offer of salvation/liberation is inherently linked to what is defined as the human problem, be that sin or suffering or any other form of existential angst. While the soul/conventional self is certainly central to world religions, it gets short shrift in Momen’s book, not because of any deficiency of treatment, but from lack of an in-depth treatment. See also pages 204-205 on human nature, and the conclusion (536-7).
- **Soteriology** (predicament/salvation): Salvation is introduced in two brief sections, “The Path to Salvation” (34-5) and “The Goal of Salvation” (35). Chapter 9 is devoted to “Suffering, Sacrifice and Salvation” (213-41). A useful chart (“Words Used for Salvation in This Life and After,” 238) lists technical terms in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá’í Faith. (Presumably Judaism lacks a definitive notion of individual salvation, although it has a more or less developed notion of corporate salvation.) No Persian or Arabic technical term is provided for Bahá’í salvation.² Absent is a discussion of the several theories of the Atonement in Christianity. Momen makes this observation, which I think is quite an important one: “Probably no area in religious studies offers more intractable problems for those who look for an underlying unity in the religions of the world” (233). In view of the lack of a Bahá’í systematic theology, Momen’s comments on Bahá’í salvation are worth mentioning. He states that the Bahá’í concept of salvation involves both “individual and social salvation for humanity as a whole” and that, moreover: “A third element is also necessary to achieve salvation, and this is the grace of God” (237).

Elsewhere in the book, however, Momen presents a typology of “Pathways to

² As to the transliteration of religious technical terms throughout the book, from Sanskrit to Arabic, macrons and subdots are dispensed with.

Salvation or Liberation” schematically represented in charts on pages 118 and 121. This typology is given in Chapter 5, “Pathways to Religious Experience” (117-40), and is as follows: Ritualism (117-20), Legalism (120-23), Evangelism (123-25), Social Reformism (126-29), Asceticism (129-30), Monasticism (130-32), Gnosticism (132-35), Mysticism (135-37). Momen seems to equate religious experience with salvation in saying: “Since the religious experience gives one the feeling of salvation or liberation, these pathways to religious experience may be called pathways to salvation or liberation” (117). Bahá'í salvation appears to be located in social reformism (126, 128; cf. 43). One difficulty in this analysis is that a complex of several of these “motifs” have already been identified by sociologist Peter Smith in his monograph, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions*, as constitutive of a Bahá'í ethos. A dimensional analysis of Bahá'í soteriology might have disambiguated Bahá'í salvation from a common misperception of its being primarily invested in social reform, to the practical exclusion of doctrinal, mystical, artistic and other concerns.

- **Eschatology** (afterlife/apocalypse): Eschatology is the “doctrine of last things.” In the same chapter, doctrines of the afterlife are treated descriptively. An entire chapter is devoted to the other major concern of eschatology, “The Promise of a Future Saviour” (242-67). Momen’s chart of “Comparative Eschatology” (243) is excellent, with Taoism and Zoroastrianism added to the six religions he treats throughout the book. Texts describing “The Golden Age that will Follow the Coming of the Saviour” (252-53) enrich the discussion. The author’s “Typology of Future Saviours and Millennialist Movements” (254-61), while apparently derivative, is engaging. This chapter is richly illustrated (albeit in black-and-white), although a better graphic representation of the Hindu messiah Kalki (249) might have been found. Sections on “Disconfirmed Prophecy” (262-64) and “Causes of Millennialist Movements” (264-66) are also valuable.

Ritual Dimension (*anthropology of religion*)

- **Calendar** (type/special features): I could find no substantive discussion of sacred calendars, including the Badi‘ (Bahá'í) calendar. This would have afforded a golden opportunity to have highlighted yet another distinctive feature of the Bahá'í religion, while commenting on its resonances with the ancient Zoroastrian calendar.
- **Rites of Passage** (rites of life/life-crisis rites/rites of faith): Victor Turner’s theory of “liminality” is recounted, within the classical, three-phase analysis of “Rites of Passage” (281-84) current among anthropologists.
- **Observances** (festivals and fasts/pilgrimages): No separate section exists on festivals, and pilgrimage is hardly represented. Fasting is discussed (105-8).
- **Worship** (communal/domestic): Generally, one of the overall strengths of Momen’s work is his emphasis on religious experience. Covered on pages 117-21, 105-108.

Ethical Dimension (*philosophy of religion*)

- **Laws** (prescriptions/proscriptions): The subject and significance of religious law is commented on (120-23, 352). This is an important topic in the history of religions because of recurring tensions between exoteric and esoteric polarities, as well as the problem of antinomianism, or religious indifference to law.
- **Intentions** (motives/reactions): While Momen explains the phenomenologist’s quest

to apprehend the intentionality or “whatness” of the phenomenon (67), the role of intentions or motives is not a focus in this volume. Like the soul/conventional self, the subject of intentionality is as central as it is elusive, its elusivity rendering its centrality too challenging for scholarship to treat in depth.

- **Virtues** (saints/saintliness): Confucian virtues are mentioned (44), but I could not find reference to the classical cardinal/theological virtues in traditional Christianity, nor Buddhist virtues. Role models - saints, paragons of virtue, moral exemplars - are noted (345).
- **Ethics** (moral principles/social principles): Covered on pages 338–62. A helpful chart of “The Golden Rule in the Religions of the World” (344).

Artistic Dimension (*art history, iconography*)

Chapter 18 is written on “Religion and the Arts” (455-74). This chapter begins with a controversial observation: “Most descriptions of religions concentrate on doctrinal or organizational matters. These aspects of religion are, however, only of peripheral importance for most religious people” (455). For Bahá’ís, however, doctrinal and organizational matters matter a great deal. Here, institutional aspects take on an equally spiritual as well as exoteric significance, as Bahá’í institutions represent the canalizing of Bahá’í spirit and moral imperatives, translated into the social sphere. Indeed, the Bahá’í administrative order comprises the very planks and pitch of “the Crimson Ark,” a dynamic Bahá’í symbol allegorized in Bahá’u’lláh’s “Table of the Holy Mariner” and in the “Tablet of Carmel.”

- **Music** (liturgical/devotional): Various forms of scripture chanting/recitation are reviewed (104), as well as sacred music in general (456), while hymns are commented on in passing.
- **Architecture** (temples, shrines, pilgrimage sites/assembly halls): Photographs are presented (472-74, 278-9). Beyond the photographs themselves, the symbolic features as well as artistic merits are captured in some of the captions, which often prove to be one of Momen’s strategic successes in effectively communicating with his audience.
- **Performance** (dance/drama): Sacred drama is mentioned (456), as is sacred dance (456, 458), with a sidebar on “Dance in Native American Religion” (458).
- **Symbols** (literary/concrete): There is a short section on “Religious Symbols” (278-79). A section of Chapter 18 focuses on “Art and the Symbolic Universe” (459-62), followed by “The Historical Development of Religious Art” (462-71). A schematic of emblematic symbols of ten world religions is provided (172), accompanied by a highly informative caption, although some of the symbols (such as the Bahá’í nine-pointed star) are not explained. A page devoted to “Religious Metaphors” (102) is also quite intriguing.

Mystical Dimension (*psychology of religion*)

- **Goal of Attainment** (quest/preparation): Momen mentions the “quest mode” (163) as one of the modalities of the religious life. The quest is the point of departure for mysticism itself, which is arguably the most fascinating of all religious phenomena.
- **Activities** (spiritual exercises/mystical orders): There is a stimulating section on “Meditation and Brain Function” (169-70). Monastic communities (130-32) serve

as mediators of contemplative experience. This is Momen at his finest, contributing uniquely, from the vantage of his medical expertise, to the phenomenology of religion.

- **Stages** (path/progress): While stages of mystical ascent are not discussed, there is a fascinating section on “A Psychological Model of the Stages of Religious Experience” (99-100) as well as “Fischer and a Map of Mental States” (173-76).
- **Peak Experiences** (visions, auditions/transformations): “The Mystical Experience” (95-7) is adumbrated briefly (with some relevant texts on page 38). “Experiences of Trance or Mystical Ecstasy” (176-78) are treated in a somewhat medical fashion. A chart depicting “Pathways to Altered States of Consciousness” (174) reflects Momen’s interest in the medical literature on the subject. Visions are mentioned in passing, as is meditation (108).

Social Dimension (*sociology of religion*)

- **Distribution** (heartland/diaspora): Diffusion is an important element in the social description of religion. Two charts, “Estimated Number of Adherents of World Religions” (504) and “Rate of Growth and Spread of World Religions” (505), are very useful. A chart, “The Spread of Islam” (318), follows the historical diffusion of Islam, as does “the Spread of the Bahá’í Faith up to 1950” (500) for the Bahá’í religion. Religious diasporas have received much recent attention in academic literature, as significant immigrant populations in North America and Europe have radically altered the religious landscape of the West. There is very little discussion of this important religious phenomenon in Momen’s volume. Notwithstanding, the author provides a chart, “Distribution of World Religions” (32).
- **Organization** (hierarchy/community): “From Personal Piety to Organized Religion” (323-28) focuses on the development of Islamic identity and praxis. A typology of religious sects is elsewhere given (74-77), followed later by a thought-provoking section on “Exclusion of Women from Religious Hierarchy” (440-42). Absent is a systematic treatment of forms of religious governance, although religious functionaries are discussed *in passim*.
- **Relations** (church/state relations/interfaith relations): A strong chapter discusses church/state relations (404-31).
- **Missions** (domestic/foreign): Missionary activity in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Bahá’í Faith is covered in passing. The three great missionary religions of the world are Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, along with the Bahá’í Faith and certain New Religious Movements in the Hindu and Buddhist worlds. Judaism was once a missionary religion, during the Second Temple period. Momen provides an arresting photograph, well worth a thousand words, of Hasidic Jews in Safad, Israel trying to convert other Jews (486). The desired effect of missionary work is conversion. Attention to conversion is one of the strengths of Momen’s book, with an entire chapter (6), “Faith, Belief and Conversion” (141-65), written on this topic.

Other comments

In the section, “Definitions of Religion” (26-28), what is probably the most famous

definition – that of anthropologist Clifford Geertz – is notably missing. (Momen provides his own definition, which is repeated in the “Conclusion” [535-6]). The author says that Geertz is among those who do not find “grand theories of religion” helpful (80). Momen prescind from his own theorising about religion, allowing the reader to take into account the wide array of theories that the author is able to pack into this information-rich volume. While Momen’s three dimensions of the experiential, conceptual, and social are useful organizing principles, the reader is presented with a veritable maze of data. This is both amazing and confusing. The data presented are bewilderingly eclectic, in what might be described as an organised fragmentation.

From the foregoing inventory, one can see that Momen’s treatment of mysticism – a major dimension of religious experience – engaging, but piecemeal. The same holds true for Momen’s discussions of religious symbols, although, in the concluding chapter, the author pulls together the various treatments of religious symbols to be found throughout the book (528-29). While Momen is cognizant of important theorists whose work he admirably integrates into the book, my sense is that this integration, although skilful and relatively seamless, is not synthetic. To be fair, this was not the author’s purpose. He had, in fact, anticipated such criticism in writing a disclaimer in his conclusion: “The disadvantage is that the work as a whole lacks any overall unifying theoretical basis and is thus less coherent” (528). More consistency in data selection and representation might have helped crystallize the book, as I explain below.

As stated above, there were six religions that Momen had originally intended to foreground: viz., Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá’í Faith (7). Taking the book as a whole, the six religions that Momen said he would primarily focus on do not receive even treatment. The appetisers (an abundance of anthropological data and data from religious traditions other than the six religions) overwhelm the main dishes (the six religions themselves). This, in my opinion, weakens the overall comparative power of Momen’s work. Speaking as a comparativist myself, I would have liked to have seen a more consistent and thorough treatment of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá’í Faith in all of the major phenomenological categories. This is partly accomplished in the various charts and other sidebars that Momen provides throughout the book, such as “Differences between Eastern and Western Religious Thought” (37) and “Comparative Eschatology” (243). There should have been more charts like the latter, perhaps one for each major category of religious doctrine. Fortunately, a number of sidebars show the author to have been faithful to his intention, such as “The Start of the Ministry” (306-8), where experiences of “prophet-founders” Moses, the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and Bahá’u’lláh are represented. (Presumably, the figure of Krsna is probably too mythical to have been included here.) Charts of the “Lives of the Founders of World Religions” (310) and “religious Role Models for Women” (442) show the author’s typological and comparative prowess at his best.

Conclusions

Momen’s erudition is vast, magnetically eclectic. His eclecticism is unique in this respect: In the academic literature to date, the Bahá’í Faith has frequently been unrepresented or, at best, under represented. This is because the Bahá’í Faith is not (yet) regarded as a major world religion. As an emergent movement, the Bahá’í Faith is more

accurately classed as a minor world religion (although it may be a major world religion in the making). Momen has implicitly suggested that the Bahá'í Faith is the most significant of the NRM's (New Religious Movements), and he may well be right. Bahá'í readers will appreciate the abundant yet judicious representation of the Bahá'í Faith throughout.

While the author is himself a Bahá'í, all religions are treated with critical empathy. A test of the merit of an academic work in religious studies is its methodological integrity, independent of any confessional or reductionist bias, and its intersubjective availability. *The Phenomenon of Religion* withstands that scrutiny. Moreover, it is an accessible book. With patience and perseverance, the nonspecialist will be able to understand it. This is no *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Momen's volume is formidable, not by virtue of its style, but by dint of its sheer massiveness. As a complement to the more established theories of religion, Momen contributes a chapter (7), "Towards a Scientific Understanding of the Religious Experience" (166-81), a treatment rarely found in the standard literature. This is probably the most challenging chapter in the book. This mass of data and theory notwithstanding, Momen succeeds in articulating his phenomenology with engaging clarity.

The Phenomenon of Religion comprehends some of the major theorists in the academic study of religion and translates their theories for the benefit of the nonspecialist. The major strength of *The Phenomenon of Religion* – indeed, its signal contribution – is that, for the first time, it has made the academic study of religion and its phenomenology available to the public.

Just as Momen's earlier work, *An Introduction to Shi'a Islam*, was first published by George Ronald and later reprinted by Yale University Press, I would like to recommend that joint publishing ventures between Bahá'í-owned and academic presses be more vigorously pursued. I would like to close with a comment on the problem of "market": Bahá'ís and readers in general who support such valuable and illuminating scholarship as Momen's *The Phenomenon of Religion* need to make it a priority to purchase and promote such books in the marketplace. This sends a clear message to academic publishers that there can, indeed, be a popular appreciation for academic endeavours that make a significant spiritual difference in deepening our understanding of what it means to live in a religiously pluralistic and socially evolving world.
