THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY OF PHENOMENOLOGY AS METHOD: THE CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Introduction
The development of religious education in Australia in the past fifteen years has been profound. When I first wrote What Is This Thing Called RE? in 1989, the question implied in the title was symptomatic of the lack of appreciation of a role for religious education anywhere outside a religious school. There had been, by that time, a report in each State of Australia (cf. for example, Rawlinson, 1980) proposing a form of religious education for the public curriculum but there was little evidence of change in the traditional arrangement that saw this subject being exclusively the preserve of the religious system.

The most exciting thing happening in broader circles was, arguably, the 12-week elective depth study titled 'religion and belief' functioning in the NSW sociologically-based subject, Society and Culture, a subject that had taken its first intake in 1985. This study, based heavily on a phenomenological approach, had the following aims:

...to provide students with a better understanding of the part played by religion and belief in their own lives and those of others. It aims to arouse in students an awareness of the importance of religion and belief in shaping human behaviour, both individually and collectively, and to enable them, irrespective of their own religious beliefs (or lack of them) to identify and assess sympathetically the nature and consequences of belief in others. (NSW, 1985, p. 33)

This elective study took the public system by surprise with its extraordinary popularity in the public school, a popularity that saw enrolments substantially outstripping those to be found in religious schools. It illustrated what many had probably doubted, namely that the study of religion could have currency in public school settings provided it functioned in a way that suited the ethos of the public curriculum. The popularity of the elective was used as part of what justified the need for a stand-alone subject in religion for the public curriculum. In 1991, Studies of Religion, also utilising a predominantly phenomenological method, took its first intake with aims along the following lines:

...to promote an awareness, understanding and appreciation of the nature of religion and the influence of religious traditions, beliefs and practices on societies and on the individual, with an emphasis on the Australian context. (NSW, 1991, p. 7)

By the late 1990s, Studies of Religion enrolments had outgrown those of most other social science subjects. It was for several years the fastest growing HSC subject. This was accounted for by two main features, namely its popularity in religious systems of all persuasions and its steadily increasing purchase in public school settings. While its major religious school population was to be found in the Catholic system, it could also be found in all manner of Christian schools, as well as Jewish, Islamic and other religious schools. Of most interest, however, was that its strength has grown year by year in the public school setting. In 2002, the award for top Studies of Religion HSC results went, for the first time, to a public school student. The capacity of a subject to function in such diverse settings and clearly be seen as contributing to the ethos of such different kinds of schools says much, in my view, about the flexibility and...unique cleverness of phenomenology as a method.

Phenomenology, unlike almost any other method, allows the learner both to stand apart from the subject of one’s learning (in other words, to be thoroughly objective and neutral in one’s stance) while, at the same time, to enter into the essence of one’s learning in wholehearted fashion (in other words, to be thoroughly subjective and even personally committed if the learning is allowed to extend so far). By this unusual combination, phenomenology is able to accommodate the central concerns of the public curriculum that a study be free of any attempt to coerce or indoctrinate while, at the same time, to accommodate the desire of religious systems that they be able to utilise the public curriculum to further some of their specific goals of enfaithment. Phenomenology is a unique and extraordinarily clever learning method which, perhaps for this very reason, is so easily misunderstood and, on occasion, skewed.

Philip Barnes, of The University of Ulster, and I began a debate some years ago about the relative
merits of phenomenology as a method for religious education. The debate, to be found in the pages of the US journal, Religious Education (cf. Barnes, 2001, 2001a; Lovat, 2001), has developed into a fruitful and friendly dialogue about a number of contextual differences that would seem to have shaped our perceptions about the relative usefulness of phenomenology. In many ways, the terms of the debate are around the enigmatic feature, noted above, that phenomenology connotes at least two very different approaches to learning. If one gets stuck on just one of these approaches, phenomenology will not work to its full potential and, like so many social science approaches to a subject that has such an inevitably personal dimension, it will be seen to be inadequate to the full range of learning possibilities necessary to the subject. However, if the two approaches are conjoined, as I believe to be the truer path for phenomenology, then one detects the potential for a range of learning intentions and functions which is far wider than the average methodology. This is both the agony and the ecstasy of phenomenology.

Phenomenology as Method for a Wider Religious Education

As suggested above, of all the social scientific methodologies which have supported the wider agenda for religious education in Australia in the past fifteen years, phenomenology has been pre-eminent. It was a form of what is broadly described as Continental Phenomenology (cf. Husserl, 1958) that first influenced an approach to the study of religion known as ‘phenomenology of religion’ and, in turn, influenced the study of religion in schools (cf. Smart, 1968, 1974, 1995; Moore & Habel, 1982). In my own view, the influence of Continental Phenomenology on school-based religious education is entirely appropriate, granted that the concerns expressed by Husserl were essentially methodological and so, in a sense, represented the natural concerns of the educator.

Husserl’s first concern about learning was to create a means by which the dominant method of his own day could be challenged and deepened. The dominant method was what he regarded as a fairly shallow form of empirical science, one that led all too easily to hasty judgements being made. He drew on the notion of epoche (suspension of judgement) as a way of slowing down this process and allowing for wider consideration to be brought to bear. Epoche was all about objectivity and neutrality of the most profound kind. The discipline involved in achieving epoche was one of ‘descriptive science’, wherein the learner’s task is to instil in oneself a strict code by which all predispositions, biases and prejudices are to be shed in favour of receiving the maximum of information from all sources before entertaining even the most preliminary conclusions.

While Husserl’s own particular target was what he regarded as a closed and inadequate form of scientific method, his ‘descriptive science’ came to be seen as just as useful an antidote to closed and inadequate methods of any kind, including traditional methods in religious education. For generations influenced by Durkheim’s (1976) attempt to study religion from the outside rather than the inside, Husserl’s descriptive science was a godsend. It is this descriptive science that makes up much of the methodology to be found in the widening world of religious education described above. It allows religious education to function in public settings with guaranteed freedom from intentions smacking of enfaithing. It is possible for a subject to proceed entirely in this way if need be, with much technical learning, and a measure of interpretive learning, to ensue from receiving masses of religious information and being exposed to any number of religious experiences, all with the sole intentions of enhancing literacy and understanding. To this point, phenomenology differs from other social scientific methods mainly in its intensity around the discipline of epoche.

However, descriptive science is only one end of the phenomenological spectrum. For Husserl, it was not an end in itself, so much as a cleansing phase by which the mind could be cleared of the accruals of heritage and indoctrination. Once cleared, the mind was capable of renewed judgement, seeing things anew, in richer context and with a faster store of information and experience behind the judgement than would have been the case prior to this cleansing. Cleared of pre-emptive judgement, the learner could engage in refreshed judgement, impelled by more impartial, dispassionate and balanced insight. The true benefit of the descriptive phase of phenomenology is that it ultimately renders one in a better position to ascertain and deal with the ‘essence’ of whatever it is one is studying. At the other end of descriptive science, therefore, is what is known as ‘eidetic science’, the study of what is essential. This is the other pole of phenomenology. Together, descriptive science and eidetic science constitute the complete phenomenological method.

Husserl’s primary concern was to establish the basis for a different perception of reality through the promotion of a more comprehensive method of investigation. He employed the research perspective of Rudolf Otto as an exemplar of what he was trying to achieve. For Otto (1958), perception of a sensus numinis (supreme being) behind religious experience came as the result of a phenomenological probe. This came only after a
long period which saw application of the strict
discipline of descriptive science, involving the
suspension of his personal views and extensive
gathering of the views of others, followed by a
refreshed and renewed insight impelled by eidetic
science, the knowing of essentials. At this end of
phenomenology, subjectivity is encouraged,
however it is subjectivity grounded in the balance
and fair measure impelled by objectivity.

The eidetic end of phenomenology allows two
things to happen in a religious education employing
its method. First, it allows the public curriculum to
ter the domain of the personal, to engage in
reflective and self-reflective learning; second, and
related, it allows for a limited enfaitching to be
included as part of what is encompassed by the
public curriculum. To be true to the terms of
phenomenology, these latter can only occur after
solid grounding in the objectivity of descriptive
science, hence ensuring that movement towards the
personal and, especially, towards exposure to
enfaithing, is maximally informed and most freed
of coercion or manipulation. Through movement
across the spectrum from objectivity to informed
subjectivity, the same course of study is able to be
stretched to cover a range of curricular goals and
satisfy the religious education intentions implicit in
a variety of school settings. On the one hand, the
public school is able to follow a curriculum that is
clearly grounded in the non-enfaithing ethos of
public education while, at the same time, allowing
for the enriched personalised learning that is so
much at the heart of modern learning theory (cf.
Habermas, 1972; Lovat & Smith, 2003). At the
same time, the religious school is able to follow the
same curriculum, grounding its religious education
in a formidable public syllabus, while allowing for
the personalised learning at one end to include a
measure of the enfaitching that will always be seen
as part of the school’s mission. The religious
education curriculum built on phenomenology rests
on this delicate balance. No other method could
achieve this vital end, so allowing a subject like
Studies of Religion to function so effectively in
both public and religious school settings.

Common Misunderstandings about
Phenomenology as Religious Education Method
Failure to grasp the comprehensive richness of
phenomenology has led to claims, both in Australia
but more particularly in the UK, that
phenomenological approaches to religious
education lead to sterile, abstract and highly
cognitively kinds of study. Granted the claims of
Ninian Smart that, in his experience, they led to
precisely the opposite, something would seem
clearly to have gone wrong in circles that draw
such conclusions. Smart declared that a
phenomenological approach to religious education
leads to “... initiation into understanding the
meaning of, and into questions about, the truth and
worth of religion.” (1968, p. 105) He took
particular issue with the idea that a study from the
outside necessarily led to a ‘dry’ or ‘heady’ kind of
educational practice. On the contrary, Smart
believed that a phenomenological approach would
engender a unique kind of experience and lead to a
very vital learning practice which would take in the
total person, mind, heart and imagination. He
spoke of the need for the study of religion to be “... warm and vibrant ... (and full of) ... imaginative
participation.” (1974, p. 3) These were goals he
believed were assured when phenomenology was
the chosen methodology.

As I have written before (Lovat, 2001), it would
seem to me to be the inescapable explanation of the
above jaundiced claims about phenomenology that
the version which has underpinned religious
education on occasions, both in Australia but most
obviously in the UK, has been an antiseptic one
that has failed utterly to engage in the eidetic end.
In other words, it has made the common mistake of
taking half the Husserlian scheme, that of
descriptive science, but leaving out the enriched
other half. There is no doubt in my mind that the
rigour of descriptive science, that version of
phenomenology which is invariably the target of
claims about its ‘dry’ and ‘heady’ nature, were
never meant to tell the entire story of phenomenology, nor to be an end in itself. As
suggested, epoche, suspension of judgement, was
designed to clear the mind of pre-emptive and
poorly formed judgements only in order to
establish the mindset necessary to engage in the
more judicial, critical and reflective study implied by
‘eidetic science’. This is the true heart of what
Husserl lauded about Otto’s methodology. At the
end of the day, Otto’s (1958) work was full of
judicial, critical and reflective assessment about the
phenomena he had earlier been at pains to describe
so faithfully. The point of full-blown phenomenological method is that this judicial,
critical and reflective assessment is only possible
after the phenomena under investigation have been
fully, faithfully and longitudinally described and
appraised without prejudice.

There is therefore no forbidding of comparison
between and critique of subject matter implied by
phenomenological method, as is so often falsely
claimed. Indeed, the opposite is the case. At the
eidetic end of phenomenology, the order of the day
will centre on comparison and critique leading to
ongoing reflection on the essential experience
underlying the subject matter. Just why a schema
as clearly put as is Husserl’s could be so
misrepresented is instructive in itself. I believe this
has much to do with the politics to be found,
especially in the UK, at the time religious education was mandated in the government system, politics uncovered in part by Barnes (2001).

In light of these politics, it would seem the explanation for the misrepresentation of phenomenology may have been that those who first proposed the approach were single-minded in their attempt to posit a method that could underpin the quest for the kind of objectivity that was clearly lacking in traditional, largely church school-based, versions of the subject. Presumably, the UK government would have needed satisfaction on this point before endorsing phenomenological religious education as a virtual State RE in the way that it did. The same could perhaps be said about the sentiments behind some of the State reports in Australia mentioned above. Amidst this broader politic, it would seem phenomenological method has been skewed if not dissected; with what was seen as the useful bit endorsed and the more problematic bit discarded. It could be that this discarding was accidental or deliberately done by those who saw potential for the eidetic end of phenomenology to lead too quickly back to some of the trappings of enfaithment. Either way, the result was a stunted and inadequate version of phenomenology being passed off as phenomenology per se. As I believe Philip Barnes and I are now in agreement, this is largely why he and I have reached such different conclusions about the potential of phenomenology to deliver all the necessary goals and intentions of religious education.

From an historical point of view, there may be an unwitting wisdom in the way phenomenological religious education has developed. Granted the history of the subject, so steeped in an enfaithing heritage, it may be that a period of intensive and almost singular attention to the descriptive phases of the method was necessary for religious educators and their clients to shed themselves of their former ways. From this same historical view, any current critique of phenomenology may be timely in correcting the imbalance and ensuring that the eidetic phases of the method are included. Even in its stunted form, phenomenology has been a powerful instrument in bringing about the far more fortified and educationally acceptable forms of religious education that now dominate in both religious and public school systems. It is time now, however, to ensure that the more complete form of phenomenology is embedded, lest we find ourselves reverting to less adequate methodologies.

As suggested, it would be difficult to find an alternative method to phenomenology that offers the same level of sophistication in blending the need for suspension of judgement at one point of a study with the need to engage in informed judgement at another point of the study.

**Phenomenology as Fieldwork Method: Speaking Personally**

Phenomenology has clearly been important to the work that I have performed as an educator in the field of religious education. It has also been important, however, in the broader fieldwork that I have conducted among followers of non-Christian religions. This latter work has been at the heart of my own research efforts of the past decade or so. It is captured in part in a number of works (Lovat, 2001a; 2002; 2003) which I will summarise below in order to try to identify the extent to which phenomenology can influence the gathering of data in the field, as well as its dissemination in the religious education classroom.

My earlier work with the followers of non Judaeo-Christian religions centred largely on the Sri Venkateswara Hindu Temple at Helensburgh, south of Sydney. This work, employing liberally the methodologies of phenomenology and its results are described in the following works (Lovat, 1995, 1995a, 1997). In this work, I not only encountered mainstream followers of Hinduism but also those from Hindu-inspired groups that tend to gather at Hindu temple sites around key festival times. It was through one of these latter events that I first became acquainted with the followers of Brahma Kumaris (BK), a contemporary spirituality with strong affiliations with the United Nations, especially through UNESCO. My later work with members of the BK is recorded mainly in the following works (Lovat, 1997a, 2003; Lovat & Morrison, 2000).

While most of the work above concerned patterns of Christian interaction with Hinduism and BK, some of it explored patterns of Jewish interaction with the same. This latter has uncovered a rich vein of research concerned with ancient and modern connections between Judaism and the religious traditions associated with Hinduism (cf. Goodman, 1994; Holdrege, 1996). Granted these are the two traditions that lie at the root of the two great religious heritages of the East and the Middle East, this vein of research has enriched significantly my own concentration on the dialogue and movement between Judaeo-Christianity and Hindu-inspired spirituality. The fact that BK has spread so easily and quickly in Israel and that the single largest pilgrimages to the BK headquarters, the ‘holy mountain’ at Mount Abu in India, come from Israel are of abiding interest in this regard.

As I have detailed in other works (Lovat, 2001a, 2002), the role that phenomenology has played in allowing me to carry out this kind of highly
sensitive work with a reasonable degree of success has been inestimable. It has prevented me from making the most common mistakes in cross-cultural work, namely, pre-emptive judging and being overly keen to get the answers. Being steeped in phenomenology disciplines one to slow the judging and increase the patience. In a word, it helps to instil the necessary sensitivity and respect, not to mention listening ear, that are most likely to bear the fruit of quality data in these kinds of settings. Phenomenology helps one to prioritise the trusting relationship with research subjects, rather than eliciting the data with the kinds of efficiencies that might actually stem the data flow. The result has been a rich tapestry of findings, albeit slightly more difficult to manage because so much of it is committed to memory (at least in the short term) rather than paper or tape recorder. For the purest forms of descriptive science, these latter are better shed in favour of the freer flow of data that comes with eyeball to eyeball conversation. I believe it is largely because of the phenomenological approach that I have taken to my work that I have enjoyed the trust and been given the degree of access that would more normally be associated with being a friend than being a researcher.

Above all, the phenomenological imperative is that one should spend quality time soaking up the atmosphere and becoming part of the environment of those one is seeking to understand. In my case, this began with many weekend hours spent at the Hindu Temple, time taken up mainly with just being there, participating to the extent allowed of a visitor and gradually gaining the acceptability that opened up conversational worlds. It continued in my work with the BK through periods of time engaged with them at their holy mountain in India, as well as at BK centres in the USA, UK, Spain, Thailand and Australia. My focus in this work was centred on exploring the dispositions that preceded and surrounded the experience of conversion to BK. Granted such a focus, reliable data depended, of necessity, on it being elicited in the most sensitive fashion possible. To do this well, I needed to be rigorous in the discipline of opening my mind to new possibilities and perspectives, the discipline described above as the descriptive science end of phenomenology.

It is only when the mind has truly opened up to new possibilities, to seeing things anew, that eidetic knowing becomes possible. I believe I have experienced this in my dealings with the Hindus and BK. By overcoming the natural defensiveness and inclination to revert to the 'truths' of one's heritage, by being fearless in staying where one might not always feel entirely comfortable, by disciplining oneself to intensive listening while stifling one's inclination towards judgement, one does find oneself eventually in a different place. The different place is one that allows for a measure of understanding and acceptance of the other, beyond that which would be possible through any less profound discipline than that of descriptive phenomenology.

In relation to my own work, it is in this new place that I have come to some understanding of the essence of what it is that Hinduism and BK are about. As eidetic knowing, it is more than mere intellectual understanding; it is an understanding that involves intuition and emotion as well. In other words, I have come to have some feeling for what these traditions, foreign to me and my heritage, feel like. One might say I have been partly enfaithed by these traditions though, thanks to the rigours of descriptive science that always lie at the heart of phenomenological knowing, I am free to stand apart even as I am enfaithed. Furthermore, I can move to other traditions, to Islam, Buddhism and even back to re-visit my native Christianity (all of which I have done) and can continue to have these partially enfaithing experiences of all these traditions while choosing to stand slightly apart from any one of them. Indeed, it must be said that the broader one's enfaithing experiences of this kind, the more difficult it becomes to surrender to complete immersion and unqualified acceptance of any one form of institutionalised religion.

Some will see in this latter point the weakness in phenomenological approaches to religious education that they have always feared. Indeed, let it be said that if the final purpose of religious education is to have someone sign off on one institutional form of religion against all other forms, then phenomenology may not be the best method to apply. If, however, the main purpose of religious education is, as with other public curricula, to provide the richest sources of information, to train people to live, function and inter-relate in a world of multiple forms, and to provide the best grounding for students' ultimate choices, then phenomenology as a method cannot be surpassed. I have spoken often of the need, in our world and granted our preservation issues, for religious education's charter to be robust and bold, rather than limp and fearful. For those who agree, phenomenology has much to offer.

Conclusion
In summary, there are two aspects of phenomenology that deserve attention for their potential to advance the cause of religious education. First, the new reality of a strong religious education component of the public syllabus provides a different philosophical, political and curriculum base for the subject, with
potential to advance the subject in a way that has not existed before. The desirability of employing a method that can allow for the range of intentions implied by public and religious settings cannot be overstated. Second, the new religious landscape becoming more and more apparent in Australia must alter the assumptions that religious educators make about their clientele, the world in which they are growing up, the forces likely to shape them, and the ways they might be trained through religious education to deal with the religious difference now so apparent in their society. Again, functioning with a method that allows for effective interaction with these forces and the people behind them, as well as one that allows for the richest possible learning about them in schools, is of inestimable importance. In this regard, I would propose that the method known as phenomenology, agonising yet ecstatic, has potential yet to be realised.

References


*Terence Lovat is Professor of Education and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education and Arts) at The University of Newcastle, Australia.

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