

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH IN ISLAMIC STUDIES

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Abstract

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Phenomenology emphasizes the understanding of religion through direct, prejudice-free, and neutral experiences. This approach seeks to uncover authentic meaning, going beyond preconceived ideas and limiting cultural frameworks. The aim of this study is to explain the application of the phenomenological approach in understanding religious phenomena by prioritizing religious experiences as they truly are. This research employs a literature study method with data collection techniques in the form of documentation, including analysis of literature related to phenomenological theory and practice within the context of religion. Research Findings: The phenomenological approach has two main characteristics: first, understanding another person's religion from a neutral perspective and then attempting to reconfigure that religion based on the individual's personal experiences and preferences. Second, a taxonomic framework should be developed to classify religious and cultural community phenomena. The true focus of religious phenomenology is the exploration of the essence, meaning, and fundamental structure of religious experience. Human religious experience possesses an irreducible essence that forms the basic structure of human religion. The phenomenological approach can be introduced in Islamic studies as an acceptable method for exploring Islam and includes practical examples commonly encountered in daily life. Conclusion: The phenomenological approach explains religious experience in a neutral, profound, and practical way to understand the essence and fundamental structure of human religion.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology is a philosophical study of direct experience from the first-person perspective, developed by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and furthered by Heidegger (1889–1976) and Sartre (1905–1980) (Mäcklin, 2021). Husserl's phenomenology emphasizes direct understanding of experience, free from prejudice and prior constructs, with an open mind to achieve an authentic understanding of reality as it is (Ridlwan, 2013). Edmund Husserl, the founder of transcendental phenomenology, profoundly influenced 20th and 21st-century philosophy, triggering the development of existentialism, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and

analytic philosophy, particularly about intentionality, consciousness, emotions, and ethics, which are relevant in contemporary philosophical discussions (Drummond & Höffe, 2019).

Figures in the phenomenological movement, from Brentano to Derrida, have discussed key phenomenology topics such as intentionality, perception, subjectivity, self, body, existence, and phenomenological methods. The contribution of phenomenology to various disciplines of philosophy and other fields is also analyzed (Luft & Overgaard, 2023). Phenomenology is an ontological philosophy based on the doctrine of intentionality, where consciousness is non-substantial and pre-reflective, and Sartre addresses Levinas' methodological issues by developing the idea of reflection as a motivated act that understands the temporality of consciousness (Sommerlatte, 2020).

Phenomenology holds a special position in aesthetics and art studies compared to traditional intellectualist currents, striving to rehabilitate the dimensions of sensitivity and perception, further developed by classical phenomenologists and a new generation such as Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Michel Henry (Lau & Nenon, 2020). Phenomenology continues the transcendental philosophy project, but the intentionality analysis forms new issues. Heidegger's understanding of truth in *Being and Time* and Husserl's expansion of the concept of object provide a research subject for fundamental ontology. However, Heidegger revised the concept of phenomenology to align with new goals (Melnikova, 2022).

The transcendental perspective emphasizes the continuity between action, perception, and cognitive function, challenging the mind-body dualism. A weaker naturalism approach proposes a natural ontology based on the subjectivity of the biological body, inspired by Merleau-Ponty (Fugali, 2024). Phenomenological methods vary depending on the methodological guidance adopted, such as Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger's approach, which sees the Qur'an as a phenomenon open to clarification (Swazo, 2015). The integration of Islam and Batak culture runs smoothly in Muslim minority areas, with appropriate cultural aspects preserved, while those that conflict are adapted to align with Islamic teachings (Dasopang et al., 2022).

The views of mufasssirun (Qur'anic interpreters) and field data suggest that Qur'anic interpretation must prioritize moderate understanding, avoiding intolerance and radicalization. Religious moderation creates tolerance and mutual respect (Mahfudz & Yuspiani, 2023). Islam and Muslims in religious education, based on the phenomenological model, focus on the interaction between religion and the secular, proposing intercultural education to prepare the younger generation for a contributive role (Thobani, 2017). The phenomenological approach to religion emphasizes a neutral understanding of religious experience and classification construction. However, it requires support from other sciences because it is relative and less attentive to cultural context (Mujib, 2015).

This study aims to explain the application of the phenomenological approach in understanding religious phenomena, emphasizing religious experience as it is, without interference from external theories or views. This approach delves into the subjective meaning individuals attach to their religious experiences, enriching the understanding of how people interact with their beliefs and religious practices. Its impact is to contribute to avoiding generalizations and stereotypes and deepening religious studies in Indonesia, which has religious and cultural diversity, focusing on individual perspectives.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature review method to explore and analyze data from relevant literature sources without conducting field observation or interviews. Data collection techniques are done through documentation, which involves accessing and gathering scientific references in books, journal articles, and reliable online sources directly related to the research topic. The data processing steps are carried out systematically, starting with identifying literature that aligns with the research focus, namely applying the phenomenological approach in religious studies. Subsequently, the content of the literature is filtered based on relevance, source credibility, and methodological alignment.

The selected data are analyzed descriptively through an interpretive process that emphasizes understanding the meaning of religious experiences as perceived by individuals. This interpretation is conducted using the principles of the phenomenological approach, which focuses on describing the essence of subjective experience, free from the influence of external normative theories. Thus, the results of this research are expected to reveal how individuals experience and authentically understand religious reality. This literature review also enriches the academic knowledge in religious studies, particularly in exploring the meaning of religiosity through the phenomenological lens.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology was first intensively proposed and introduced as a philosophical study by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), often referred to as the Father of Phenomenology. The reality of a crisis in the sciences drove Husserl's emergence of phenomenology. In this crisis, science could not offer guidance for human life. Science was detached from daily life practices. According to Husserl, this crisis in science was caused by misunderstandings within scientific disciplines regarding the concept of valid theory. Through phenomenology, Husserl sought to find the connection between theory and the lived world, ultimately aiming to generate pure theories that could be applied in practice. In other words, Husserl's phenomenology is rooted in the philosophy of science. In this regard, he proposed that phenomena be understood and approached in distinctive ways. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that aims to understand lived experience through detailed descriptions from research participants. Researchers strive to suspend their biases (through bracketing and epoché) so that participants can freely describe their experiences without external influence. Common variations of transcendental/descriptive phenomenology include existential and hermeneutic/interpretive phenomenology (Matz, 2024).

In addition to Edmund Husserl, another key figure in the phenomenological approach is Max Scheler (1874–1928), who regarded phenomenology as a particular way of perceiving reality. Scheler's teachings focus on three important aspects in phenomenological experience: a) Natural facts (facts arising from sensory experience and relating to objects perceived in everyday experience); b) Scientific facts (facts that detach from direct sensory application and become increasingly abstract); c) Phenomenological facts (facts that reveal the essence of direct experience and are not dependent on whether or not there is a corresponding external reality). Another important figure, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–



1961), argued that all perceptual experiences carry essential conditions about an underlying reality beyond consciousness. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty emphasized that perception is crucial for understanding what is real (Novayani, 2019). *Phenomenological Studies in Education* explores and applies the phenomenological method to build an understanding of experience in education and pedagogy (DeHart, 2023).

The term phenomenology derives from the Greek words *phainomenon* (meaning "what appears") and *logos* (meaning "study"). In English, a related term is "phenomenon," which refers to manifestation, event, or phenomenon (Echols & Shadili, 1975, p.427). A phenomenon itself is a fact that is perceived and absorbed into human consciousness. It is not immediately visible to the eye but exists in front of consciousness and is presented with consciousness. In other words, phenomenology can reflect human experiences directly, with the experience being intensely related to an object (Misnal, 2008, p.89). Phenomenology can be classified into two meanings. In the broad sense, phenomenology is the science of phenomena, focusing on analyzing the events that flood human consciousness. On the other hand, in a narrower sense, phenomenology is considered the study of the phenomena that appear in our consciousness. The goals of the phenomenological approach are as follows: to interpret texts related to religious issues as accurately as possible; to reconstruct the complex structure of an ancient sacred place or explain the issues of a mythological story; and to understand the structure and organization of religious communities in their surrounding life (Kodir, 2020, p.115).

2. Basic Concepts and Characteristics of the Phenomenological Approach

Several fundamental concepts need to be understood to understand phenomenology, as follows: First, *phenomenon*. Etymologically, the term *phenomenon* comes from the Greek word *phaenesthai*, meaning to appear, manifest, or show itself. A phenomenon is an object or event that appears in reality and corresponds to the actual reality. In Husserl's concept, a phenomenon is a reality that appears without any veil or curtain between humans and that reality. Meanwhile, in confronting this phenomenon, humans engage their consciousness regarding an unavoidable reality. Each phenomenon also represents the starting point of the object studied in phenomenological research (Hasbiansyah, 2008).

Second, *consciousness* refers to the active giving of meaning. As a continuity of phenomena, the world is anticipated in consciousness, where we view the world as a means to realize ourselves as consciousness. In other words, consciousness is the ability to treat objects as they are, or to be objective towards oneself. Additionally, consciousness can be seen as openness and continuity about others, where there is no clear separation between oneself and others. In phenomenology, *intentionality* refers to the belief that all acts of consciousness have a quality of awareness directed towards objects. Conscious actions are called *intentional acts*, and their objects are termed *intentional objects*. According to this concept, humans manifest their intention as something transcendent, a synthesis of the subject and object. *Intention* refers to the orientation of the mind towards an object, while *intentionality* deals with consciousness and the internal experience of being conscious of something (Hasbiansyah, 2008).

Third, the *constitution* refers to the process by which a phenomenon appears in consciousness. In other words, the constitution is like the construction process within human consciousness. When observing an object, what the senses perceive is only a part of it.

However, consciousness performs constitution, making one aware of the object from another perspective. Therefore, it can be concluded that constitution is viewed from the subject's perspective, interpreting the world and the universe as experienced. Fourth, *epoché* comes from the Greek word meaning to suspend judgment. *Epoché* is a new way of looking at things. In *epoché*, everyday understanding, judgments, and knowledge are temporarily set aside, allowing the phenomenon to emerge and be revised in a fresh, open, and unprejudiced way, from a pure or transcendental ego perspective. Fifth, *reduction* is described as a movement back to transcendental consciousness. Before transcendental consciousness, the world appears clearly, without any darkness. Phenomenological reduction is idealistic because it is a transcendental idealism that views the world as a unified set of values inseparable and shared between two people, where their perspectives are intermingled. This enables communication. Reduction is divided into phenomenological reduction and transcendental phenomenological reduction (Hasbiansyah, 2008).

The characteristics of the phenomenological approach are twofold: First, phenomenology is a method to understand the religion of others from a neutral standpoint, using the preferences of the individuals involved to attempt to reconstruct their experience. The most significant contribution of phenomenology is the use of norms in the study of religion based on the experiences of the adherents. The most important aspect of the phenomenological approach to religion is that what is experienced, felt, said, and done by the adherents has meaning for them. Second, phenomenology aims to design a taxonomy to categorize society's religious and cultural phenomena. After gathering as much data as possible, the task of phenomenology is to find categories that reveal commonalities among the group. This activity is essentially about seeking structure within religious experience to identify broader principles that reflect the diversity of human existence comprehensively (Novayani, 2019).

3. Phenomenology in the Study of Islam

In studying Islam as a religion, the terms *insider* and *outsider* arise. From the Muslim perspective, an insider refers to someone within the religion (a Muslim) who studies Islam. In contrast, an outsider is someone from outside the religion (a non-Muslim) seeking to study Islam. The difference between these two lies in their interpretation: insiders have a deeper and more complete understanding of the religious teachings, whereas outsiders, lacking religious experience, may not fully grasp them. When studying Islam as a religion, the distinction between insider and outsider becomes apparent. Insiders have a better understanding of religious teachings compared to outsiders, who do not have religious experience. Since outsiders' scope is limited, the phenomenological approach is seen as a more suitable and effective way to understand religion from the outside. Fazlur Rahman argued that the Qur'an and Hadith must remain normative references, and phenomenology should be applied as an acceptable approach in Islamic studies. According to him, the Qur'an and Hadith must control and modify the phenomenological method. Otherwise, phenomenology could become difficult to cure (Sholeh, 2016).

Religious phenomenology is a new or alternative approach in studying world religions, including Islam. On one hand, religious phenomenology remains controversial among scholars. However, on the other hand, it presents religion as an object that needs to be

studied and can be verified in the empirical world. The purpose of religious phenomenology is not to compare religions broadly, but to focus on the facts and phenomena occurring in different religions. Therefore, religious phenomenology allows religious thinkers worldwide to be more critical, free from personal thoughts, imaginations, and assumptions based on claims of the truth of a particular religion, as well as assumptions that tend to criticize other religions about Islam.

When examined more closely, what phenomenologists uncover is not unfamiliar to theological mutakallimun in the Islamic faith. However, there are noticeable differences in methodology between the two approaches. For mutakallimun, understanding religion comes from revelation (wahyu). This group emphasizes the written form of revelation, especially for nations with a written tradition. They would not attempt to address religious aspects in non-literary cultures, as they believe these non-literary cultures need to be religified. On the other hand, the findings of phenomenologists go further back, to times when humans did not know writing. The phenomenological approach begins with the phenomenon of human religiosity as it is. This approach is not burdened by any specific religious mission that demands the search for more followers. Phenomenologists examine religion in an essential, fundamental, and universal manner, whether in literate or non-literate societies or in classical or contemporary settings.

However, it cannot be denied that the systematic effort made by phenomenologists has high validity and significance, as it is the aspect of this approach that has elevated the study of religion to a scientific level. Although religious phenomenology has gained popularity in recent years, there has been little effort to apply this method and perspective to Islamic studies. This is also the case in Europe, where the phenomenological approach originated. In this regard, phenomenology seems more suitable for investigating religious communities that express themselves non-verbally, and for this reason, phenomenology places great emphasis on what is considered primitive religion. However, within Islam, there are numerous development fields for those proficient in using phenomenological approaches and other methods specifically used in religious studies research. Those studying Western academic traditions directly related to Islamic traditions have widely acknowledged the enthusiasm for delving into Islam and the revolution in the development of this phenomenological method.

Before phenomenology emerged, much of the writing produced by Western Orientalists about Islam was apathetic, even openly hostile to the perceptions and values of Islam itself. Western Orientalists lacked moral sensitivity to the commitments of other religious adherents and used flawed scientific methods. Those who devote time and energy to studying Islam are experts deeply concerned with religion, with a place in the tradition of religious studies, and they strive to apply scientific approaches to religious studies, with phenomenology as their method. In the phenomenological approach, two aspects are fundamental:

The first aspect is that phenomenology is a method for understanding the religion of others, which involves experts setting aside or remaining neutral to their preferences and beliefs in preparation for attempting to reconstruct the experiences of followers of other religions. This aspect of phenomenology is essential for Islamic studies, as it plays a crucial role in correcting the errors of various unsympathetic and often hostile approaches

developed within the tradition of Western Orientalist scholarship. It can also open new doors for penetrating Islamic religious experiences into broader and more important realms. The highest achievement of phenomenology lies in its view that the norm for all studies of religion is the experience of its adherents.

Therefore, this approach involves elaborating on the meaning contained in the religious rituals practiced by its followers. Furthermore, categorizing and understanding religious experience involves categories that are genuinely formed by adherents of a religion for personal use, expressed through traditions and historical works, and narrated through their own experiences (Mahmudin, 2021).

The second aspect of this phenomenological approach is to develop a taxonomy scheme to clarify the phenomena that emerge between the boundaries of religious communities and culture. By gathering as much material as possible, phenomenologists classify phenomena exhibiting common characteristics. Although gathering materials related to religious phenomena requires phenomenologists to investigate the specific characteristics of a religious tradition, the meaning of religious phenomena cannot be understood if it is not focused on the historical aspect. It must be examined in a broader field to identify the structural, universal, and fundamental impulses demonstrated by particular phenomena (Mahmudin, 2021).

4. Implementation of the Phenomenological Approach in Islamic Studies

The phenomenological approach seeks to study and understand religious phenomena as they truly are by allowing the manifestations of religious experience to speak for themselves. This approach emerged at the end of the 20th century, influenced by the philosophy developed by Edmund Husserl. Phenomenology was born and applied in the study of religion as a scientific research method in contrast to theological approaches. The continuity of religious phenomenology as a philosophical tradition, along with the theological assumptions or motives behind it, and the role of religious scholars in facing social-political realities and the challenges of their involvement in the public space (Akhiyat, 2019).

There are two key characteristics of the phenomenological approach. The first is that phenomenology is a method for understanding the religion of others from a neutral perspective, using the subject's preferences to attempt to reconstruct and understand their experience. The second characteristic of phenomenology is the construction of a taxonomy to classify the phenomena of religious and cultural communities. Religious phenomenology focuses primarily on searching for the essence, meaning, and fundamental structure of human religious experience. Within this experience, an irreducible essence forms the fundamental structure of human religiosity.

The phenomenological approach can be understood as an effort to create an objective discipline in the study of religion, accompanied by its methodology. In simpler terms, the phenomenological approach aims to combine the objective and subjective aspects present in every religious scholar. Ethical engagements, such as "progressive Islam," influence scholarly representation. My research on "Islam and the environment" emphasizes the need for a methodologically disciplined approach in understanding Islam as an object of phenomenological study (Gade, 2016).

Some examples of the phenomenological approach are as follows: The first example is *Tahlilan*, a collective prayer event held at the deceased's home, attended by family, neighbors, and relatives. *Tahlilan* begins on the day of a person's death and is typically held at night after Maghrib or Isha prayers. This tradition often lasts seven consecutive days and is also held to commemorate the deceased's seventh, fortieth, hundredth, or thousandth day after death. This commemoration is a pre-Islamic Indonesian tradition blending local culture and Hindu-Buddhist practices. During the Majapahit Kingdom era, respect for the deceased was performed in stages: on the day of death, three days later, seven days later, forty days later, one year later, two years later, and a thousand days later (Novayani, 2019).

The second example is *Ziarah kubur*, or visiting graves, which involves praying for the souls of the deceased, asking for their deeds to be accepted by Allah SWT, and their sins to be forgiven. However, as this tradition developed in Indonesia, it incorporated aspirations unrelated to the Islamic context. The Islamic tradition of *ziarah* has mixed with practices of ancestor worship and Hindu-Buddhist deities, where instead of praying for the deceased, the visitors might pray for the spirits of ancestors or figures to gain supernatural powers, making them sacred and significant. However, Islam teaches that the deceased cannot assist the living, such as granting wealth, status, or immunity. Thus, some people use the term *nikal* to refer to pilgrimage rituals, a term rooted in prehistoric times that still influences Islamic traditions today (Novayani, 2019).

The third example is *Maulid Nabi*, commemorating the Prophet Muhammad SAW's birth, which became a Muslim tradition some time after the Prophet's passing. This observance is a sign of respect and serves as a reminder of the greatness and exemplary life of Prophet Muhammad SAW through various cultural, ritual, and religious activities. On the 12th of Rabiul Awal in the Islamic lunar calendar, Muslims worldwide celebrate *Maulid Nabi*. The government officially recognizes this celebration as an important national holiday in Indonesia. The Maulid Nabi celebrations typically involve events in mosques, prayer halls, Islamic schools, and other venues, including mass circumcision ceremonies, recitations, and competitions. The peak of this celebration usually takes place on the night of the 12th of Rabiul Awal, during which the *Sila Nabawiyya* (the life story of Prophet Muhammad SAW) is recited, from his birth to his passing. Different regions, such as Yogyakarta, have unique ways of celebrating Maulid Nabi, incorporating local cultural traditions like *sekaten* (Yunus, 2019).

As a method of thinking, phenomenology is progressive because it seeks to return to

the fundamental aspects of human life. As an effort to preserve logos in modernity, phenomenology successfully reveals the pre-reflective aspects of daily life that shape experiences of modernity as a shared public world. Applying phenomenology as an acceptable approach to studying Islam means that the Qur'an and Hadith must remain the normative references. According to Fazlur Rahman, the Qur'an and Hadith should control and modify the phenomenological method, as failure to do so could render phenomenology relativistic and challenging to cure.

Cresswell suggests the following steps for researchers wishing to apply phenomenology in religious studies: First, researchers need to understand the philosophical perspective behind the phenomenological approach, particularly how people experience phenomena. The concept of *epoché*, which involves suspending prior judgments about a phenomenon to understand it through informants' voices, is crucial. Researchers then formulate research questions that explore the meaning of an individual's experience and ask individuals to describe their daily experiences. Data is collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied, typically through in-depth interviews with 5 to 25 informants (Cresswell, 1998, p. 54).

As a qualitative research tradition, phenomenology has roots in philosophy and psychology, focusing on an individual's internal and conscious experiences. The phenomenological approach to studying personality centers on individual experiences and their personal views of the world. This method adjusts procedures of *epoche* (suspension of prior judgments) and *eidetical intuition* (exploring the meaning of religion) with the study of symbolic expressions that people respond to as values that are boundless to them. Applying phenomenology in Islamic studies requires understanding and seeing Islam as its adherents do, using the religious phenomena and experiences that are deeply intertwined with local culture and traditions. Phenomenological ethics, as a presuppositionless method, resolves and prevents conflicts. It suggests teaching it across religions to foster unity, promoting peaceful co-existence as the ultimate goal (Alumona & Ogelenya, 2023).

D. CONCLUSION

Phenomenology was first intensely introduced as a philosophical study by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), often referred to as the Father of Phenomenology. His philosophy became widely known around the 1950s. The main goal of this philosophy is to provide a foundation for philosophy so that it can function as a pure and autonomous science. Initially, phenomenology served as a set of approaches in philosophical, sociological studies, and the



study of art. The emergence of phenomenology by Husserl was driven by the crisis in the sciences, where knowledge could no longer provide guidance for humanity.

Phenomenology comes from the Greek words *phainomenon*, meaning something that appears, and *logos*, meaning science. Edmund Husserl introduced This term at the beginning of the 20th century by his successors at the University of Göttingen and Munich in Germany, eventually spreading to France, the United States, and other countries. The closest English term related to this is *phenomenon*, which means manifestation, event, or symptom. A phenomenon is a fact that is consciously perceived and enters human awareness. A phenomenon is not necessarily visible to the naked eye, but is presented before consciousness and understood with that consciousness.

In other words, phenomenology directly reflects human experience, which is intensively connected to an object. The phenomenological approach has specific goals, fundamental concepts, and characteristics that describe it, always prioritizing existing realities. Furthermore, this approach can be implemented in the study of Islam by using the appropriate steps or stages.

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