

Phenomenological Approach to the Teaching of Religious Education: Sharing Knowledge to Benefit Religious Educators

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the *Phenomenological Approach* to the teaching of religious education as suggested by Ninian Smart (1968). It has been established that this approach to the teaching of religious education does not stress the acceptance of a particular faith or belief system, which is the privilege of religious bodies to do, nor does it press for conversion. It is committed to a search for religious meaning, purpose and value which is open to all men. It reflects a multiplicity of beliefs and non-beliefs. No belief system is seen as the only source of value in society. Professor Ninian Smart, who is a leading exponent of the approach has been careful to point out that “Phenomenological Approach” to religious education is not only concerned with providing information about the practices and beliefs of a particular religion but different religions.

Keywords: phenomenological approach, religious education, religious dimensions, knowledge

1. Introduction

Phenomenological study of religion can be defined as the personal participation of a scholar in the religion he seeks to study in order to understand the essence and the manifestations of the religious phenomena of a particular religion (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). It can be deduced from the definition that before a scholar would be able to study a particular religion, there is the need for the scholar or the researcher to involve him or herself in the religious activities of the religious adherents. Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010) stated emphatically that for the researcher to study a particular religion phenomenologically, there should be grouping of the religious occurrences, the suspension of value judgement which was previously held about the religion being studied and researcher should take a neutral stand in order to understand the religion being studied. This presupposes that the researcher should approach the religion being studied in a more scientific way and the religion must be studied objectively with no biases in his or her judgements. Hence, the researcher should employ a phenomenological approach to the study of religion. In a like manner, the teaching of religious education should be done using a phenomenological approach. The aim of this paper is to explore the ‘*Phenomenological Approach*’ to the teaching of religious education as suggested by Ninian Smart (1968).

2. The Emergence of Phenomenological Approach to the Teaching of Religious Education

The ‘*Phenomenological Approach*’ to the teaching of Religious Education (RE) arose as a reaction to the failure of the use of confessional approach to the teaching of religious education. This postulates that it is important to take a brief glance at the confessional approach to the teaching of religious education. In the words of Walters (2010), the confessional approach to the teaching of religious education is explicitly the evangelical method of teaching the subject. According to Grimmitt (1978), the aims of the confessional approach were first to bring the child (learner) into an encounter with Jesus Christ and not just to present the Bible as a record of historical events, second, to teach the theme of Christian discipleship (defined as a way of life based upon faith in Jesus Christ whom God sent to be our deliverer and through whom man can enter into a special relationship with God) and third, to present to the learner the challenge of the personality of Jesus Christ. It can be gathered from the aims stated above that the main aim of confessional approach to teaching religious education was to help children in their journey to faith in one ‘true’ religion, say Christianity, whose doctrines are taught as the absolute reality.

It can be said that this approach was mainly dogmatic, in that, the teaching of religion was to covert learners into Christianity and only teach them the teaching of Jesus Christ. Such an approach came under various criticisms which a few of them would be mentioned in this discussion. First, the confessional approach to the teaching of religious education was criticized to have lacked educational rationale (Jackson & O’Grady, 2007). This is to say it only sought to condition the minds of the learner and not to train them. Second, critics also have also said that it is unsuitable for children in an increasingly secular and plural society where only a minority acknowledge that religion is an important part of their live (Watson & Thompson, 2007).

It was on the basis of these criticisms levelled against the confessional approach which led to the rise of phenomenological approach to the teaching of religious education. Phenomenological religious education is associated with the teaching of world faiths in the common school (Yonah, 2011). As a concept, phenomenology has a long history as my present understanding of it, is generally associated with the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Ricoeur, 2007). Although Husserl’s influence on religion is indirect, his thinking planted the seed from which future philosophers and scholars in education connected his ideas in the study of

religion (Jackson, 2004). In brief, Husserl was generally interested with the classification and interpretation of 'phenomena'. In his study of the structure of consciousness he aimed to distinguish between the act of consciousness and the phenomena with which it was directed. He then proposed that our knowledge of the 'phenomena' or 'essences' would be possible if we 'bracket out' our presuppositions of the external world, a process he called *epoche* (Ricoeur, 2007). Yonah (2011) maintained that most scholars agree that it was in England where a clear connection between Husserl's ideas and religious education was made when Ninian Smart directed a team of researchers at the University of Lancaster on a project that focused on Religious Education (RE) in secondary schools. Based on this project, the idea of phenomenological RE as a distinct pedagogy for the teaching of religious education in the context of religious plurality in the common school, emerged (Smart, 1975).

3. Aims and the Use of Phenomenological Approach to the Teaching of Religious Education

Phenomenological approach to teaching religious education is premised on the fact that in contemporary society, children should be exposed to a wide range of religious views and not just about Christianity as had been the case before (Smart 1973). According to Grimmit (1978), this approach takes "Religion" as a field of study and seeks to show what is distinctive and unique about religion as a mode of thought and awareness. He then continues that "if religious education teachers could adopt the attitude of a shopkeeper with wares in his window which he is anxious for customers to examine, appreciate and even try on but not feel under any obligation to buy, then many of the problems connected with religious education would disappear" (p. 26).

This gives reason to the fact that phenomenological approach to the teaching of religious education presents a classroom scenario where teachers of religious education should present the religions to the learner and let them know their beliefs and practices but not to impose any religious faith on the learners as it was seen in the case of confessional approach. This distinctive character of the phenomenological approach makes it undogmatic. By the application of such an approach to the teaching of religious education, it meets the first three educational criteria outlined by Grimmit as: "the subject should incorporate a unique mode of thought and awareness which is worthwhile to man's understanding of himself and his situation", "the subject should serve to widen and deepen the child's cognitive perspective in a unique and valuable way and so contribute to his total development as a person" and "the subject should be taught in ways which ensure understanding and actively foster the child's capacity to think for himself" (p. 16). These three criteria form the seats of three questions upon which a subject that is to be included in the curriculum should answer. In effect if religious education is taught in a way that satisfy the conditions stated in the three criteria, then it can be included in the curriculum. In other words, this approach recognizes that the teaching of religious education should be governed by the same educational principles as any other subject. Thus, the aims of this approach to the teaching of religious education are expressed as follows:

1. The aim of religion is to promote understanding of the nature of religion itself as a distinctive way of interpreting experience.
2. The aim of religion is that of creating in pupils' certain capacities to understand and think about religion (Smart, 1968).

The first aim of teaching religious education has to do with the fact that it is to promote understanding of the nature of the religion itself as a distinctive way of interpreting the religious experience. Here, the religious educator is to presents the various phenomena in the religion in a way that would be understood by the learner. These phenomena are what Professor Ninian Smart referred to as the dimension of the religion or the structures of the religion. Explaining these dimension or structures in the religion is what is referred to as structural explanation. It is important here to take a look at these dimensions as explained by Smart (1996).

It is worth mentioning to state that the first dimension of religion in using the phenomenological approach to the teaching of religious education is the ritual dimension. Rituals here mean certain recurrent form of behaviour and practices. For example, prayer, asceticism, worship and yoga or spiritual meditation. This involves outward expression of religion but with an inner meaning. Rituals are symbolic in that they point to something other than themselves or they have an inner intention. Smart makes us aware that rituals need not to be formal. He cites an example of closing of the eyes to pray. Although this act is simple, it is ritual in nature. He further explained that it expresses an outward behaviour coordinated to an inner intention to make contact with or to participate in the invisible world (Smart, 1968). This relates that the teacher or religious education should teach the subject by presenting the ritual practices of the religion to the learner for the learner to understand and make meaning out of the ritual dimension.

Secondly, another dimension that the teacher of religion must present to the learner as far as phenomenological approach to teaching of the subject is concerned to promote understanding of religious education and to interpret the religious experience is mythological dimension. Rennie (2010) postulated that the collection of myths, images and stories through which the invisible world is symbolized is mythological

dimension of religion. In this discussion, a brief look at the definition of myth is a *sine a qua non*. Myths are sacred stories which are passed on from generation to generation and from a religious perspective about “the sacred” or the deity (Van-Esch & Van-Esch, 2012).

According to Smart (1996), myths are sacred because such stories work on several levels to amalgamate the narratives and explain what a particular tradition believes through a systematic and complete interpretation of god(s), the nature of humans and their place in the universe. It can be said that myths are stories about the origins of certain things. They cover transcendental events, entities, historical events and the origin of rituals, customs and taboos, origin of the world and the end of humans as well as the end of the world. This also reveals that the use of phenomenological approach tries to employ the teacher to present to the learners of religious education, the origin of events and deities of the religion in order for the learners to know and understand the genesis of the religion under discussion in the classroom.

The third dimension of the religion that the teacher of religious education should present to the learner is doctrinal dimension. Professor Ninian Smart says doctrine is an attempt to give system, clarity, and intellectual power to what is revealed through the mythological and symbolic language of religious faith and ritual (Smart, 1996). It can be inferred that doctrinal dimension of religion has to do with the rituals and experiences which are nurtured by religious institutions and are normally interpreted in certain dimensions. These involve beliefs of various kinds which are formally grouped as doctrines. The beliefs associated with the rituals form the doctrinal dimension of the religion. For example, the beliefs associated with the Eucharist in Christianity is the renewal of the covenant bond to keep the laws of God and His commandments through the death of his son Jesus. Another example is the belief in the Salat as seen in Islamic religion which shows the belief of complete purification of the physical nature of the adherents before appearing before Allah (the only one true God). It is obvious that these beliefs present to the learner of the religion the doctrines associated with the religion. In the teaching of religious education, it behooves on the teacher of religious education to present to the learners the various doctrines of the religion which are the intellectual explanation and the articulation of faith. Again, phenomenological approach to the teaching of religion reposes on the fact that the teacher of religious education must at all levels present to the learner the logical examination of the doctrines of the various religions. Here the emphasis is on the systematic and intellectual account of the religious beliefs.

The fourth dimension as given by Ninian Smart that the teacher of religion should present to the learner(s) is the ethical dimension. Of the ethical dimension, Smart says they are the code of ethics of the religion that controls the society. In the words of Grimmit (1978), he explained the ethical dimension of religion to mean a religion’s teaching about the conduct of the faithful, both in their individual lives and as members of the community and of the society. Additionally, ethical dimension focuses on laws in which a religion incorporates into its both formal and informal, either written or orally transmitted which adherents are expected to adopt (Smart, 1996). Furthermore, Malloch (2003) asserted that ethical dimension of the religion involves the set of rules, guidelines, or behavioural percepts for which members of the religion judge a person depending on the level of conformity to those percepts. He continued that such rules are often regarded as revealed from the supernatural realm or from the highest being. It has been stated emphatically that ethical dimension concerns how members of the religion should behave towards one another. For example, the Decalogue in Christianity and the taboos in West African Traditional Religion. This dimension is often the source of motivating factor for right conduct. It is also a concrete expression of the “Ultimate Reality”. In practice it shows that the teacher of religious education should be able to present to the learners the code of conducts (ethics) of each religion to the learners.

The fifth dimension regarding the use of phenomenological approach to the teaching of religious education proposed by Professor Ninian Smart is the social dimension. On social dimension, Professor Ninian Smart defines it as the “mode in which the religion in question is institutionalized whereby, through its institutions and teaching, it affects the community in which it finds itself” (Smart, 1969 p. 21). In its simplest form, the social dimension of the religion has to do with the organization of people to form an institution with various leaders and various responsibilities assigned to them. It is also related to the various social groups that arise within one religious group. The rise of these groups is a product of structures with each structure assigned with a responsibility which are for the expression and the continuation of the religious traditions they have inherited. In mentioning the institutions, reference can be made to the institution of priesthood and prophetism. Through such institutions, a religion comes to influence the larger society where it finds itself or operates. For example, the institution of priesthood in Christianity or West African Traditional Religion has helped to influence the society in such a way that bad omens when perceived in the society are prevented by the priest through praying with the members of the religious society or praying on their behalf. In the Old Testament it is seen that the institution of priesthood helped the Israelites in knowing whether or not they would succeed in wars. The teacher of religious education using the phenomenological approach to the teaching of religious education should present to the learners the ways in which the religion being taught the learners has influenced the society it operates.

The sixth dimension of the religion that the teacher of religion should present the learners is experiential dimension. This dimension is defined as human being having an encounter with the invisible world (Smart, 1969). To put it in another way it can be said that experiential dimension gives a picture of the visible or the physical having an encounter with the invisible. In regard, two types of religious experiences are found; ordinary and dramatic experience. The ordinary experience is accompanied by rituals and beliefs. For example, when a religious adherent has an intimate encounter with God while reading the scripture or praying, it is said that said an adherent had had an ordinary experience if the Supreme Being or God. On the contrary, a dramatic experience is said to have occurred when a religious adherent had an experience with God in theatrical manner. For example, Paul's Damascus Road encounter. It is important to add that the factor of religious experience is even more crucial when we consider the events and the human lives from which the various religions have emerged. The Buddha achieved enlightenment as he sat in meditation under the Bo-Tree. As a result of his shattering mystical experience, he believed that he had the secret of the cure for suffering and dissatisfaction of life in this world. Mention can also be made of inaugural visions of some of the Old Testament prophet and God spurred them to teach men in his name. It was also through such an experience that the Holy Prophet Mohammed (Salallahu Allahu Wassallam) began to preach and teach Islam which is the basis for the Islamic religion today. In experiential dimension, there is a sense of intimate closeness to the father (Smart, 1969). For example, the words of Jesus reveal a sense of intimate closeness between Him and the father. It applies to the teaching of religious education in the sense that the teacher of religious education should teach the religion in a way that will make the learner have knowledge to be able to have an intimate experience the Supreme Being.

4. Benefits to be Derived from the Study of Phenomenological Approach by Religious Educators

This section of the discussion would focus on explaining benefits that the religious educator can derive from the study of this pedagogy. The first benefit that the religious educator can derive from the studying such a pedagogy is that the religious educator would teach the subject in a way that it would not be based on the aim of converting students to any particular faith. In this respect it would put the religious educator in the position that no religion can be exalted or condemned against the other.

Secondly, the teacher of religion would benefit from the study of the pedagogy as it would lead him or her to teach the religion with no intention of teaching and instructing the learners to follow strictly the morals of a particular religion. For example, a Christian Religious Studies teacher in a senior high school would not be in the position to strictly teach his or her students to follow strictly the moral lessons derived from any of the religious stories. However, it important to note that although the students would learn the moral lessons presented to them by the religious educator, it can be said with no iota of doubt that the teacher did not play the role of imposing the religion on the students.

Thirdly, the teacher of religion would also have the ability to learn and present to the learners in a comprehensive manner the origin, doctrines and beliefs of each religion. This agrees with the fact that a distinctive feature of phenomenological approach is that it avoids reductionism. Reductionism is a method whereby scholars try to reduce and even trivialize religious phenomena to purely sociological, psychological, anthropological, economic or environmental terms (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). Such reductions according to Moreau (2001) ignore the complexity of the human experience, impose social values on transcendental issues and ignore the unique intentionality of the religious participant.

Fourthly, the religious educator would be able to present to the learners the ethics of the religion being taught to the learners with no elements of biases. It is asserted that every religion has its code of conduct that brings out the various practices and beliefs that the community or the society in which the religion is situated upholds.

Finally, a teacher of religious education would be able to teach the student to learn and know how to have an intimate experience of the Supreme Being. At this stage the learner would be able to appreciate and know when he or she had had an intimate experience with the Supreme Being. This involves informing pupils in a descriptive, critical and experiential manner about what religion is, and increasing their sensitivity to the areas of experience from which a religious view of life may arise. My point here is that it should stimulate within pupils, and assist them in the search for, a personal view of meaning in life, whilst enabling them to understand the beliefs and commitments of others.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper gives comprehensive explanations of the phenomenological approach to the teaching of religious education. It has been established that this approach to the teaching of religious education does not stress the acceptance of a particular faith or belief system, which is the privilege of religious bodies to do, nor does it press for conversion. It is committed to a search for religious meaning, purpose and value which is open to all men. It reflects a multiplicity of beliefs and non-beliefs. No belief system is seen as the only source of value in a society. Professor Ninian Smart, who is a leading advocate of the approach has been careful to point

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