Examination of the discipline of the History of Religions (Religionswissenschaft), of which the phenomenology of religion will be viewed as one 'branch', reveals that the central contemporary problems are methodological in nature. Most of the nineteenth and twentieth century approaches to religious phenomena, while involving a vast accumulation of religious data, have tended to be methodologically uncritical, highly subjective and normative. My position is that if Mircea Eliade, who is considered the foremost contemporary phenomenologist of religion, represents a methodological improvement over previous approaches, this is because of an impressive hermeneutical framework which serves as the foundation for his phenomenological approach to religious phenomena.

Throughout our formulation of the nature of Eliade's phenomenological approach, our attempt to relate his phenomenology to various methodological problems and to concepts in phenomenological philosophy, and our suggestions for new directions in moving beyond his phenomenology, the reader will notice the crucial importance of concepts of 'structure' and 'creativity'. Structure is at the foundation of Eliade's methodology. Eliade will claim that religious experience has a specific religious structure; that in terms of the unique structure of sacralization, we may distinguish religious from non-religious phenomena. He will attempt to interpret meaning through structure; to grasp the meaning of a particular religious phenomenon by reintegrating it within its structural system of symbolic associations.

In Eliade's phenomenology, creativity emerges not out of some void but from structure, not from nothingness but from what we do with structures that are in some sense 'given'. Creativity emerges when we can experience those fundamental structures of the world, those essential symbolic structures, and 'revalorize' them so that we 'burst open' the prevailing limiting ways of experiencing reality to reveal
new universes of meaning. Not only will Eliade view the history of religious manifestations as a creative process, but he will criticize ‘modern’ society for its provincialism and will suggest possibilities for new creative breakthroughs and new philosophical anthropologies.

There are three distinguishable but interrelated parts to this study. In Part I, we examine the leading nineteenth and twentieth century approaches and arrive at some understanding of the present hermeneutical situation in the History of Religions. In order to understand Eliade’s approach, it is necessary to comprehend the contributions and limitations of the evolutionists, functionalists, and other anthropologists; of the sociologists, psychologists, and phenomenologists; in short, of the various approaches which have defined the context within which Eliade interprets the meaning of religious phenomena. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 provide a brief but rather comprehensive introduction to the major approaches in the History of Religions.

In Part II, we formulate the key methodological notions which provide the foundation for Eliade’s phenomenology: the dialectic of the sacred and the profane and the ‘autonomous’, universal, coherent, structural systems of symbolic associations. In terms of the interaction of these methodological notions, we can begin to determine on what basis Mircea Eliade distinguishes religious from nonreligious phenomena and interprets the meaning of a religious phenomenon. In contrast to the numerous interpreters of Eliade who have submitted that he has never been concerned with questions of methodology and is methodologically uncritical, we maintain that Eliade has an impressive methodological framework of interpretation. This is probably the first attempt to ground Eliade’s methodology in his view of symbolism.

Part III presents the most controversial analysis in the book and at the same time offers the greatest possibilities for new directions and creative ‘openings’. Here we go far beyond anything Mircea Eliade has ever written. We raise many methodological issues implicit in his approach and endeavor to modify his phenomenological approach to render it more adequate and to suggest many creative possibilities for future research.

Several sections of this book are revisions of previously published

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