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Annemarie Schimmel's Phenomenology: an Approach to Religious Experience in Islamic Studies

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: 6 December 2024	<i>This study aims to analyze and explore the phenomenological approach in Islamic Studies from the perspective of Annemarie Schimmel, as well as her contribution to Islamic Studies. It aims to offer a deeper understanding of Islamic beliefs, practices, and spiritual experiences. The research uses a literature review (library research) with a historical figure study approach. The researcher collected data from scientific articles, journals, books, and relevant documents, which were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively using content analysis. The findings of this study reveal that Schimmel's phenomenology is an approach that seeks to understand and penetrate the essence of religion by first examining its phenomena and then delving into the deeper layers of human responses to God until reaching the most profound sacred essence of each religion the centre, the divine, or Deus absconditus. This approach aims to interpret the meaning of Islamic teachings as understood and experienced by its followers rather than based on preconceived notions or the researcher's observations. In practice, this approach employs the concentric ring model theory, which helps create a more empathetic and objective understanding of the religious experiences of Muslims. This theory can serve as a valuable tool for interfaith dialogue and enhancing the image of Islam in the Western world.</i>
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Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dan mengeksplorasi pendekatan fenomenologi dalam Studi Islam perspektif Annemarie Schimmel, serta kontribusinya terhadap

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Studi Islam. Hal ini dapat memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang keyakinan, praktik keagamaan, dan pengalaman spiritual dalam Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan kajian pustaka (*library research*) dengan pendekatan kajian sejarah tokoh. Pengumpulan data dari artikel ilmiah, jurnal, buku dan dokumen yang relevan dan dianalisis secara deskriptif secara kualitatif menggunakan analisis konten. Hasil penelitian ini menjelaskan bahwa fenomenologi Schimmel adalah pendekatan yang berusaha memahami dan masuk ke jantung dari sebuah agama dengan cara menelaah lebih dulu fenomena yang terjadi dan selanjutnya menelaah lapisan-lapisan yang lebih dalam yang kemudian dilanjutkan dengan menelaah lebih dalam lagi dari tanggapan manusia terhadap Tuhan hingga dia mencapai intisari suci yang paling dalam dari masing-masing agama, pusat, sang Ilahi atau *deus absconditus*. Pendekatan ini berusaha menyimpulkan makna ajaran Islam sesuai dengan apa yang diceritakan dan dipahami oleh pemeluknya bukan oleh pra-konsepsi dan hasil pengamatan penelitiannya. Secara aplikatif pendekatan ini menggunakan teori model cincin konsentris yang membantu menciptakan pemahaman yang lebih empatik dan objektif terhadap pengalaman religius umat Islam, serta dapat digunakan sebagai alat dialog antaragama dan memperbaiki citra Islam di dunia Barat.

I. INTRODUCTION

Islamic studies is a method of studying Islam, encompassing its teachings, history, and worship practices in daily life throughout the development of civilization. Initially, Islamic studies had minimal space and were only discussed in the context of religious history, comparative studies of religion, or religious science in general. Along with the development of science, more and more scientists are studying related to Islamic studies. The approach in Islamic studies has attracted the interest of many experts in the field. However, when studying Islam, there are differences in motives and goals between Muslims and non-Muslims (Mujib, 2015). For Muslims, the purpose of studying Islam is to understand and appreciate its teachings and to apply them in daily life. Meanwhile, for those outside of Islam, the goal is to know the teachings and practices of Islam in daily life. Apart from being a science, the study of Islam by non-Muslims also sometimes has political and economic motives, as happened in Europe in the history of Islamic studies (Alfian et al., 2020).

Islamic studies began to be developed in the West by Orientalists, later followed by Muslim scholars in various parts of the world, especially in the Middle East, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. This phenomenon can be observed

with the emergence of orientalist, Islamologists and Muslim scholars, such as Ignaz Goldziher, Thosihiko Izutsu, Annemarie Schimmel, Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Amina Wadud, Muhammad Arkhoun, Muhammad Syahrur, Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabiri, Abdullah Saeed, Hasan Hanafi, Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, Mukti Ali, Harun Nasution and so on. Various approaches have been used to understand and analyze religious phenomena in the context of Islam (Kasdi et al., 2020). One approach that has attracted the attention of academics is phenomenology, a method that focuses on the direct understanding and interpretation of human experience (Smail et al., 2015).

The idea of studying Islam from a phenomenological perspective began to emerge in Schimmel's work as a response to the irrelevant and often reductive representations of Islam found in various scholarly discourses. The phenomenological approach in her work emphasizes that Islam has a vibrant spiritual tradition that emphasizes aesthetic and mystical dimensions. This research aims to develop Schimmel's perspective by exploring experiential aspects of Islamic spirituality, which remain largely unexplored in Islamic studies. As such, it seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of Islam as a dynamic and lived religious tradition (Asdlori, 2023; Malik, 2020).

For many historians of Religion, Islam emerged later, described as a religion that was not significantly different from the cult, anti-Christian, humanist, and primitive Religions (Ridho & Thibburruhany, 2019). Islam itself has offered a wide range of areas for development for anyone who has expertise in using phenomenological approaches or other methods employed explicitly in religious studies research (Marsudi, 2017). Annemarie Schimmel is a renowned German scholar recognized for her significant contributions to the study of Islam, particularly in Islamic mysticism (sufism) and Persian literature. Schimmel was an orientalist who mastered many languages, including Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish, and dedicated his life to understanding and bridging understanding between the Islamic and Western worlds (Asdlori, 2023).

According to Hasbiansyah (2018), the phenomenological approach allows researchers to "suspend all assumptions and place themselves in the perspective of

the subject so that authentic meaning can be revealed." This is in line with the epoché principle promoted by Schimmel, namely the exclusion of presumptions so that researchers can truly "enter" the world of religious meaning (Hasbiansyah, 2018). This suggests that phenomenology can uncover the most profound meanings of religious experience that social theories cannot adequately explain. In his most influential work, *Deciphering the Signs of God: a Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (1992), Schimmel introduced a model of understanding Islamic religiosity through the structure of the "concentric ring" (Schimmel, 1998).

This model describes the religious experience as something multilayered, beginning with external phenomena such as rituals, places of worship, sacred texts, and symbolic objects, then moving inward toward layers of theological reflection and personal spiritual experience until it reaches the deepest centre of the transcendent divine reality (*Deus absconditus*) (Mahmudi et al., 2024; Netton, 1996). The uniqueness of this approach lies in its ability to preserve the sacredness of religious experience without reducing it to mere sociological, psychological, or historical constructions. In this case, Schimmel's version of phenomenology is a framework that harmonizes academic rigour with spiritual empathy (Novayani, 2019).

The decision to focus this research on Schimmel's phenomenological approach to Studying Islam is driven by her numerous works; Schimmel seeks to explain that Islam is one of the most misunderstood religious religions, especially in the Western world. His works are from his sympathy for Islam, which, for a group of Westerners, is a sin (Dodi, 2018). Much of the existing literature tends to reduce Islam to legal, political, or doctrinal dimensions, often neglecting its rich spiritual, aesthetic, and experiential elements. Schimmel emerges as a unique figure who challenges such reductive portrayals through her deep linguistic and cultural immersion in Islamic texts and traditions. Her application of phenomenology enables a more empathetic, descriptive, and spiritually attuned understanding of Islam, particularly through the lens of Sufism, symbolism, and devotional practices (Syafii et al., 2024).

By examining Schimmel's thought, this research explores how phenomenology can serve as an alternative methodological lens to grasp Islam as a lived and deeply

personal religious tradition. This focus is not only academically relevant but also necessary in an era where misrepresentations of Islam continue to circulate widely. We need to understand the reasons why Annemarie Schimmel chose to approach and understand Islam from a phenomenological perspective, particularly in light of the widespread misrepresentations and reductive portrayals of Islam in Western scholarly discourse. Her contributions lie in presenting Islam not merely as a system of beliefs or laws but as a dynamic, experiential tradition rooted in personal and collective spirituality. Apart from her contributions, implications have been drawn by Muslim scientists and communities, primarily through the application of Schimmel's phenomenology in Islamic studies (Zubayda, 2024).

Schimmel's application of phenomenology in Islamic studies offers notable implications for Muslim scholars and the broader Muslim community. For scholars, her work introduces a descriptive and experience-centered methodology that moves beyond normative or doctrinal analysis, encouraging deeper engagement with Islamic religiosity's inner, symbolic, and emotional dimensions. This approach opens up new pathways for research in fields such as Islamic spirituality, ritual practice, and religious aesthetics while also challenging the dominance of external and often Orientalist perspectives. For Muslim communities, Schimmel's writings serve as a reaffirmation of Islam's spiritual richness and cultural depth, helping to counter prevailing stereotypes that portray the religion as rigid or monolithic. By emphasizing Sufi practices, her phenomenological perspective supports reclaiming spiritual identity and encourages a more compassionate and inclusive engagement with religious diversity. In this way, Schimmel's contributions enrich academic discourse and inspire reflective self-understanding within the lived experience of contemporary Muslims (Mahridawati & Bahri, 2023).

Considering the scientific method, the phenomenological approach has an advantage over other approaches because the essence of phenomenology is the denial of the assumptions of human nature, the nature of emotions, the characteristics of society, and the characteristics of the world, such as the themes in the sociological approach, as well as history and psychology which are full of "ready-made" theories and such theories the potential for bravado and manipulation

of facts (Moran, 2018). This approach may also be opposed, as are other approaches. However, this is where the role of phenomenological participation is concrete and objective. Phenomenology within Islamic studies has become a crucial framework for understanding the lived experiences of Muslims.

This approach offers a unique opportunity to explore the subjective and deeply personal ways individuals engage with their Faith. My interest in Annemarie Schimmel stems from her significant contributions to phenomenology in Islamic studies, particularly her insightful approach to Sufism and her ability to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western perspectives on Islam. Schimmel is widely acclaimed for her distinctive approach to Islamic studies, especially for applying phenomenology in studying Sufism. What distinguishes Schimmel's work is her remarkable ability to merge academic rigour with spiritual sensitivity, fostering a profound humanistic understanding of Islamic mysticism. In her work "*Deciphering the Signs of God*", she exemplifies this phenomenological approach, not merely analyzing Islam's external phenomena but also immersing herself in the internal experiences of Muslims, illuminating the religious consciousness that shapes their practices.

Although scholars like Ignaz Goldziher and Toshihiko Izutsu have made significant contributions to Islamic studies, Schimmel's work stands out due to her phenomenological perspective. In contrast to scholars who primarily emphasize historical or comparative aspects of Islam, Schimmel focused on understanding the lived realities of Muslims. Her emphasis on mysticism and her ability to blend the spiritual with the academic are key elements of her contribution, making her an exceptional figure in the study of Islam. While previous studies have analyzed specific facets of Schimmel's work, such as her contributions to Sufism and her feminist interpretations of Islamic texts, this article aims to comprehensively examine her phenomenological approach to Islamic studies. By integrating Schimmel's concentric ring model with Islamic teachings, this research offers a novel perspective on how Islamic spirituality and religious experiences can be understood in layers, extending from external practices to the most profound, sacred essence.

This integrated framework, which has not been extensively explored in earlier research, represents the unique contribution of this study.

As for the related research that has been carried out by Ahmad Purwanto (Purwanto, 2015), Abdul Hafidz (Hafidz, 2019), Afif Syaiful Mahmudin (Mahmudin, 2021), and Junaidi Hasanah (Junaidi & Hasanah, 2021). The study presents a more comprehensive and systematic study of Annemarie Schimmel's phenomenological approach. Previous research has focused on specific thematic aspects such as feminism, education, or basic concepts of phenomenology. However, this article integrates three worlds within Schimmel's phenomenological approach: the world of external manifestation, the world of imagination, and the world of experience, ultimately reducing them to the reality of divine objectivity. However, this article highlights the application of Schimmel's phenomenology in Islam, utilizing the concentric ring as a unique framework of analysis that has not been explored in depth in previous research.

Based on some of the research above, this article aims to analyze religious experiences and confirm Annemarie Schimmel's phenomenological approach to Islamic Studies. This article will explore Annemarie Schimmel's interest in phenomenological approaches, which can offer a deeper understanding of religious beliefs, practices, and spiritual experiences within Islam. Additionally, this article will describe Annemarie Schimmel's contributions to applying phenomenology in Islamic Studies. This article will offer new insights for researchers and academics while encouraging further application of phenomenological approaches to expand our understanding of Islam. This article will make an important contribution to the development of Islamic Studies as a growing and relevant discipline.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach to comprehensively overview Annemarie Schimmel's phenomenological perspective. The method used in this study is library research, which aims to provide a theoretical foundation and in-depth background in Islamic studies, utilizing a phenomenological approach. By reviewing books, scientific journals, articles, reports from international

organizations, and relevant Islamic study documents (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This is done to establish a theoretical foundation and facilitate the conclusion of the discussion, making it easier for the author to complete this research by drawing on related sources.

The technique used to collect literature research data in this study involves reading primary, supporting, and other library data sources. The primary data in this study are drawn from a book by Annemarie Schimmel entitled "*Deciphering the Signs of God: a Phenomenological Approach to Islam*". The secondary data are from articles, books, and proceedings related to Annemarie Schimmel's phenomenological work. In the data analysis used in this study, all the data obtained are presented descriptively and analyzed using content analysis. The data are then interpreted and displayed as a result (Miles et al., 2014; Moleong, 2018).

To ensure data validity, various validation techniques were employed to enhance the credibility of the research results, informed by a literature review. One of the techniques employed was source triangulation, which involved collecting data from relevant primary and secondary sources. The primary source used in this study was Annemarie Schimmel's book, "*Deciphering the Signs of God: a Phenomenological Approach to Islam*," while secondary sources included scientific articles, journals, and books related to phenomenology in Islamic studies. Using source triangulation aims to confirm existing findings and improve analysis accuracy by comparing various perspectives in the literature.

To ensure the validity of the interpretation, this study also involved examination by experts in the fields of phenomenology and Islamic studies. These experts provided input and criticism of the analysis of Schimmel's work, ensuring that the understanding and application of the phenomenological approach in Islamic studies discussed in this article are consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Schimmel. Cross-referencing techniques were also applied in this research to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the data obtained. This process involved comparing the findings in Schimmel's work with other relevant literature. Cross-referencing aimed to verify that the analysis conducted was academically accountable and free from significant interpretive errors.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Phenomenological Approach in Islamic Studies

In the context of Islamic studies, a phenomenological understanding involves applying phenomenological principles to comprehend the religious experiences of Muslim individuals. This approach enables researchers to delve into the various dimensions of Religion in Muslim society in greater depth without being constrained by a particular doctrinal or theological framework. *First*, understanding phenomenology in the context of Islamic studies entails acknowledging the complexity of individual religious experiences (Malik, 2020; Sihabuddin, 2020). Phenomenology offers an inclusive approach to understanding different religious practices, beliefs, and spiritual experiences.

Furthermore, to understand phenomenology in the context of Islamic studies, it is essential to recognize that the experience of religion is inseparable from the social, cultural, and historical context in which the individual lives. The understanding of phenomenology in the context of Islamic studies also emphasizes the subjective aspect of religious experience (Pahutar et al., 2024).

Each individual has unique perceptions, emotions, and meanings related to their religious practices. Phenomenology enables researchers to capture more effectively the richness and diversity of Muslim individuals' religious experiences without neglecting their personal and subjective dimensions (Nisa et al., 2024). The terms "insider" and "outsider" emerged when studying Islam as a religion. In the Muslim perspective, an insider is an insider (Muslim) who studies Islam, while an outsider is an outsider (non-Muslim) who wants to study Islam. The insider and outsider problem refers to the notion that only the adherents of a religion can understand it correctly and perfectly, while outsiders who do not share that religion's beliefs cannot (Novayani, 2019). It is similar to John Wisdom's opinion that the owner of experience can access his experience, something that cannot be shared with others (Edi Sungkowo, 2022).

This is because the scope of outsiders feels so narrow if the above is applied; therefore, the phenomenological approach is promoted by Richard C. Martin, who is also agreed upon by M. Amin Abdullah. However, in his application to the field of

religious studies, Fazlur Rahman outlined the requirements for outsiders when researching other religions (Babullah et al., 2023; Edi Sungkowo, 2022). Among them is that they (researchers) should not have a hostile attitude or prejudice. They must also be open-minded, sympathetic, honest and sincere. That attitude will be able to set aside and even eliminate the problem of differences between insiders and outsiders. Furthermore, in applying phenomenology as an acceptable approach to studying Islam, Fazlur Rahman argues that the Qur'an and Hadith must remain normative reference points (Waghid & Davids, 2018).

According to Fazlur Rahman, the Qur'an and Hadith must be able to control and even modify the method of phenomenology, which, if not modified, phenomenology will tend to be relatively difficult to cure. (Rahman, 1984) As for the steps that can be taken by a researcher who wants to apply and use phenomenology as one of the methods of approach in the study of religious research, it can be seen as compiled by Creswell & Clark (2011): *First*, researchers need to understand the philosophical perspective behind the phenomenological approach, particularly the concept of how people experience phenomena. The concept of epoché is important, suspending preconceived ideas about a phenomenon to understand it through informants' voices. *Second*, researchers write research questions that explore the meaning of an individual's experience and ask individuals to describe their daily experiences. *Third*, researchers then collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied. This information is gathered through lengthy interviews (supplemented by reflections and descriptions developed beforehand from artistic works) with informants consisting of 5 to 25 people.

Fourth, the steps of phenomenological data analysis are generally the same as those discussed by all psychological phenomenologists. All psychological phenomenologists use a similar series of steps. The procedural design is divided into questions or horizontalizations. The units are then transformed into clusters of meanings expressed in psychological or phenomenological concepts. Ultimately, these transformations are unified to form a comprehensive description of the experience, encompassing a textual account of what is experienced and a structural

representation of how it is experienced. Some phenomenologists modify this approach by incorporating the meaning of personal experience through single-subject analysis before proceeding to inter-subject analysis and examining the role of context in the process. *Fifth*, Phenomenological reports conclude with a better understanding by the reader of the unchanging essence of experience while acknowledging that a single, complete meaning of experience does not exist. For example, all experiences have a "basic" structure (the sadness over the death of a loved one is the same, whether the loved one is a pet dog, a parrot, or a small child). A reader of such a report will respond, "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that."

In addition to the concepts presented by Creswell and Clark (2011), the phenomenological approach to the study of religion is also systematically explained by Gerardus van der Leeuw in his book, "Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in the Phenomenology of Religion." He offers four main steps in understanding religious phenomena. *First*, researchers must classify various religious phenomena into specific categories, such as sacrifice, sacraments, sacred places, sacred times, sacred words or writings, festivals, and myths. This classification seeks to understand the value and significance of each element within a religious context. *Second*, researchers are encouraged to engage in interpolation or personal involvement to participate in the study of religious life. By blending in and participating directly, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the religious meaning from within rather than merely observing it from the outside.

Third, is to perform "epochè," which involves suspending all initial judgments. By being neutral and non-judgmental, researchers can see religious phenomena as they are, without prejudice or prior assumptions. *Fourth*, researchers must identify structural relationships between the collected information to build a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the religion being studied. According to Van Der Leeuw, if these four steps are carried out sequentially and naturally, they will result in an authentic understanding based on reality or the manifestation of Revelation itself. He also emphasizes that the phenomenological approach cannot stand alone

but must be combined with other approaches to maintain objectivity and depth of analysis.

Annemarie Schimmel's Perspective Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology is the most relevant approach to studying religion. This approach will lead to a deeper understanding of the nature of a religion, which presents its complexity in research activities. Phenomenology is an approach used in research to understand religion from the perspective of its adherents. Phenomenology does not assess much and tends to ignore the preconceptions of a researcher who wants to conduct religious studies (Asdlori, 2023; Moran, 2018). Schimmel, one of the German professors with a deep concern for Islamic studies (Islamologist), applies this approach in her exploration of Muslim religious beliefs and practices. Through her work, she highlights how Islamic spirituality is manifested in various cultural and social contexts, emphasizing symbols, practices, and inner experiences as important elements in understanding the reality of Muslim religiosity (Schimmel, 1996).

Schimmel also contributed to the definition of religion and developed a phenomenological approach to studying religion. The religion at the centre of Schimmel's research is Islam (Hafidz, 2019). So, the meaning of the phenomenological approach that he developed was explicitly aimed at Islam. Schimmel sees that the phenomenological approach is very suitable for understanding Islam. Because in Islam, *"Everything can become an aya a sign, not only the verse of the Qur'an."* All of God's creations glorify His greatness in their way. Therefore, everything in this realm can be viewed through the lens of religion, leading to an understanding of the Almighty, specifically through His three great verses: the verse of *Kauniyah*, *Insaniyah*, and the *Qur'aniyah*. Of course, it will come to The Essence of God, which is transcendental and universal (Bhat, 2022).

According to Schimmel, the phenomenological approach method is legitimate for studying and expressing Islam. He argued that Islam must be seen and understood through the lens of Islam itself or understood as Muslims understand it. By understanding the phenomena experienced by Muslims in Their Religion, encompassing both the understanding of nature and living things, as well as their

rituals, it becomes clear that there is plurality in the religion of humanity in this world because it may occur in one religion and also occur in other religions or vice versa. Through his work "*Deciphering the Signs of God: a Phenomenological Approach to Islam*," Schimmel explains that there are things that are sacred and sacred in Islam. In Schimmel's view, these sacred aspects are found in nature and culture, space and time, deeds, God's words and books, individuals and society, and God and His creation (Junaidi & Hashanah, 2021; Schimmel, 1996).

The phenomenological approach presented in Schimmel's work seeks to portray the face of Islam as friendly and full of love. Schimmel, who was interested in the Sufi world, concluded that the greatness of God can be understood from the signs that exist in this universe (Chishti & Khan, 2023). This phenomenological approach, as seen in Schimmel's perspective, is not original to his thinking, as he honestly admits that his work was heavily influenced by Friedrich Heiler, who heavily influenced his work. This is reinforced by Schimmel, who revealed

"I believe that the phenomenological approach is well suited to a better understanding of Islam, especially the model which Friedrich Heiler developed in his comprehensive study 'Erscheinungsformen und Eesen der Religion' on whose structure I have modelled this book" (Stuttgart, 1961; Schimmel, 1996).

Schimmel saw that Heiler had tried to get to the core of religion by first understanding the phenomenon of religiosity and then the deeper layer, which was man's response to the dimension of the Godhead, until finally, he reached the holiest part of every religion, which is its noumenal centre point or *dues absconditus*, that is, the Substance that cannot be reached by logic (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010).

In practical terms, phenomenology, according to Schimmel, is to try to understand and get to the heart of religion by first studying its phenomena and then the deeper and deeper layers of man's response to God until he reaches the deepest sacred essence of each religion, the centre, the God or in the term of Frederich Heiler *dues absconditus*. Thus, the highest spiritual experience will be triggered by observing the sensed object. Like the form of the wind, it can be known from the movement of grass and leaves (Schimmel, 1996). Essentially, research employing a phenomenological approach is quite challenging and highly structured, allowing for an accurate representation of the essence of religion. Why is this so? Because the

phenomenological researcher must describe what it is when defining a religion through the understanding its adherents possess (Sarfraz et al., 2023).

In this research activity, the dominant researcher did not observe any preconceptions before or after. Activities that are of the nature of judging or judging are hardly found in phenomenological research. Frederich Heiler is a figure who has contributed a lot to Schimmel because many of Schimmel's critical thoughts were born from the study of Heiler's works. Another figure is Husyan An-Nuri, a mystic figure from Baghdad (Syafii et al., 2024). Reading the thoughts expressed by Nuri in some of his monumental works prompted Schimmel to initiate the concept of the concentric cousin model, which can be used as an analytical tool in conducting religious research through a phenomenological approach (Sulaiman, 2019). The concentric ring model designed by Schimmel is divided into four layers of spirals as follows (Schimmel, 1996).

The outermost layer of the concentric ring model by Scimmel is the world of external manifestations. This layer encompasses aspects of religion that are visible and observable, including sacred objects, space, time, numbers, and rituals such as cult activities. It also involves sacred words that are spoken and written. The sacred word consists of the word of God, the word of God, and holy silence. The word of God includes mantras, the name of God, myths, legends, prophecies, teachings, and doctrines. Words to God include prayers in worship, penance, praise, thanksgiving, supplication, and surrender. These holy words are complemented by what is referred to as holy silence. In addition, there are also sacred individuals and communities, which means that all things within reach are physically observable, visible, audible, and tangible. This means that religion is not an empty spirituality but a physical union with the Divine. Schimmel emphasizes that religion is based on physical manifestation, uniting the divine with the material world.

The first inner layer is the world of religious imagination, which includes thoughts, images, and ideas about God's invisible nature and visible works. This layer involves key conceptual understandings of divinity, beginning with theology, which is concerned with studying God's nature and existence. This layer also contains cosmological conceptions of salvation, including the origin of humanity and

the concept of sin. The next conception, Revelation, or the perception of how the divine will is manifested in the spoken word, history, and the human soul, is the focus of Christology. Finally, eschatology considers the fulfilment of divine promises in the afterlife or future. This intellectual and imaginative framework bridges external practices with doctrinal teachings about creation, human destiny, and redemption.

The second inner layer focuses on the concept of a sacred and profound relationship between humans and the divine, characterized by reverence for the divine, holy fear, faith, and trust in God's self-revelation, as well as hope and love, which are expressed through longing, submission, and devotion. These experiences bring people to a phase of inner peace, joy, and a deep-seated urge to share Their Faith. This layer also encompasses extraordinary religious phenomena, including sudden conversion, divine inspiration, mystical enlightenment, visions, ecstatic states, and supernatural manifestations such as stigmata or glossolalia. These experiences represent the transformative power of personal, transcendent, and often beyond doctrinal explanation.

The centre of the layers is Divine Reality. Furthermore, this core represents God as revealed (*Deus revelatus*) and hidden (*Deus absconditus*). Deus' revelations are the sense of the personal and relational divinity that embodies holiness, love, and truth, while Deus' absconding is the sense of the ineffable absolute unity. This duality of representation synthesizes all the outer layers, from physical rituals and intellectual conceptions to inner experiences, culminating in the perception of the divine presence.

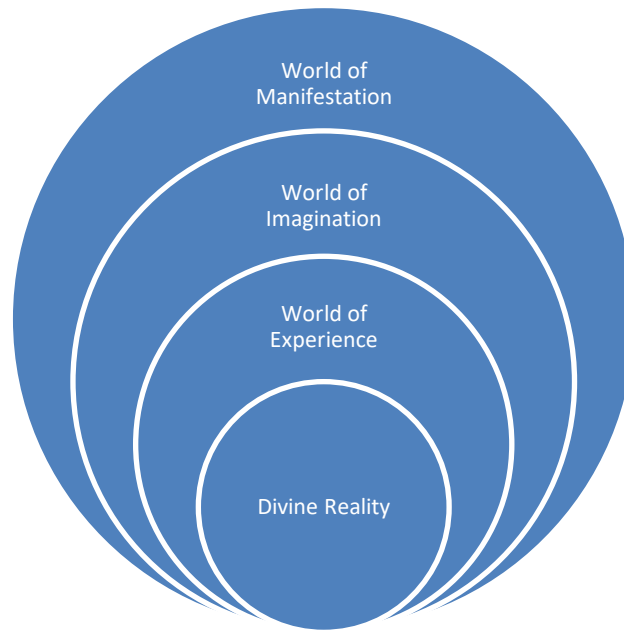


Figure 1. *Annemarie Schimmel's concentric ring visualization*

According to Schimmel, the four layers above are connected and interrelated, with physical forms such as expressions, thoughts, and feelings ultimately linked to divine reality. However, divine reality will never be fully revealed. Therefore, God's creation will be related to God's substance, which exists by itself. The Concentric Ring is a metaphor that describes how spiritual and mystical experiences develop in layers, centred on a deep core often related to God or other transcendental experiences. This concept can be understood as a structure containing several layers that interact with each other but are all centred on the same core. From the four layers of Schimmel's concentric ring, it can be understood that:

First, Different Layers: Concentric rings describe the existence of several interconnected layers of understanding or experience that focus on a single centre. For example, in the context of Sufism, these layers encompass various physical, emotional, and intellectual experiences, all of which ultimately lead to a deeper and purer spiritual understanding or experience. These layers illustrate how humans can simultaneously experience this dimension of the world, but ultimately lead to the consciousness of the transcendent.

Second, Deep centre and transcendental core: the core of this concentric ring is an understanding or experience connected to a higher dimension, such as God, the unity of the universe, or universal consciousness. In the context of Sufism, this

core can be a profound experience with God, achieved through self-emptying and a spiritual quest. These experiences can be beyond the reach of rational knowledge and are more direct, transcending the material world.

Third, Interactions between layers: Concentric rings also describe interactions between different layers of experience. It suggests that each layer in the human experience (such as the physical world or psychological dimension) interacts and contributes to a deeper understanding. This approach views that there is no spiritual experience entirely separate from everyday life but that they are interrelated and contribute to an overall understanding of reality.

Fourth, Phenomenology as an approach: Schimmel employs a phenomenological approach to explore these mystical experiences in the concentric rings theory. In this case, phenomenology focuses on how subjective experiences of God or transcendental reality can be understood and analyzed without neglecting the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of those experiences. The concentric ring serves as an analytical framework for mapping the various layers and dimensions that comprise the spiritual experience.

Overall, the concentric rings in Schimmel's phenomenological approach facilitate the description of how mystical or transcendental experiences are layered and centred on a spiritual core. Through this theory, Schimmel invites us to understand the depth of spiritual experience as a structure that involves the interaction between seemingly different layers, ultimately leading to an understanding of a larger, transcendental reality (Netton, 1996; Sulaeman, 2020). Thus, Schimmel views phenomenology as an approach to studying Islam by examining first its phenomena (the world of manifestations outside Islam) and then the deeper and deeper layers of human responses to God (the world of imagination and religious experience) until reaching the deepest sacred essence of each Religion, the centre, the God, *Deus absconditus* (the objective world of religion).

Schimmel developed the phenomenological approach in response to a call to the heart, awakening Western Orientalists who believed that studying religion, especially Islam, required a broader approach than the historical or scientific methods they had employed. In Schimmel's view, such approaches, social,

historical, anthropological, and the like, only at the outward level or external aspects of a religion, which prevents them from diving into the heart of the religion it is religion being studied; this approach is often contaminated by Western Islamologists' preconceptions, who consider Islam to be a religion that contains errors, is considered inhuman, and is primitive (Schimmel, 1996). The phenomenological approach becomes significant, soothing, and solvable in understanding Islam because it is based on the adherents' point of view, not the researcher's (Sihabuddin, 2020; Syafii et al., 2024).

Schimmel's above efforts have contributed significantly to integrating, marrying, and reconciling Islamic studies in this contemporary era through a phenomenological approach. Because Islam does not only consist of exoteric but also esoteric aspects, let the Muslim or the object of his research tell himself about his experience in practising a religion. And what they reveal is a truth that must be accepted. This solution aligns with Amin Abdullah's statement that the phenomenological approach is a method that can bridge the study of contemporary Islamic studies (Abdullah, 2015). Those are some of Schimmel's contributions to defending Islam in the West by integrating, reconciling, bridging, and reconciling through a phenomenological approach as a middle-way approach in Islamic studies in this contemporary era. For his contribution and success in creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding between the West and Muslims, it is not wrong if, in 1995, German Book Traders chose Schimmel as the winner of the Peace Prize.

Implementation of Islamic studies: Annemarie Schimmel's Phenomenology

The World is an External Manifestation of Islam

Annemarie Schimmel's phenomenological approach to Islamic studies begins by examining the world of external manifestations of religion, namely various phenomena that are considered sacred in Islamic nature and culture. He distinguishes these aspects into three categories: the inanimate realm (such as stones, sky, water, and light), the living realm (such as plants and animals), and man-made objects that are considered sacred (such as weapons, sticks, turbans,

and weaving) (Schimmel, 1996). All of these elements are seen as having symbolic and spiritual significance in the religious experience of Muslims.

Next, Schimmel focuses on space and time, which are considered sacred. The holy space encompasses various locations, including caves, houses, mosques, tombs, the Kaaba, and holy cities such as Makkah, Medina, and Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the holy time begins with the prophetic history of Muhammad, the Hijri calendar system, specific days, and the hours of worship. This space and time are closely associated with sacred numbers, especially odd numbers, which are considered to have a special spiritual meaning in Islam, a concept later expanded to include even numbers and others (Purwanto, 2015; Schimmel, 1996).

The next aspect is the holy act, which refers to the actions of the Prophet Muhammad, serving as a moral and social measure in society. Schimmel groups these actions into three stages: via purgative (self-purification, including rituals of cleansing and protection), via illuminative (the boundary between the profane and intentional rituals), and via unitive (union with the Divine). These three examples demonstrate that religious actions in Islam are outward and involve deep spiritual processes (Schimmel, 1996, 1998).

Finally, Schimmel examines the phenomenon of the word and the holy book, namely the Qur'an, which is considered Islam's spiritual centre. He examines the aspects of the sacredness of the recitation of the Qur'an (such as tajweed and tartar), the beauty of language, the aspect of miracles, and its contents. In addition, he also examines the phenomena of Islamic individuals and societies, including Islam's view of human beings as spiritual and social beings, as well as the dynamics of Islamic society as an ideal community, governance, interaction with non-Muslims, and the internal diversity of Muslims based on the Qur'an and traditions (Schimmel, 1996).

The World of Islamic Imagination

Annemarie Schimmel's study of the external manifestation world of Islam leads her to a deeper level in the phenomenological approach, namely the world aspect of the religious imagination. At this stage, he discusses the conception of God and His creation in Islam. Schimmel mentions three main approaches to understanding

God: causality, eminent, and negation. Via causality refers to understanding God through His most excellent attributes, such as Al-Khaliq (Creator), Ar-Razzaq (Giver of sustenance), and Al-Muhyi (Giver of life). This is the most prominent way in the Qur'an to describe God's power (Netton, 1996; Syafii et al., 2024). Schimmel then discusses the conception of creation in Islam. In contrast to the understanding of ancient religions that consider creation as a form of emanation or birth from a god, in Islam, creation is the result of God's free will (Schimmel, 1996).

God created not out of necessity but from His wisdom and will. The Qur'an emphasizes that creation is not a game but a meaningful part of the sunnatullah. In this case, the phenomenon of creation is not the result of mere causality but is a direct intervention of God. In this framework, duality is evident in the relationship between God and His creation, for example, as seen in the contrast between Jalal (majesty) and Jamal (beauty) or in the distinction between the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* (Sarfraz et al., 2023; Sulaeman, 2020). The world is considered a living fabric of the interaction of these polarities, which gives life and the balance of nature. Humans live in an environment created by God not to be destroyed but to be used as a place of worship and spiritual improvement through good work and deeds (Schimmel, 1996).

In addition to humans, other creations of God, such as angels, jinn, and demons, also hold an important place in the Islamic cosmos. Angels are depicted as perfect, static beings who are the guardians of God's grace, while humans possess the advantage of having free will and growth potential. Jinn and demons, created from fire, are also part of the dynamics of the spiritual cosmos. Ultimately, the essence of all beings is towards death. Schimmel describes death as part of a spiritual journey, a mirror of deeds, a form of return to God, and as part of the framework of Islamic eschatology (Hafidz, 2019; Sulaeman, 2020).

The World of Islamic Experience Towards the Objective World of Islam

In her study of the Islamic world, Annemarie Schimmel poses the fundamental question: *"In what language do modern Muslims express themselves, their faith, and their ideals?"* This question, he says, touches not only on philosophical aspects but also reflects a genuine general attitude in modern Muslim art, music, and

literature. He also questioned how modern Muslims, amid the dominance of Western technology, could remain faithful and conform to the classical teachings in tafsir and hadith. He highlights the dilemma between modernity and tradition, questioning whether traditional Islamic science, which was once intended to lead humans to the afterlife, remains relevant amid the current tide of modern science (Schimmel, 1996).

Based on his observations of the Islamic experience, Schimmel stated five important principles: *first*, Islam is sufficiently independent and does not depend on other philosophical or religious systems; *second*, Islam develops through constant dialectical movements; *third*, normative Islam is a common characteristic of the ummah in various places; *fourthly*, the shahadah is the primary foundation of Islam; and *fifth*, Islam requires Faith as an ethical dimension and Ihsan as a form of practice. He also highlighted the challenges of Muslims in the modern era, such as cultural alienation, loss of closeness to classical traditions, reduced understanding of Arabic, and de-Arabization efforts that weaken Islamic identity. This creates a tension between a rationalistic approach to religion (nomos-oriented) and an emotional-spiritual (eros-oriented) approach.

Ultimately, all the phenomena of the world of external manifestation, the world of imagination, and the Islamic experience in Schimmel's phenomenological approach converge at a single centre: Divine Reality, the essence of all religious expression. He refers to this as the objective world of Islam, a transcendent reality understood through its outward manifestations, inner experiences, and spiritual reflection. This approach is a result of Friedrich Heiler's phenomenological development. Schimmel applied more specifically in Islamic studies, including in the aspect of feminine spirituality as depicted in his work "*Meine Seele ist eine Frau*" (1995) or his English version "*My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*" (1997), which has been translated into Indonesian under the title "*Jiwaku is Wanita*" (1998) (Schimmel, 1996, 1998).

IV. CONCLUSION

The primary orientation of religious phenomenology is the study of the experiential aspect of a person's religiosity, consistently attempting to describe or analyze that which focuses on the Faith or belief of the object of research. Schimmel's phenomenology is an approach that seeks to understand and get to the heart of religion by examining its phenomena and then delving into deeper and deeper layers of man's response to God until he reaches the deepest sacred essence of each religion. Religion centre, the Divine or the ultimate approach, seeks to determine the meaning of Islamic teachings based on what is conveyed and understood by its adherents rather than preconceptions and the researcher's observations. In practice, this approach utilizes the concentric ring model theory. The phenomenological approach in the study of Islam and Religion generally tries to capture and interpret every type of human encounter with the sacred. The phenomenological method not only produces a description of the phenomenon being studied, but it also aims to explain the philosophical nature of the phenomenon. Religious phenomenology is not merely descriptive or normative; instead, it provides a deeper understanding of a religious phenomenon, revealing the essence of the phenomenon, namely its empirical and objective nature.

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