

The Phenomenology of Religion

Introduction and Background

It is extremely interesting to trace philosophy's relationship to the rising history of religion [*Religionswissenschaft*] . . . I shall only mention that throughout the nineteenth century and up to the present the so-called philosophy of religion, out of which the history of religion grew, took it upon itself to study the specific questions of the history of religion. Only very recently have empirical research and philosophical speculation been separated.

—Joachim Wach, 1924¹

In his article, "What Constitutes the Identity of a Religion?," Hubert Seiwert poses two questions: "What constitutes a historical reality?" and, "What is a religion?"² Using "Buddhism" as an example, he asks how it is that there can be an identity between specific acts, practices, beliefs, etc., in different times and in different places, all of which are identified as "Buddhist" and none of which have any direct contact with each other? In an analysis of the meaning of such an identity, he concludes:

Obviously one cannot maintain that there is no difference whatsoever between Buddhism in China of the 8th century and Buddhism in Ceylon of the 20th century. This implies that we cannot speak of an identity between these two phenomena. We can generalize the issue: Every observable phenomenon, i.e., every empirical fact, has as one of its attributes a spatiotemporal specificity. No empirical phenomenon can, therefore, be identical with any other than itself. From this it follows that either there is no identity of Buddhism or that Buddhism is not an empirical phenomenon.³

Given that each empirical phenomenon is perfectly discreet, how is it that we form unities out of these multiplicities? How, in other words, how do we form categories such as “religion,” “tradition,” “faith,” “Buddhism,” “Christianity,” etc.? The very idea of a systematic study of religion is predicated on some kind of answer to this question. The ongoing attempt to define “religion” is indicative of the field’s continuing struggle with precisely this issue.

In the history of the study of religion there have been a variety of responses to this issue. One school, however, has had a profound impact on the development of Religious Studies⁴ as an autonomous endeavor, namely, *the* phenomenology of religion, also known as classical phenomenology of religion.⁵ Scholars such as Rudolf Otto, W. B. Kristensen, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach, and Mircea Eliade reformulated nineteenth-century *Religionswissenschaft* into a distinct enterprise, one which has had a constitutive influence on the development of Religious Studies in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the world. What is characteristic of this research tradition is its answer to the question just posed. Although each figure mentioned above differed in many respects from the others, they all adamantly agreed that religion must be studied as a *sui generis* phenomenon of the human spirit. As shall be discussed at the end of this study, they did this by reformulating the Hegelian concept of *Geist*, or Spirit, into the less metaphysically aggressive concepts of “Man”⁶ or “consciousness.” They answer the question posed by Seiwert by arguing that underlying the multiplicity of historical and geographically dispersed religions was an ultimately metaphysical, transhistorical substratum, variously called *Geist*, “Man,” “human nature,” “mind,” or “consciousness.” This transhistorical substratum is an expressive agent with a uniform, essential nature. As such, by reading the data of the history of religions as “expressions,” it is possible to understand them sympathetically by tapping into one’s *own* human subjectivity. *Geist*—spirit, human spirit, human nature, and/or “Man”—then, is the basis for a philosophy of religion, a philosophy of history, and a hermeneutical theory.

Traditional Historiography of the Phenomenology of Religion: Hegel versus Husserl

Hegel versus Husserl

Much of this is well known, of course. However, the historical origins of this approach and the issues that arise from it have been, in my

view, seriously misunderstood. Most historians of the phenomenology of religion argue that the phenomenological approach of Edmund Husserl was the main methodological and philosophical source for that movement. Willard Oxtoby represents the standard view on this issue: "Understood strictly, the phenomenology of religion is supposed to be a precise application to religion of insights from the European philosophical movement known as phenomenology, launched by Edmund Husserl."⁷ Walter Capps concurs that it was Husserlian phenomenology that influenced Religious Studies: "Merleau-Ponty has not received much attention among persons working religious studies. Husserl has been considerably more prominent."⁸ Capps further notes that there is disagreement about the pedigree of the phenomenology of religion and that

[t]he reason for this lack of agreement is there are at least two strands of thought—two intellectual points of departure—which can produce a phenomenology of religion. The most obvious one is the one that stems directly from post-Kantian and post-Hegelian continental philosophy. Regardless of whatever else it includes, the strand always lists Edmund Husserl (1859–1961) as its primary inspirer, founding father, and intellectual catalyst.⁹

Finally, Hans Penner notes that the phenomenology of religion is as an "approach to religion is often located in the phenomenological movement which began with Husserl."¹⁰ Penner cites Douglas Allen as a particularly ardent advocate of this view: "He [Allen] places Otto, van der Leeuw and Eliade, 'the three most influential' scholars of religion, directly in the phenomenological movement and states that they 'have used a phenomenological method and have been influenced, at least partially, by [Husserlian] phenomenological philosophy.'"¹¹

Clearly, *there is a tradition* of claiming Husserl as the founder or "intellectual catalyst," at least, of classical (if no other component) phenomenology of religion. Kristensen and van der Leeuw in particular are seen as having been influenced by Husserl's twin ideas of the *epoché* and the eidetic vision. In this tradition of origins these Husserlian ideas are not seen as mere icing but as fundamental concepts.

A closer reading of the texts of the phenomenologists of religion indicates that this emphasis on Husserl is simply not warranted. The argument of this study is that, rather than see Husserl as the *primary* source for classical phenomenology of religion, its primary inspiration is derived from Hegel. The main features of phenomenology's paradigm and its appropriation of Hegel are, in turn, drawn from the

early history of *Religionswissenschaft*, especially from C. P. Tiele and P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye. It is the appropriation and transformation of the concepts of this historical trajectory that make up the intellectual, discursive content of the phenomenology of religion.

Arguing for Hegel more than Husserl puts this study in agreement with several other historians of the phenomenology of religion. While all the supporting texts cannot be cited here, a few will suffice. In contrast to reductive, noninterpretive approaches: "The phenomenological approach thus originated as an attempt to construct a coherent methodology for the study of religion" and that

[t]he philosophy of Hegel provided a basis on which to build. In his influential *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806), Hegel developed the thesis that essence (*Wesen*) is understood through the investigation appearances and [as] manifestations (*Erscheinung*). Hegel's intention was to show that this led to the understanding that all phenomena, in their diversity, were nevertheless grounded in an underlying essence or unity (*Geist* or Spirit). This play upon the relationship between essence and manifestation provided a basis for understanding how religion, in its diversity, could, in essence, be understood as a distinct entity.¹²

Erricker goes on to argue that "Hegel's influence is evident in the title of the first significant publication to outline a phenomenological approach to the study of religion in a coherent way, Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933)."¹³

Another scholar who sees Hegel's influence on the phenomenology of religion is Olof Pettersson who argues that, contrary to seeing van der Leeuw as the originator on the strength of the above named work of this approach:

However, the phenomenological method applied to the study of religion has its roots in the 18th century. We may remember F. Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, published in 1807, in which the author stated that essence can be approached through a study of appearances and manifestations. He wished to discern unity behind diversity, to reach an understanding of the one essence of religion behind its many manifestations.¹⁴

Pettersson goes on to note: "I do not hesitate to maintain that the comparative method used by the mentioned scholars [Tyler, Lang, Marrett], among others, was *de facto* the embryo of the method that was later named the phenomenology of religion."¹⁵ As I, too, will argue, while evolutionary and phenomenological approaches are typically seen as polar opposites or enemy camps, it is clear that the latter appropriated the former via the Hegelian concepts Erricker cites above. The teleological schemes are turned into synchronic schemes, with much the same structures and valuations as the former—despite protestations to the contrary. Of Tiele he argues, as do others, that: "He may be regarded as the first conscious representative of the Dutch phenomenological school."¹⁶

Finally, Walter Capps, again, gives us an excellent summary of the history of the phenomenology of religion. As noted above, he argues that there are two strands in this history (and perhaps more; I only argue that the Hegelian strand is the "thickest"). While the Husserlian legacy is one such strand, when phenomenologists of religion "trace their intellectual roots, the genealogy they offer tends to reach back not to Husserl . . . but to such relatively obscure figures as Cornelius Petrus Tiele . . . and Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye" both of whose work began in 1877.¹⁷ He argues that, as with Hegel's agenda described above: "Both Tiele and Chantepie engaged in phenomenology of religion while maintaining methodological interest in questions regarding religion's essence and origin."¹⁸ From the earliest forms of Continental *Religionswissenschaft* to the peak of its development in Eliade, the phenomenology of religion retained its Hegelian structure, viewing history as the field of manifestation through which *Geist/Wesen* expresses itself; a hermeneutical/phenomenological method (even when called "history of religions") seeks to decipher these historical particulars *as manifestations* and relate them, diachronically or synchronically, to their essence. This is the way in which they answer those absolutely fundamental questions posed by Seiwert.

Which Hegel?

This immediately raises the question: "Which Hegel?" Hegel has been read in numerous and conflicting ways. The traditional Marxist historiography¹⁹ reads nineteenth-century Hegelianism as having split early between the "Young" or "Left" Hegelians and the "Old" or "Right" Hegelians. The former group read Hegel as the "philosopher of contradiction," and saw his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Geist*) as the

key work from which to interpret the master. The latter group read Hegel as the “philosopher of identity” and saw his more complete and systematic, yet more conservative *Enzyklopaedie der Wissenschaft* as the key work from which to interpret the master.²⁰ In the twentieth century, following Kojève, the “French” reading of Hegel radicalized the Left Hegelian reading and returned Hegel to the “philosopher of contradiction,” with a heavy emphasis on the “master/slave” dialectic and the problematic of “the Other.” This reading influenced such major thinkers as Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Lacan. The Hegel who influenced classical phenomenology of religion is *clearly* the so-called “philosopher of identity,” the more conservative Hegel who had been well established in the academy.²¹

Derrida tells us of Hegel that he “summed up the entire philosophy of the *logos*. He determined ontology as absolute logic; he assembled all the delimitations of philosophy as presence; he assigned to presence the eschatology of *parousia*, of the self-proximity of infinite subjectivity.”²² *Logos,ontos, presence, subjectivity*: the combination of these elements, played out differently in different scenes, form the skeletal structure of that specific concept-operation, or research paradigm, “*the phenomenology of religion*.” It argues that the concrete is a manifestation of the essential, that individual moments of religious consciousness are rooted in consciousness, or Spirit/*Geist* and can only be properly understood as such. Using the symbol of the “Cosmic Tree” as an example, Mircea Eliade argues: “Suffice it to say that it is impossible to understand the meaning [or essence] of the Cosmic Tree by considering one or some of its variants [manifestations]. It is only by the analysis of a considerable number of its examples [the many] that the structure [the one] can be completely deciphered.”²³ Or, as Joachim Wach will argue in his “search for universals in religion”: “A comparative study of the *forms* of the expressions of religious experience, the world over, shows an amazing similarity in structure.”²⁴ From the many, one. Essence, or unity trumps difference as a founding category.

I will argue that Hegel and these Hegelian motifs, more than Husserl, provided the philosophical foundations or research paradigm for the phenomenology of religion. The quote at the beginning of this chapter from Wach summarizes the main features of phenomenology’s paradigm and its appropriation of Hegel: “the so-called philosophy of religion, out of which the history of religion grew,” the nineteenth-century philosophy of religion out of which *Religionswissenschaft* grew, was *Hegelian* philosophy of religion (something quite different than what goes by that name in Anglophonic contexts). And it was from

this philosophy, or conceptual structure, that the history of religion (or phenomenology; see below on terminology) “took it upon itself to study the specific questions of the *history* of religion.” That is, the phenomenology of religion’s theory of history was a Hegelian theory of history, to wit, history as the manifestation of objective Spirit.

These Hegelian motifs pass through, so to speak, the early history of *Religionswissenschaft*, especially from such figures as C. P. Tiele and P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, and are modified and appropriated by Otto, Wach, van der Leeuw, Kristensen, and Eliade. It is noteworthy that Chantepie de la Saussaye cites Hegel as the founder of *Religionswissenschaft*: “[W]e must see Hegel as its true founder, because he first carried out the vast idea of realizing, as a whole, the various modes for studying religion (metaphysical, psychological, and historical), and made us see the harmony between the idea and the realization of religion [*zwischen dem Begriff und der Erscheinung der Religion zur Anschauung zu bringen*].”²⁵

Hegel more than Husserl not rather than Husserl

Clearly, both are important sources for the phenomenology of religion, as are Kant, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey among others. If we follow Derrida’s reading of them, as is done here, both must be located in the larger discourse of Western metaphysics, or ontotheology.²⁶ Both participate in the “subjective turn” in Modern Philosophy with its central emphasis on the category of “consciousness.” Clearly, they both have much in common as well: “Heidegger insists Hegelian philosophy and *its extension in Husserl’s phenomenology* brings an ‘end to philosophy.’”²⁷ While the latter claim is obviously contestable, there is good evidence all around that there are important continuities between the two arch-phenomenologists. From the reading offered here, discussed in chapter 2, a discursive/textual reading rather than a strictly philosophical/conceptual reading, their differences vis-à-vis ontotheology, significant as they are, are reduced rather than expanded.

Hegel more than Husserl for two reasons. First, historically, of course, Hegel precedes Husserl, and there is a significant, if heavily qualified, appeal to Hegel throughout the literature of early *Religionswissenschaft*, as well as in classical phenomenology of religion. Though none of these figures could be considered “Hegelians” in any strict sense, nevertheless, certain important Hegelian motifs recur in their works, and these at crucial junctures. These motifs show up in *Religionswissenschaft* well before Husserl’s work. For instance, Tiele will classify religions according to a teleological conception of their

degree of rationalization or spiritualization. Chantepie de la Saussaye will make use of the term *phenomenology* before Husserl, but he means something quite different by the term. Furthermore, as noted, Chantepie cites Hegel as the founder of the study of religion. Ergo, by the time Husserl's phenomenology is established, the idea of phenomenology is already well entrenched in *Religionswissenschaft*.

Second, at the level of paradigm structure, as the problematic laid out by Seiwert above indicates, the issue of identity in or through history is of basic concern, is perhaps even foundational, for the systematic study of religion. Here, not only does Hegel precede Husserl, the philosophy of history was central to his thinking, whereas Husserl is notorious for his lack of concern with precisely this issue.²⁸ Although the issue of identity in history is articulated by classical phenomenology of religion in direct opposition to Hegel's notion of "*Entwicklung*" or "development," it nevertheless consistently maintains the preeminently Hegelian view of history as the unified, expressive activity of the human spirit, or *Geist*. The paradigm for classical phenomenology of religion, then, is the same as Hegel's Science of Wisdom, namely, that of "*Wesen und Erscheinung*" or "essence and manifestation." Also, even when articulated in an explicitly synchronic framework, the structure of Hegel's metanarrative of *Geist* informs the structure of the synchronic taxonomy of classical phenomenology of religion.

Geist and the *Geisteswissenschaften* in Nineteenth-Century Continental Thought

To understand the influence of Hegel more clearly, it is important to understand *how* it was that Hegel was appropriated within the academic world of Continental Europe. It is a paradoxical story. Hegel is, from the 1830s on, appropriated by way of the explicit *rejection* of Hegel. That is, in all the schools where Hegelian ideas appear, they are constantly attended by explicit statements of denunciation of the master. This is common among theologians and philosophers, among all members of the "Historical School," and, most famously, among the dialectical materialists.

This appropriation/rejection of Hegel must be understood within the context of the general position of the human sciences from the 1830s on. In order to maintain any sense of their individual identity, it was necessary on the one hand to resist their being subsumed into a system of Absolute Knowledge, or "speculation" as Wach describes it above, that is, subsumed into philosophy, while on the other

hand, indicating why they offered a technical competency that was both like, yet different from, that of the natural sciences. As Herbert Schnädelbach notes:

The need to maintain this double front, against philosophy and the natural sciences, which was especially characteristic of the historical consciousness in Germany, gave a considerable impetus to epistemological reflection among historians, and explains the strong, if also often indirect, influence of writers such as Droysen, Dilthey or Rickert on the way in which the human sciences understood themselves.²⁹

What was *rejected* in Hegel was his notorious a priorism, along with his insistence that the essential element of science was not its facticity, but its systematicity.³⁰ This was a defensive maneuver against both the “subordination” of the specific sciences to the system of Absolute Knowledge, and, against the charges of unscientificity being leveled from the direction of the natural sciences.³¹ This is what Wach was alluding to when he said, in the epigram to this chapter, that “only very recently have empirical research and philosophical speculation been separated.” The “empirical research” was historical research, but historical research understood on an Hegelian, expressive model of history. It was this empirical element, that is, concrete historical materials, which made the *Geisteswissenschaften* scientific.

Consequently, to preserve this middle ground, what was *retained* from Hegel, even by his detractors, was the conception of history as *objective spirit*, and entailed by that, the idea of development as the unfolding of Spirit:

the bitterness of the polemics between the parties [Hegelians and the Historical School] should not conceal how close to each other they nevertheless were. . . . For Hegel as for the Historical School, history is *spirit*, that is, a domain of reality *which is in essence not nature*, but depends on freedom, on action which is capable of becoming conscious and creative individuality, and hence is intelligible to the individual knower.³²

The ambiguity of this position is reflected in Droysen’s slogan, that the method of the historical sciences was that of “Understanding [*Verstehen*] observation.”³³ Understanding is the a priori, conceptual element of research; observation, the empirical element.

The Hegelian idea of development was especially influential in the study of religion. As Frederick Gregory notes: "If the employment of Hegelian reason involved a movement toward the identity of the concept with its object, the same process was reflected in the development of religion in history. It is from the idea of development inspired by Hegel that his influence on Protestant theology was felt in the nineteenth century debate over the relation between religion and natural science."³⁴ As shall be discussed at some length, although van der Leeuw famously said, "*der Religionsphänomenologie wiess die 'Entwicklung' nichts*" ("the phenomenology of religion does not know 'development'"), and Eliade will frequently proclaim that "the sacred is a structure of consciousness, not a stage of history," all phenomenologists of religion nevertheless hold to the idea that individual religions are manifestations of the essence of religion. "Essence and manifestation," then, continues to be the paradigm for the study of religion, whether understood diachronically or synchronically. In a statement written in 1924, Wach again summarizes the situation in a complete manner: "Hegelianism did not derive its categories and laws from the course of history but imposed them on it from above. It is nevertheless possible to inquire, quite apart from metaphysical speculation and construction, into the principles according to which religion as a manifestation of the objective spirit evolves historically."³⁵ Yes to objective spirit (because it is objective and subject to empirical research); no to a priori categories. Such is the way the phenomenologists of religion appropriated the master.

Underlying, as it were, this view of the atemporal nature of consciousness, is a philosophy of matter (or nature, or *Natur*). One of the central arguments of this book is that this philosophy of matter/nature underlies the entire project being discussed here, that is, both the diachronic metanarrative of *Geist* in Hegel and Tiele and the synchronic taxonomy of "consciousness" in van der Leeuw and Eliade. Hegel articulates this view more thoroughly and explicitly than any of the other authors in this tradition:

It is a result of speculative Philosophy that Freedom is the sole truth of Spirit [*Geist*]. Matter possesses gravity in virtue of its tendency toward a central point. It is essentially composite: consisting of parts that exclude each other. It seeks its Unity out of itself. . . . Spirit, on the contrary, may be defined as that which has its center in itself. It has not a unity outside itself, but has already found it; it exists in

and with itself. Matter has its essence out of itself; Spirit is self-contained existence (*Bei-sich-selbst-seyn*).³⁶

Rudolf Otto, for example (a figure who will be included in this study), agrees, arguing that “[t]he direct experience that spirit has of itself, of its individuality and freedom, of its incomparability with all that is beneath it, is far too constant and genuine to admit of its being put into a difficulty by a doctrine [materialism] which it has itself established.”³⁷ *Natur/Matter* as such, cannot attain true selfhood or subjectivity, as the essence of subjectivity is to be “in-and-for-itself.”³⁸ Matter’s ontological determination is to have its being as “out-of-itself.”

As shall be discussed below, one of the heinous outcomes of this construction of the structural relation between *Geist* and *Natur*, Spirit and Nature, becomes evident when it is applied to human beings, some of whom are classified as *Naturvölker*, while the correlation between *Kultur* and *objectiv Geist* is elevated to both a methodological and a metaphysical principle. The result is that “civilized” peoples are inherently free and *Naturvölker* are, as Nature/Matter itself is, inherently dependent, having their *telos* and purpose outside of themselves. This is, of course, a legitimation for the colonization and subordination of the latter by the former. This occurs both in practical terms, where Nature—including *Naturvölker*—is a repository of resources which exists *for* Spirit, and, in theoretical-scientific terms where, as objects of inquiry, “primitive” cultures are the Other by and through which Spirit comes to “*pure* self-recognition in absolute otherness.”³⁹ Spirit is both subject and substance, the underlying reality that makes temporality “history,” as opposed to mere flux or change. So, “higher civilizations” have a history, whereas “primitives” or *Naturvölker*, do not. The metaphysics of peoples, if you will, necessitates a colonial discourse reading of the phenomenology of religion, a reading that forms a major element of this study, as shall be discussed in detail in chapter 2.

Besides being an ontology, the distinction between *Geist* and *Natur* becomes the basis for the structure of knowledge and for the explicit articulation of the methodology of the human sciences. As Charles Bambach notes: “In the work of different [post-Hegelian] philosophers ranging from Rickert and Windelband to Vaihinger, Simmel, Troeltsch, and Cassirer, one notices the same rigorous focus on developing a critical theory of knowledge divided by the dual spheres of subject and object, mind and nature, *Geist* and *Natur*.”⁴⁰ In particular, the work of Wilhelm Windelband was formative for this paradigm:

Windelband argued that the traditional distinction between “*Natur* and *Geist* was a substantive dichotomy.” (Windelband, “History and Natural Science,” p. 173) In other words, its principle of classification was based on the object being investigated—its content rather than its form. *Naturwissenschaften*, according to this model of the disciplines, were simply those sciences dealing with the objects of nature: physics, biology, chemistry, geology, meteorology, and the like. *Geisteswissenschaften* were, by contrast, those sciences dealing with the objects of human life: history, moral philosophy, economy, politics, and society. In this scheme, the *Naturwissenschaften* were concerned with the external, corporeal world of nature, and the *Geisteswissenschaften*, with the internal, reflexive world.⁴¹

Far from being some obtuse intellectual exercise, this division becomes part of *the very structure of institutionalized knowledge*: “At all major German universities, the disciplines were distinguished either as *Naturwissenschaften* (natural sciences) or as *Geisteswissenschaften* (sciences of the mind).”⁴²

The human sciences “save” themselves, so to speak, from being negated by the natural sciences by arguing that *Geist* is qualitatively distinct from *Natur* and must, as such, be studied by different methods. Dilthey’s famous dictum expresses this point: “Nature is ‘explained’ [*Erklären*] but Spirit is ‘understood’ [*Verstehen*].”⁴³ He elaborates: “All science and scholarship is empirical, but all experience is originally connected, and given validity, by our *consciousness* (within which it occurs) indeed, by our whole nature.”⁴⁴ While it may sound as if he is an empiricist, he is in fact denying that empiricism is adequate for understanding the inner workings of consciousness. It is, again, consciousness’ apprehension of *itself*—free of external stimuli, i.e., *emperia*—by which understanding occurs. This is a commonly shared notion among the phenomenologists of religion and leads to many misunderstandings (discussed below) on the part of Anglophonic empiricists’ readings. Given that this inner experience occurs in the pure interiority of consciousness, the method of *Verstehen*, then, is *explicitly* rooted in the metaphysics of Spirit. Furthermore, “*Verstehen*,” understanding, is an act of subjectivity, an act of that infinite proximity of which Derrida spoke: I can understand the “expressions” of the ancients, for example, because, at some level they express the universal structure or nature of *Geist*, consciousness, or “Man”: “Thus he [Dilthey] differs from Hegel ultimately on one thing only, that according to Hegel the homecoming of the spirit takes place in the

philosophical concept whereas, for Dilthey, the philosophical concept is significant not as knowledge but as expression."⁴⁵

Dilthey's Importance

Dilthey is a key figure in the transmission and translation of Hegelianism. This was accomplished by rendering the concept of "objective spirit" scientifically respectable. In so doing, he also laid out the basic structure of the *Geisteswissenschaft* as these would be understood by several generations of scholars. Like Hegel, Windelband, and others, held that the division between *Geist* and *Natur* was foundational. More than just a methodological divide or bureaucratic convenience, Dilthey felt that this was a fundamental metaphysical truth: "He even claimed that the actual division of the sciences according to nature and spirit was based on these metaphysical principles of first philosophy."⁴⁶

Furthermore, Dilthey worked on formulating both a methodological foundation and an agenda for the *Geisteswissenschaften*.⁴⁷ As Bambach argues, it is from this context that the modern view of the sciences stems: "The term *Geisteswissenschaft(en)* is a crucial one for Dilthey and needs to be understood within the context of late-nineteenth-century German thought in general. . . . Hegel used the phrase *Wissenschaft des Geistes*, and it is the Hegelian notion of *Geist* (bound up with all the historical, cultural, and metaphysical implications of a 'philosophy of mind' or 'philosophy of spirit') which influenced Dilthey. . . . the term signified for Dilthey that group of studies dealing with the cultural spirit of humanity."⁴⁸

Dilthey's appropriation of Hegel, then, becomes one of the major sources for what will later be known as "the History of Religion(s)," or "the phenomenology of religion." His formula of "experience-expression-understanding" may as well have been the motto for the phenomenology/history of religion. Traces of Dilthey's influence are evident in Otto and Eliade, but are quite explicit in Wach and van der Leeuw. Both of the latter could be, without serious violence, considered "Diltheians." For this reason, although he was not a phenomenologist of religion, I have devoted a chapter to his views of the nature and methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

"Explanation versus Interpretation":

Previous Critiques of the Phenomenology of Religion

The phenomenology of religion and its legacy in Religious Studies have come into direct conflict with another approach, namely those

who understand the scientific study of religion to take the form of reductive or naturalistic explanations.⁴⁹ The conflict has left the field with a great deal of uncertainty about what may be called “meta-theoretical” issues. That is, we are at odds as to what the study of religion is supposed to accomplish: is it sympathetic *understanding* by way of a hermeneutical approach, or is it an objective, reductive *explanation*, modeled more or less on the natural sciences? A search for meaning or a search for causes? Contemporary philosophy of social science (and even natural science), however, has indicated that one of the keys to understanding scientific quandaries is to critically examine the *history* of a science, especially the history of its category formation. Contrary to earlier positivist views of science, contemporary theorists hold that categories, scientific discourses, and research paradigms structure the objects and possible objects of scientific research, and not the other way around. Historical examination of the hidden assumptions and histories embedded in research questions, then, can indicate ways in which data were selected and organized.⁵⁰ Critical historical analysis of this kind is able to uncover previously unrecognized metaphysical, epistemological, and ideological assumptions that turned out to be *constitutive* of the data being analyzed. It can also suggest alternative ways to select and organize data. The way out of unsatisfactory results is not to find new data, but to ask new questions.

The Anglophonic critics of phenomenology and Religious Studies, mostly in North America, have drawn upon a philosophy of science developed by thinkers such as Karl Popper and Imre Lakatos.⁵¹ Such an analytical apparatus has a specific yield, as it were. I, however, want to analyze classical phenomenology of religion in light of a significantly different paradigm, namely, that of poststructuralist philosophy and postcolonial theory as informed by poststructuralism. This paradigm will show that what is taken to be the very strength of classical phenomenology’s method, the empathetic/hermeneutic approach, is based upon not so much normative Christian theology, but upon ideological humanism, *Geist*, or a transcendent notion of subjectivity.⁵² Ideological humanism, far from being a benign concern for “mankind,” has been implicated by poststructuralism and postcolonial criticism in a variety of forms of Euro- and ethno-centrism, a point which shall be argued at length in chapter 11 of this study. Once classical phenomenology of religion’s Hegelian heritage is delineated more fully, this critique will be much clearer. Such delineation requires a specific kind of reading of Hegel, however, a reading very different than that of traditional Anglo-American analytic philosophy. This reading of Hegel, and of phenomenology in general, has been

one of the most important accomplishments of poststructuralism. This point will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 2.

Anglophonic-Empiricist Critiques of the Phenomenology of Religion

At this point it will be helpful to the overall thesis of this study and to clarify the methodology it uses to review some of the main criticisms offered by the empirical-Anglophonic scholars and indicate some of the ways in which my own critique of the phenomenology of religion agrees with and differs from these empiricist-oriented critiques.

FIRST CRITIQUE: THE RELIGIOSITY OF THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

“Let us confront this situation bluntly and in all honesty. Theology is very much a part of what has become known as the history and phenomenology of religion”; “In brief, the phenomenology of religion and theology are two *sides* of the same coin.”⁵³ Anglo-American critics of Religious Studies find this to be one of the great weaknesses of both the phenomenology of religion in general and Eliade in particular (and, by extension, Religious Studies). I will, at many points below, take criticisms of Eliade as stand-ins for more general criticisms of the phenomenology of religion. Donald Wiebe concurs with Penner, going even farther: “The scholarly study of religion is now and has always been an essentially religio-theological undertaking for the majority of those involved in the enterprise. It is and has always been predominantly informed, that is, by theological assumptions and religious commitments.”⁵⁴ As I will argue below, one aspect of what this argument holds is that theological and religious commitments overstep their bounds, claiming to do work in an area for which they are not suited. Wiebe sometimes implies, at least on my reading, that this elision/confusion of boundaries is an act of dissimulation. The theologians and religionists are not totally open, or perhaps not completely intellectually honest about what they are doing.

Robert Segal makes a similar claim about the twofold strategy that religio-theological approaches take to the social scientific approach: “Religionists deploy two strategies to fend off the social sciences: neutralizing the social sciences and embracing them.”⁵⁵ The phenomenology of religion accomplishes this by using, on the one hand an old-fashioned faculty psychology: man thinks, feels, and wills, or has intellect, emotion, volition.⁵⁶ These innate and universal faculties correspond to the various aspect of human life: science, art, and ethics. On the other hand, once this is done, phenomenologists

tend to break down the work of the sciences into what they sometime call “regional ontologies,” but more often simply list, in categorical fashion, the various disciplines and their appropriate objects/areas of investigation. This neutralizes the impact of, say Freud, by sharply, logically, and categorically isolating “psychology” from history or phenomenology.

Robert Baird believes that this leads to a normative, rather than a descriptive-analytical methodology for the study of religion. As Baird notes, essentialism is not simply an objective description of the abstract, logically determined specific difference of a class of things in the world. Rather: “The search for the ‘essence’ of religion is subtly normative rather than historical-descriptive.”⁵⁷ This is a major component of what I will argue in this study: the ontotheological categories of the phenomenology of religion necessarily create an “economy of privilege” in which some things are given greater value, reality, and being than others. While I do not see this aspect as importing an extraneous criterion into the descriptive task as does Baird, it is also true that phenomenologists—as well as many other scholars of religion—do import such criteria. My argument, rather, is that *the very structure of the discourse* of the phenomenology of religion is latent with hierarchies that are “values” in a broad sense. Such acts of valuation, then, are a *necessary* component of this discourse. As such, it cannot be salvaged by merely “removing” the normative elements. The kind of elements I am describing cannot be removed as they are constitutive of the conceptual system of the phenomenology of religion as a whole.

I completely concur with the assessment of Religious Studies in general and phenomenological approach specifically as an intellectual structure saturated by metaphysical-religious concepts. The phenomenology of religion is “religious” in some broad sense. Its intellectual pedigree is thoroughly embedded within and saturated by religio-theological concepts. However, the kind of critique I offer does not simply see phenomenology’s problem as primarily a matter of theology but of *ontotheology*. Following other poststructuralists, I see the metaphysical structures underlying phenomenology as being part of the larger Western metaphysical tradition with its distinct structures and functions. These have been detailed and critiqued by many great thinkers, Nietzsche and Heidegger readily come to mind, but I will elaborate on Derrida’s specific version of the structural critique of this historical-structural reality embedded as it is, deep within the structures of the Western thought. This will be spelled out in the next chapter and in the last chapters of this study.

The shift from theology to ontotheology is quite drastic in that it allows a much broader range of critique. Naming phenomenology as theology—a name it does deserve, though “metaphysics” would be more felicitous—generates a critique about the provinces of knowledge and the truth or falsity of religion. Theology, if considered legitimate at all, is a discipline that has a distinct sphere of concern. Penner’s (et al.) critique could be seen as saying that the problem is one of overstepping bounds, that is, theology’s proper area of concern. Theology also raises the question of the truth of religion: by labeling the phenomenology of religion theology Penner (et al.) is accusing the phenomenology of *advocating* of the truth of religion in the guise of a bias-free descriptivism and taxonomy. Like most critics in this vein, Penner holds out for a notion of science that is value-free and objective. While each has a somewhat different way of defending and explaining it, each of these critiques believes that the problem with a theological-normative approach to the study of religion that advocates for religion is that it violates the value-free canon of science.

The critique from ontotheology raises considerably different issues. It is a meta-critique of the “regimes of truth” that have been deployed throughout Western history. It sees the fundamental categorical structure of Western metaphysics—including such categories as being, consciousness, truth, God, meaning, the good, mind, reality (*ex mente*), objectivity, the subject, and reason—as not simply being false, but as being utterly interdependent. Any “philosophy” is a permutation of the many-yet-finite possibilities contained within the larger system of available concepts (the paradigm in structuralist terms). These permutations occur by the exclusion, even suppression, of some elements of the system and the favoring and foregrounding of others, often combining them in novel ways. This means that apparently opposite philosophical doctrines have more fundamental features in common than they have differences. For instance, rationalism and empirical realism both are predicated upon the Heliotrope, that is, the idea of knowledge as light, light of the mind versus the light of sight or seeing (empirical verification). The play of the Heliotrope, then, governs the possible permutations of these positions (and not the other way around). Deconstructing (versus rejecting or falsifying) these positions says, in effect, “a pox on both your houses.” It does not take sides between rival positions but tries to lay bare these common, constitutive features of each position.

Another trajectory of critique that the perspective of ontotheology allows is the situating of the phenomenology vis-à-vis the issue

of Euro-imperialism and/or colonialism. While this may seem to be yet another normative turn in theory—poststructuralism's norms this time—this is not the case. Tracing out the play of the constitutive concepts of ontotheology shows that the structures of the terms by which colonialists describe the colonized and the structure of terms by which “religion is put into discourse” in the phenomenology of religion are quite similar, showing many points of outright identity. Again, it is not a matter of moral condemnation, but of structural analysis of concepts that constitute the conceptual framework of the phenomenology of religion. Deconstructing these is not the same thing as imposing a grid of moral-normative concepts upon phenomenology. It is an analytical operation, not an axiological one—axiological categories are themselves part of ontotheology.

SECOND CRITIQUE: NON-EMPIRICAL AND AHISTORICAL

The flip side of this normative critique is the criticism in Penner's claim “that the academic study of religion has failed to carry out its original scientific agenda.”⁵⁸ Dudley cites Eliade's approval of Levi-Strauss because: “he forces anthropologists to *think*, and to think hard. For the empirically minded Anglo-American anthropologist, this is a real calamity.”⁵⁹ This shows that, *pace* the *Verstehen* tradition of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, Eliade has disdain for any unfiltered, non-categorical (in Kant's terms) access to external reality, namely, typical empirical notions predicated on the correspondence theory of truth. Most Anglo-American Religious Studies critics find this to be one of the great weaknesses of both the phenomenology of religion in general and Eliade in particular.⁶⁰

While Eliade himself makes some claims to doing empirical work, especially as it concerns historical research, my guess is that this is more a matter of academic politics than actually methodological or metaphysical commitments. If we recall the difficult positioning of the *Geisteswissenschaften* discussed above, this makes perfect sense. As did Windelband et al., Eliade finds himself sandwiched between an “epistemological right” that insists that all academic research be strictly (even narrowly) empirical in method and an “epistemological left” that tends toward either philosophical idealism or existentialism, that is, an explicitly nonempirical philosophical approach. Eliade, as did his predecessors, wishes to defend the scientific nature of his work. To do so he must satisfy the empiricists while denying that his work is simply a philosophy of religion or a philosophy of *Existenz*. The appeal to history accomplishes both of these tasks—as it did in the

nineteenth century; the redundancy of the debate is an interesting fact in its own right. It suggests that we are dealing with the antinomies of a paradigm, in this case a Cartesian theory of consciousness, and not the progressive-dialectic of a theoretical debate that is actually making advances by eliminating failed perspectives.

Segal asserts that any "preemptory dismissal of any effort by the social sciences to assess the truth of religion is unjustified,"⁶¹ viz., dismissal or denunciation by phenomenologists of religion, or religionists in general: "Eliade's denunciation of the study of religion by other disciplines" including the disciplines of " 'physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art.' "⁶² By rejecting even the potential usefulness of these, Segal argues that phenomenological religionists are being dogmatically and unscientifically nonempirical⁶³ in that they seek to avoid or elide the impact of the social sciences on their scholarly agenda. While I completely concur with the latter argument, my approach to this entails neither accusing phenomenologists of being dogmatic (they are no more nor less so than social scientists or post-structuralists all *can* be) or of employing the falsification technique to criticize their work (although, again, I think, not without some serious reservations, that is a fruitful approach). The "yield" of my critique will be quite different as it differs significantly in both methods and aims. However, I think the results, viz., that the phenomenology of religion is a dead enterprise, of both approaches are quite similar. We are all looking to get "beyond phenomenology," but in radically different ways⁶⁴ for radically different reasons.

While I agree that the phenomenology of religion is inadequately empirical in its research methods and especially in its underlying theory of history and consciousness, I believe that Segal and Wiebe have both misunderstood the arguments of the phenomenologists in some rather drastic ways. The main way this systemic misunderstanding comes about is by the *equivocal and nonhistorical usage* of the terms of empiricism as applied to the phenomenology of religion. The result is that they impose extraneous criteria on the agenda of the phenomenologists, criticizing them for failing to do things they never set out to do. As the historical discussion of the complex footing of the *Geisteswissenschaften* above shows, the idea of "the empirical" is quite different in that tradition than it is in the empiricist tradition used by Segal and Wiebe. This is, I am afraid to say, a "family failing" of empiricism: it fails to historicize things, using a static, Cartesian epistemological model instead (an abstracted, individualized subject in relation to an abstracted, individual object). Frankly, the phenomenologists are more sophisticated than the empiricists on this point,

if on no other. Saying this does *not*, it should be noted, justify the phenomenologists' program. It just indicates that, insofar as Segal and Wiebe consistently misrepresent the position of the phenomenologists, their critiques are hampered rather than helped. The cure for their historical-exegetical failings is the work of Schändelbach and Bambich cited extensively above. My impression is that the empiricists do not *like* what the phenomenologists are up to, and so their agenda leads them to make fast and loose equivocations, equivocations that amount to normative ideas of what science *should* be.

Another critique of the phenomenology of religion is that it is ahistorical in nature. Given what has been said about its use of history, this may seem a paradoxical, even contradictory charge. However, there is a strong ahistorical tendency in the phenomenological method as a taxonomic operation. Kristensen gathers examples from all religions (or "Christian" and "non-Christian" religions), arguing that phenomenology's goal is "to consider phenomena, not only in their historical context, but also in their ideal connection"; "it does not matter where we find them."⁶⁵ Eliade's procedure in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, one of his most important works, is avowedly ahistorical, using a decontextualized, synchronic-taxonomic method, a kind of merger of Kant (a priori categories of the mind) and Plato (forms or essences that are common to all material instantiations).⁶⁶

Clearly, it is true: much of the phenomenology of religion's work is ahistorical. One must be cautious here: this is exactly the claim of phenomenology; it is a structural, synchronic, taxonomic operation which seeks to see the *simile in multis*, the same, common, structural, universal elements of diverse religious phenomena. It seeks the meaning of "sacrifice itself," not this or that sacrifice.⁶⁷

Perhaps the more damning critique is not that they are ahistorical but that in their search for universals, for the *simile in multis*, they are engaged in imposing the "tyranny of the Same" (Levinas) onto their subjects, thus depriving them of their historical particularity—i.e., their cultural identity. These subjects are, rather, subsumed into a metaphysics of *hylé/morphè* (hylemorphism), or matter and form. As mere matter, they are once again, on the lower side of the *Geist* (immaterial, universal a priori categories) and *Natur* ("subject matter"; "it does not matter where we find them") dichotomy.⁶⁸ The logocentrism of this approach allows and/or entails the elision of the particular identities of the subjects under investigation. The treatment of these subjects will be reviewed in detail throughout this study, but a clue to its target is signaled by Kristensen's macro taxonomy of Christian/non-Christian