UNDERSTANDING RELIGION

Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies

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CONTENTS

PART II. THEORIES, METHODOLOGIES, AND CRITICAL DEBATES

PART III. RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND SOCIETY

INTRODUCTION

TO THE STUDENT

I hope that you will both learn from and enjoy reading this book. I have tried to make it not just another ho-hum, run-of-the-mill introduction to . . . (yawn) . . . type of book. Rather, I address debates between scholars and give you the skills and knowledge to comprehend the world around you. That means this book is about—and it sounds scary—methodology and theory. Theory and method are not just dry, abstract concepts, but principles relating to life and society. Indeed, giving you new ways to look at the world is a major aim of this book.

So, this book is not *about* "religions." Rather, it is a book about *how to study* religions. Reading this book first, or alongside, other books on specific religions will help you understand them (the books and the religions!) better.

Furthermore, religions are not separate from our embodiment and social life. We should not study religion as isolated ideas, texts, or rituals, but as part of human life. This is why the following issues are core to this text:

Politics: I do not mean being party political. However, all scholarship is political: it makes choices about what we study, who gets funding, what subjects are worth studying, and so on. Why the study of religion looks the way it does will be addressed.

Commitment: You may have been told that academic study should be neutral and uncommitted; however, there are academic traditions committed to

justice, the oppressed, and the welfare of all humanity (and sentient beings, other-than-human-persons, and the planet we live on). These debates will be addressed.

Voices: Western scholarship comes from Western traditions and the Enlightenment. While this has always been in conversation with global voices, much of the outside legacy has been hidden or sidelined. This has affected how the concept "religion" is conceived. Less fully represented voices, in terms of gender, race, and class, which challenge the standard construction of religion are explored.

Decolonizing: I will bring in insights from nonwhite and non-Western scholarship. This book will fail miserably to be truly decolonial and include all possible voices; there are just too many. But it will try.

Enlightenment values: Such values as equality, reason, and justice are key to this book, and the Western heritage behind the study of religion is part of how we have come to study as we do. But, as noted above, we cannot take it as the only voice; we must understand that scholarship has a political heritage and that various stances will help us see differently.

The rest of this introduction will do a few things, which you can read or skip. I have an introduction to instructors (what do I tell them but not you?); some notes on teaching theory (pedagogy) and scholarly choices; and a methodological introduction (or rant) which helps put some ideas in context. Although this last section is more directed at fellow scholars, it addresses concepts that are fundamental to this book.

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

If you are reading this, there is a good chance that you are thinking of adopting this book. I should therefore follow this with a sales pitch. However, I will do something more mundane and outline some key aspects of this text (which is, of course, simply a subtler sales pitch):

Student-centered: A trendy buzzword, but I use it here meaningfully in at least two ways. First, the writing and style is accessible. Second, it aims to give students practical skills, tools, and knowledge to examine the varied phenomena we term "religion."

Case study methodology: Often seen in business schools, this approach has not been widely adopted in the study of religion. I say more about this later, but I believe case studies are of benefit to both students and teachers.

Theory and method approach: This book does not address theory and method in the traditional ways of particular approaches (e.g., "sociology," "anthropology," "feminism," etc.), but focuses on helping students understand religion in society as discourse and practice.

way, one that achieves its perspective by distancing or by probing beneath a surface."[4]

History: This book is about contemporary religion, but I often engage history. My PhD was in the history of religion, and I believe that we cannot understand the contemporary world, or why things are as they are, without understanding how they came about. As such, one chapter engages historical methods and many chapters delve back hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years. However, in general, our focus remains on how this history affects us today.

Technical/foreign terms: Generally, English-language terms are used. This reflects a desire to be accessible to students at different stages, although foreign/technical terms often follow in parenthesis. These may be glossed or further explained in the glossary; definitions there normally appear under the technical/foreign term to stress their particular meanings. The book's focus, though, is method and theory, so it does not generally delve deeply into tradition-specific terms. Occasionally, a foreign/technical term is used in the text where the reader should be alert to a very distinct meaning for a pedagogical purpose, even if that term is elsewhere rendered in English. My guiding principle is ease of usage for the reader while alerting them to further complexities; where and how instructors supply further details will, of course, vary depending on course objectives, level of students, and so on. Further, given that terms come from Arabic, Chinese, Latin, Greek, Pali, Sanskrit, and a range of other languages, it should be clear why this book avoids deep engagement with specific terms, whose meanings may also be the subject of ongoing scholarly disputes.

Text boxes: Heavy use is made of boxes, which do at least three things. One is to provide introductions to key theories, issues, and concepts which can be cross-referenced from other chapters when relevant. Another is to provide examples without interrupting the flow of the main text, so readers can stop to check them or carry on and come back to them later. A third is to provide key background knowledge which may be known to some readers but not others, so those to whom it is familiar can keep with the flow of the text, while others can read them. In some cases, one box may serve more than one of these purposes.

OPPRESSION, JUSTICE, AND THE POLITICS OF SCHOLARSHIP

This book expressly addresses a number of issues which affect the way that scholarship is written and how we are able to think about the world. This has made this book deeply political in that it asks questions about who controls scholarship, and what voices have been silenced or marginalized in scholarship. This means that questions of class, race, and gender frequently arise as they have shaped our categories. This also means that this

is a book deeply concerned with questions of justice and oppression. This is both a personal and an academic choice; such questions have been raised both as personal expressions and as academic choices by various academics.[5]

The contemporary study of religion has a history, in part as a tool of colonial classification and control. We cannot simply jump to a place of pure and objective criticism of this without asking where we stand. The notion of standing apart from such questions, or even simply offering some supposedly external critique without being grounded in a concept of justice, is a stance that is viable only for those who support the unjust status quo. Therefore, as Desmond Tutu and others have noted, to refuse to seek justice against the status quo is an act that continues to support oppression.[6] It should be noted in this regard that this book is influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* including his notion that the oppressors can be liberated by the oppressed.[7] That is to say, it is sometimes hard for those in positions of privilege to see views from elsewhere, and it takes hard work to recognize the validity of the stance of our "Others."

To address some potential criticisms that may arise and clarify some issues, I will raise three points:

"Theses on method": Bruce Lincoln's famous statement on method largely aligns with my own stance and opinions.[8] It is often one of the first texts I give to my students. However, I do not tell them they have to accept it all. When it comes to the thirteenth thesis, I believe there are good reasons why scholars may be advocates in certain circumstances. This is discussed in chapters 5, 7, 10, and 18. However, I raise it as a point of debate, rather than asserting my own position as correct.

Does this book tell people what to think? I am stating my own stance here because I believe that, as students and scholars, we need to be reflexive about our own stances, biases, and prejudices, as discussed in chapter 2. Autobiography can become part of our scholarship.[9] However, I am very clear in asking readers to question the claims of this book.

Is this book an SJW (social justice warrior) manifesto? Many assert that academia is full of "cultural Marxists" who have stopped looking at evidence and only assert politically correct ideologies. My commitment to justice, decolonizing methods, and a concern with race, gender, and class may lead to this accusation. However, I would argue that objective and rational academic study will show that oppression is a real factor that shapes our world. My stance comes from evidence, not ideology. I do not, though, prescribe a single form of action nor what we could describe as a political agenda: those are questions I leave to the reader. This book also does not dismiss what the Western world and elite white males have contributed to our knowledge and understanding, which has been considerable. However, there are more voices to listen to, and hearing them will widen our knowledge and understanding further.

INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

This book is written in my role as a scholar who identifies with interreligious studies.[10] Interreligious studies is a fairly new term in academia, and refers to several things:

- A multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach (respectively, using or learning from many distinct disciplines, and combining the disciplines in study or research).
- An interest in situations of religious diversity, so that rather than studying religions in isolation, we seek to understand the "dynamic encounters and interactions" that occur between different traditions, including secular traditions and non-religious worldviews.[11] See especially chapters 2, 13, 14.
- The recognition that scholars are part of the creation of the discourse and cannot pretend to sit back as impartial observers who only examine other people's discourse or practices. Many scholars of interreligious studies are scholar-activists and do not see this as inherently controversial or contradictory.[12]
- An acknowledgment, following from the above point, that theological approaches and the secular academic study of religion are not strictly separate; secularism is discussed in chapter 16. Rather, we see a continuum of approaches. This book is definitely not a confessional theological one.[13] However, it is open to learning from theologians when they have something to tell us. Theologians are sources of data for the scholar of religion, but can also be sources of theory, an issue discussed in chapter 2, but also raised in chapter 7.

This book focuses on contemporary society and diverse societies, and critically explores attitudes toward religious diversity and the practice of interreligious dialogue, the latter two in chapters 13 and 14, respectively. However, it does not advocate for dialogue nor any specific view on this.

CASE STUDIES

The sustained use of case studies is rarely found in the study of religion. Even when it is, it is not normally approached in the way it is here. The model here draws from what is seen as good practice in other disciplines,[14] and is influenced by the pioneer efforts of Diana Eck in the study of religion.[15] I will briefly explain the method and key features.

The case study is a way to bring theory or method to life for students. In particular, it shows that we are not simply discussing abstract concepts but issues that relate to and apply to the real world outside the classroom. Indeed, this interaction with real-world issues allows theory and method to be applied directly, and therefore understood better because it becomes an active method of learning. It also emphasizes that there are not necessarily right or wrong answers.

A successful case study generally should accomplish the following:

- Involve a personal or existential aspect. Students may be asked to put themselves into the context of somebody in the scenario, or see things from another point of view. This helps highlight that answers are partly perspectival. Further, considering the effect the issues have on people will help develop an element of "genuine choice," or crisis, in that a decision needs to be made.
- Raise at least one or more aspects of theory and/or method to allow students to think about its application.
- Not have a single answer. Students should be able to see why, in different situations, from different perspectives, or at differing times and places, the situation may be thought about or answered differently. This encourages a reflexive approach (see box 2.7).

The case study approach also makes this text flexible as a teaching tool. While I have deliberately used case studies from global situations and a range of different traditions, an instructor could devise their own case studies for a single religion or regional context. The diversity here is seen as a virtue, because it is partly by engaging differing worldviews that students will hopefully be asked to think outside their normal boxes. However, it is not essential. Indeed, asking students to see another person's point of view from another strand of their own religion (if they have one, but this is equally applicable to students with no religion) can be challenging and eye-opening. Scholarly study is enriched through asking existential questions that engage diverse points of view and potentially give greater depth of understanding.

CRITICAL HERMENEUTICAL PHENOMENOLOGY AND METHODOLOGICAL POLYMORPHISM

No academic standpoint floats free of history and context, and I have already suggested certain things that inform this study. In this section, I will engage two areas. First, I address some reasons for the wide engagement with differing theories and methods. Second, I outline my own particular theoretical framework. I do not provide a fully developed theoretical platform (partly because if I had written a 60,000-word introduction I think the publishers would have had something to say about it!), but merely sketch some key issues. This section is addressed more to my fellow scholars, so I hope other readers will bear with me if parts seem opaque or obscure at this stage.[16]

METHODOLOGICAL POLYMORPHISM: OR, BEING PROMISCUOUS WITH METHOD

Whatever "religion" may be (and taking seriously critiques that suggest we abandon the term altogether), it is neither monolithic, sui generis, nor clearly definable. Therefore, being multidisciplinary, or even interdisciplinary, is essential. We should have a diverse

toolkit. This I term methodological polymorphism, which is to say that our method must take on a variety of forms in differing circumstances. This is needed for at least three reasons:

1. The range of phenomena under investigation are themselves plural, and thus our methods of investigation, to get a suitable angle, must also be plural.
2. Our ways of looking affect what we see, and thus varied lenses will help us gain insights from different angles and prevent us from assuming any is the "Truth."
3. Extending from the last point, multiple perspectives will help us see better. Assuming we cannot attain "Truth" does not mean that we cannot seek for more coherent, more consistent, or more plausible theories and explanations with a hope to approximate "truth."

Employing many approaches may mean that our methods and theories are not always consistent. Sometimes, taking insights from varied—even from potentially conflicting—methods and theories may be beneficial. This is why I have subtitled this section "being promiscuous with method." For many, this may seem illicit; however, I suggest that promiscuity may at times be a virtue. Through it all, this book hopes to weave a central narrative that makes sense of how we understand the theoretical basis.

SKETCHES TOWARD A CRITICAL HERMENEUTICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

The theoretical basis I am advancing here is termed a critical hermeneutical phenomenology. In a fuller sense, I might term it a critical, embodied, feminist, postcolonial, decolonizing, philosophical hermeneutical phenomenology. That, however, is too much of a mouthful and so the shorter term may stand in. It will be useful to clarify the terms:

Critical: Connoting critical theory and social constructionism. This is dealt with more fully in chapter 5. Critical theory may draw from many sources (see box 0.1), but in broad terms it is a scholarly and investigative suspicion of claims to knowledge, power, and authority. Importantly, it is not (necessarily—and certainly not here) a claim that all knowledge is relative. However, it does historicize how we see the world, showing that what we see as obvious, commonsense, or taken for granted may simply be cultural formations that are more or less arbitrary. In the broad sense taken here, it includes both feminist and postcolonial approaches that question, respectively, male-centric and Western-centric ways of seeing the world.

Hermeneutical: Meaning hermeneutical philosophy, which names a particular lineage of thought that has explored how humans make sense of the world around us through language and interpretation (see boxes 0.2 and 2.6).

Phenomenology: Originating in the early twentieth century (see chapter 2, especially box 2.3), phenomenology is—as the name suggests—the study of phenomena. Heavily critiqued via critical theory, it can nevertheless be seen as a viable approach combined with a reflexive awareness of our own preconceptions (see box 2.7). Further, it helps underpin our method through an embodied awareness that takes materiality seriously (see box 9.10).

First off, we need to deal with what will no doubt be a charge of undue promiscuity. Phenomenology has come under criticism from critical theory. This is discussed in chapter 2. But hermeneutical philosophy has also come under fire from a range of critical thinkers, including Jürgen Habermas, who is linked to the Frankfurt school, as well as Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Habermas's arguments I think misconstrue Gadamer's thought,[17] and the same can be said for Derrida.[18] However, some hold that Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) work also undermines Gadamer's ideas. As substantial usage is made of parts of Foucault's work—though I would not describe my method as Foucauldian, nor Gadamerian, come to that—we should address this. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow claim that when Foucault said "For centuries we have waited in vain for the decision of the Word," he discredited Gadamer's hermeneutical endeavors.[19] However, this has been disputed, with Foucault, Dreyfus, and Rabinow seemingly misunderstanding the nature and intent of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.[20] Indeed, we should be suspicious of claims that sophisticated scholars can be so readily declared irrelevant by this "magic wand" approach, whereby a simple phrase (or incantation) makes a whole school of thought disappear in an instant. It is, I would argue, a problem to which many scholars in the critical theory camp are prone. However, equally, the naysayers of critical theory also seem prone to assuming that some errors (and admittedly some incoherence) in the writings of certain theorists means that everything they say is meaningless.[21]

Why do I advance a critical hermeneutical phenomenology (that is also postcolonial, feminist, and embodied) here? First, I draw strongly from the way that both critical theory and philosophical hermeneutics have a strong focus in language as the basis of human interpretation of the world. This can be related to what is often termed the "linguistic turn" in the humanities and social sciences, which also relies on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). Older theories of knowledge (epistemology) assumed that we spoke about the world as something we directly experienced—as "facts" out there. But things are not this simple. The linguistic turn recognizes that our experience of the world is based in language (our cultural and social conditioning), which determines to some degree what we can know, understand, and experience. We never consciously experience or understand the world directly, but always and only through language. Now this may sound quite radical—and, indeed, some critics have suggested that such theories are primarily political in nature[22]—but there are solid reasons why these theories took root. For example:

BOX 0.1 WHAT IS CRITICAL THEORY?

"Critical theory" can be defined narrowly or widely. Here, it is used widely to describe a range of approaches which variously trace their heritage from (to note a few figures): Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) (phenomenology); Theodore Adorno (1903–1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) (the Frankfurt School); Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), Judith Butler, and Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) (broadly, but inadequately, postmodernism [see box 2.5] and/or poststructuralism); Peter Berger and Sally Haslanger (social constructionism); and, Walter Mignolo, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2008), Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (postcolonialism/decolonization). To roughly draw a common "critical" stance:

- Dominant ways of seeing the world are not the only ways we can see it.
- Many groups are suppressed (oppressed) in social and cultural discourse.
- Methods such as the archaeology/genealogy of knowledge, the historization of ideas, social constructionism, or deconstruction help question our concepts and ideas.

Notably, we are not discussing a single school of thought or set of ideas. This is a broad drawing of a "critical theory" approach. Chapter 5 explores this more fully, though focusing on only certain strands of critical theory; chapter 7 focuses on postcolonial and decolonization theory; and chapter 10 on feminist theory.

BOX 0.2 WHAT IS PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS?

Originally, hermeneutics meant the interpretation of Christian scripture. But it also refers to any textual or literary interpretation, including in legal contexts. Codified through figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), it started to become part of a wider discussion about how humans come to understand, or interpret, anything at all. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) is often seen as the father of hermeneutical philosophy, which is a systematic investigation into the nature of human interpretation and understanding. His ideas and hermeneutical philosophy were further developed by Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). Together, their ideas have been influential in various fields, especially in terms of how humans interpret language.

- In English, we demarcate a range of colors, such as green, red, blue, brown, and so on. However, some linguistic groups, especially from jungle environments, have a multitude of words that equate to what we call green, with each being its own separate "color." This is not simply a linguistic fact; tests indicate that speakers of these languages can distinguish between a range of what we would call "shades" of green that English-language speakers cannot discern.
- Some languages have words for emotions or experiences that we do not possess in English, and it seems credible to claim that this may equally affect the limits of what we can and cannot experience in certain ways.
- Some cultures do not speak of left and right, but of the cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west). They orientate themselves in the world this way. So, if a speaker of such a language says move your leg on the southeast side one step forward, other speakers of that language will be able to do this and orientate themselves in ways that English speakers are simply not able to do.[23]

Now, and this is very important, one consequence for some people who follow critical theory and take the linguistic turn is support for non-realist epistemologies. That is to say, theories of knowledge which assert that, as it is often phrased: "it is discourse all the way down." In other words, the only reality we ever come to know is the cultural, social, and linguistic one. Sophisticated non-realisms do not assert that there is no "reality," but only that we simply cannot "know" it directly for it always comes discursively conditioned. I discuss in chapters 5 and 9 the reasons why I would advocate instead for a critical realism (which aligns with the current scientific, philosophical, and social scientific consensus), and which overlaps with a sophisticated non-realism (sometimes anti-realism; see box 5.8).[24] Notably, I do not want to directly contrast as absolutely different the variety of things which get termed "non-realism" or "anti-realism," or sometimes get termed "poststructuralist" views, with the variety of things which get termed "critical realism." This is partly because each includes a variety of standpoints, and sometimes there is much overlap. For instance, many of the theorists who inform non-realism also inform critical realism, such that both may be said to be poststructuralist—and so I see "poststructuralism" as an empty term to bandy around here—with some differences depending on varying readings of the theorists (my readings, I would argue, accord with the mainstream philosophical readings and align with legitimate critique raised by such areas as feminist or decolonial scholarship).[25] Recognizing that these terms are used differently, within this text non-realism will stand for approaches where the social construction of reality is seen to take priority over the experience of "reality," and in which we are primarily faced only with differing interpretations of experiences. Meanwhile, critical realism stands for approaches which see "reality" as being—while socially constructed in our discursive experience of it—too powerful an influence to be merely a secondary component to social construction, for it determines our discourse and lived realities. From a critical realist

stance, it "is possible for social science to refine and improve its knowledge about the real world over time, and to make claims about reality which are relatively justified, while still being historical, contingent, and changing."[26] The latter is favored here partly because we should also take account of the "material turn" and not just the "linguistic turn" in contemporary thought, discussed briefly in what follows. But it can be noted here that Wittgenstein's work accords with my arguments.[27] Five key insights from hermeneutical philosophy also supplement my theory:

1. A basic premise of philosophical hermeneutics is the fact that understanding and interpretation are always combined. We do not first understand something and subsequently interpret it; rather, all our acts of understanding are already and always interpretations of the data we have received. This necessitates having a reflexive attitude to understanding. There is not, and never can be, some free-floating reason or critique which is above the fray. As such, hermeneutics extends beyond arguments which contend that reason is pure and neutral (one interpretation of modernity), on the one hand, and unreflexive critical theory which sees itself as having no ideological foundation, on the other (one interpretation of " postmodernity"; see box 2.5[28]): there is no such thing as a nonfoundational theorist, when this is erroneously used to deny an embodied and socially conditioned perspective.
2. Developing this idea, Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate the term "prejudice" as something positive. Our prejudices are our preunderstandings and form the basis of all new possibilities of understanding. An important feminist criticism of Gadamer to keep in mind here characterizes his stress on prejudice as reinforcing patriarchal and traditional norms. However, as I read hermeneutical philosophy, this is not entailed. Prejudice informs our starting point, which may lead to an opening of our horizons; it is not the endpoint, or limit, as discussed below.[29]
3. Inherent in what we have said above is the linguistic nature of all understanding. However, this does not mean that we can never understand another culture, language, or worldview. For Gadamer—and Wittgenstein—the commonality of language is the possibility of communication, not an unsurpassable barrier. It is also important to have an embodied focus on materiality which prevents logocentrism (see box 9.1), as discussed in chapter 9. Our being-in-the-world—thrown as we are into a certain context that is not of our choosing (see box 9.2)—and our socially and linguistically constructed discourse must be held in balance; we go astray when we emphasize one without the other. We are interpreting (hermeneutical) and embodied beings. Our materiality and embodiment shape us before we ever linguistically construct our world (see box 9.10).

4. This brings us to the concept of translation. Hermeneutical philosophers such as Gadamer and Ricoeur have argued for what may variously be termed the "agony of translation" or the "im/possibility" of translation. These figures are not naive, and certainly recognize that even between closely related languages we do not see a one-for-one correspondence of words. Nevertheless, translation does take place. When you visit France, India, Botswana, or Mexico, you can find the language to get you to the museum, eat the food you are looking for, or navigate your way to the lavatory (or is it the toilet, loo, or cesspit?). William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can be translated into Romanian, Hindi, and Korean, while Sunzi's *Art of War* can be translated into English, Spanish, and Malay. There may be some things we do not quite get in translation, but this does not mean that translation is impossible. Indeed, translation also occurs within one language: many speakers of contemporary English struggle with Shakespeare's Tudor English and need a "modern translation"; not to mention when we read some contemporary theorists! Importantly, we are not simply speaking about words here, because all language embodies a culture, and cultures are embodied in words and actions. We may never become a "native speaker," but we can find our way. Or, stressing the possibility of translation, as Souleymane Bachir Diagne has put it, "The language of the universal is translation."[30] In other words, we understand always and only through seeing that which is beyond ourselves. So, we must always translate (from our own language, from another language, from the gestures, touch, and actions of another, or even from seeing ourselves in a mirror) that which is beyond us into meanings that we can interpret in terms we understand.
5. We come now to one of Gadamer's key concepts: the "fusion of horizons." I prefer to term this the "opening of horizons," as I think it is less liable to misunderstanding.[31] Now, our present knowledge (our current set of prejudices) forms our horizons: it forms the limits of what we see/know. However, the analogy of the horizon is apt because as we walk from one place to another the skyline that we can see (our horizon) shifts with us. In short, it is a basic facet of human understanding that our knowledge changes (grows, expands—though we may also forget or become more closed) with time and experience. Our horizons (generally) expand naturally. An important part of this, for Gadamer, is the way that when two people (worldviews, cultures, systems of thought) intersect or come together we can have new learning: the opening of horizons. We can understand the other, while new perspectives that neither had thought of before may arise. However, this is not about creating a new thought realm, or horizon, shared by each participant; rather, we see each participant in the learning experience

having their horizons opened in new, and sometimes unexpected, ways. In Freire's terms, we can overcome our "limit-situation."[32]

This brief survey of five key points is neither definitive nor comprehensive of hermeneutical philosophy. They do, nevertheless, provide a basis for helping us move forward in theorizing religion. Such a stance moves beyond the problematic binary of either a naive realism or radical non-realism. The possibility of our understanding can, and must, be held in tension with the problematic "agony" of translation, which means we can never entirely enter another's worldview. In one sense, we remain forever, as Derrida would suggest, in a state of *différance* where a final and absolute meaning/meeting is never attained; indeed, Derrida would have suggested that the final, fixed, truth is a fiction, as standpoints and the world always change. Yet it does not suggest we are forever stuck unable to speak. Derrida himself maintained that we must speak and act, and his deconstruction was aimed, in part, at justice.[33] We may seek "truth" even if we see "Truth" as an unobtainable and false goal. This accords with Freire's balance of subjectivity and objectivity.[34] The lineage traced is primarily concerned with elite Western male thinkers (though we have noted some others), which may seem to go against the concern with gender, class, race, and a decolonizing lens.[35] Space does not allow us to extend on this here, but how such perspectives can add to theory appears through this book.

This may all seem somewhat abstract theory now, but especially through chapters 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 18, we will see why these debates matter and how they help us understand and think about what "religion" may (or may not) be, as well as to coherently interpret the world. The reader may freely reject or critique this theoretical basis. It is not essential to deploying the various methodologies contained herein. For instance, social identity theory, the cognitive science of religion, decolonial perspectives, and lived religion do not rely upon a critical hermeneutical phenomenology. Nevertheless, I hope that readers will find it a compelling stance that helps make sense of the complex realities and social structures we associate with religious traditions and how we think about the world.