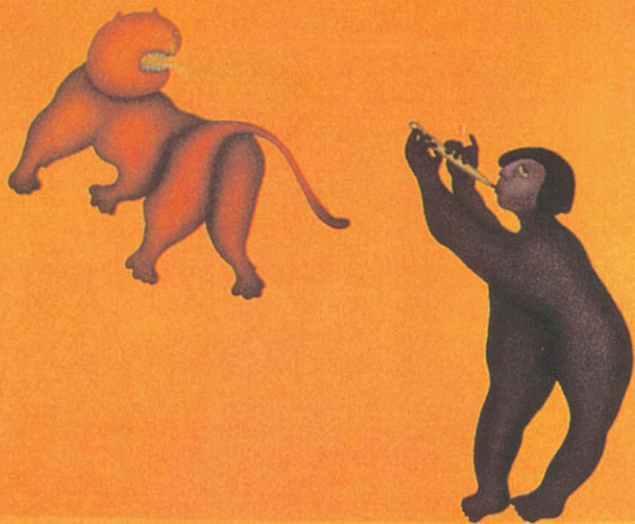


BEYOND

PHENOMENOLOGY

Rethinking the Study of Religion



GAVIN FLOOD

Beyond Phenomenology

Rethinking the Study of Religion

Gavin Flood

 **continuum**
LONDON • NEW YORK

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For Professor John Bowker

ममाचार्येभ्यो नमः

‘But I hear *voices* in everything and dialogic relations among them.’
(Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*)

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Introduction: the relevance of metatheory

In his famous *Mimesis*, Eric Auerbach opens his text by contrasting the story of Odysseus' scar with the biblical narrative of Abraham and Isaac. In Homer's story the old nurse Euryclea recognizes the hero returned to Ithaca disguised as a beggar by the scar on his thigh. We are told every detail of how Odysseus restrains the joy of the old woman as well as how he obtained the scar. The narrative is clear, within a well-ordered temporal frame in which nothing is hidden, where all is visible and illuminated. This contrasts starkly with the biblical narrative of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac which he obeys, only to be restrained by God at the last minute. Here we are told very little, only the bare necessity to illumine the narrative with all else kept in obscurity.¹ Auerbach takes these as narratives representing the Greek and Jewish traditions, the one emphasizing light and clarity with nothing left unsaid, the other emphasizing darkness and things hidden, outside of conscious awareness.

The contrast in these narratives in our own time might be taken to represent the Enlightenment desire for clarity, truth and temporal order, which is questioned by postmodernity in which there is temporal rupture, resistance to closure, and an emphasis on ambivalence and hybridity, with things remaining obscure. The present book is written at a time when these two positions, one might say powers, have argued over the contested ground of truth and knowledge, and at a time when the humanities and social sciences have gone through, and are going through, a process of self-reflection and a questioning of their pre-suppositions and horizons of possibility. This book attempts to locate the academic study of religion within this contested arena of meaning

and explanation, aligning issues in the study of religion with issues in other fields of cultural inquiry. While not abandoning the importance of reason and clarity, the book does wish to absorb into the academic study of religion ideas of indeterminism, the situated nature of inquiry and its dialogical nature, and the importance of a reflexive or metatheoretical discourse about religious studies.

Such a reflexive discourse has not been absent and there have been, at times, heated debates about the purpose and methods of the academic study of religion and whether the term 'religion' itself is a category that has significance outside a particular history in the West. I hold the view that the academic study of religions is an important, viable endeavour that can be examined within the subject area of 'religious studies', but that must draw upon other disciplines because 'religion' cannot be separated from historical, social and cultural contexts. To the question 'then why not simply study religion within anthropology, philology, politics, history or sociology?' I would answer, because religions are certain kinds of value-laden narrative and action that can be distinguished from other kinds of cultural forms (going to church is different from going to the supermarket) but which are only given life within specific cultures. But this is not to present a picture of religion as a category outside of history and narrative. Indeed, there can be no discourse of religion outside of specific cultures (even globalized culture is specific in its historical occurrence). Conversely, while some kinds of cultural expression can be identified as religious in contrast to cultural forms that are not, there are also 'religious' dimensions to many aspects of culture (such as football or running). Nor do I hold to the view that religion can simply be reduced to politics. While it is integral to any understanding of religion, there are forms of religion resistant to political power (such as the survival of traditions in the face of political oppression or simply wider cultural indifference) and questions addressed by religions that resist erosion by the course of history. Questions about meaning and purpose arguably arise in varied cultures and histories, which itself poses the question of whether there is a common human nature.

Metatheory, theory and practice

But there are two problems with the present state of religious studies. First, while the academic study of religions has largely moved away

from essentialist understandings that religion has some common, perhaps transcendent, essence, it has only begun to take seriously the claim that religion cannot be abstracted from its cultural matrices. Courses on 'world religions' still present these constructed entities as if they are in some timeless realm (perhaps a realm of pure doctrine) outside of wider cultural patterns and history (especially colonial history, the relation between religion and capitalism, and recently globalization). This is markedly true of 'eastern' traditions that absorb the West's projections, but also true, though to a lesser extent, of Christianity. This can sometimes be linked to an often hidden, totalizing claim about the 'spiritual unity' of these traditions, itself developing out of liberal Protestantism. To address this issue the academic study of religion needs to examine religions within their political, cultural and social contexts. This kind of work is being done in other disciplines, the reading of 'literature' alongside other kinds of writing, for example; I am thinking particularly of the new historicism and Stephen Greenblatt's work on Shakespeare and the Renaissance. We need much closer attention to religious texts being read alongside political documents, and questions asked concerning the constraints operative upon the text, the pervasiveness of social agency within them, and questions of resistance and compliance. This book does not directly engage with this problem which is best done in the context of specific regional studies.

The second problem, that this book does seek to address, is the need for the academic study of religions to engage much more with wider debates in the social sciences and humanities and to develop a rigorous metatheoretical discourse. This problem is directly related to the first in so far as the construction of 'world religions' is underpinned by a certain kind of theorizing whose roots are in the Enlightenment and which seeks universals. The ability to abstract the world religions from history and to see them as in some sense equal (though often not equal to Christianity with which they have been set in contrast), might itself be seen as part of the modernist idea of progress towards a clearer future in the academy, emerging, as Blumenberg reminds us, from a developmental process governed by scientific method.² Abstracting the world religions and presenting them as 'objects' of study is part of this progress whose scientific method, it is claimed, generates accurate, objective knowledge. Within the borders of its own field, religious studies needs to examine these kinds of questionable assumptions and to look at the ways in which its categories have been formed and its knowledges constructed.

There has been a decided lack of enthusiasm for metatheory within the subject area and this book hopes to contribute to redressing this imbalance. Moccasin walking or empathy does not provide a sufficiently rigorous theoretical basis on which to build an academic discipline. Indeed, within the academic study of religion there has been a strong antitheoretical tendency and a resistance to metatheoretical discourse. This antitheoretical tendency has rather sought to foster a pragmatic approach to 'world religions', that might use phenomenology or a 'toolbox' method. On this line of thinking what is important are the 'data' and the illumination of the data, by any methods that are to hand. The antitheorist simply claims that world religions are historical realities that demand 'our' understanding (for 'we' who stand outside of them) and all that is required is fellow-feeling and empathy. For the antitheorists, who might situate themselves within the phenomenology of religion, religious data are transparent as 'religious'. But this is to beg questions not only about the nature of these 'religious data' but also about the nature of the inquiry that is taking place: why is it taking place and who is doing the inquiring?

There are two potential criticisms of the present project from the antitheorists that I wish to pre-empt. The first is that a meta-theoretical discourse is irrelevant to practice; there can be metatheory until the cows come home but in the end, so what? The second is that the discussion of issues and thinkers highly relevant to metatheory within the general areas of the philosophy of social science, literary theory and anthropology, is irrelevant to the academic study of religion; that the links between these disciplines and religious studies are tenuous at best. In response to these potential criticisms I would wish to argue that metatheory *does* matter because it affects theory, questions the apparent transparency of practice and data, and even that the institutional future of the study of religions depends upon it. If the antitheorists win the day then religious studies will be marginalized at intellectual levels, will not be taken seriously by other disciplines, and will, in the end, lose out in the all too important institutional competition for limited funds. Metatheory provides a rigour at the level of discourse, interfaces with other disciplines and so integrates religious studies into the wider academy, and the only way a discipline can develop is through reflexive critique.

In relation to sociology Ritzer has defined metatheory as 'the systematic study of the underlying structure of sociological theory'.³ We can replace 'sociological theory' with 'theory of religions' and add

the 'practice of the academic study of religions' to express what I intend by the term 'metatheory'. Metatheory in the academic study of religions is critical reflection upon theory and practice. Through metatheoretical analysis we can attempt to unravel the underlying assumptions inherent in any research programme and to critically comment upon them; a metatheoretical perspective is a critical perspective. It involves deconstruction in the analysis or rereading of texts that are its object. In contrast to the antitheorist, the metatheorist would argue that data are not transparent and that the fault-lines and tensions within a research programme can be brought into the open; a metatheoretical perspective is therefore a reflexive perspective. If, as Ritzer claims, metatheory is coming of age in sociology, it has hardly been born in religious studies. This is partly because there is as yet no critical mass of metatheorists within the subject area, as there is in sociology, but also more importantly because, with the exception of some university departments, there is a strongly antitheoretical tendency. There is comparatively little work done on the paradigms operative within the study of religions, an unquestioning use of methods developed long ago and, although with notable exceptions, a suspicion of any metatheoretical perspective. But before developing a metatheoretical perspective, let me here briefly illustrate the importance of metatheory in relation to religious studies and its practice, through an example from Eliade.

Taking a passage almost at random from the Eliade *œuvre*, we read in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*:

Every ritual has a divine model, an archetype; this fact is well enough known for us to confine ourselves to recalling a few examples. 'We must do what the gods did in the beginning' (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, VII, 2, 1, 4). 'This the gods did; thus men do' (*Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa*, I, 5, 9, 4). This Indian adage summarizes all the theory underlying rituals in all countries. We find the theory among so-called primitive peoples no less than we do in developed cultures.⁴

This passage implicitly contains his theory of hierophany, that religious forms manifest the 'sacred', and the theory that ritual recapitulates myths of origin and, indeed, that the origins of ritual are in myth. But the theory of hierophany is itself questionable from a cultural materialist perspective and based on an implicit theological and ahistorical understanding of religion; an understanding that sees religion as transcending history. Eliade's statements about ritual in the

Indian context are particularly open to criticism, for example from Staal's perspective of Vedic ritual as having syntax but no semantics, structure but no meaning, or from, say, a Girardian perspective that sacrifice is a kind of safety valve that channels a society's violence. That every ritual 'has a divine model' is far from clear and is unreflexively assumed.

The critique of Eliade (not to mention his defence) is by now well established. It is not my intention to score points through criticizing him – indeed, he remains a giant figure in the academic study of religion – but merely to point to the relevance of metatheory. A metatheoretical critique of Eliade would not necessarily present an alternative theory of ritual, but would bring out Eliade's implicit assumptions about the foundational basis of knowledge about religion and contextualize his readings of religion within a specific social, historical and, indeed, political time-frame. Not to mention the personal trajectory of his astonishing career and his existential encounter with the 'terror of history' that stands opposed to the ahistorical sacred, a metatheoretical analysis would examine what McCutcheon has called the 'politics of nostalgia' in the context of mid-twentieth-century politics and wider historical framework.⁵

Metatheory is therefore very important within the study of religion, not only because its antifoundationalism reveals what lies hidden, but especially because what is hidden has immediate consequences at the level of praxis. This can be illustrated, most importantly, in religious studies pedagogy. Metatheory directly affects what goes on in the classroom from the university to the primary school. The teaching of religion, or rather about religion, largely follows from the work of the phenomenologists such as Eliade. For them, religion is a category that stands outside of history and socio-political structures, and is presented as a *sui generis* phenomenon, beyond other social and historical concerns. Many introductory textbooks to world religions used in tertiary education – let alone in secondary education – reflect this bias as McCutcheon has shown.⁶ In such texts there is a general absence of theoretical and critical considerations and an assumption about the nature of religion as having a common essence variously manifested. McCutcheon offers numerous examples of such implicit assumptions in text books. For example, he cites Karen Armstrong's *History of God*, who can still write in 1993 that her study of the history of religion 'has revealed that human beings are spiritual animals . . . Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recog-

nizably human.’⁷ Such sentiments reflect a precritical approach to the study of religions and reflect implicit assumptions generated through ‘world religions’ scholarship.

There is nothing inherently wrong with assumptions, they are the inevitable historical contingencies within which we all operate. Indeed, as Gadamer has argued, ‘prejudice’ is a precondition for understanding. But metatheoretical considerations can make us aware of the importance of assumptions in theory formation or, in the case of phenomenology, a proclaimed renunciation of theory. The importance and relevance of metatheory can be seen in the necessity to deconstruct implicit assumptions about the nature of religion and its place, for such assumptions impact upon the classroom and so upon the wider society. Metatheory is important because it questions the contexts of inquiry, the nature of inquiry, and the kinds of interests represented in inquiry. Rather than a merely notional, objective description that engenders a kind of passive reception in the minds of students and children in the classroom, metatheory promotes questioning, critique and analysis, that, in my opinion, are educational ideals that should be fostered. Against the passive, notionally objective description of the antitheorist, the metatheorist promotes an active, perspectival, questioning of the ground of practice and the theory that underlies it.

Anticipating my argument, the kind of metatheory I wish to promote can be characterized as dialogical. Although the present text is a metatheoretical consideration, and there is little systematic discussion of concrete examples, it does have practical consequences for the study of religion. The phenomenology of religion, I argue, contains implicit assumptions about an ahistorical subjectivity – it entails a philosophy of consciousness – that is inevitably imported into practice, whereas the dialogical model I wish to support entails a philosophy of the sign. This means that rather than subjectivity (belief, cognition, inner states and religious experience) language and culture, the realm of signs become the locus of inquiry. Phenomenological description contains hidden assumptions about subjectivity and transtemporal objects, but focusing on language emphasizes the dialogical and situated nature of inquiry, that fosters rigour in analysis, reflexivity, and critique. For example, a phenomenological account of a Hindu ritual offering 108 pots of sanctified water to Gaṇeśa, will simply describe the pots and the actions of the participants in a way that assumes a detached objectivism. A dialogical account will assume the presence of the researcher, will be explicit about the research questions brought to

bear upon the situation, and will focus on the analysis of language-as-performance in relation to action within a historically circumscribed horizon. Similarly, a dialogical reading of the New Testament might focus on the text as a literary document and upon the differing historical contingencies that produced both it and its reader. A dialogical account would therefore need to bring to the material different levels of narrative and its analysis.

This is not simply 'conversation' or a sharing of affective bonds that the term 'dialogue' might imply, but is 'critical conversation' – or even argument – that brings different kinds of analysis to bear. But unlike objectivist studies, it has implications for a wider interconnectedness in recognizing that inquirer and inquired-into are within a framework where discourse is possible. I hesitate to use the term 'common' framework, but certainly a dialogical model implies that researcher and researched are co-partners in dialogue, that they can share speech genres, that understanding is possible (though not necessarily translation), and that this occurs within an increasingly 'global ecumene', to use Ulf Hannerz' phrase.⁸ Yet a dialogical model must also emphasize difference, particularity, and the non-closure of research. Such a model moves away from a postulated universalism and objectivism towards the sharpening of difference and clarification of discourse.

Lastly, metatheory is important because of the increasingly fragmented nature of the academic study of religion. As I will argue, if there is an extension of the liberal humanism of the academy to embrace the scholarship of feminism, postmodernity, gay criticism, or even religious scholarship, then metatheory becomes indispensable for the coherence of any discipline. If the study of religions is to become a critical study that interfaces with related disciplines and includes within it multiple theoretical positions and approaches from feminism to Islamic scholarship, then metatheory is the only ground where these approaches can meet. Metatheory provides the only possibility of shared discourse. The contribution to this discourse offered here is an argument for a dialogical approach set against the objectivism of phenomenology.

Setting the parameters

The most important paradigm in the academic study of religions has been phenomenology. Through the adoption of its method religious

studies hoped to reach an objective, unbiased, empathetic understanding of religions that moved away from the traditional Christian attitude to other religions either as wrong, or as pale reflections of its truth. In this sense the phenomenology of religion offered a welcome antidote to theological dogmatism and opened the way for the West to encounter other horizons of possibility. But the objectivism of the phenomenological research programme can be brought into question from the perspective of postmodern indeterminism, and an argument presented that the understanding and/or explanation of religion is always historically contingent; knowledge is always produced from a social base, though this base is rendered invisible by objectivist science. This historical contingency entails a dialogical relationship between the object tradition and the method, between the researcher and the researched. Awareness of historical contingency means that a research programme is reflexive in the sense that interacting or conversing with its 'object' will also illumine its own context, its own assumptions and its own theory of method (or methodology). It is primarily the problem of phenomenology in the context of religion that the present study examines. While not underestimating the force and importance of phenomenology, this book seeks to develop a critique of it broadly from the perspective of a hermeneutic or narrativist tradition (particularly the work of Ricoeur) and dialogism (particularly the work of Bakhtin and the Bakhtin school). Indeed, Husserl, Ricoeur and Bakhtin, so very different, are enormous figures always in the background of this study.

In many ways, the contrast that underpins this book between phenomenology on the one hand and hermeneutics and dialogism on the other, is a contemporary recapitulation of a distinction between the philosophy of consciousness (*Subjektphilosophie*) and the philosophy of the sign. The tradition of the philosophy of consciousness can be traced from Descartes, and beyond him to Greek thought, but it especially developed within German idealism of the late Enlightenment and early Romanticism. Here it is associated with the work of Fichte who claimed that the intelligibility of the world only follows from the 'I' as the absolute ground of knowledge; the 'I' cannot itself rest on some other certainty.⁹ This concept is foundational in German philosophy and, although he criticized Fichte, has echoes in Kant's idea of the transcendental unity of apperception. For Kant the intelligible, autonomous self is distinct from the world governed by laws. This philosophy of consciousness – the 'I' as the absolute ground of

knowledge – can be traced through to Husserl who continues the transcendental inquiry of Kant and Fichte,¹⁰ in his development of Descartes's subjectivity or 'I think' (*cogito*). From Husserl the assumption of the transcendental 'I' as the absolute ground of certainty enters the phenomenology of religion, as I hope to show.

In contrast to the philosophy of consciousness, the philosophy of the sign, that communication and systems of signification are more important than subjectivity in understanding society and culture, develops with the hermeneutical tradition from Luther and the Reformation, eventually to Schliermacher, Dilthey, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Here interpretation as a transindividual, historical activity takes precedence over subjectivity and consciousness. In contrast to Husserl, Dilthey's grounding of the human sciences is a shift, in the words of Gadamer, 'from the structure of coherence in an individual's experience to *historical coherence*, which is *not experienced by an individual at all*'.¹¹ The philosophy of consciousness is critiqued from this perspective of historical contingency and the self as a self-in-relation to others: communication and intersubjectivity take precedence over subjectivity as the basis of epistemology and analysis, and interpretation takes precedence over ontology. This move from ontology to hermeneutics, from subjectivity to communication is further enhanced by the development of the semiotics of Saussure and Peirce, and from them the structuralists and the Russian formalists. While it is the consciousness tradition that has been most important in German thought, the seeds of structuralism are nevertheless also found there in Jacobi's idea of knowledge as the relation (the 'linked determinations') between elements within perception.¹² It might even be argued that the philosophy of consciousness and the philosophy of the sign are opposites that generate each other and there has been tension between them throughout the recent history of philosophy. In structuralist accounts, meaning is found not in any essential properties, but in the relations between elements of a signifying system, and so the philosophy of consciousness has no ground, and inquiry must begin from the sign. These developments in turn lead to the poststructuralist critique of structuralism (e.g. Kristeva and Bakhtin's critique of the formalists) and the postmodern deconstruction of the philosophy of consciousness (e.g. Derrida's critique of Husserl). We might say that in response to structuralism, two currents developed, the one as postmodern deconstruction, a hypercritical account of modernism, suspicious of all claims to certainty and knowledge which tends to read knowledge

as power, the other as dialogism with its links to hermeneutics and narrativism, that is suspicious of claims to objectivity and truth, but is fundamentally grounded in communication and acknowledges a self-in-relation.

Within the extremely broad purview of the philosophy of the sign we have cultural studies whose intellectual foundations can be found in dialogism and hermeneutics, but most importantly in the dialectical, social thought developing from Hegel to Marx and, in the twentieth century, into the critical theory of Adorno, Benjamin and Habermas, among others. In broad relation to this subject area we have feminist theory and postcolonial theory that offer sweeping critiques, though often indirectly, of the philosophy of consciousness. These are the broad parameters of the landscape within which the academic study of religions now finds itself.¹³

In the following pages I wish to present a metatheoretical discussion, locating religious studies within the landscape I have outlined here, by showing how its predominant paradigm, the phenomenology of religion, assumes a Husserlian philosophy of consciousness and how this can be criticized from the perspective of the philosophy of the sign. My basis for the critique of phenomenology and the ghost of essentialism in religious studies is provided by the dialogical tradition in relation to narrativism, and I argue for the demise of the ahistorical, philosophy of consciousness within the academic study of religions in favour a historically contingent philosophy of the sign. While this critique locates itself broadly within a hermeneutical tradition, an alternative critique could equally be launched from the perspective of critical theory and emancipatory praxis,¹⁴ though this is a path I do not take for it is not the tradition I find myself standing within and I am sceptical of the *Aufklärung* engendered by an ideal speech situation. Some of this book is spent in describing the arguments and positions of those I would wish to refute. I do this both because I cannot assume the reader's familiarity with these arguments and because it clarifies the following critique. I must repeat that this book is not a theory of religion but a metatheoretical analysis of phenomenology and an argument for dialogism. Nor is the book about the relation of post-modernity to modernity. While there are clearly continuities between deconstruction and metatheory, and I certainly wish to absorb indeterminism into the study of religion, the book locates itself within a broadly hermeneutical tradition that recognizes a distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and does not read relationships within

culture purely in terms of power. It does not locate itself within postmodernism as pure, political critique.

A summary of the book's argument can be found in the first chapter, which is followed by two preliminary chapters setting the scene by examining the nature of the academic study of religion in relation to reductionism and non-reductionism. The direct encounter with phenomenology in which the main critique is developed is found in chapter four, and the remainder of the book develops the implications of that critique in terms of narrativism and dialogism, arguing for dialogical practice in chapter seven and the ethical entailments of a dialogical religious studies in chapter eight. The epilogue considers some of the implications of the position I defend for the future of the academic study of religions.

1. The other tiger

In Borges' poem 'The Other Tiger', he juxtaposes the tiger incessantly constructed in the imagination with that of the real tiger that paces the earth beyond the text and beyond imagination. In this portrayal of a search for the 'real' tiger we have a metaphor for the search for an 'objective' understanding of the human subject and world which has traditionally been the goal of the social sciences and humanities. This goal of objectivity beyond representation is however, like Borges' tiger, constantly deferred and constantly slips out of reach. This quest for the objective and the real, while having its roots in the ancient world, particularly developed from the seventeenth century in the West at least, and by the twentieth century became articulated in the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the social sciences which reflected the methods and procedures of the natural sciences, on the other. But the quest for objective knowledge through rational investigation has, primarily since Nietzsche but especially with the advent of postmodernism, become the subject of severe criticism. Like Borges' tiger made of symbols and shadows, knowledge and understanding have been seen largely as constructed in the imagination of the researcher, and the quest for an objective truth independent of language or a particular system of symbols, has been abandoned by many within the social sciences and humanities. Within literary studies, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, and especially with the development of cultural studies, there has been a move away from the idea of understanding any objective truth towards relativism and perspectivalism; that objectivity is relative to the contexts of its occurrence and to perception.

At the same time as the move away from objectivism, has arisen the erosion of boundaries between disciplines and inter-disciplinary

approaches developed which draw from a number of sources. While this is not necessarily related to the erosion of objectivity (indeed some disciplines that cross traditional boundaries, such as biochemistry, are strongly wedded to objectivity), it does point to new configurations within academic disciplines and the creation of new 'symbolic cultures', each with their own rules of coherence and patterns for establishing knowledge.¹ The interface between these symbolic cultures has become the focus of intense interest and has generated new ways of approaching human subjectivity and intersubjectivity. At a general level the present study is set at the interface between the broad areas of the philosophy of social science and religious studies. More specifically I see this work as being located at the confluence of the phenomenological tradition, on the one hand, and the narrativist and dialogical tradition on the other, with the general aims of re-examining some central methodological claims at the heart of the phenomenology of religion and to take seriously the intersubjective nature of research.

By phenomenological tradition I refer mainly to Husserl, who inherits the German tradition of a philosophy of consciousness from Kant and especially Fichte, and by the narrativist or dialogical tradition I refer to Ricoeur, Gadamer and Bakhtin/Voloshinov who inherit and advocate a philosophy of the sign. Given a construction of the human subject in terms of a philosophy of the sign, any research programme external to the traditions it is applied to will be in a dialogical relationship with those traditions. The central argument of this book runs as follows:

1. The phenomenology of religion which advocates a method of bracketing the ultimate status of research data, the creation of typologies or 'reduction to essences', and empathy, entails a phenomenology of consciousness. That is, this method inevitably brings with it Husserl's idea of a disembodied, disengaged consciousness or epistemic subject who has privileged access to knowledge.
2. The philosophy of consciousness entailed by the phenomenological method can be critiqued from the perspective of the philosophy of the sign. That is, the self is a sign-bearing agent embodied within social and historical contexts, within narratives, rather than a disengaged consciousness. This critique of the philosophy of consciousness is a critique of the phenomenology of religion.

3. The critique of phenomenology means the recognition of the interactive nature of research, which firstly entails the recognition of the centrality of narrative in any research programme, and secondly that all research programmes are dialogical, constructed in interaction between self and 'data' or subjects of research.
4. The dialogical nature of research places language, and particularly utterance, at the centre of inquiry and provides the tools for the analysis of religious utterance. The dialogical nature of research entails that it is impossible to get behind language and its reference systems.
5. The dialogical nature of research entails an ethic of practice which reflexively recognizes the contextual nature of research and its implicit values and is sensitive to the power relationship in any epistemology.

Contemporary religious studies

The academic study of religions, as with other human sciences, is concerned with questions of human meaning, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. It implies a theoretical as well as an empirical discourse concerning the relationships between 'self', 'body', 'culture' and 'transcendence' and concerning wider political issues of the relation between 'self' and 'other', 'first world' and 'third world', 'world capital' and 'ecosystem', and between 'global' and 'local'. The inspiration behind this book partly comes from puzzlement at what sometimes appears to be marginal interest in a developed metatheoretical discourse within religious studies and partly from the discipline's general failure, with notable exceptions,² not only to engage with broader intellectual issues but also to *influence* wider debates. This book is intended to be a contribution to the literature which addresses the contemporary theoretical and philosophical issues concerning method in the study of religion, as well as the nature of religion itself, generated both by the interface between religious studies and other disciplines, and by developments within contemporary religion. The study of religion should, echoing a sentiment of Richard Roberts, be drawn back 'from the intellectual and affective periphery to a position nearer the centre of current concerns in social and cultural theory'.³

This general lack of engagement with contemporary theory in the

study of religions is partially accounted for by the use of the phenomenological method and the acceptance of the implicit distinction between theory and method, and partially on account of the lack of a strong, reflexive intellectual tradition within religious studies itself as Walter Capps has implied.⁴ Taking 'theory' to mean both the Popperian sense of hypotheses open to falsification and to the interpretation of the socio-cultural world, the argument might be that religious studies has method but no theory because it does not attempt to impose theory upon data, but rather wishes to allow religious phenomena to reveal themselves. There has been, of course, a lively debate, as we shall see, about the reductionistic or non-reductionistic nature of the discipline and the status of the concept 'religion', but little sustained debate with wider epistemological problems concerning the status of knowledge and the place of theory in the construction of knowledge. While the origins of the science of religion can be found, as Preus has so marvellously shown, as far back as Jean Bodin,⁵ it is in the nineteenth century that the term 'science of religion' is coined by Max Müller.⁶ But while the antecedents of modern religious studies can be found before the Enlightenment, it is nevertheless to phenomenology generally and to Husserl in particular that religious studies as the phenomenology of religion owes three of its most central concepts: that of 'bracketing' (*epoché*) truth statements, the intuition of essences, and empathy. Although, as Ryba has shown,⁷ philosophical phenomenology and the phenomenology of religion are distinct, nevertheless the phenomenology of religion adopts bracketing, the reduction to essences and empathy directly from philosophical phenomenology. Some of the most important thinkers in the phenomenology of religion, Kristensen, Van der Leeuw, Eliade and Ninian Smart for example, have adopted, or partly adopted, the method developed by Husserl.

Yet given the importance of Husserl in religious studies methodology, there has been little continued discussion with him.⁸ There has been no development of the phenomenological method since its adaptation by Van der Leeuw within religious studies and indeed the concepts of *epoché* and *eidetic intuition* seem to have been deemed sufficient in the methodological *bricolage* of the subject. Yet outside of religious studies things have moved on considerably and the phenomenological tradition has offered critiques of Husserlian method and has set out in new directions, some of which engage with the wider cultural movement of postmodernism. I am therefore 'coming from' a

desire to see religious studies claim a place within the contemporary study of culture and society and not to be marginalized at intellectual or theoretical levels. I am convinced that where theory is disavowed in the interests of objectivity, there theory is most rife, and while it may not at the present time be possible to generate theory out of the discipline of religious studies in itself, it certainly is possible to generate a metatheoretical discourse within the subject area by drawing upon other, related disciplines, and by putting other disciplines alongside religious studies, to generate, as it were, an alchemical reaction between them. This book therefore wishes to have a foot in two camps, within the academic study of religion and within the philosophy of social science, that itself interfaces with other disciplines, especially literary theory. But while the emphasis of the book is on metatheory and its relation to method, in looking at theory one must not forget its object 'religion', which is such a vital force in the contemporary world, and which has bearing upon culture, society, and economics, and above all on human subjectivity and meaning. While recognizing that a discussion of methodology cannot be divorced from a discussion of that to which method is applied, namely 'religion,' this study intends to address the problem of method at the level of discourse rather than in terms of the ways in which method has been applied to the history of religious change. It is not a theory of religion, but a metatheoretical consideration.

As a way in to a discussion of the nature of the study of religions, the present chapter will provide a background by looking at the foundations of the academic study of religion, namely theology and social science. First I will discuss the relation between theological language and the language of religious studies, looking at how both theology and religious studies are discourses and kinds of writing which are underpinned by practices sanctioned by wider social and historical contexts. This discussion will point to parallels between theological language and the language of religious studies. Secondly, against this backdrop, we will be in a position to see how the discourse of religious studies inherits objectivist values that have traditionally underpinned the social sciences. Thirdly, I suggest that a metatheoretical discourse can be developed that critically reflects upon these foundations by keying in to what can broadly be termed narrativist and dialogical theory. There are a number of directions in which to go here. For the purposes of the present chapter I shall draw upon the work of Bourdieu and Bakhtin to sketch one shape of what such a discourse

might look like, and shall develop this model in later chapters by drawing further on the work of Bakhtin, but also using Ricoeur. The academic study of religions had the seeds of a metatheoretical discourse in its partial engagement with Husserl's phenomenology, but this discourse has been slow to develop, and I will suggest that a dialogical model can provide the impetus for both reflexive critique and for developing the practice and writing which is the study of religions.

Religious studies and theology

The establishing of religious studies departments in the USA and the UK during the decades following the Second World War,⁹ marked an important shift in the study of religion away from theology – traditionally regarded as an insider discourse, in Anselm's terms echoing Augustine, of 'faith seeking understanding' – towards a 'non-confessional' approach which tried to treat religions as key dimensions of human culture which can be understood in ways akin to other disciplines' understandings of their objects; to sociology's understanding of 'society' or psychology's understanding of the 'mind'. While institutionally theology and religious studies often find themselves in close proximity as there are many combined theology and religious studies departments in European (though not American or Canadian) universities, many within religious studies have perceived the separation of religious studies from theology as a hard-won battle which has separated a confessional understanding of religion from a non-confessional, objective one.¹⁰ Religious studies tended to define itself negatively against theology, seeing itself as a rational scientific discourse, aligned to objectivist science. There is a discernible process in the development of religious studies on the one hand rejecting theology, while at the same time ironically drawing on Protestant theological tradition in the use of Otto, and beyond him, Schliermacher, while on the other hand embracing Müller's idea that there can be a science of religion. I shall therefore begin the discussion by briefly exploring the relation between religious studies and theology in order to show that the ground has now changed and that old debates and antagonisms between theology and religious studies have been superseded by fresh debates in the wider academy.

I shall attempt to illumine the differences between theology and

religious studies by arguing that these differences have been primarily about language, but that the language of contemporary, academic theology is closer to religious studies than to traditional theology understood as 'faith seeking understanding'. Although they have different histories, both academic theology and religious studies are kinds of writing *about* religion, with convergence and divergence, and both arise from the practice of rational method. While this might be obvious, it is not a trivial point and has consequences for the location of these disciplines within academic discourses generally. This discussion will necessarily take us down paths that will be explored in more detail in future chapters, but of which some foreknowledge will be necessary. Examining the nature of the languages of theology and the study of religion shows us the ways in which these disciplines are located within the overall pattern of academic disciplines, and illuminates the nature of the differences between them.

Theology and religious studies are both kinds of discourse expressed in writings about religion. In speaking about religious studies we are primarily speaking, on the one hand, of an institution within the education system given legitimacy by the wider social and historical context of its occurrence (or *place*) and, on the other, as certain kinds of *practice* which result in a *discourse* primarily expressed, modifying a phrase of de Certeau, as the 'writing of religion'. This is directly akin to de Certeau's understanding of history as comprising a practice (discipline) and its result (discourse).¹¹ The discourse of religious studies that results from the practices embedded within the educational institution (practices such as rational analysis, readings of texts, or fieldwork), characterizes itself in a number of ways, but above all as the proclaimed value-free exploration of religious meaning and institutions which comprise its 'subject matter' or 'object'. The language of this discourse, as we shall see, distinguishes itself from the object of its investigation and presents itself as detached from that which it studies: there is a rift between the writing of religion and religion as the object of that writing, and the clearer the rift the more objective the discourse is perceived to be.

This is what has traditionally separated religious studies from theology. Whereas religious studies is a kind of writing about religion in which there is a clear separation between the discourse and the object of the discourse, theology, on this view, is a kind of writing about religion in which there is no separation between the discourse and its object. Theology is a reflexive discourse, a discourse about

something of which it is itself a part; the reflexive self-description of a religious tradition. On this view, the language of theology is a language which *expresses* religion whereas the language of religious studies is a language *about* religion.¹² Weston La Barre once criticized theology for being meaningless in that if God is unknowable then theology is a science without subject matter and theologians are ones who do not know *what* they are talking about.¹³ But this is to miss the point that theological discourse only claims to refer to something outside of itself as part of its internal discussion. Claims about transcendence are only ever constituted within language which is the articulation of tradition; from one perspective theology is a discourse about itself. Indeed, theology in this sense can become an object of religious studies discourse. Conversely, theology can use or incorporate the data gathered by religious studies into itself.¹⁴ The issue of the distinction between religious studies and theology is therefore about different kinds of discourse and about the kind of the language they employ. To make this clear let us briefly examine the nature of theological language.

The language of theology and rational analysis

Like other academic disciplines, Christian theology in the West is given legitimacy by the wider social context in which it is embedded, by the place of its occurrence, but unlike other disciplines is legitimized not only as part of the educational establishment, but is also a part of institutionalized religion. The practices which lead to theology, or the discourse (*logos*) about God (*theos*), have therefore developed directly from a wider and deeper historical basis than the more recent study of religions, and the nature of contemporary theological discourse has its roots and draws its inspiration from the history of its traditions. The nature of theological language is, of course, a vast topic with a complex history, but our purpose here is simply to take some general, central features of theological language in order to juxtapose this language with the language of religious studies.

Nicholas Lash, citing Anselm's distinctions between soliloquy and allocution, monologue and address, suggests that whereas philosophical discourse is concerned with monologue, theological discourse is concerned with dialogue.¹⁵ While it is obviously the case that philosophy can be conceived as dialogue – or conversation as Rorty would

argue¹⁶ – within texts and between thinkers over the centuries, what Lash means is that in contrast to philosophical language theological language is the language of address. Theological language claims to address an ‘other’ beyond discourse, beyond the world, and beyond all predicates,¹⁷ although this claim is only ever constituted with the language of theology itself. Philosophical language, by contrast, does not address a ‘Thou’ or anything beyond itself and in this sense is monological. Theological language, for Lash, is dialogical language. Indeed, the breakdown of the possibility of faith in a meaning beyond the world is a feature of modern philosophy that distinguishes it from theology. Philosophy on this view cannot be addressed to anything beyond the world and is necessarily atheistic. According to Simon Critchley, philosophy in the modern world is atheism ‘arising out of the experience of nihilism’.¹⁸

This dialogical language of address to that which is other than the world is also the language of analogy, based on the analogy of the being of God with the being of the world. It is through analogy that an attempt is made to circumvent the problem at the heart of theological language, as Ferré has described echoing Anselm, that to speak of God in terms of human language is not to speak of God but to speak of worldly things drawn from human, transactional experience. But, on the other hand, if theological language is not about finite things then it becomes meaningless for human finitude; theological language as ‘univocal’ or ‘equivocal’ is caught between anthropomorphism and agnosticism. As Ferré says,

the theist would seem compelled to choose between *univocal* language, which makes the object of his talk no longer ‘God’ because merely comparable to the rest of his experience, and *equivocal* language, which ‘cleanses’ the terms used in describing God entirely of any anthropomorphism but thereby forces the theist into a position of total agnosticism.¹⁹

Ferré describes a third way between these extremes; the logic of analogy, the abstraction of a characteristic from finite being applied to infinite being. Thus God can be described as a ‘father’, a ‘king’ or as ‘love’ – or, indeed, in the Indian traditions as ‘mother’ (*mātr*), ‘old crone’ (*kubjikā*) or ‘child’ (*bāla*) – although these are not without problem in that to understand the meaning of metaphor one has to understand the meaning of its primary and secondary terms, of both ‘God’ and ‘king’, or ‘love’ or whatever.²⁰ But while these are problems specific to theological language, theological language is not dissimilar

to other forms of discourse in so far as analogy is pervasive. As Tracy says '(e)ach of us understands each other through analogy or not at all',²¹ and the metaphorical space in which analogy occurs is at the heart of many if not all, at least Indo-European, languages.²²

While theological language addresses analogically a 'Thou' beyond the world, in a more concrete sense it arises out of the practice of understanding revelation: revelation is the object and source of theological discourse, be it the Christian Bible, the Hindu Veda or the Moslem Qur'ān. Theological language, while centred on analogy, is the language of the interpretation of revelation and in this sense is an internalized discourse which does not refer to anything outside of itself. We can see this particularly clearly with Hindu theology where rival schools wrote commentaries on sacred texts offering alternative, often contradictory, readings concerning the key themes of knowledge, action, the nature of liberation and the relation of transcendence to the world. It is the place of revelation that distinguishes Hindu theology (*astika*) from its Buddhist counterpart (*nāstika*), although both share a common world and terminology about paths to understanding or shared discourse (*vāda*) and means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). In this sense Buddhist and Hindu discourses are closer to each other than a Hindu theological discourse would be to a Christian one, exemplified, as Milbank observes, by the themes of creation, the Trinity, incarnation, christology and sacrament.²³

So far, we have discussed the nature of theological language as traditionally understood, as a primary discourse about God and revelation. Contemporary theology, however, is an academic discipline which sits alongside biology, philosophy, history, religious studies and so on, within secular academic institutions as part of the liberal humanist, Western academy. Indeed, the question might be asked as to whether a discourse whose focus is on revelation has any place in a modern, secular university. In response to this question we must distinguish between two kinds of theological language, on the one hand theology as a primary discourse, on the other, as a secondary one.²⁴ Put simply, the former can be described in traditional terms of faith seeking understanding, of the language of analogy and of a discourse in Christianity about the Trinity, christology etc. The latter by contrast is a language about the primary discourse and is the subject of university degree programmes and indeed, much valuable research; but it is not theology in its primary and original sense. It is theology in this secondary sense, as the history of Christian theology, the history

of a certain kind of analogical language, which is taught at universities and which often sits alongside religious studies at a pedagogical level within a single department. Theological language as a secondary discourse – or the history of theology – would not be dissimilar to the language of the religionist because at this level both the theologian and the religionist share a common practice of rational, critical analysis sanctioned by the wider society around them. Theology in this sense is not ‘faith seeking understanding’ but rather ‘understanding “faith seeking understanding”’ which is a particular form of the religionist’s ‘understanding religion’. In the sense of academic disciplines, both theology and religious studies stand outside of the narratives upon which they comment and of which they can offer critiques. Indeed, theology in this second sense only differs from a secular religious studies as concerns its ‘object’ tradition and in its historical trajectory. The degree to which personal religious agendas influence or should influence scholarship is an issue we shall return to presently. But at this point we need to make some general remarks about the process of rational analysis which characterizes, or rather is the practice which results in contemporary academic discourses.

The educative process in Western educational institutions, particularly since the Enlightenment, has been the transmission of a modality of thinking or practice characterized as the method of rational analysis.²⁵ This method of rational analysis, always founded upon narrative, entails the processes of the assimilation of material, the interpretation of material through the construction of appropriate hermeneutical paradigms and the critique of those paradigms. The method of rational analysis is a practice which is not limited in the scope of its inquiry and which generates a discourse characterized by openness and a critical distancing from its object. This practice, however, does not occur in a kind of vacuum, but is communitarian and its practitioners have an investment in the maintenance of this rational community²⁶ of practitioners in open conversation. As such, the transmission of method therefore entails a dimension of power and implies the structural maintenance of certain social relationships (between teacher and student, between professor and lecturer, between government funding body and institution, or whatever). This transmission of rational analysis has, of course, been the subject of postmodern criticism of the Enlightenment project, although the practice of criticism which this critique presupposes is itself a part of the practice which it criticizes. While those who employ the practice of