
On the Function of the *Epoche* in Phenomenological Interpretations of Religion

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In attempting to interpret sacred phenomena, a problem arises: whatever is held to be sacred is not readily given, that is, it is not accessible in the way that an everyday phenomenon is. In terms often adapted and adopted from Rudolf Otto, “the sacred” (*das Heilige*) is “wholly other” (*ganz andere*)—ineffable, mysterious, and completely different from normal reality (Otto 25-30). The sacred is not an everyday object or concern, but is rather an “ultimate concern”—a concern that Paul Tillich described as the defining characteristic of faith (Tillich 12-16). Furthermore, what one person holds sacred may not be given as such to another person, which is to say, there seems to be no single phenomenon (whether a place, myth, belief, ritual or person, etc.) that everybody considers sacred. Accordingly, a rigorous description of that which is considered sacred must account for the difficulty of speaking about various ways in which *others* experience that which is *wholly other*.

In what follows, I argue that the restraint or “bracketing” that characterizes the phenomenological *epoche* can facilitate an understanding of the radical alterity of the sacred and of the others who experience the sacred. This is not to say that the *epoche* is the only way or the best way for enacting such hospitable restraint, for there are elements of the *epoche* itself that need to be restrained, elements tied to some of the conceptual baggage of phenomenology, but

there are significant ways in which the *epoche* makes it possible to welcome the alterity of other religions, other ethnicities, other people, and indeed, every other. Insofar as this restraint welcomes the alterity of every other, it can support ethical and political gestures of hospitality, such as the peaceful gestures conveyed in interfaith dialogue and international diplomacy. To begin, I provide a brief overview of the historical genesis of explicit articulations of the “phenomenology of religion,” particularly in light of the work of the Dutch scholar Gerardus Van der Leeuw, who lived from 1890 to 1950. After defining the phenomenological approach to the interpretation of religious meaning, I proceed to explicate the significance of the phenomenological *epoche* for developing an interpretation that is hospitable to the alterity of what others understand to be sacred.

I. The Phenomenology of Religion

In the phenomenological approach to religion expressed in Van der Leeuw’s *Phänomenologie der Religion*, from 1933, the word “phenomenology” is used in a complex way. It does not refer exclusively to the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl. Van der Leeuw mentions Husserl, but he also integrates the contributions that other thinkers have made to phenomenology. Although the following overview of these different contributions to phenomenology will not address the subtle nuances of each, it will provide a sense of the strands of phenomenology woven together in Van der Leeuw’s use of the term. In short, Van der Leeuw’s phenomenology cannot be understood as a simple outgrowth of Husserlian phenomenology or of the phenomenology of religion developed by his immediate predecessor, W. B. Kristensen, but must be understood as a complex integration of multiple strands of phenomenology, including contributions from Hegelian phenomenology, British

phenomenology, Dutch phenomenology of religion, and the hermeneutic phenomenology of Martin Heidegger. Furthermore, a brief overview of the connections between Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion and other strands of phenomenology provides an indication of the vast theoretical resources available for further phenomenological research.

Hegel's approach to phenomenology plays an important role in Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion. Critically extending approaches developed by Kant, Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, from 1807, presents a scientific examination of the manifestations of Absolute Spirit as they are experienced by consciousness throughout various stages of history.¹ Van der Leeuw cogently describes the Hegelian notion of the dialectical stages of history, wherein knowledge "first appears in the form of immediate spirit, which is mere sensuous consciousness devoid of spirit, and then steadily advances toward Absolute Spirit" (*Religion* 691). Through the dialectical mediation of subjective consciousness and objective spirit, spirit becomes realized in history as Idea. The realization of Idea in the development of history is parallel to the realization of essence in experiences of particular manifestations. In short, Hegel's phenomenology works toward a grouping of experienced manifestations into historical stages according to the degree to which these stages manifest knowledge of the essential Idea. The importance of the Hegelian strand of phenomenology for Van der Leeuw is evident in the English translation of Van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion*, which uses Hegelian terminology in its very title—*Religion in Essence and Manifestation*.

However, Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion is not simply an extension of a Hegelian approach. Van der Leeuw's approach to phenomenology also contains, at least implicitly, an empirical strand of phenomenology, which focuses less on speculation about the

essence of religion and more on the arrangement of religious manifestations into groups or classes. An empirical phenomenology is first expressed in the works of British philosophers and scientists, including John Robison, who lived from 1739 to 1805, and other thinkers for whom the term “phenomenology” generally referred to a “philosophical history,” which is defined by the empirical task of descriptively classifying observable facts and inferring the laws that bind them (James 26-29).²

The integration of the empiricist and idealist phenomenologies is at work in the first explicit occurrence of the phrase “phenomenology of religion,” which appears in the *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte (Handbook of the History of Religions)*, written by the Dutch scholar Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye in 1887. In this groundbreaking work, Chantepie articulates the task of the science of religion and provides an “Outline of the phenomenology of religion” (James 42-45). Employing the terms of Hegelian phenomenology, Chantepie divides his science of religion into two areas of inquiry, essence and manifestations, which are approached through investigations in philosophy and history respectively. However, Chantepie takes a more empirical tone as he defines the roles of philosophy, phenomenology, and history quite differently than Hegel. Chantepie argues that the task of phenomenology is not to examine historical types in terms of a philosophical or theological concept, but rather to prepare historical data for philosophical analysis through “a *collection*, a *grouping*, an *arrangement*, and a *classifying* of the principal groups of religious conceptions” (43). Thus, Chantepie’s sense of phenomenology as a grouping of manifestations weaves together an empirical phenomenology with a Hegelian phenomenology of essence and manifestation.

Chantepie’s *Lehrbuch* was highly influential, and many scholars began similar efforts after its publication and its subsequent translation into English and French. Chantepie’s influence

can be seen in the work of a fellow Dutch phenomenologist, William Brede Kristensen. In 1901, at the University of Leiden, Kristensen was appointed to the first professorship for the phenomenological study of religion. Some of Kristensen's lectures on the phenomenology of religion have been edited posthumously, and the English translation of these lectures was first published in 1960 as *The Meaning of Religion*. Kristensen's phenomenology follows many of the Hegelian and empirical aspects of Chantepie's grouping and classifying of religious phenomena. Kristensen also adds to Chantepie's approach, making it more complex and intricate. For instance, both Kristensen and Chantepie argue that phenomenology is affected by historical manifestations and philosophical concepts, but Kristensen goes further than Chantepie in arguing that phenomenology is also the medium whereby the philosophy and history of religion interact and affect one another (9).

Although Kristensen's phenomenology supposes an essential meaning of religion, it transforms the essence by situating it within the typology of its manifestations. This is analogous to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of phenomenology as a way of thinking that "puts essences back into existence" (*Phenomenology* vii). Whereas theologians and philosophers describe the essence of religion according to their own understanding of religion, Kristensen transforms this philosophical concept of essential meaning by arguing that phenomenology must investigate the meaning that appears to those people who experience the phenomena. As George James describes it, Kristensen's phenomenology of religion investigates "the meaning that the religious phenomena have for the believers themselves" (144). With such an approach, the phenomenologist investigates other religions on their own terms rather than assimilating doctrines and practices to his or her own religious background.

In elucidating the essential meaning of religion in its different manifestations for different believers, Kristensen does not merely classify the various types of its manifestations, but also seeks to understand these various manifestations. “Phenomenology has as its object to come as far as possible into contact with and to understand the extremely varied and divergent religious data” (Kristensen 11). As a guiding supposition from which such an understanding can be approached, Kristensen adopts Otto’s concept of the holy (*das Heilige*), which Otto articulates with the expression *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—a numinous power revealed in moments of “awe” that admit of dreadful shuddering (*tremendum*) and fascinating wonder (*fascinans*) in the face of the overwhelming majesty of the “wholly other” mystery (*mysterium*) (Kristensen 15-18; Otto 12-40).

The phenomenological approach to the study of religion developed in Van der Leeuw’s *Phänomenologie der Religion* follows the work of Kristensen, with the ultimate aim of understanding what others experience as sacred (James 205). Furthermore, Van der Leeuw’s phenomenology also integrates hermeneutic approaches to understanding, including Heidegger’s phenomenological concept of discourse that points to hermeneutic meaning (Van der Leeuw, *Religion* 676-77). According to Heidegger, phenomenology is a way of letting phenomena become seen as phenomena: “phenomenology” means “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (*Being and Time* 58). The discourse of phenomenology is apophantical, with *apophansis* defined as a discourse that “lets us see something from the very thing which the discourse is about” (56). Apophantical assertions thus make it possible to point to a phenomenon and let it be seen from itself. Human existence (or more properly, *Dasein*) can use discourse to point to the meaning of phenomena because the assertions of apophantical discourse are grounded in the hermeneutic structure of discourse,

which is pre-assertoric meaning (i.e., meaning that is pre-predicative, pre-linguistic, and pre-thematic). It is in this hermeneutic structure that *Dasein* is given access to the difference between Being and beings, access that allows every phenomenon to be interpreted, to be spoken of *as* something (61-62). This hermeneutic structure is the “as-structure” of discourse. It is a bivalent unity of composition (i.e, presence) and division (i.e., absence) whereby phenomena appear meaningful.

In short, the hermeneutic meaning upon which the Being of beings shows itself is disclosed to *Dasein* through the “as-structure,” the structure upon which beings and Being are differentiated as present or absent to the understanding (188-203). Although the meaning of Being is not itself given as a phenomenon, discourse about phenomena can point to what shows itself and speak of the hermeneutic structure of this meaning, indicating the differences (i.e., combinations and separations; presences and absences) upon which appearances become understood as meaningful aspects of the world. Thus, the truth (*Wahrheit*) disclosed through phenomenological discourse is not one of proof or logical correctness but one of discovering (*entdecken*) or un-concealing the concealed meaning of phenomena. Heidegger articulates this sense of truth by appropriating the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, which connotes un-concealment or un-hiddenness, deriving from the verb stem *lath*, which means “to be concealed” (56-57, 262).

The hermeneutic dimension of Van der Leeuw’s phenomenology is not only reflected in his approach to questions of meaning and understanding, but also in his description of religious meaning in terms of experience. Like Heidegger, Van der Leeuw works with the hermeneutic conception of experience (*Erlebnis*) developed by Wilhelm Dilthey.³ For Van der Leeuw,

understanding is the subjective aspect of phenomena, and this subjective aspect is inherently intertwined with the objectivity of any manifestation that becomes understood. Van der Leeuw articulates the relation of understanding to understood phenomena according to the schema outlined in Dilthey's argument that the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) are "based on the relations between experience [*Erlebnis*], expression [*Ausdruck*] and understanding [*Verstehen*]" (*Religion* 676). Van der Leeuw correlates subjective experience, expression, and understanding with three objective levels of appearing—relative concealment (*Verborgenheit*), relative transparency (*Durchsichtigkeit*), and gradually becoming manifest or revealed (*Offenbarwerden*) (Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie* 769). The primordial level of phenomenal appearing is the understanding of that which becomes revealed. Upon reflection, this level of the phenomenon's becoming manifest is rendered transparent and opaque: transparent insofar as the meaning of the phenomenon can be expressed; opaque insofar as the meaning of the phenomenon is concealed in the alterity of the past experience that is being reflected upon. Through discourse, what becomes revealed to the understanding is expressed, thus making transparent the meaning of the phenomenon as it was experienced.

Van der Leeuw describes different experiences of meaning in terms of interconnections of meaning (*Sinnzusammenhänge*), also called "types," analogous to what Dilthey spoke of as structural connections (*Strukturzusammenhänge*) (Van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie* 771; *Religion* 673). Such types can be described differently according to different contexts, and they could include types of sacred objects (e.g., stones, trees, fetishes, buildings), sacred people (e.g., priest, king, saint, mystic), sacred actions (e.g., purification, divination, prayer), etc. The basic type or structure of religious meaning is that of the sacred. Because Van der Leeuw, like Kristensen, adopts Otto's concept of the sacred in defining the essential meaning of religion, the

concealment which becomes revealed in connections of meaning is considered to be the concealment of the wholly other. Insofar as all phenomena un-conceal concealment, all phenomena can be described as appearances of the radical alterity of the sacred.

Human existence is always already engaged with the sacred, which is to say, human being is “*homo religiosus*,” the opposite of “*homo negligens*” (Van der Leeuw, *Religion* 50, 680). In other words, “all understanding, irrespective of whatever object it refers to, is ultimately religious: all significance sooner or later leads to ultimate significance” (684). Similar to Van der Leeuw, but with more emphasis on hermeneutics, Gadamer argues that all hermeneutic inquiries must conceive of understanding “in terms of religious experience,” such that all experiences are in some sense experiences of the sacred (Gadamer, *Philosophical* 80). Of course, not all appearances are experienced as appearances of the sacred. In other words, all phenomena manifest the sacred, but not necessarily as such.

The radical alterity concealed in the manifestation of phenomena can become obscured, such that the concealment of phenomena is ignored or neglected: *homo religiosus* becomes obscured and resembles *homo negligens*. Thus, not only can one neglect a sense of the sacred power of one’s own religious practices, but one can also neglect a sense of the sacred power concealed in all the phenomena in one’s everyday life. Likewise, one can neglect a sense of the sacred power of another person’s religion, but one can also neglect a sense of the sacred power concealed in every aspect of the other person, including those aspects of the other person that are foreign, antithetical, or hostile to one’s own conception of what is religious or sacred. A phenomenology of religion is thus not a matter of abstract methods, theories, or schemata; rather,

it is a way of engaging the radical alterity of every phenomenon and avoiding attitudes and practices of neglect.

Phenomenology is, for Van der Leeuw, the “true vital activity” of the human: “standing aside and understanding what appears into view” (*Religion* 676). Phenomenology is not merely a philosophical school or theory, it is the way in which humans understand the mysterious other as it is becoming manifest in experience. Similar definitions of phenomenology are proposed by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger says that being an actual “movement” (*Richtung*) of philosophy is not essential to phenomenology (*Being and Time* 62). Phenomenology is not essentially a school of thought, but is rather “the possibility of thinking,” the possibility “of corresponding to the claim of what is to be thought” (*On Time and Being* 82). If phenomenology is experienced as such a possibility, “it can disappear as a designation in favor of the matter of thinking whose manifestness remains a mystery” (82). Merleau-Ponty expresses a related notion in saying that the task of phenomenological reflection is “to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason” (*Phenomenology* xx-xxi). From these accounts, it would appear that the task of a phenomenology of religion is to use discourse to communicate the sacred mystery of what appears by making transparent the connections of meaning that are concealed in different experiences.

Phenomenology thus provides a way of translating all types of religious experience into communicable discourse without effacing the radical alterity of that which becomes manifest in such experience. For Van der Leeuw, the attitude of restraint is a fundamental part of phenomenological interpretation because it holds discourse back and keeps it from obscuring or assimilating the phenomena under investigation (*Religion* 646, 674-676). By elucidating this attitude of restraint, which is encrypted in phenomenological appropriations of the Ancient

Greek word *epoche*, I indicate how phenomenology can, without effacing the phenomena of which it speaks, facilitate hospitable discourse about religion and the sacred.

II. Hospitable Restraint

Epoche is a term employed throughout Husserl's works on phenomenology. It signifies the "brackets" into which are placed assertions about the world, particularly assertions arising "*from the natural standpoint*" (Husserl 101-110). The natural standpoint (or natural attitude) is the fundamental situation of the human being. It is the situation whereby the self is "set in relation to a world," which is "*a world of values, a world of goods, a practical world*" (103). Merleau-Ponty expresses a similar conception of the phenomenological *epoche*, arguing that phenomenology "places in abeyance the assertions arising out of the natural attitude, the better to understand them" (*Phenomenology* vii). Bracketing the natural standpoint is not the same as the Cartesian exercise of putting into doubt the notion that the world is there or that others exist. Rather, the *epoche* suspends assertions and presuppositions about what appears in the natural standpoint in order to focus on what appears as it appears. With the *epoche*, phenomenologists restrain themselves, holding back judgments so that their discourse lets phenomena show themselves as phenomena.

James notes that Van der Leeuw's use of the term *epoche* has "little to do with its meaning in Husserl's thought" (231). Unlike Husserl's use of the *epoche*, the restraint (*Zurückhaltung*) of Van der Leeuw's *epoche* does not seek a constitutive transcendental ego, and still further it "implies no mere methodological device, no cautious procedure, but the distinctive characteristic of man's whole attitude to reality" (Van der Leeuw, *Religion* 675). The *epoche* is

not simply a method that can be applied in some cases and not in others. The *epoche* is always already at work as it pervades the understanding. “Understanding, in fact, itself presupposes intellectual restraint” (684). Understanding is always already holding itself back so as to let that which becomes revealed in the appearing of phenomena show itself as such. The *epoche* is the restraint whereby one holds oneself back so as to let that which is other than oneself show itself. The *epoche* implies that one must turn away from some things in order to turn toward others. To understand the meaning of what appears, some things must be suspended or put out of play.

In short, Van der Leeuw views the *epoche* as a fundamental characteristic of concrete human existence, and not as an abstract methodological instrument. Edith Wyschogrod describes a similar “concretization of the *epoche*” in the work of Emmanuel Levinas: “Bracketing is no longer an instrument invented for understanding consciousness in its primordially but a fundamental structure of human existence” (*Levinas* 75). In other words, with his “prereflective mode of living the Husserlian *epoche*,” Levinas “brings the *epoche* into the life world itself.” Levinas is also similar to Van der Leeuw insofar as both of these thinkers work with phenomenology as a way to account for different manifestations of the human relation with the radical alterity of the wholly other, which infinitely exceeds the limits of any object, any phenomenon, or any totality. Like Van der Leeuw, Levinas defines religion in terms of this relation with alterity. “We propose to call ‘religion’ the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality” (*Levinas, Totality* 40). Furthermore, Levinas addresses the ethical implications of alterity, particularly in terms of the relation of “the one-for-the-other,” which is a “face to face” relation characterized by the “substitution of the same for the other” (*Otherwise* 26; *Totality* 39).

In light of the senses of phenomenology expressed by Van der Leeuw and Levinas, one can see how phenomenological inquiries into religion work with the *epoche* in attempting to restrain one's own presuppositions and let what others experience as sacred appear in its irreducible alterity. This is not to say that presuppositions are bad and should be completely avoided. Indeed, one cannot comprehend another's experience of the sacred without already having some presupposed understanding of the sacred. Without presuppositions, no experience and no reality could appear at all. Gadamer makes this point, saying that presuppositions "are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us" (*Philosophical* 9), which itself requires at least a minimum of restraint. From the presuppositions of one's existential situation, one can experience others, but without further restraint their radical alterity is subsumed by one's own presuppositions. With further restraint, one can proceed to understand others' experiences without effacing their alterity.

Furthermore, one's own experiences themselves appear other as soon as one begins to reflect on them. Any reflection on an experience is a reflection on an experience that is other than the experience one is having during the reflection. For instance, whether I am trying to decipher a shopping-list I wrote twenty minutes ago or I am trying to decipher the Rosetta Stone, the expressions that I am interpreting are not expressions of an experience that is presently mine. Indeed, the moment I reflect on what I am doing right now, my experience is no longer present. It has already become past, "already become strange" (Van der Leeuw, *Religion* 675). Accordingly, the phenomenologist of religion always interprets *others'* experiences. Even when the phenomenologist of religion employs the *epoche* to understand his or her own experiences, this experience is already strange, already other.

In restraining oneself so as to interpret what others experience as sacred, one cannot completely restrain oneself without suspending the very hermeneutic context that makes it possible to interpret others' experiences. Where one cannot say "No" to any more of one's own presuppositions and cannot say "Yes" to any more that is other than one's presuppositions, understanding reaches a limit. To further restrain oneself would be to dissolve the very presuppositions from which the other can be interpreted as other, and to cease restraining oneself would be to further reduce the other to one's own presuppositions. This is the limit of understanding, the limit of phenomenology, the limit that marks the encounter with radical alterity. At this limit, the other's experience of the sacred appears as other. Van der Leeuw notes that, at this limit, understanding loses its name and can only be considered as "becoming understood" (*Verstandenwerden*):

the more deeply comprehension penetrates any event, and the better it 'understands' it, the more evident it becomes to the understanding that the ultimate ground of understanding lies not within itself, but in some 'other' by which it is comprehended from beyond the frontier. (*Religion* 683)

As understanding interprets the meaning of any phenomenon, it becomes clear that "this meaning is never understood" insofar as it is ultimately "a secret which reveals itself repeatedly, only nevertheless to remain eternally concealed" (680). Although the concept of an eternally concealed secret repeatedly revealing itself sounds theological, such concealment is evident from a phenomenological perspective and need not be a matter of theological doctrine. For example, Merleau-Ponty argues from a phenomenological perspective that, for humans to sense anything, the perceiver must extend itself out toward things that are not yet perceived or comprehended, remaining open to "an absolute Other" that is reflected in perception (*Phenomenology* 325f). The perceivable parts of the world are aspects of an "absolute mystery" perpetually becoming

manifest to perception precisely as that which is absolutely different from one's own perception (333). Merleau-Ponty also expresses this interpretation of the perception of mystery in terms of German phenomenology as he notes that the sense-experience of the world is an original presentation (*Urpräsentation*) of concealment (*Verborgenheit*)—i.e., a presentation of that which is originally not capable of being present or visible (*Nichturpräsentierbar*) (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 218, 239, 251).

Every phenomenon discloses the appearance of the wholly other, such that what is disclosed in phenomenological discourse is always the appearance of that which, as such, does not appear. This implies that the task of the phenomenology of religion is not simply to interpret appearances of religious experience. More fundamentally, the task of the phenomenology of religion is to disclose the limit where appearances break up and concealment breaks through, that is, the limit where others' experiences of the sacred appear in their irreducible alterity. Moreover, at the limit of restrained interpretation, others' experiences themselves appear as wholly other, such that every single other is ultimately given as wholly other. Derrida articulates this point in terms of a "play of words" that contains "the very possibility of a secret that hides and reveals itself at the same time within a single sentence"—*tout autre est tout autre* (where "*autre*" means "other"; "*est*", "is"; and "*tout*", "every" or "wholly") (Derrida, *The Gift* 87). This provocatively ambiguous French phrase suggests that every particular other is completely other, wholly other: "Every other (one) is every (bit) other" (82).

Holding back the understanding, phenomenology approaches the limit where understanding loses its name and encounters the ineffable other, and for the phenomenologist of religion, this other is every other, including the phenomenon of another's experience of the

sacred. Simply put, the phenomenology of religion enacts the *epoche* in an explicit attempt at holding oneself back so as to welcome the other as other, to welcome others' experiences of the wholly other in all of their otherness. John Caputo argues that this gesture of welcoming the arrival of the other (Derrida's "*l'invention de l'autre*") is a common commitment of many inquiries in hermeneutics and also in deconstruction (Caputo 42). It is this same welcoming of transcendence and alterity that led Wyschogrod to suggest that various articulations of hermeneutics and deconstruction are particularly helpful in approaching a study of religious phenomena (Wyschogrod, "Civilizational" 58-79). Phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction—whether working separately or in conjunction—restrain the structures of discourse so as to not obscure the alterity of the other. To elucidate the implications of the *epoche* for the interpretation of sacred phenomena, I further examine Van der Leeuw's appropriation of the *epoche* while also considering the significance of investigations in hermeneutics and deconstruction for interpreting how others understand that which is wholly other.

The details of Van der Leeuw's appropriation of the *epoche* are most evident when reflecting on what it is that Van der Leeuw considers particularly important to restrain. James notes that Van der Leeuw puts three aspects of religion into the brackets of the *epoche*: 1) any reality behind the appearance of the phenomenon, 2) any development or evolutionary progression of history, and 3) any theological judgments that consider alien religious phenomena to be "spurious religion and degeneration" (233). All of these aspects of religion must be held in abeyance if one is to understand the phenomenon as such, as another's experience of a revelation of alterity. If one does not restrain oneself to this extent, one's interpretation of religion will likely posit assertions and make judgments about phenomena in such a way as to obscure and

efface the other. Brief examples of the three forms of discourse that Van der Leeuw brackets will help clarify how phenomenological interpretations can speak of experiences of the sacred.

1) Similar to Heidegger's argument that there is nothing "behind" what shows itself in the appearing of phenomena (*Being and Time* 60), Van der Leeuw argues that phenomenology "is concerned only with 'phenomena', that is with 'appearance'; for it, there is nothing whatever 'behind' the phenomenon" (*Religion* 675). This follows from Van der Leeuw's separation of phenomenology from theology and philosophy, which are concerned with the metaphysical truth underlying appearances. Accordingly, Van der Leeuw does not claim that phenomena are manifestations of Platonic Ideas or of a Kantian thing-in-itself (*Ding-an-sich*). This also means that Van der Leeuw brackets the structures that empirical scientists posit as an underlying reality, such as the position of some physical and social scientists who claim that the world is primarily random material events of which human consciousness is merely an emergent phenomenon or epiphenomenon (Van der Leeuw, *Religion* 677). Although the rigorous exactness and precision of many scientific investigations can yield data and hypotheses that are relevant to what is experienced of sacred phenomena, they cannot assert anything about the reality underlying all interpretation, for such reality is a mystery and is not disclosed to the reflective gaze of the researcher (whether the researcher is an anthropologist, linguist, botanist, philosopher, chemist, etc.).

In restraining all propositions about true structures 'under' or 'behind' apparent structures, Van der Leeuw's phenomenology holds back the violent tendency of discourse to assimilate the incomprehensible other to the words, concepts, and categories of understanding. Derrida views the *epoche* similarly, arguing that such restraint (which Derrida relates to the

“holding” of the German *halten*) is respectful to “sacred mystery,” respectful to that which “ought to remain intact or inaccessible, like the mystical immunity of a secret” (*Acts* 85-86). The restrained holding of the *epoche* is part of an “entire semantic family” involving varieties of “holding” (*tenir*), including tending, attending, pretending, extending, intending, and these different ways of holding can welcome the visitation of the other (85, 360).

Derrida associates the semantic family of “holding” with the meaning of hospitality, with hospitality conveying a gesture of welcoming that invites the arrival of that which is beyond all welcoming apparatuses. Hospitality is a matter of letting oneself “be swept by the coming of the wholly other,” which is to say, “to be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken” (361). Hospitality is also an important theme in the phenomenology of Levinasian ethics. Indeed, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas seeks to “present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality” (27). For Levinas, hospitality is “the one-for-the-other in the ego,” which means “giving to the other the bread from one’s own mouth” and “being able to give up one’s soul for another” (*Otherwise* 79).

For Derrida, this hospitably restrained welcoming of the unapproachable other is an instance of deconstruction. Indeed, deconstruction is the very event of hospitality: “deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than ‘its other,’ to an other who is beyond any ‘its other’” (*Acts* 364). With the hospitable restraint of the *epoche* comes the possibility of speaking of a “universal structure of religiosity”—a structure that allows different names for the sacred to be translated into one another without effacing the alterity of the sacred and without reducing the sacred to any particular name, even including names like “other” or “sacred” (86). Furthermore, hospitable restraint not only opens the possibility of translating different names for the sacred. It also opens the possibility of one’s own relation with alterity, including the possibility of one’s own faith or religious orientation. “It is in the *epoché*,” for

Derrida, “that faith appears. The only possibility of faith is in the *epoché*” (Derrida, “Epoché” 47).

2) An important type of structure that must be restrained in an interpretation of the sacred is that which posits any developmental progression for the history of religions. In bracketing the question of history, Van der Leeuw “does not deny the historicity of what appears,” he just holds evolution and development back, putting them into abeyance (James 233). In this respect, Van der Leeuw is following Chantepie and Kristensen in classifying phenomena according to apparent types without defining these types in terms of historically antecedent causes or origins (267-268). Developmental (or evolutionary) accounts of religion are at work whenever a religious phenomenon is evaluated in terms of a causality present in its historical situation.⁴

An example of a developmental account of religion that Van der Leeuw puts into brackets is Hegel’s account of religion as a dialectical progression toward knowledge of Absolute Spirit, wherein magic and the other natural religions are imperfect realizations of human freedom in Absolute Spirit (Hegel 262-265). Bracketing evolutionary accounts does not make phenomenology anti-evolutionary. For in the preface of his work, Van der Leeuw says that his “phenomenological comprehension of history” avoids any arguments for or against evolutionary theories of history (*Religion* vi). Thus, Van der Leeuw considers evolutionary *and* anti-evolutionary theories of the history of religion, but not as conclusive statements about the reality of religion. He considers these theories only insofar as they manifest some of the various ways in which the history of religions can be understood. For instance, Van der Leeuw notes that while he finds Christianity to manifest the peak in the development of religions, he is aware that this peak would not necessarily appear for a person of another religious background, such as a

Buddhist, who would most likely interpret the history of religions in terms of Buddhist theories and practices (646). The phenomenologist is not concerned with who is “right” but rather with understanding how each interpretation has meaning for those who hold it. Therefore, the phenomenologist not only brackets historical, scientific, and philosophical concepts, but also puts into brackets one’s most basic understanding of what is sacred or divine, which implies that all theological discourse must be restrained.

3) In bracketing theology, Van der Leeuw is bracketing the question of truth with respect to God—the object of theological inquiry. God is not a phenomenon, “at least not so that we can comprehend and speak about him” (687-688). Bracketing theology thus entails that one not disparage alien religious phenomena or reduce them to degenerate expressions of one’s own religious orientation. James notes that this “a-theological” approach to the study of religion is common among phenomenological investigations of religion (52-57, 166). Derrida argues that the a-theological aspect of the *epoche* is particularly important because of its potential for “liberating a universal rationality and the political democracy associated with it” (*Acts* 47, 57). Through the restrained discourse of the *epoche*, it is possible to express a structure that is hospitable to all varieties of religious phenomena, a structure that Derrida calls a “universal structure of religiosity”—a structure that would allow “global translations” of the various names associated with religion, the sacred, the other, etc. (86). Such a universal structure could help provide political representation for all religious phenomena, and it could do so without excluding the different appearances that people of other faiths and other nations experience of this structure. Moreover, this universal structure is peaceful, hospitably welcoming the other rather than waging a war and effacing the other. Thus, Levinas equates war with totality, whereas peace is based on the relation with radical alterity, which breaks up all totality (*Totality* 21-23). In this

sense, the hospitable restraint of the *epoche* facilitates a discourse on religion that supports the sort of ethico-political relations conveyed in the peaceful gestures of interfaith dialogue and international diplomacy.

Of course, interpretations of political democracy, interfaith dialogue, and international diplomacy have their own theological suppositions. Even when rigorously observing the *epoche*, one's own existential experience "can never be freed from its own religious determinateness" (Van der Leeuw, *Religion* 646). It is the task of phenomenology to restrain one's own religious determinateness as completely as possible, reaching the limit where it becomes apparent that one's own understanding is incomplete and that "the ultimate ground of understanding lies not within itself, but in some 'other' by which it is comprehended from beyond the frontier" (683). Merleau-Ponty also speaks of the incompleteness of restraint, claiming that it teaches us the most important lesson that the phenomenological reduction can teach us: one's attempt to reflect on phenomena is situated in something other than one's own reflection, for it is situated in the transcendence of a pre-reflective dimension (*Phenomenology* xiv).

In terms of deconstruction, the impossibility of complete restraint can be described as "the possible/impossible hospitality," which is possible insofar as one can welcome the other, but simultaneously impossible insofar as one cannot invite the other without, at least to some extent, appropriating or assimilating the other into one's own habitation and horizon of expectations (Derrida, *Acts* 364, 408). In terms of Gadamer's hermeneutics, such hospitality toward the other can be spoken of as effective historical consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), which implies that restraint is a matter of becoming conscious of the historical horizon of one's own inherited prejudices and presuppositions (Gadamer, *Truth* 300-307, 340-379). In becoming

conscious of one's own historical horizon, the other is continually superseding and being superseded by one's own presence, such that one must perpetually renew contact between one's own horizon and that of the other. Gadamer refers to this contact as a "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*) (Gadamer, *Truth* 306-307, 397). Like Derrida's possible/impossible hospitality, the fusion of horizons is possible, but insofar as it is a perpetual effort that is always incomplete, it is impossible. With hospitality or the fusion of horizons, the other is present in one's own horizon precisely as that which cannot be assimilated into one's own horizon.

Van der Leeuw restrains any judgments or assertions about whether what he sees "has its roots in any ultimate 'reality,'" and as a Christian, he relegates such issues to theological inquiry (*Religion* 646). Thus, while Van der Leeuw admittedly interprets other religions from the perspective of his own religious history, he indicates the limit where his own horizon encounters the alterity of others' religious engagements. Analogously, the Buddhist philosopher Keiji Nishitani sees the Buddhist experience of *sunyata* ("emptiness") as the fundamental principle of religion, and it is from this presupposition that he compares various facets of Buddhism, Christianity, and the philosophy of existential nihilism (Nishitani 1-45, 86-91). Nishitani's Buddhist standpoint provides a perspective from which he, rather than disparaging or denigrating other religious (or seemingly non-religious) traditions, articulates many insights that indicate convergences and similarities between the horizons of Christianity and Buddhism, such as the similarity between Christian love (*agape*) and Buddhist compassion (*karuna*) (58-74).

Both Van der Leeuw and Nishitani speak of other religions in terms of their own, but what is important is that they understand religion through a process wherein they clarify the limits of their presuppositions and indicate how their horizons fuse with the foreign horizons of practitioners of other religions. To interpret the sacred in such a way as to recognize and respect

the alterity of others' experiences of the wholly other, one can enact restrained hospitality and hold back the presuppositions that contextualize whatever words and concepts are used to interpret the appearances of the other, including words like "God," "Yahweh," "*sunyata*," and "*Dao*," but also words and concepts that might seem universally translatable (e.g., "religion," "wholly other," "sacred," "*mysterium tremendum*"). To allow sacred phenomena to appear as such, one must welcome the other and restrain all assertions, judgments, and prejudices about what is becoming revealed.

To enact the hospitable restraint of the *epoche*, one does not need to practice phenomenology, hermeneutics, or deconstruction, or any particular school of thought or mode of analysis. What Heidegger says of phenomenology also applies to the *epoche*, that is, "it can disappear as a designation in favor of the matter of thinking whose manifestness remains a mystery" (*On Time and Being* 82). A hospitable interpretation lets itself be overtaken by the alterity of others' experiences of the wholly other. Theories and concepts about the *epoche* and the phenomenology of religion ultimately disappear as they welcome the arrival of the wholly other. In the phenomenology of religion, the *epoche* functions as a gesture of peace and hospitality, welcoming the irreducible alterity of other religions, other peoples, and indeed, of every other.

Notes

¹ Hegel's approach to phenomenology, as a way of articulating different stages in the manifestation of knowledge, resembles the approach to phenomenology expressed in the coining of the word phenomenology (*phänomenologie*) by Johann Lambert and his correspondent, Kant (James 23-25). For Lambert, phenomenology is a "*transcendental optics*" that investigates all appearances (visual, ideal, moral, etc.) with the ultimate aim of proceeding from appearances to knowledge of the things themselves. For Kant, phenomenology works to arrange experiences according to the manifestation of knowledge therein, particularly by differentiating principles of sensuality from principles of reason. However, the phenomenologies of Lambert and Kant are primarily oriented to the subjective conditions of knowledge and human representation, whereas Hegel investigates knowledge as a developing manifestation of Absolute Spirit and not merely as a mode of human representation (44).

² Kant, Hegel, and the British phenomenologists never explicitly articulated a phenomenology of religion. However, phenomenology can appear implicitly in any rational account of religion. Thus, when considering Kant's account of religion "at the limits of reason alone," Jacques Derrida argues that the suppositions of phenomenological inquiry seem to be at work in any attempt to bring religious events into the light of rationality, particularly insofar as this rational light (*phos*) is etymologically affiliated with phenomenological appearance (*phainomenon*) and the act of appearing (*phainesthai*) (Derrida 46-48). If phenomenology is at work in any rational discourse on religion, then it would be possible to undertake an investigation that discerns implicit occurrences of the phenomenology of religion throughout various philosophical and theological traditions. Such an investigation is beyond the scope of the present essay. For the purposes of this essay, it is important to recognize that Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion is a complex integration of empiricism and idealism.

³ The importance of Dilthey's concept of experience for Heideggerian phenomenology is evident in Heidegger's discussion of "factual life-experience" (*faktische Lebenserfahrungen*) in his 1920-1921 lecture course on the phenomenology of religion. Like the hermeneutic understanding characteristic of *Dasein*, factual life-experience can be described as a bivalent unity of combining and separating (Heidegger, *Phenomenology* 4-13). As Thomas Sheehan describes it, factual life-experience involves a "dynamic interplay of presence and privative absence (pres-ab-sence)" (Sheehan 315). Furthermore, it is important to mention that the hermeneutic tradition has particular religious presuppositions insofar as it has roots in theology and biblical exegesis. Hans-Georg Gadamer notes that hermeneutic research influenced by Dilthey's work tends to communicate in terms "stemming originally from Protestant theology" (Gadamer, *Philosophical* 4). I elaborate on the importance of such theological presuppositions in the second part of this essay.

⁴ Hannah Arendt's cogent expression of this matter is appropriate: "Whoever in the historical sciences honestly believes in causality actually denies the subject matter of his own science" (Arendt 319). The suspension of belief in causality is thus necessary (although not sufficient) to affirm a subject matter in the historical sciences.

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