Beyond Dichotomies: The Import of Gadamer's Hermeneutics for the Debate of Relationship between Theology and Religious Studies*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of the relationship between theology and religious studies, drawing on certain principles of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical theory. Leaving aside differences between Gadamer and his critics, it is argued that his rehabilitation of prejudice, authority and tradition as well as his notions of the fusion of horizons and intersubjective dialogue put into question the utility of dichotomous categories like subjective-objective, normative-descriptive, and insider-outsider in approaches to religion. It is suggested, therefore, that a clearer distinction between theology and religious studies can be established in terms of the subject matter of these disciplines rather than on the basis of their methodological principles. However, as both disciplines venture to understand at least some overlapping dimensions of religious phenomena which make up their common subject matter, to this extent, they can be viewed as dialogical partners and as providing different but complementary perspectives on religion.

Sketching out a typology of the various disciplines engaged in the study of religion, an eminent Japanese scholar writes that there are two basic standpoints, markedly different in their objectives and methods of study. The first is the standpoint of faith, which approaches the meaning of religion from a personal and subjective perspective. The second is the objective study of religion, in which religion is studied empirically, in the context of individual and social behaviour, taking these as cultural phenomena. This is a value-neutral approach.¹

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference Theology and Religious Studies or Theology versus Religious Studies, Oxford, July 6–7, 2006. The conference was organised by the Subject Centre for Philosophy and Religious Studies based within the University of Leeds, England.

Such a distinction between the academic study of religion over against theology and the philosophy of religion had already emerged by the time of the Marburg Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in 1960.\(^2\) On this view, theology by definition concerns itself with a single religious tradition, whereas the discipline known in today's world as "religious studies" approaches the phenomenon of religion in its plurality, taking it as a part of human culture. Also, theological reflection is seen as aiming at the rationalisation and proof of what is already believed to be true, and hence is suspected of begging the question, assuming the truth of the matters which it seeks to investigate.\(^3\) By contrast, religious studies is considered to be neutral in terms of presuppositions, an open-ended quest for knowledge as far as its objective is concerned. As Zwi Werblowsky has put it, for a scholar religion is not the source but the object of inquiry.\(^4\) The assumption is that religious studies is an objective, empirical form of study and theology a subjective, religious activity.\(^5\)

As may be recognised from the above remarks, this viewpoint typically draws on dichotomous categories such as subjective-objective, normative-descriptive, and biased-neutral in order to distinguish between theological and philosophical studies of religion on the one hand and the academic study of religion on the other. The dichotomies are sometimes further extended to include the insider's and outsider's perspectives on religion or religions, the former being an involved believer whereas the latter a detached student of religion.\(^6\) Now, such clear-cut distinctions may have been decisive while the legacy of the Enlightenment still dominated the academic landscape. However, in the wake of postmodernism, the theoretical cogency of distinctions between theology and religious studies has become increasingly suspect, and may indeed be seen as reflecting an outdated interpretation of these two forms of inquiry.\(^7\)

Within the field of religious studies itself, the phenomenological paradigm, which was dominant in the twentieth century and was to a large

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4 R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Marburg— and After?," Numen 7 (1960), 220.
7 Cady and Brown, Religious Studies, Theology, and the University, 4.
extent the unifying principle of the discipline, is now under attack and about to be changed. However, this shift is not unchallenged, and the decline in fortunes of the phenomenology of religion has left the discipline in something of a crisis of self-definition. What is more, a recent critique of religious studies exposing it as a disguised form of liberal ecumenical theology also places a question mark over the logic of its conventional self-identification over against theology. Such questions and challenges are compelling scholars to rethink the disciplinary landscape and to review the established distinctions.

The appearance of the term “religious studies” already bears the signs of change. It gained currency from the 1970s, joining but not superseding labels such as comparative religions, science of religion, and history of religions. As noted by Eric J. Sharpe (1933–2000), the new term has the advantage of including in principle anyone engaged in the study of religion as well as displaying the multidisciplinary and poly-methodic nature of the discipline, the meeting place of complementary approaches to a given body of material.

Against the background of such developments, at one end of the continuum are those who prefer to stick to the conventional distinction, viewing theology and religious studies as essentially different and to a degree opposed to each other. For them, what can unite students of religion is not some theological or dialogical model, but the realisation that, notwithstanding the truth of the numinous or transcendent, their experience pertains to empirical facts of human existence and history, which like all human facts should be studied by the appropriate methods. Donald Wiebe has emerged as one of the most fervent supporters of this position. He is abundantly clear that the distinction between theology and religious studies is at the methodological level. He maintains that “the question of theology’s methodological relationship to the academic study of religion jeopardizes the existence of such an academic study of religion, for it re-opens the debate about who controls the agenda for such study—is it the scholar-scientist or the scholar-devotee, the

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academy or the Church, scientific procedure or transcendent subject-matter, and so on.”

At the other end of the scale, some foresee—and not with disapproval—a process of convergence between theology and religious studies after their initial separation, and consider them to be complementary approaches. Here the argument is that unification of the two fields would bring more clarity and honesty to their procedures. Yet another position rests on more or less similar premises, but with a reverse conclusion. Since it has become increasingly clear that claims of neutrality in the field of religious studies are not well grounded, the discipline may be guilty of pursuing a hidden ideological and theological agenda, and so is better abandoned in favour of approaches like anthropology, history, and cultural studies.

It is by now clear that the issue at hand is too complex and multifaceted to be grasped by simple dichotomous categories. Rather, a thorough review is required of the respective motives, methods, and subject matters of both fields of inquiry, to say nothing of such theoretical questions as the meaning and truth of religion and the philosophical bases of disciplinary demarcations within the Geisteswissenschaften—humanities and social sciences—in general. Such across-the-board review is however beyond the scope of the present paper. Instead, narrowing the focus, its argument draws on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) in the hope of bringing greater clarity to the issue under consideration.

This focus is postulated upon three grounds. First, considering the theoretical nature of the question, it stands to reason that some wider philosophical frame of reference should be employed, transcending narrow disciplinary confines. The hermeneutics of Gadamer can serve this purpose as it has deeply affected the field of philosophy since his magnum opus Truth and Method first appeared in 1960 and in particular because it makes a certain claim to universality, encompassing every mode of understanding including the methods of the sciences. The alleged universality of hermeneutics provides

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13 Wiebe, Politics of Religious Studies, 141.
14 Dawes, “Theology and Religious Studies,” 49.
16 Fitzgerald, Ideology of Religious Studies, 10.
a basis for a dialogue between hermeneutics and our current understanding of
the sciences. Both theology and religious studies can thus be viewed against
the canvas of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as a means of discerning
the nature of the interface between them.

Second, apart from this overarching relevance, many of the central
questions about religion—for example the relations between theory and
practice, faith and history, interreligious relations, and the relation of the
individual to his or her own tradition—find common ground in
hermeneutics. Finally, it is the working assumption of the paper that certain
principles of Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory are pregnant with direct
implications for the present inquiry.

An Overview of Gadamer’s Hermeneutics

From the viewpoint of the present undertaking, an important development in
the history of hermeneutical tradition is owed to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833—
1911), who devised a distinctive methodology for human sciences
(Geisteswissenschaften) to raise their status to parity with the natural sciences.
For this he put forward the notion of verstehen—interpretative
understanding—contrasting with the causal mode of explanation prevalent in
the natural sciences. Gadamer questioned the presupposition of Dilthey’s
work, which understood hermeneutics as epistemology centred on the debate
between explanation and understanding. For Gadamer, both these modes of
knowing share one common presupposition: the opposition of subject and
object. “Our line of thought,” says Gadamer, “prevents us from dividing the
hermeneutic problem in terms of the subjectivity of the interpreter and the
objectivity of the meaning to be understood. This would be starting from a
false antithesis that cannot be resolved even by recognizing the dialectic of
subjective and objective.”

According to Gadamer, this conceptual bifurcation of subject and object
underpins the notion of method in the modern sciences. The idea of method
rests on a misapprehension of reality which originates from René Descartes’
(1596–1650) turn to subject and then permeates the whole legacy of the
Enlightenment. According to this view, reality is divided between the reflexive
subject and the external objects. As a result, truth takes on a correspondence
structure, that is to say, a thinking subject’s idea is true if it tallies with a

Richard J. Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Parxis
reality outside the subject. For Gadamer this theory of truth is inadequate because reality encompasses the subject as well as the objects it perceives in one prior whole or unity. Truth would be the disclosure of this whole or unity, but it remains unacknowledged by the methodological procedures. That is because methods take into account individual objects in abstraction from the whole of which they are parts.\(^{23}\)

Also, the concept of method follows the Cartesian doubt, accepting nothing as certain that can in any way be doubted.\(^ {24}\) For Gadamer, this stance ignores the fact that "the human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science: with the experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science."\(^ {25}\) In this way, Gadamer asserts the universality of hermeneutics, taking it beyond method as well as beyond the subject-object dilemma which underlies it.

At this point Gadamer's contribution is significant from an additional perspective. Within the human sciences there has been a rift between positivists and, so to speak, humanists over the supposed dilemma of subject and object. The humanists effectively critiqued the object of knowledge, arguing that the subject matter of social sciences is inherently subjective because it deals with meaningful action. On the constructive side, however, they were less successful and could not advance a plausible alternative methodology for the social sciences. This was because the deconstruction of the other horn of the dilemma, the knowing subject, remained to be done. The work of Gadamer is an important move in this connection.\(^ {26}\) He moves forward by pushing towards "a three-way relation: one person comes to an understanding with another about something they thus both understand."\(^ {27}\) This flies in the face of the binary view of understanding in which a person understands something as an object, making it a subject-object relationship.

Thus moving away from subjectivism, Gadamer offers a model of understanding focused on the primacy of tradition. For that reason it has been dubbed as the hermeneutics of tradition,\(^ {28}\) referring to Gadamer's

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25 Ibid., xxi.
rehabilitation of the three interconnected concepts of prejudice, authority, and tradition. Putting this slightly differently, Richard Bernstein (b. 1932) notes that Gadamer rejected the oppositions that have been so entrenched—since the Enlightenment—between reason and tradition, reason and prejudice, reason and authority.29

When it comes to formulating his theory of hermeneutic experience, Gadamer takes up the problem of prejudice at the very outset. Prejudice is “a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined.”30 This definition is obviously neutral and far from endorsing the disparaging view associated with the term. According to Gadamer, it was only following the Enlightenment that the concept of prejudice acquired the negative connotation associated with it today. Being a prejudgment, prejudice does not necessarily mean a false judgment; it can have either positive or negative value.31 Following his mentor Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Gadamer considers prejudices a necessary condition for the event of understanding to take place at all. Understanding begins with fore-projection of the meaning of a text or historical event to be understood. In the process of acquiring genuine understanding, however, this fore-projection is not static but continues to be replaced by more suitable projections as we approach things and they disclose themselves to us. Working out appropriate projections to be confirmed by the things themselves constitutes the movement of understanding. Thus, in opposition to the Husserlian notion of “bracketing,” Gadamer follows the Heideggerian line of thought which suggests that presuppositions are not to be eliminated or suspended.32 However, Gadamer would concur with the phenomenologists that the finite phenomenal world is the only one accessible for scholarly deliberation and no absolute essence or noumenon can be accounted for within the limitations of human discourse.33

Apart from being an essential precondition for understanding, prejudices are not at the free disposal of the interpreter either. One cannot separate in advance the helpful prejudices that enable understanding from those that hinder it and create misunderstanding.34 The only objectivity here is to confirm the fore-projection in its working out with reference to the things themselves and to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the subject matter can

29 Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 37.
33 Peters, “Truth in History,” 43.
34 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 295.
present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its truth against one's own fore-meaning.\textsuperscript{35}

Gadamer criticises the Enlightenment for its rejection of all authority, considering it a source of prejudice.\textsuperscript{36} According to him, being a source of prejudices does not necessarily preclude authority from being a source of truth. At the same time, he challenges the apprehension of authority as blind obedience. The concept of authority has less to do with obedience than with knowledge. Acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary but true.\textsuperscript{37} On these grounds he contends, "I cannot accept the assertion that reason and authority are abstract antitheses."\textsuperscript{38}

To the question whether being subject to prejudices and one's tradition means being limited in one's freedom, Gadamer's reply is that all human existence is limited and qualified in many ways. The idea of absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms. The prejudices of the individual, rather than the judgments, make up the historical reality of his or her being.\textsuperscript{39} The reference to the historical reality of being suggests that prejudice or acceptance of authority is not arbitrary. Tradition plays a decisive role here. In the view of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), the rehabilitation of prejudice and the authority of tradition is directed against the reign of subjectivity and reflexive philosophy.\textsuperscript{40}

Since, we are always part of a historical situation and entrenched in it, we are unable to have its objective knowledge. A situation is something which limits the possibility of vision.\textsuperscript{41} Thus Gadamer leads us from situation to the notion of horizon: "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."\textsuperscript{42} Seen negatively, the concept of horizon entails limitation of vision but it also suggests the breadth of vision which makes understanding possible: "To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 270–72.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 274.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 280–81.
\textsuperscript{38} Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," 290.
\textsuperscript{39} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 277–78.
\textsuperscript{41} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 301.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
proportion.\textsuperscript{43} With the constant historical movement of human life the horizon of an individual continues to change. Thus, our horizon moves with us and we move in it.\textsuperscript{44} We can note here that horizons are not static entities and so we can think of narrowness and possible expansion of horizons as well as of the opening up of new horizons.\textsuperscript{45} Neither the horizon of the present can be acquired apart from the past nor do the historical horizons exist in isolation from the present. Understanding always involves the fusion of horizons.\textsuperscript{46}

The notion of fusion of horizons means that when a historical horizon is projected in the process of understanding it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of the past consciousness, but is engulfed by our present horizon of understanding. As the historical horizon is projected, at the same time it is superseded. Thus it becomes obvious that the fusion of horizons takes place because of historically effected consciousness.\textsuperscript{47}

The thesis of the fusion of horizons relates to some other conclusions of Gadamer which are important in the present context. The first is that understanding always involves applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation. This means that hermeneutics is not only understanding and interpretation but also application. In an event of understanding these three aspects make up one unified process. This, in turn, leads Gadamer to oppose the division of the normative and cognitive functions of hermeneutics. He argues that the meaning of a law that emerges in its application is similar to the meaning reached in understanding a text.\textsuperscript{48} It means that not only legal and theological hermeneutics, where the applicative function is obvious, but also historical hermeneutics has a task of application to perform. It too severs applicable meaning by bridging the temporal distance that separates the interpreter form the text.\textsuperscript{49} Thus Jürgen Habermas (1929–2007) acknowledges, "I find Gadamer's real achievement in the demonstration that hermeneutic understanding is linked with transcendental necessity to the articulation of an action-orienting self-understanding. . . . He persuades us that the applicative understanding of distinguished traditions endowed with a claim to authority provides the model for hermeneutic understanding in general."\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 303.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 301.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 305.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 305–06.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 309.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 310.
Second, Gadamer writes with emphasis that "the fusion of horizons that takes place in understanding is actually the achievement of language" because language is the medium of the horizon. Thus, the phenomenon of understanding shows the universality of human linguisticality. Language is not simply an object in our hands, it is the medium through which we perceive our world. Gadamer's oft-quoted maxim is "Being that can be understood is language" (Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache). It is only through language that coming to an understanding becomes possible.

The fundamental linguisticality of understanding further implies that it can occur only in a form of dialogue. That dialogue by definition entails reciprocity between the dialogical partners is obvious. What should be underlined, however, is the fact that true conversation takes place between equal partners, not between an active subject and a passive object. In order for dialogue to succeed, one must consider the other involved in the conversation as a fellow subject. True dialogue therefore is intersubjective in nature.

Another point related to the notion of fusion of horizons is that understanding never repeats itself. When a person understands a text, his or her horizon at that particular time will be different from the one that at another time, and also the horizon of the text itself will have gone through new effects of history meanwhile. So understanding arrived at on a first occasion will never be identical with that gained at any other time. However, to equate Gadamer's stance with relativism would be misinterpreting him. Two contentions of Gadamer save his hermeneutics—understood as intersubjective dialogue—from degeneration into stark relativism: his focus on the subject matter instead of the subjectivity of those engaged in dialogue, and the importance he attaches to tradition.

The fundamentals of Gadamer's hermeneutics can be illustrated by reference to the metaphor of play which we find in the first part of Truth and Method and again in the concluding passages of the book. He shows the primacy of play over the subjective consciousness of the players by an insightful analysis of the concept of play. In play the constantly repetitive movement is so central that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. Players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches

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51 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 370.
52 Ibid., 283.
53 Ibid., 286.
54 Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, 450; Gadamer, Truth and Method, 470.
55 Ibid., 370-71.
56 Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, 127.
57 Smith, "Intersubjectivity and Community," 383.
presentation through the players. This metaphor shows the primacy of the subject matter over the subjectivity of the dialogical partners as well as explains the theory of truth as disclosure of reality. Then, fair play means putting all the players on equal terms, which in turn signifies the logic of intersubjective dialogue between equal partners. Also, if we take the example of playing chess, it becomes clear that the previous moves in a game already decide to a great extent the course of future moves. The model of play thus exemplifies the principle of the effect of history and the related idea of the consciousness of effective history. Thus, it has been rightly pointed out that the relation between Gadamer's models of understanding and truth can be understood most clearly through his model of play.

However, there is a difference between playing and understanding in real historical circumstances. When we play, we start the game at a certain time and then as we gradually become entrapped in the moves we submit ourselves to the limitations of the game. Thus, in a manner of speaking, the game starts playing itself until it is played out. Unlike play, when we embark on the task of understanding in real life we are already somewhere in the middle of the play of history and do not proceed with it to the end. History precedes us and supersedes us. The former reality—the course of history before us—points out the limits of our reflexive moment, whereas the latter fact—the course of history after us—stands for the finitude of our understanding. For Hinman, such differences count as limitations of the analogy of play. The observation is not detrimental, however, if we take the example of play as clarifying the concept instead of identifying it.

Relating Gadamer to the Debate of Theology and Religious Studies

Before we return to the question of the link between theology and religious studies, two observations are in order. First, Gadamer never pretended to propose an alternative method or technique of understanding. His work aims at an explication of what happens in an event of understanding. "It is not my intention," he declares, "to make prescriptions for the sciences or the conduct of life, but to try to correct false thinking about what they are." As for the potential implications of his hermeneutical theory for practical procedures of understanding, he remarks that it would benefit the art of understanding at the

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60 Ibid., 520.
most only indirectly.\textsuperscript{62} Similarly, it may be inferred that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics can bear upon the present debate only indirectly and by implication.

Second, discussion of the relationship between theology and religious studies focuses more often than not on Christian theology alone, which is seen as intersecting or intruding into the discipline of religious studies. It may be argued that the aim of emancipating the discipline of religious studies from the baggage of one particular religious tradition is in itself a welcome move. However, while plotting the disciplinary boundaries we need to take into account theology in comparative terms. It is necessary to come to grips with theological reflection as such and how it is conceptually different from, or similar to, the basic tenets of the modern discipline of religious studies.

To begin with, Gadamer’s emphasis on the linguisticity of understanding and the inevitability of intersubjective dialogue between equal partners bears relevance to the discussion. The notion of intersubjective dialogue entails that religious studies should take a dialogical posture, not only towards different religious communities but also related fields of inquiry including theology. Religious studies guided by such a spirit is likely to allow greater mutuality and reciprocity between observers and followers on the one hand and creative interdisciplinary symbiosis on the other. That is because, if different traditions are taken as dialogical partners instead of mute “objects,” they are most likely to speak out from their respective theological positions. Thus the suggestion that the field of religious studies should embrace the entire world’s religions not only as subject matter, but also as representing scholarly traditions including theological studies,\textsuperscript{63} seems in line with Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Such a posture is in sharp contrast to one in which the subject matter of study is approached one-sidedly as an object, and it can divert the focus from abstract discussion of distinguishing religious studies from related fields to the constructive cause of mutual understanding between different scholarly and religious traditions (save that mutual understanding here refers to the hermeneutical and not ecumenical sense). For, if understanding happens at all, it happens as mutual understanding.

Taking our cue from Gadamer, we may also agree with the statement that religious studies is irreducibly perspectival, in the sense that our perspectives of interpretation are not only historically and culturally conditioned, but also religiously or ideologically conditioned.\textsuperscript{64} This argument, if accepted, will put

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 268.
\textsuperscript{63} Neville, “Religious Studies and Theological Studies,” 198-200.
both religious studies and theology on a par as two perspectives on the phenomenon of religion. However, the perspectival view of reality should not be equated with sheer relativism. There is no denying that a given perspective by definition eclipses other perspectives and therefore is an incomplete view of reality. But the notion of perspective does not necessary imply that its referent is not real. Put in more concrete terms, there can be different perspectives on a particular reality, each of them revealing some of its facets. Different perspectives, therefore, can be taken as complementary to one another and not contradictory, completing a picture instead of presenting different pictures.

Also, the rehabilitation of prejudice, authority and tradition bears immediate relevance to our discussion. Gadamer has explained at length that when following any methodological procedure we do not step out of our historical situation, which implies that our prejudices take precedence over our judgments. Understanding necessarily involves fore-projection, in the present case prejudices stemming from the religious or cultural tradition of the student of religion, as well as the pre-understanding underpinning the methodological apparatus being employed. Methodological pre-understanding can be distorting or helpful in the process of understanding, similarly to other prejudices. This means that if theology rests on a set of prejudices afforded by a particular religious tradition it is in good company. By making recourse to social scientific methods, religious studies too begins with certain prejudices, though of a different kind. It is therefore not plausible to distinguish religious studies from theology on the grounds of neutrality.

Viewed from another angle, despite the recent criticism of phenomenology of religion, it can still be considered part of the current umbrella term “religious studies.” As is well known, the phenomenology of religion borrowed from Husserlian phenomenology the ideal of “bracketing,” that is of bracketing out one’s prejudices to understand the religious structures in their own terms. Gadamer’s hermeneutics flies diametrically in the face of this ideal. As prejudices are not at our free disposal, “bracketing” is not one of the options on the table. The argument, however, has a converse bite too. The critique of religious studies as being imbued with theological or ideological assumptions might have brought clarity about its contextual limitations, but the suggestion of dissolving the discipline itself on this ground is stretching the argument too far, for the simple reason that no possible alternative will be free of prejudices or “ideologies” either.

Gadamer transcends the subject-object dilemma through the concepts of the fusion of horizons and intersubjective dialogue of two equal partners on a subject matter. It is thus no longer possible to distinguish between disciplines

in term of objectivity and subjectivity. In the words of Ben Vedder, “the person who perceives religion as the object of his thinking is always affected by the spectrum of a particular religion. . . . It is therefore impossible to make a definitive distinction between theological discussions about God as a representation of the genitivus objectivus and philosophy of religion as an expression of religion. A person who thinks that religion and the history of religion must be studied exclusively in a positivistic way, sponges on an event of which he denies its effect on himself.” Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that the idea of fusion of horizons is not always adequate for the social sciences. There are certain cases of understanding where conversational communication is unconceivable. The reading of statistics, which is a sort of interpretation, counts for an example. But let us leave aside the question of the plausibility of this observation, as it makes no difference to the discussion since neither theology nor religious studies is such an exceptional case.

Considering that theology and religious studies are sometimes presented as, respectively, insider and outsider perspectives on religion, we should review this notion too. The dichotomy rests on the presumed subject-object confrontation which has been uprooted by Gadamer. Therefore, with Gregory Dawes we may stress the need to reconsider how far it is true that theology studies religion from the “inside” while religious studies approaches religion from the “outside.” The insider-outsider metaphor is useful but it can also be misleading. For instance, critical theology sometimes regards its own tradition of faith from the “outside,” testing its claims against more general criteria of religious truth. On the other hand, the student of religious studies, too, is not simply a stubborn “outsider.” “S/he is supposed to get involved and to meddle in ‘other people’s’ affairs without committing himself/herself to anything except a simple, sincere and sensitive search for the meaning of the concepts and terms. In doing this, s/he is also expected perpetually to commute intellectually between involvement and detachment while concurrently avoiding any kind of emotional commitment.” Thus so-called insiders sometimes appear to be outsiders, and vice versa.

Gadamer’s integrative hermeneutics which does not recognise the divisions of cognitive, normative and applicative understanding calls for the revisiting of another dichotomy, that of normative and descriptive, which is

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often taken for granted to distinguish between disciplines. Here one needs to reflect on the question what precisely normative means. The point at stake is that if normative here simply refers to application, then it might be a different usage from the sense of giving value judgments. Put more succinctly, the question is how far application overlaps with judgment. Does applying a universal to the particular entail a value judgment about the validity of the universal itself? A moment’s reflection reveals that the answer is affirmative. In application, the validity of the universal is approved, implicitly if not explicitly. This being so, the dichotomy between the normative and descriptive study of religion is not self-evident in the Gadamerian frame of thought.

In light of the above discussion, it becomes clear that dichotomies like subjective-objective, insider-outsider, and normative-descriptive are rooted in questionable assumptions. Therefore, they cannot be reasonably employed to distinguish between theology and religious studies after Gadamer’s explication of hermeneutical consciousness. This is not to say that all such categories and distinctions are meaningless or need to be discarded outright. What is being argued is that such categories might be useful to a greater or lesser degree for analysis of structures and ideas but they can only be a starting point and not a final conclusion. To draw on them in absolute terms can be positively misleading.

While being aware of the naivety of these simplistic dichotomies, we should not fail to consider the significance of motive behind the study of religion. Gadamer’s rehabilitation of prejudice, in the sense of pre-understanding, does not warrant a dogmatic and rigid attitude to one’s positions. Such a stance would make prejudices a hindrance to rather than a starting point for the process of understanding. In fact, it would bring to a halt the to-and-fro movement of understanding between the experience to be understood and its fore-projection. Michael Pye has rightly pointed out that though there is no denying that the study of religion will always be subject to the personal interests of researchers, there is a difference between trying to be value-free and not trying to be value-free. The two attitudes are not similar and need to be distinguished from each other.

The whole discussion up to now has focused on distinctions of methodological principle. The question of subject matter remains to be dealt with. The view needs to be considered that religious studies concerns itself with cultural expressions of religion while theology deals with what supposedly lies behind these expressions, that is, the meaning of religious

forms and ultimate truth claims. It is even more important to take into account that certain strands of theology are confined to one particular tradition, in contrast to religious studies which undisputedly approaches the phenomenon of religion in its plurality. Such considerations are pressing because Gadamer’s dialogical stance refers to a shared subject matter. If the subject matter itself is different, intersubjective dialogue will lose the necessary common referent. Therefore, his exposition of the fundamental historicity and finitude of human understanding do not dissolve away distinctions based on subject matter between different academic disciplines. An interpretation of Gadamer to this effect will be stretching the argument beyond its limits.

Any conclusion about the interface between theology and religious studies must thus largely depend on to what type of theology and which model of religious studies one is referring. The whole question of relationship arises only when the two fields are considered as studying religion with overlapping connotations of this term. In the case of a particular vision of theology and religious studies which construes them as dealing with different subject matters, there will then be no question of a relationship. Consequently, it is considered that to distinguish between theology and religious studies on the basis of subject matters is more valid than in terms of their methodological principles. However, it is hard to deny that there are certain overlapping dimensions of religion which both disciplines venture to understand and interpret. Such dimensions make up their common subject matter.

At the end of the second section above, the metaphor of play was referred to which explains the fundamentals of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. It seems apt to refer to the play model again to draw a clear picture of some of the conclusions drawn above. If understanding and interpreting religion is a game in today’s world of religious plurality, theology has the role of a player with a clear identity. It remains to be asked however, what role religious studies pretends to play: that of player, spectator, commentator or referee? Considering the still cherished ideals of neutrality and objectivity, the answer might seem obvious: the role of a spectator or at the most that of a commentator. Now, the rules of the game demand that “spectators” or “commentators” should not interfere with play at any stage. Non-compliance with this condition is exactly what makes the question of demarcation between religious studies, theology, and philosophy of religion persist.

It has been noted that the discipline of religious studies not only develops its own analytical apparatus for understanding and interpreting religious structures but in so doing actively affects and even creates its subject matter. Mark C. Taylor writes, “Far from existing prior to and independent of any
inquiry, the very phenomenon of religion is constituted by local discursive practices. Investigators create—sometimes unknowingly—the objects and truths they profess to discover.70 The moment an oar is put into play, the player becomes subject to the rules of the game and is put on equal terms with all other players. To make for fair play, the roles of players, spectators, commentators, and referees must not be confused or arbitrarily exchanged.

It may be noted again that certain ideologically laden scholarship and narrow strands of theology may appear in the analogy of play as "playing" with the game, seeking something other than simply an understanding of religion. Gadamer's play model will not be applicable if the movement of play itself becomes secondary to some other overt or covert agenda.

Conclusion

We may conclude that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as such does not warrant the orientation of religious studies within the theological framework of a particular religion. To impose the frame of thought and categories borrowed from one religious or cultural tradition on all religious phenomena would be contrary to Gadamer's concept of intersubjective dialogue between equal partners. However, his work does imply that students of religion and theologians alike need to be aware of their own religious and ideological commitments as well as the historicity and finitude of their understanding. The more they realise this the more they will be able to take religious differences seriously and to respect the 'otherness' of other religions.71 Similarly, the more they become aware of the limitations of their understanding, the more they will be able to allow expansion of their respective horizons and thus enable a productive fusion of horizons to take place. The import of Gadamer, in short, is that theological traditions and religious studies can be viewed as different but complementary perspectives on religion, and more than that as dialogical partners in their striving to understand a common subject matter. This holds true for those overlapping dimensions of religious phenomenon which both disciplines venture to understand and interpret.

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71 Schöwbel, "History of Religions," 72.