A PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION?

by

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This research explores the possibility of a phenomenology of religion that is ontological, founded on Martin Heidegger’s philosophical thought. The research attempts to utilise Heidegger’s formulation of phenomenology as ontology while also engaging in a critical relation with his path of thinking; as a barrier to the phenomenological interpretation of the meaning of Religion. This research formulates Religion as an ontological problem wherein the primary question becomes: how are humans, in our being, able to be religious and thus also able to understand the meaning of ‘religion’ or something like ‘religion’?

This study focuses on the problem of foundation; of whether it is possible to provide an adequate foundation for the study of religion(s) via the notion ‘Religion’. Further, this study also aims to explore the problem of methodological foundation; of how preconceptions of the meaning of Religion predetermine how religion(s) and religious phenomena are studied. Finally, this research moves toward the possibility of founding a regional ontological basis for the study of religion(s) insofar as the research explores the ontological ground of Religion as a phenomenon.

Due to the exploratory and methodological/foundational emphasis of the research, the thesis is almost entirely preliminary. Herein, the research focuses on three main issues: how the notion of Religion is preconceived, how Heidegger’s phenomenology can be tailored to the phenomenon of Religion, and how philosophical thought (in this case, Pre-Socratic philosophy) discloses indications of
the meaning of Religion. Pre-Socratic thought is then utilised as a foundation for a preliminary interpretation of how Religion belongs to humans in our being.

This research provides two interrelated theses: the provision of an interpretation of Religion as an existential phenomenon, and an interpretation of Religion in its ground of being-human. With regard to the former, I argue that Religion signifies a potential relation with the ‘originary ground’ of life as meaningful. Accordingly, the second interpretation discloses the meaning of Religion as grounded in being-human; that for humans in our being, the meaning of life is an intrinsic question/dilemma for us. This being-characteristic, I argue, can be called belief.

**Subjects:** Religion, Phenomenology, Ontology, Metaphysics, and Pre-Socratic thought.
Preface:

The motive for this research goes back, in a theoretical sense, to my early undergraduate studies. I was struck, in my early studies of religion, by two primary issues: first, that most explanations of the meaning of Religion are reductive and positivistic, and moreover, that there are very few serious scholarly works dedicated solely to the question of the meaning of Religion as a notion. As such, the motive for this research goes back to an early frustration with attempts to define ‘Religion’, a rejection of reductionist explanations of Religion, conjoined with a search for an approach that would enable an interpretation of Religion as somehow universal to human existence.

This search led me out of the more traditional ways of approaching Religion (as religious traditions and associated phenomena) through the sociology of knowledge into philosophy. Eventually, I encountered Hans-Georg Gadamer’s work *Truth and Method* which to my mind felt like a breakthrough into the real problem I was trying to address. In attempting to engage with the philosophical foundation of Gadamer’s philosophical-hermeneutics I inevitably encountered Martin Heidegger’s thinking… which only began to make sense after two or three frustrating years of intense reading, not only of Heidegger’s works, but the entire philosophical tradition that gets appropriated by Heidegger.

This particular piece of research originated at this point; when I began to feel comfortable with Heidegger’s philosophy and moreover, felt that phenomenology (as ontology) was precisely the way of thinking I was looking for. However, as the research progressed, I began to have doubts about the logical end-point of
Heidegger’s path of thinking in relation to the meaning of Religion. These doubts were confirmed for me with the publication of the translations of Heidegger’s lectures on Religion in 2004 (*The Phenomenology of Religious Life*) wherein the meaning of Religion is reduced to a mere ‘factual life experience’ of the truth of being (as an entity). As a result, the research required substantial amendment; changing from a purely ‘Heideggerian’ approach to a tailoring of Heidegger’s phenomenology to Religion as a phenomenon belonging-to being-human.

This research has three primary goals with regard to making an original contribution to the academic world. Initially, this research aims to provide an original contribution to the foundational and methodological debates within the study of religion by showing how these studies could be founded on a phenomenological-ontological interpretation of Religion. Additionally, this research aims to contribute to the philosophical study of Religion by engaging with the philosophical tradition insofar as this tradition has an important role to play in both the methodological problems of studying religion and further, has been under-utilised in attempts to consider the meaning of Religion as a notion. Finally, this research also aims, indirectly, to contribute to scholarly debates about the extension and application of Martin Heidegger’s philosophical thinking.

At this stage, I would like to acknowledge three important spaces that have motivated and enabled this research. Initially, I would like to acknowledge my family background through which I grew into a world that would make no sense without the religious question of meaning. Further, this family of mine enabled and encouraged me to be-religious without restriction to religious tradition, institutional boundaries, or delimited doctrinal beliefs. I thank my mother for her creative passion and questioning struggle, my step-father Don for guidance, and my father for the principle
of love (over legalism) and inadvertently – for the existential crisis that in part motivated this research.

Equally, I need to acknowledge my ‘own’ family; my partner Susan and our children – Anwyn and Bryn. To Susan, I owe the debt of passion and motivation to finish this research – and for loving me during the process. To our children I owe a great deal of sanity and love.

I also need to acknowledge the department of ‘studies in religion’ at the University of Sydney. To Garry Trompf I owe a debt for inspiration and guidance, for the realisation of the importance of the history of ideas, and for being one of the only possible supervisors that could put up with someone as single minded and stubborn as I am. To the rest of the department, especially Carole Cusack, I thank for creating an environment that encourages both intellectual rigour and creativity in thinking about religion.