

synonymous, in Husserl's thought.<sup>46</sup> Husserl means something limited when he speaks of metaphysics or theology. They are systems of thought which assume that there are "things-in-themselves" or a "thing-in-itself" which we cannot know.<sup>47</sup> The Logische Untersuchungen is an explicit denial of this kind of metaphysical skepticism.

Whether a phenomenology of religion is a possibility or not, Husserl's critique at this point becomes relevant to a predominant theme we have discussed in the first chapter; the view that religion is in some sense a manifestation of The Sacred. As we have seen, the exact sense of this notion is ambiguous, if not mysterious. If we take the widely quoted work of Rudolf Otto as our example, it becomes clear that The Sacred as such can never be known. As we saw, van der Leeuw, Kristensen and Eliade, to name the most well-known scholars in the discipline make similar assertions about The Sacred.

Now, whether we accept Husserl's phenomenology or not, his analysis of the constitution of skepticism applies to the core of the history and phenomenology of religion. This problem is often hidden by statements which insist on objectivity. Thus, we may read that the task is not explanation but understanding or that religious expressions wherever and whenever they occur are of equal value or validity, that the history and phenomenology of religion make no judgement about the validity of religious expressions. Yet, The Sacred as a thing-in-itself is THE judgement on which all other statements are made.

Once again, the problem here seems clear. The solution, to the problem, however, is anything but clear. The issue is simply as follows: if The Sacred is indeed the religious reality, the religious a priori, the reality wholly other, das ganz andere and if this "reality" in principle cannot be known, then the history and phenomenology of religion is in contradiction with itself; it cannot assert that it is objectively describing the manifestation of religion as The Sacred in history while at the same time denying that The Sacred as such can be known. Following Husserl, this assertion not only drives us into skepticism concerning the knowledge of the object of religion, but it leads inevitably to dogmatism.

This judgement is certainly harsh and difficult to accept. Yet, there are scholars of religion who do not see anything wrong with the

assertion that their discipline is a series of contradictions which lead to incoherence. Whatever the reasons for such acquiescence to incoherence, it would seem that if a phenomenology of religion is to be developed, The Sacred as the object, a 'wholly other' reality, must be rejected. Conversely, if the history and phenomenology of religion is to be grounded on The Sacred as in principle wholly other, then a phenomenology of religion becomes an impossibility. A phenomenology of religion as pure description only prolongs the problem; it does not overcome it. The pseudo-neutrality of such a position can be immediately unmasked by the question, "pure description of what?" or "what is the object of your pure description?"

We are repeatedly told that the phenomenology of religion is a distinct methodology that should not be confused with history, sociology, anthropology or theology. When we inquire about the distinctive characteristics of this methodology, we are given the reply that it involves taking The Sacred, the "essence" of religion, seriously. I believe that it is an indisputable fact that no methodology of religion can hope to succeed which asserts that it is necessary that we take a certain reality seriously while denying at the same time the availability of that reality for rational, critical inspection. A science of religion based on a mystery remains a mysterious science! It may well be the case that there are individuals who do not know the meaning of their religion. It would be odd, however, for a science of religion to proceed with descriptions and explanations of data whose reference, by definition, can never be known. This places us in the peculiar position of admitting that the subject we wish to describe has in the end escaped our method for describing it.

Why, then, do scholars construct a method which self-destructs the moment it actually begins to explain or understand a particular subject matter? The answer, of course, is that no one in the phenomenology of religion has pursued such a bizarre course of study. It is the result of taking phenomenologists of religion literally. Once we become accustomed to the language phenomenologists of religion have learned to use, it becomes obvious that they do not always mean what they say.

Once we have learned this lesson, we will be in a better position to interpret the assertions of phenomenologists of religion. It is not the case