

# THE WHY AND WHAT OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

## Towards a New Hermeneutic Phenomenology for Pedagogical Practice

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**Abstract:** This essay seeks to question the typical approach taken by philosophy of religion, and offers a new one in its place. This new approach differs by letting the religious be heard on its own terms, rather than simply judging it on philosophical ones. Employing the thought of Martin Heidegger, it begins with an exploration of the word 'why' in philosophy according to Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason. This is contrasted with the mystical thought of Angelus Silesius, also known as Johannes Scheffler. Again, through Heidegger, the second part explores the meaning of the word 'what' in philosophy, and shows how the nature of philosophy was circumscribed as speculative knowledge. The third part examines what it means to do philosophy of religion, and explains why as it stands this is inadequate. Finally, drawing on classroom practices an arguably more fruitful phenomenological hermeneutic approach to philosophy of religion is offered.

**Keywords:** Leibniz, Heraclitus, Scheffler, Heidegger, Phenomenological Hermeneutics, Philosophy of Religion, Principle of Sufficient Reason, Subjective Representation

### 1. Introduction

This essay argues that philosophy of religion tends to approach the religious as a subject of interrogation. Accordingly, a religious claim is accepted or rejected based entirely on speculative philosophy's objective rational assessment. The

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result, I argue, is that philosophy of religion loses sight of religion and is, therefore, inadequate. In contrast, I claim that it needs to approach religion as something worthy of being questioned rather than questionable, so that philosophy is responsibly answerable to religion and does not simply provide answers to it.

I develop these arguments by drawing on philosophical insights provided by Martin Heidegger. I divide the essay into four parts. The first explores the meaning of 'why' in philosophy and focuses on Heidegger's critique of Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason, which argues that for every truth a reason can be given and so nothing is without a why. Heidegger contrasts this with a line from Johannes Scheffler's poetry that says a rose is without why and blooms because it blooms. The second part explores what we mean by the word 'what' in philosophy. The word 'what', it is argued, produces a delimitation in philosophy owing to the fact we already anticipate a preconceived answer by looking for an object. I show how Heidegger ventures a different kind of questioning or asking that differs from the interrogation of an inquisitor seeking the terminal answers of positivistic knowledge. The third part uses these Heideggerian explorations into the 'why' and 'what' of philosophy to demonstrate that this is precisely how philosophy of religion approaches its subjects. I, then, prepare the ground for an alternative approach based on wider considerations. The final part discusses this alternative in the context of pedagogical practice, namely, aspects of my own teaching as a form of phenomenological hermeneutics.

## 2. The 'Why' of Philosophy

It is fairly well known among scholars of his work that Martin Heidegger explored the notion of 'living without a why', first conceived by the Christian mystical theologian, Meister Eckhart. Heidegger, it is said, knew that he was drawing indirectly from Eckhart through the mystical poet, Angelus Silesius, a pseudonym for Johannes Scheffler. In his poem, *The Cherubinic Wanderer*, Scheffler famously writes: "The rose is without why; it

blooms because it blooms; it cares not for itself; asks not if it's seen.”<sup>1</sup> Heidegger explores this line in a course of 13 lectures given at Freiburg in 1955-1956, and later published as *The Principle of Ground* (*Der Satz vom Grund*).<sup>2</sup> The lectures focus on Leibniz's famous 'Principle of Sufficient Reason' (*principium sufficientis rationis*) that states: 'nothing is without reason' or, as Heidegger translates it, "nothing is without ground." This essentially means that 'for every truth, a reason can be given', which makes the principle of ground, the ground of every truth.<sup>3</sup> In his study, *The Mystical Element of Heidegger's Thought*, John D. Caputo adds: "The power (*Macht*) of the Principle of Ground lies in the fact, then, that all knowledge (*Erkennen*), all representations, are subject to its demand."<sup>4</sup>

A crucial point here is that this unconditional demand on the subject to deliver a reason was, according to Heidegger, still being made and shaped our thinking.<sup>5</sup> Thus, under the influence of Leibniz's principle, we are everywhere searching for reasons.<sup>6</sup> In short, 'nothing is without a reason', which we might translate as, *nothing is without why*. This is not simply a basic proposition,

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<sup>1</sup>*Die Ros ist ohn' warum, sie blühet weil sie blühet, Sie acht't nicht ihrer selbst, fragt nicht, ob man sie siehet.* Angelus Silesius, *The Cherubic Wanderer*, cited in John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, New York: Fordham University Press, 1986, 61.

<sup>2</sup>*Der Satz vom Grund*, 3, Auflage, Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1965.

<sup>3</sup>See, Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 54-55. William L. Reese explains the Principle, saying: "For any occurrence, a being with sufficient knowledge would be able to explain why it is as it is and not otherwise." William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980, 299.

<sup>4</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 55.

<sup>5</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 57. Generally speaking, I believe that this unconditional demand is still being made today and shapes the thought that constitutes philosophy of religion. This, as I will argue, is not appropriate or sufficient in this context. In fact, it might be renamed the 'Principle of Insufficient Reason'.

<sup>6</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 57.

says Caputo, but a decree laying claim to our thought.<sup>7</sup> Hence, our living in 'the atomic age', where we are "driven by a desire to explain and rationalize, i.e., to give grounds."<sup>8</sup> The answer to the question 'why' provides the grounds for this or that *being so*. But Heidegger wants to re-root what he sees as our uprootedness from the true ground of human existence, which, for him, is Being itself, and to lead us away from our preoccupation with this or that being so according to the dictates of reason.

Where Leibniz, in essence, argues that 'nothing is without why', Scheffler suggests the contrary: 'the rose is without why.' But Heidegger is aware that reason and sound common sense tell us the poet is mistaken here. The botanist, for example, can tell us much about the why and wherefore of a rose. Responding to this, Heidegger says that the poet acknowledges that the rose has a reason or ground, and in this sense a why, but "it does not consider (*achtet nicht*) it, nor does it question (*fragt nicht*) it."<sup>9</sup> In short, the rose in itself is not subject to the subjectivistic principle of Leibniz, which demands that a reason be provided to the thinking subject. Thus, Heidegger writes: "It is valid *of* the rose, but not *for* the rose; of the rose insofar as it is an object of our representing; but not for the rose insofar as this stands in itself and is simply a rose."<sup>10</sup> The gist of this is that the principle of Leibniz is true in the rationalistic terms that constitute 'representational' thinking: "Every object which 'stands before' (*gegen-steht*) 'consciousness' must have a ground."<sup>11</sup> But the crucial difference identified by Heidegger is that the mystical poet "speaks of the rose not as it stands before the representing subject, but as it stands in itself (*in sich selber steht*). The poet lets the rose be the thing which it is, without reducing it to the status

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<sup>7</sup>Here I paraphrase Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 56-57.

<sup>8</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 57.

<sup>9</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 62.

<sup>10</sup>Heidegger, "The Principle of Ground," cited in Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 64.

<sup>11</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 64.

of an ‘object’.”<sup>12</sup> The rose, then, is in a different region outside representational thinking where it stands on its own grounds and is under no demand to provide grounds for its being so, either to itself or to any observer. Caputo writes:

The poet, for Heidegger, is inviting us to enter this other region outside representational thinking where the Principle of Rendering a Sufficient Ground does not hold... The region in which representational thinking is suspended will seem to him a strange and forbidding place.<sup>13</sup>

For Heidegger, the demand we live under today to give grounds has, in fact, taken away the basis of our human dwelling, robbing us of our rootedness in the ground and soil upon which we have always stood – Being itself. In short, the more we have searched for grounds, the more groundless our lives have become.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Heidegger, through Scheffler’s line of mystical poetry, wants to return our footing to what he sees as a more genuine ground. Referring to this more genuine ground, Caputo notes:

The ancient Greeks – before Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – knew what the mystical poet Angelus Silesius also knew – that things lie forth of themselves, that they emerge from out

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<sup>12</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 64.

<sup>13</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 65. Incidentally, Caputo adds that Laszlo Versényi, in his work *Heidegger, Being and Truth*, believes this region to be “an absolutely uninhabitable land in which no human can dwell.” See Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 65. This would be in line with Kantian thinking, which argues that the ‘thing-in-itself’ (*dinge-an-sich*) cannot be known. This is because, as argued in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, things are known *by us* as phenomena. Asking what a thing-in-itself is like would be akin to asking how it appears to us when it does not appear to us, which is nonsensical. This is because Kant assumes through his ‘transcendental idealism’ that it is we who ‘structure’ our experience through the intuition of sensibility and the conceptions of understanding.

<sup>14</sup>Here I paraphrase Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 57.

of their own grounds, and that there is no need for the “ego” to “supply” grounds for them.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, Heraclitus says: “Listening to the Logos and not to me, it is wise to agree that all things are One.”<sup>16</sup> Philosophy, says Caputo, “as a thing of reason” (*eine Sache der ratio*), is thus seen by Heidegger as the result of an oblivion.<sup>17</sup> This is because philosophy does not recognise that a thing stands forth of itself on its own grounds, as did a more primal pre-Socratic thinking.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. The ‘What’ of Philosophy

It is a response to the sheer wonder of Being’s isness, that early thinking endeavoured to think upon the mystical tenet ‘All is one’ (*Panta ta onta*). George Steiner writes: “This insight is founded on and makes sovereignly explicit the fact that ‘all being is in Being. To put it more pointedly, being *is* Being’.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, this is perhaps more difficult to understand today, because modern thinking reduces Being to no more than the being of beings in general. But, for Heidegger, philosophy, in its more genuine sense, seeks being with respect to Being. Thus, Heidegger himself sought Being insofar as it *is*. He, therefore, asked the question: What *is* ‘is’? To do this he had necessarily to begin the question with the word, *what*. But *what* is meant by the word ‘what’, even in this very question I am now asking? Why ask the question, ‘What *is* ‘is’?’ at all? What are we after? Have we already missed the *isness* of ‘is’ in doing so? Heidegger was well aware of this problem. He realized that our asking what ‘is’

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<sup>15</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 79.

<sup>16</sup>Richard Geldard, *Remembering Heraclitus: The Philosopher of Riddles*, Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2000, 37.

<sup>17</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 79.

<sup>18</sup>It might be argued that Heidegger is doing some approaches of philosophy a disservice here. I think, for example, of those elements in Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics that appeal to ‘natural law’. Thus, Reese says of Plato that he “conceives of law as a disposition of reason ordering things according to their nature.” See Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, 379.

<sup>19</sup>George Steiner, *Heidegger*, London: Fontana Press, 1992, 25.

is may already frame and anticipate a preconceived answer, owing to that which is already implied in the meaning of the word *what* in the question. For example, he writes: “In the *Who?* or the *What?* we are already on the lookout for something like a person or an object.”<sup>20</sup>

Traditionally, the word ‘what’ concerns *quiddity*, that is, it enquires into the inherent nature or essence of something. But the sense of what quiddity itself is changes over time.<sup>21</sup> Heidegger argues that we might ask: “What is that over there in the distance?” The answer is given: “A tree.” But we can further ask: “What is that which we call a tree?”<sup>22</sup> In so doing we approach the Greek *ti estin* (what is it?). This is the form of questioning, according to Heidegger, that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle developed. With these thinkers, not only is delimitation sought in terms of the answer to ‘what is it?’, but also a different interpretation of what the ‘what’ means is given by each subsequent philosopher (and all philosophers thereafter).

Heidegger is aware of these differences in asking in the same way ‘what is ...?’, but by seeking an answer to his own question, ‘What is philosophy?’, he specifically endeavours to uncover *what is it is to ask what something is*. In the course of doing so Heidegger argues that, for the pre-Socratic thinker Heraclitus, the word *philosophia* did not yet exist, rather, Heraclitus coined the adjective *philosophos*. Heidegger wants to show that the *philosophos* of Heraclitus is not the same as what will later become *philosophia*, rather the person doing the former is not a philosophical person (*aner philosophos*), but he who *loves* the sophon (*hos philei to sophon*). For Heidegger, the distinctive feature of *philein*, of loving, in the Heraclitean sense is a correspondence in accord with the *sophon*. This corresponding accordance points to ‘harmony’.<sup>23</sup> For Heidegger the individual

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<sup>20</sup>Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell, ed., London: Routledge, 1993, 230-231.

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960, 24-42.

<sup>22</sup>Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* Albany: NCUP, 1956, 37.

<sup>23</sup>Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* 47.

loves or is in harmony with the *sophon*. Heidegger next explores the word *sophon*, and writes:

The *sophon* means, *Hen Panta*, 'One (is) all.' 'All' means here, all things that exist, the whole, the totality of being. *Hen*, one, means, the one, the unique, the all-uniting... [A]ll being is united in Being. The *sophon* says - all being is in Being. To put it more pointedly - being *is* Being.<sup>24</sup>

However, over time the loving as a harmony with the *sophon* (i.e., One is all or being is Being) was altered to a different kind of loving. The reason for this, Heidegger argues, is because the Greeks had to rescue and protect Being against the attack of Sophist reasoning, which always had ready for everything an answer that was comprehensible to everyone and which they put on the market.<sup>25</sup> This rescue of being in Being, says Heidegger, was accomplished by those who now *strove* for the *sophon* and, thereby, kept alive the *yearning* of others for the *sophon*.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the loving of the *sophon* as 'harmony' becomes a 'yearning' or 'striving' for the *sophon*. Now the *sophon* is especially sought, effecting a switch of attention from 'all being is in *Being*' to 'the *being* in *Being*'. This is because the loving is now no longer an original harmony with the *sophon*, but a particular striving *towards* it.<sup>27</sup> Thus, this new way of loving the *sophon* becomes *philosophia*. Heidegger explains:

This yearning search for the *sophon*, for the 'One (is) all', for the being in Being, now becomes the question, "What is being, in so far as it is?" Only now does thinking become 'philosophy'. Heraclitus and Parmenides were not yet 'philosophers'.<sup>28</sup>

As a 'thing especially sought', being is now ardently pursued by way of questioning. Philosophy seeks what being is, insofar as it is. With this move, the nature of philosophy was circumscribed. Philosophy, says Heidegger, becomes "*episteme*

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<sup>24</sup>Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* 47-49.

<sup>25</sup>Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* 51.

<sup>26</sup>Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* 51.

<sup>27</sup>See Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* 51.

<sup>28</sup>Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* 51-53.

*theôrêtikê* (speculative knowledge).”<sup>29</sup> This means that it is a kind of competence that is capable of speculating, that is, “of being on the lookout for something and of seizing and holding in its glance what it is on the lookout for.”<sup>30</sup> Even philosophy itself can be held in its own glance as an object of speculative knowledge. Thus, with regard to Heidegger’s question ‘What is philosophy?’ Steiner writes:

To ask in ‘philosophic’ terms – i.e., in Platonic, Aristotelian, or Kantian terms – “What is this thing – philosophy?” is to guarantee a ‘philosophic’ answer. It is to remain trapped in the circle of the dominant Western tradition, and *this* circle, in contrast to what Heidegger takes to be inward-circling paths of thinking, is sterile. We must therefore attempt a different sort of discourse, another kind of asking. The crucial motion turns on the meaning of *Ent-sprechen*. An *Ent-sprechen* is not ‘an answer to’ ... but a ‘response to’, a ‘correspondence with’, a dynamic reciprocity and matching such as occur when gears, both in quick motion, mesh. Thus, our question as to the nature of philosophy calls not for an answer in the sense of a textbook definition or formulation, be it Platonic, Cartesian, or Lockean, but for ... a response, a vital echo, a ‘re-sponson’ in the liturgical sense of participatory engagement. And this response or correspondence will *answer to* the being of Being.<sup>31</sup>

We get a sense here of Heidegger’s attempt to return to the *harmony with* ‘all being is in Being’ rather than the *yearning for* ‘the being in Being’. Importantly, Steiner notes that the English phrase ‘to answer to’ captures what Heidegger is trying to convey. This is because it contains a sense of both ‘response’ and ‘responsibility’. Rather than simply give an *answer to*, we are moreover, *answerable to* the question of Being, as the phrase ‘to answer to’ implies. We must become answerable to, that is respond to, the call or appeal of Being that astonishes us with the

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<sup>29</sup>Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* 57.

<sup>30</sup>Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* 57.

<sup>31</sup>Steiner, *Heidegger*, 29.

existential mystery that it is, and in this way we will, in turn, become more genuinely philosophers, or rather, thinkers. This 'response to an appeal' is very different from what is the 'demand of a decree' in Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason.<sup>32</sup>

For Heidegger, 'questioning' is not the interrogation of an inquisitor, but based on a 'correspondence' with the question of Being, or the Being-question (*Seinsfrage*). So, rather than give an *answer to*, we are *answerable to* the question of Being. Mindful of this difference, Heidegger makes a distinction between the 'questionable' (*fraglich*) and the 'worthy of being questioned' (*fragwürdig*). The questionable is based on positivistic investigation and gives terminal answers that leave the question settled. As Steiner asserts, we do not need to ask again, what is the mileage to the moon or the formula for hydrochloric acid. He continues: "We know the answers, and the finality of this knowledge has, according to Heidegger, demonstrated the inessentiality or, at the last, smallness of the original question."<sup>33</sup> However, that which is 'worthy of questioning', is on the contrary, inexhaustible: "There are no terminal answers, no last and formal decidabilities to the question of the meaning of human existence or of a Mozart sonata ... But if there can be no end to genuine questioning, the process is, nonetheless, not aimless."<sup>34</sup>

For Heidegger, the most worthy of being questioned is Being, and the question of Being makes us travellers or wanderers who come home to the unanswerable. Throughout his career, Heidegger tried to think and say Being. This is a significant point, he *tried to*: "The imperative is, strictly one of attempt. Heidegger knows this, and says it over and over again. 'Auf einer

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<sup>32</sup>I have used the term 'demand of a decree' by paraphrasing Caputo. He said: "The Principle of Ground is not just a proposition (*Satz*), not even a basic proposition (*Grundsatz*), but a decree (*Spruch*) which lay claim to our thought and makes a demand of us (*in Anspruch nehmen*)." Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 56.

<sup>33</sup>Steiner, *Heidegger*, 56.

<sup>34</sup>Steiner, *Heidegger*, 56-57.

*Stern zugehen, nur dieses'* (to proceed toward a star, only this).  
'*Alles ist Weg'* (all is way) or 'under-wayness', as in the word *tao*.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. Philosophy of Religion

My Heideggerian explorations into the 'why' and 'what' of philosophy have been designed to show that this is how philosophy tends to approach most if not all of its subjects of interrogation. For the concern of this essay, philosophy's subject of interrogation is religion, which highlights that branch of philosophy called 'philosophy of religion'. As discussed, according to Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason, 'nothing is without a reason'. For every truth, a reason or ground can be given and knowledge is subject to this principle's demand. According to this thinking, to philosophically understand any aspects of religion under scrutiny, we must explain and rationalize so as to give grounds for our knowledge. As a result, religion deliberately and inevitably becomes an object of philosophy's representing. This is to say that in the enterprise called 'philosophy of religion', religion is necessarily appropriated by philosophy. In philosophy of religion, the religion is subject to the philosophy, which, therefore, means that philosophy has already lost sight of religion. This, I believe, is an example of how philosophy as a thing of reason is a product of oblivion. It does not recognize that all things stand forth out of their own grounds.

In philosophy of religion, religion has to satisfy philosophy but (and this is perhaps the essence of my argument) philosophy does not have to satisfy religion. The approach is solely on philosophy's terms, which I would suggest seriously compromises the integrity of the approach. For example, in his, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*, Keith E. Yandell says that he takes religious claims to be "neither more nor less open to rational assessment than any other sorts of

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<sup>35</sup>Steiner, *Heidegger*, 80.

claims.”<sup>36</sup> It becomes clear that, for Yandell, ‘rational assessment’ is the aim of philosophy of religion because religions make claims. This seems to mean that for any claims to be judged as sound claims, they must surely be assessed rationally. In fact, Yandell says that showing it is possible to assess religious beliefs rationally is his major agenda.<sup>37</sup> He remarks that his agenda runs against what he sees as the popular but false belief that matters of religion are private affairs. While from another angle, to those people who say thinking of religions as making claims is to misunderstand them, Yandell attributes a failure of nerve and unwillingness to think hard.<sup>38</sup>

Related to the thinking hard of rational assessment (and so against the private) is ‘objectivity’ which, says Yandell, is rightly prized in philosophy as elsewhere. To be objective, he says, is “To accept or reject a belief on the basis of what can be said in favour of, and what can be said against, its truth, no matter whether one prefers the belief to be true or not.”<sup>39</sup> Here, I would argue, is a perfect example of philosophy appropriating religion, in that accepting or rejecting a religious belief is subject to philosophy’s rational approach to the truth. By accepting or rejecting the belief it does not therefore simply refer to an objective ‘description’ of the religion, but to an objective ‘assessment.’ But while this admittedly avoids reducing religious matters to private feelings, it nevertheless subjects them to the notion we have discussed earlier, namely, that nothing is without why and for every truth a reason can be given because knowledge is subject to this demand. Yandell, then, searches for reasons because nothing is without a why, and we must explain and rationalize in order to give grounds for belief. The subject of interrogation must become an object of representation seized by the glance of speculative knowledge rather than stand forth out

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<sup>36</sup>Keith E. Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, 13.

<sup>37</sup>Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 14.

<sup>38</sup>Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 14.

<sup>39</sup>Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, 15.

of its own ground. In short, it must be assessed rationally and objectively.

This long-held approach to doing philosophy of religion is, I believe, inadequate. As argued, all the while religion is subject to philosophy (or philosophy done in this way), it is, thereby, appropriated and lost in the process. Whatever interpretation is given to the ‘why’ or ‘what’ in question, the process invariably seeks a rational and objective answer that, in turn, circumscribes philosophy. The name ‘philosophy of religion’ would seem to suggest that the philosophy is *belonging to* or *coming from* the religious aspect, but this is not the case. While it indirectly concerns or involves religion, it directly concerns or involves philosophy. It is *philosophy about* religion, and rarely *philosophy of religion*. The philosophy is not an away from and back again to religion. It is foremost a staying where it is *in* and *as* philosophy.

Put another way and drawing from our earlier discussion, any ‘why’ or ‘what’ given by philosophy of religion is valid *of* the religion insofar as it is an object of our subjectivistic representing, but it is not valid *for* the religion insofar as it stands in itself as the religion.<sup>40</sup> But all the time we seek philosophical answers by demanding that a reason is given to the thinking subject, we remain trapped in the circle that is the dominant western thinking.<sup>41</sup> In order to participate in what I would argue to be a more genuine or fruitful philosophy of religion, we must step out of this circle and into a different region outside representational thinking.<sup>42</sup> This step, I assert, would, in fact, constitute the religious. To begin with, the subject of any enquiry or questioning, in this case the religious, must not be subject to the subjectivistic principle, which demands that a reason is given to the thinking subject. We must endeavour to let the religious be the religious, without reducing it to the status of a subjectively represented object. To understand it on its own terms as standing forth from out of its own grounds requires us

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<sup>40</sup>Here I echo Heidegger in “The Principle of Ground,” cited in Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 64.

<sup>41</sup>Here I echo Steiner, *Heidegger*, 29.

<sup>42</sup>See Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought*, 64.

perhaps to become religious. By turning the religious into a subjectively represented object, Yandell might not be making religion a 'private' affair, but he is, following the Kantian line of thought, making religion a necessarily 'subjective' affair even if this is on universal terms. Thus, it is not as objective as he likes to think it is. This is because in terms of being rationally assessed the religious is 'understood' *by us*. The demand made by ourselves for the religious 'to give reasons' and in that we through subjective representation supply the conceptual tools for rational assessment, prevents our being able to dwell in the religious as the religious. The religious, as with Scheffler's rose, must be grounded in and so blossom out of itself as a pure emerging and shining.<sup>43</sup> In this way, the religious will stand in the highest regard not because a value has been conferred upon it, but *because* it stands forth of itself. Caputo writes of Scheffler:

So long as one remains within 'representational' thinking there are no exceptions to the Principle of Sufficient Ground: every *object* must have a sufficient ground or reason delivered up for it. But the mystical poet has opened up access to a region where there are no 'objects' but only 'things' (*Dinge*) which are left to 'stand' (*stehen*), not 'before' (*gegen*) a subject, but 'in themselves' (*in sich selbe*). In this region, grounds are neither sought after nor supplied because 'things' rest on their own grounds. In this region, thinking is not under the obligation or 'demand' to supply grounds at all.<sup>44</sup>

This would mean that rather than give an answer to the religious we must be, moreover, answerable to it. The 'loving' aspect of our philosophy must be more akin to the pre-Socratic 'harmony with' than the post-Socratic 'striving after'. Our being *answerable to* the call or appeal of the religious contains a sense of both 'response' and 'responsibility'. As stated earlier, this 'response to an appeal' is very different from the 'demand of a decree'. It is not the interrogation of an inquisitor, but an altogether different

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<sup>43</sup>See Heidegger, "The Principle of Ground," cited in Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 72.

<sup>44</sup>Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, 65.

kind of questioning based on correspondence or re-sponson in the liturgical sense of participatory engagement.<sup>45</sup>

### 5. Back to the Text Itself

This brings me to aspects of my own teaching practice where I have tried to involve students in a similar correspondence or re-sponson as a form of learning. Here the aim has been to engage in an arguably more genuine form of questioning or enquiry *as an act of seeking*. I say more genuine because the seeking ‘quest’ remains in the questioning, and does not resort to positivistic interrogation looking for and decided by terminal answers. Seeing the religious as worthy of being questioned rather than just questionable, the approach embraces the inexhaustibility of the unanswerable. In short, it remains open to what is worthy of being questioned. As the *quest* remains in the questioning, the students become more akin to travellers or wanderers as opposed to mere tourists guided on a predetermined route.<sup>46</sup> While there is no end to this genuine questioning and listening, the process is not aimless. In this way, we endeavour to step outside the circle of representational thinking, or what my current undergraduate students often refer to as their *mind-set*. But how might we let the religious become grounded in and so blossom out of itself as a pure emerging and shining? How do we let the religious stand in the highest regard not because a value has been conferred upon it, but *because* it stands forth of itself?

In the classroom context I speak of, the aim has been to correspond or engage with religious texts by endeavouring to let them speak. So, rather than speak over the text in the form of answers as rational decidabilities on our own terms, we foremost

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<sup>45</sup>See Steiner, *Heidegger*, 29.

<sup>46</sup>This has proven so successful that a group, which studied under my tutelage for ten years using this method, continue to meet in order to study texts and call themselves, the Questors.

endeavour to listen to the text speak on its own terms.<sup>47</sup> The quest then becomes a form of hermeneutic hearkening. As Heidegger writes, "... to think is before all else to listen."<sup>48</sup> In my experience as a teacher working with texts, especially religious texts, readers have lost the ability to listen or hearken. This is because they tend first to be on the lookout for what they already know, or seek to bring what they read into line with what they already know. In the process, the text, rather like a poorly treated guest, is spoken over and so not heard. Again, Heidegger writes: "It therefore might be helpful to us to rid ourselves of the habit of always hearing only what we already understand."<sup>49</sup>

An aim in my classes is to try and get students to hear religious texts from different traditions. This includes two texts from India, namely, the *Bhagavad Gita* and Sankara's *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*. Such texts are especially a challenge to hear when students judge them (often unwittingly) by standards that are western givens. For example, it is deeply entrenched in the western mind that reality is one thing and consciousness another. The student can readily accept that consciousness is of reality, but reality is what it is regardless of whether anyone is conscious of it or not. As many different subjective individuals, we are each separately aware of one material reality. But when the student begins to see that, according to the above texts, reality is ultimately identical to consciousness and, furthermore, that this is not reality or consciousness as they typically understand it, then the challenge is for the student to take the text seriously and to go on hearing it. For some, the western given will act as a filter, which only lets those parts of the text through that meet the standard expected for philosophical credibility. That which does not meet this standard cannot be

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<sup>47</sup>I first became familiar with this approach when I was a master's degree student under the tutelage of Joseph Milne in his 'texts seminars'.

<sup>48</sup>Heidegger, 'The Nature of Language', *On the Way to Language*, New York: Harper Collins, 1971, 76.

<sup>49</sup>Heidegger, 'The Nature of Language', *On the Way to Language*, 58.

taken on board and, thus, taken seriously. Put another way, this means that it cannot be heard on its own terms and so stand forth of itself, because its own terms as grounds are not trusted owing to the fact that a negative value has been conferred upon them for simply not fitting what is sought.

Where this indeed happens, we might say that the student is successfully doing philosophy of religion. This is because the interrogation of the inquisitor has been rationally assessed and, thereby, provided with grounds for belief or otherwise. In the process, the subject of interrogation has become an object of representation seized by the glance of speculative knowledge. But it has, thereby, been prevented from standing forth on its own terms and out of its own ground. Rational assessment, it seems, polices the border and either raises the barrier to let those things in that it recognizes and acknowledges, or leaves it down to keep the unfamiliar and unacknowledged out. But, regardless of the religion, because so much of the text is not recognized or acknowledged, it is simply not heard. Therefore, philosophy of religion is valid *of* the religion insofar as religion is an object of our subjectivistic representing, although even this is debateable, but it is not valid *for* the religion insofar as it stands in itself as the religion. Philosophy of religion has given an *answer to* religion following the demand of a decree, but has not been *answerable to* religion as a response to its appeal. This is clearly made worse by the fact that the philosophical framework for rational assessment already mistrusts and rejects much, if not most, of what is deemed to be religious because it is often at odds with its outlook.

Where does this leave us? In order for philosophy of religion to become answerable to religion as a response to its appeal and, thus, correspond with it in the form of participatory engagement, it clearly needs to be determined, I believe, as much by the religion as it is the philosophy. This is to say that philosophy, by virtue of corresponding with its subject matter, must become *religious* philosophy. As it tends to stand in philosophy of religion, religion has to satisfy the demands of philosophy purely as philosophized religion, whereas I am

suggesting that the philosophy will also need to satisfy the religion as religionized philosophy. In the process, a philosophy of religion thus conceived may well allow a circumscribed philosophy to accord more with its pre-Socratic roots as a *harmony with*, in contrast to the post-Socratic *striving for* it has undoubtedly for the most part become.

In pedagogical terms, according to the classroom context I speak of, the subtle aim is to get the students to perform a textual *epoché* with respect to the phenomenological method of Heidegger's great teacher, Edmund Husserl. We, therefore, try to suspend or bracket out a 'natural attitude' towards the text, that is, set aside prejudices or assumptions and wherever possible in terms of a phenomenological hermeneutics get 'back to the text itself'. The endeavour is to hear the text on its own terms according to its inherent system of meaning. The meaning of the text becomes present to us as an 'intentional' object of our listening. So, the intentional text is our foremost concern, not our judgments in the form of rational assessments. But suspending the natural attitude in order to take an altogether different approach to philosophy of religion is a challenge not only with respect to texts but people as well, as was shown by my recent experience with students who prejudged and, thus, could not hear a Muslim scholar who had come to speak to them about Islam. Yet, for religions to be heard, for dialogue to truly take place, and for all of us as students to learn, it is a challenge that all these must be taken up and, in the process, transform philosophy of religion.

## 6. Conclusion

This essay has put forward a critique of the subjectivistic approach taken by philosophy of religion and has endeavoured to provide an alternative rendering of this discipline. This I have argued is necessary because the religious is appropriated and, therefore, overlooked by the philosophical, which explains and rationalises in order to make the religious an object of its representing. That everything is on philosophy's terms makes philosophy of religion an inadequate discipline with respect to

understanding the religious. The demand by philosophy, I have argued, is valid *of* the religion insofar as it is an object of our representing, but not *for* the religion insofar as it stands in itself. I have, therefore, proposed a change of attitude that lets something stand forth in itself, and I would further argue that this change of attitude is precisely what constitutes the religious. This is because a thing in itself is in a different region outside representational thinking where it stands on its own ground, and is in this very respect the religious as the religious. Accordingly, it is under no demand to provide grounds for its being so either to itself or an observer. This further tells us that the ego does not supply grounds for the religious. On the contrary, the ego may come to realise that it was groundless before this more genuine ground came to be.

I have also argued that to ask philosophically about the religious is to guarantee a philosophical answer, never a religious one. I have, therefore, suggested a different approach to the questioning of philosophy of religion, where philosophy becomes answerable to the religious which is worthy of being questioned, so that the religious is not simply questionable in order to seek an answer to it. The aim I propose is not to arrive at definitions or formulations, but to proceed towards a responsive participatory engagement that brings exegeses home to the unanswerable because it is inexhaustible. I believe it is important for philosophy to see that religious claims are more genuinely understood when interpreted *religiously*, rather than being accepted or rejected only when assessed rationally. This I believe also returns us to a more genuine and extensive sense of philosophy, not circumscribed by reason and objectivity.

The responsive participatory engagement that I suggest is best approached through a method of phenomenological hermeneutics in which students attempt to hear the text speaking, rather than speaking over the text and only hearing what they already understand. Therefore, it is the text teaching them while the tutor attempts to facilitate interpretation. Accordingly, the text is more able to stand on its own terms and speak forth from out of its own ground. This is because the text's

speaking is determined by the religious and the religious is determined by the text speaking, not by speculative philosophy. Finally, I have endeavoured to argue that textual reading (or an encounter with a lived religion) as a hermeneutic hearkening becomes a more genuine philosophy of religion when it is religious philosophy.