



TEMENOS

NORDIC JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Temenos Vol. 56 No. 1 (2020), 75–94

DOI: 10.33356/temenos.80350

Ricœur's Historical Intentionality and the Great Goddess Freyja: Some Problems in the Phenomenology of Religion and Interpretations in the Study of Religions

ANE FAUGSTAD AARØ

University of Bergen

Abstract

The main question in this article concerns whether hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology can address some of the problems and critiques raised in the study of religions. Inspired by Gilhus's proposal in her article 'The Phenomenology of Religion and Theories of Interpretation', I investigate the possibilities in this strand of thought concerning interpretation and explanation from the perspective of Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology and language theory, taking Norse mythology and the goddess Freyja as examples of how this method might work. I argue that Ricœur's contribution to hermeneutic phenomenology is important to methodology in the study of religions, and that the *historicity* of the interpretation of religious phenomena is based on a lifeworldly intentionality. I also analyse the depth of understanding, the formation of ideas, and meaning in its historical context at the level of the historian's process of interpretation, and I argue that the method may constitute a theoretical basis for an objective science.

Keywords: historicity, interpretation, understanding, context, Ricœur, hermeneutic phenomenology.

The phenomenology of religion as a theoretical tradition has undergone serious critiques and challenges concerning its viability and usefulness in the study of religions. In her article 'The Phenomenology of Religion and Theories of Interpretation' (1984) Ingvild Sælid Gilhus raises important questions about the development of hermeneutic phenomenology. She sees recent phenomenological and hermeneutical theories of interpretation as affording the possibility of resolving some of the theoretical issues and debates

raised in the study of religions, and she advances the idea that Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology offers something valuable for elucidating the interpretative process in research into religious phenomena. Gilhus identifies several problem areas in the hermeneutic phenomenology of religion.

First, since Gerardus van der Leeuw's *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933), there has been little theoretical development. Gilhus attributes this to a lack of theoretical renewal and to the fact that post-war developments in philosophical hermeneutics and theories of interpretation have not been applied (Gilhus 1984, 27).

Second, the issue of empiricism prevails: 'The phenomenology of religion has been criticized for searching for Platonic ideas and essences, for detaching the phenomena from their historical and cultural connections and for not being empirical' (Gilhus 1984, 27). This criticism has led to a defensive attitude, in which phenomenologists 'are reluctant to discuss the concept of empiricism and the theoretical problems connected with the discipline as such' (Gilhus 1984, 27).

Third, Gilhus identifies the major concerns in recent discussions within the field as *objectivity* and *empiricism*, and thus a tendency to work towards making the phenomenology of religion empirical, which in turn favours the typological phenomenology of religion (Gilhus 1984, 28).

Finally, Gilhus's article takes up the issue of 'understanding', a question she maintains needs close attention. In van der Leeuw's phenomenology there is a determination to analyse the process of understanding, but his concept of understanding does not take into account the depth-structure of the phenomenon (Gilhus 1984, 30). This is a problem which also hampers the hermeneutic branch (Gilhus 1984, 31).

Her article further raises the objection that religion is not considered an integral part of culture (Gilhus 1984, 32). To remedy this, Gilhus proposes that Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology can offer an understanding of the human being in a cultural context, expressed through language in signs and symbols. Symbolic language is opaque, and interpretation is necessary to indirectly reveal intentionality and meaning (Gilhus 1984, 34-35). This approach combines the insights of phenomenology and a rigorous attention to context and language. Her main concern is the theoretical problems concerned with the understanding, explanation, and interpretation of religious phenomena (Gilhus 1984, 38).

Gilhus's claim is that recent hermeneutic phenomenology can offer a better theoretical foundation, because it combines pure phenomenological interpretation with analytical explanation. Gavin Flood makes a similar

point in a more recent work, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (1999). Flood argues that what is needed in the study of religions is a metatheoretical reflexive discourse on the manner in which religious practices are embedded in cultural matrices (Flood 1999, 3). He suggests combining phenomenology with a hermeneutic and narrativist tradition, especially that of Ricœur: 'Awareness of historical contingency means that a research programme is reflexive in the sense that interacting or conversing with its 'object' will also illuminate its own context, its own assumptions and its own theory of method (or methodology)' (Flood 1999, 9).

This article's main problematic concerns whether hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology in the study of religions can address some of the problems and critiques raised in the academic field. Inspired by Gilhus's proposal, my article will offer a theoretical analysis of meaning and interpretation in the study of religions from the perspective of Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology and language theory. My focus will be on the historicity of the interpretation of religious phenomena, the depth of understanding, and the formation of idea and meaning in its historical context, taking into account Ricœur's contribution to hermeneutic phenomenology.¹ Snorre's narrative about the Norse goddess Freyja will serve as an empirical example of a religious figure upon which to employ Ricœur's interpretative method.

The historicity of interpretation

The historicity of interpretation is the researcher's knowledge and viewpoint in an historical place and time, with his or her particular language(s), traditions, and practices. Every subject has his or her own background in history, language, beliefs, practices, and customs. To deal with historicity is to contextualize the researcher's cultural situation and academic framework (in this case the study of religions) in a particular place-time in history and language. We must concede that every researcher will steer the academic non-confessional study of religions according to a linguistic, historical, and cultural/religious background and academic habitus. This also applies to the object of research. The ideals of objectivity and empiricism are noble but hampered by the influx of interpretative biases. In this text I will offer an analysis of how an awareness and explication of historicity in the interpretation and explanation of religion may address some of the metatheoretical problems in

1 On perception and the importance of embodied perception see, for example, Ó Murchada and Faugstad Aarø 2016; Faugstad Aarø 2010.

the study of religions. Interpretation and explanation can be explicated by a deeper understanding of the mechanisms involved in the formation of cultural meaning and the understanding of historical and religious ideas, and may be justified theoretically by an analysis of the most basic and original formations of understanding of and insight into the source material.

An elucidation of the processes that govern the individual researcher's formation of understanding and experience of meaning in encounters with religious and historical ideas will shed light on the subjective and contextual conditions activated in the interpretative process. Furthermore, it is my thesis that an insight into the cultural meaning formation of the self will place the ideals of objectivity and empiricism conveyed by the academic discipline itself into critical relief.

The article will aim to answer some of the metatheoretical questions concerning the status of interpretation and explanation in the study of religions with the help of hermeneutic phenomenology, such as the problems indicated by Gilhus and Flood.

The ideals of freedom and engagement in the humanistic fields can be perceived to be in conflict with the required objectivity in scientific endeavours: that is, objectivity in the form of reproducible, intersubjectively communicable interpretations. Is there a necessary requirement of 'objective' humanistic research that precludes elements of the self's own experiences from contributing to interpretation; or can interpretations be grounded in the actuality of one's own subjectivity, in which interpretation reveals transcendence, openness, and multiple meanings? The conception of objectivity in the humanistic fields, including the study of religions, would benefit from a nuanced explication, based on the necessary *preconditions for understanding* that the community of people engaged in the activity share and by which they are motivated. However, my argument will not be based on a philosophical analysis of objectivity in itself, which has been thoroughly debated in recent decades. It is rather this article's emphasis that different perspectives on the subjects of the interpretation of religions and their historical context may affect how the community of learning, and thereby the sphere of objective knowledge, is perceived.

Understanding religious ideas and practices

Let us investigate how the academic self – the historian of religions – and his or her formation of cultural and historical meaning work, and subsequently how *objectivity* is understood based on hermeneutic phenomenological

analyses. The question is relevant within both the research and didactic in the study of religions. The primary concern is a meaning formation based on the *different* cultural frameworks from which interpretation arises, and the researcher's historical backgrounds and personal conditions, which may be considered to contribute to the process of forming cultural ideas. Thus, the thematic places this question into the central problematic regarding the study of religious beliefs and practices with researchers' and students' various individual backgrounds, and how a metatheoretical approach may allow for this aspect of interpretation, as Gilhus and Flood have proposed. Interpreting religious ideas and practices faces the deep and inexhaustible question of the various elements that are in play in understanding, and which belong to every human being's horizon of understanding and his or her making meaningful uses of ideas and thoughts in their own intellectual endeavours. The thematic thus resonates with central texts in hermeneutic phenomenology by Ricœur and Husserl, and in the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. By focusing the research on this basic and prerequisite groundwork we may shed light on the individual thought processes involved in understanding religious ideas and practices – thought processes that are presupposed in the idea of a common goal or ideal of a reflective and critical attitude in the tradition of the academic study of religions.

Theoretical framework

We can base the analysis of subjective formations of cultural meaning on the central works in hermeneutic phenomenology, perception, and historicity, specifically the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricœur, and the debate following their writings on the field of subjectivity, focusing on aspects of special relevance to the study of religions. One such theoretical problem is that historically situated subjective meaning formations are not sufficiently elucidated to ensure the desired independent and critical reflections in research. There is therefore a need to critically question the theoretical foundation and methodology of this practice through hermeneutic phenomenology, theories of perception, language, and the historical formation of understanding and explanation.

The formation of meaning

The philosophers Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Ricœur and their conceptions of meaning offer a useful path for the academic task

of interpretation in the humanistic field. The unfulfilled character of self-reflection, however, belongs to a fundamental problem in analysing thought and the formation of ideas in the individual self. The analysis of this problem elucidates the reflective process of thoughts, ideas, and meaning formations. My concern is to focus on the phenomenological analysis of the formation of meaning, with its critique and elucidation of a problematic theoretical obstacle in our understanding of the self, such as the dualism of mind and world. The chosen theories in this article are determined in part by the theorists who themselves have formulated the problem of historicity in the constitution of meaning: namely, that of hermeneutical theory and phenomenology.

Continental philosophy has traditionally placed a greater emphasis on the *historical* element in the meaning constitution of the self, such as in the works of the late Edmund Husserl. I will take this historical element as a starting point, drawing on the basic understanding within philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology. Paul Ricœur is one among several philosophers whose works arise from the central theme of the historical existence of the human being, which is best understood by the concept of *historicity* (Ricœur 2000, 373, 480).

An important aspect of the historical being in modern continental philosophy is that meaning formation is interpreted in a way that seeks to avoid objectivist understandings of subjectivity and history, which in different ways describe history as an external reality in relation to an objective 'givenness' of the human being. Human meaning formation and self-reflection are not produced by an analytical distance from the self's history apprehended as an object, but are seen as interwoven in an internal relation to situations and engagement in an historical and cultural society. I will clarify how an understanding of the world in this philosophical tradition is closely tied to and interrelated with historicity and experience, something which includes conceptual and linguistic traditions. Bringing the interplay of language and thought further to the fore undoubtedly complicates the question and is a separate field of study in itself. However, it must be acknowledged that it has a certain bearing on how we understand and describe culture and religion, and is thus another necessary part of the groundwork or reflection for which this problematic inevitably calls. The concepts we learn to use regarding religion, culture, and history belong precisely to the tradition into which we are initiated, and naturally complicates any reflection on the self's constitution of cultural meaning (Ricœur 2000, 307; 1990).

The question concerning *meaning* is central in twentieth century philosophy, whether in linguistic traditions or in the more ontological or transcendental theories on the continent.

After Kant there was a reaction against understanding the self as an autonomous rational subject existing in a void produced by a distance from the world, an understanding that has been criticized by phenomenological philosophers in the twentieth century and especially by critical theory in the twenty-first century. This critical tradition is represented by Deleuze and Guattari among others. They have developed a view of *thought* as process, a becoming or incident that stands in a multifaceted connection with perception, experience, and our responses to the world. Theorists of this school claim this view explains the interrelations of meaning throughout existence in a new way (See e.g., Goodchild 2004, 173.). Modern continental philosophy has claimed that critical analysis of the inner/outer dichotomy is needed to avoid naturalistic interpretations of meaning and to discern how the historical, generative element in meaning formations is in effect. It is not sufficient to direct awareness towards history as *knowledge of history* and the elements we find relative to our time and cultural situation. This making conscious of the self's meaning formation presupposes a deeper analysis of the generative processes that underlie our understanding of different types of meaning, whether they are cultural, religious, or historical. Yet the generative functions disclose a problematic with regard to the inner/outer duality of the self and nature, or the constituting and the constituted. This problematic will also be dealt with in my investigation of meaning and its constitution, through an examination of the perception theory of Merleau-Ponty in his late writings, among others, to elucidate the processes in situations that are fundamental to the perception of ideas.

This question may be conceived as a meta or transcendental thematic, as in the argumentation of philosopher Steven Galt Crowell, who argues for the transcendental turn by pointing to how the question discloses that philosophy *itself* is constituted with regard to understanding meaning and reasons. He argues that transcendental phenomenology is indispensable to the philosophical elucidation of the space of meaning (Galt Crowell 2001, 3). Again, this points to the importance of analysing conceptual frameworks of the perceptions of cultural issues and religious ideas.

Husserl's historical consciousness is grounded in a deep reflection on meaning ('*Besinnung*'), in which we clarify what is ours, thereby returning to ourselves with regard to the historical being that we are. Husserl's statement in *Ideas II* that human science is based on pure intuition is an important claim in this connection (Husserl 2002, 374). The question of how intuition is compatible with the demand for objectivity in the human sciences is important, and by analysing the implicit ideals of freedom and engagement in

the humanistic tradition in the Nordic countries and Europe today we may discuss the concept of objectivity with which the academic world engages. Husserl defines objectivity thus in *Ideas II*:

In the broadest sense, it refers to (we are speaking of empirical Objectivity, not of the Objectivity of the idea) a being which in an open personal association is thought as determinable in such a way or as determined in such a way that it is in principle and at any time determinable in an absolute way by every possible Ego-subject of the association of researching subjects (Husserl 2002, 398).

This paragraph points to an important perspective on objectivity in the case of interpretations of historical texts, a perspective which calls for further analysis in connection with the possibility of individual engagement and freedom in humanistic study.

Husserl's exposition in *Ideas II* describes the sciences as a theoretical attitude with their own constituted apperception of what constitutes the object of science, which in its turn means that the sciences are preconditioned with regard to scientific intentions (directedness) (Husserl 2002, 4). His analysis of objectivity within the human sciences leads him to the critical reflection that the transcendental reduction represents (Husserl 2002, 398). The question of how intuition in interpretation is compatible with the demand for objectivity in the human sciences is not unclear when seen in connection with the reduction and eidetic variation, and is thus an understandable goal for science.

Ricœur views selfhood as a process or action instead of a posited 'I' (Ricœur 1990). As we have seen, Deleuze and Guattari have also developed a view on *thought* as process, a becoming or incident. Merleau-Ponty in his late writings investigated the question of historical situatedness with the aim of elucidating the processes of the perception of ideas (Merleau-Ponty 1964).

Whereas Husserl's understanding of historicity and historical self-consciousness is always transcendental, by presupposing a reduction to the immanent sphere on which meaning and constitution of meaning is reflected, Heidegger's understanding of history is characterized by being part of the factual *being-in-the-world* that encloses Dasein as an indeterminate, or non-finite and therefore not fully explicable, existence (Guignon 2006, 551; Crowell 2001, 5. Heidegger, 1927). Ideas in recent phenomenology such as *wonder* in face of the world, *striving* or *desire* (Toadvine 2003), and *passion* (Heinämaa 2002) towards seeking meaning have been suggested

as interpretations of the constitution of meaning. For example, Anthony J. Steinbock argues for the experience of the divine in *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*. He is interested in what is actually given to us in real human experience. 'The spheres of experience and givenness that are more robust than just those of objects, I call vertical givenness, or verticality' (Steinbock 2007). We do not merely experience objects and artefacts; we have inner experiences, dreams, visions, hopes, and fantasies that drive us to seek *something* that will reveal itself to us.

Interpretation and subjectivity

Applying a phenomenological and hermeneutical method in analysing meaning, interpretation, and historicity in the study of religions may take us along several different routes. Ricœur's epistemological and hermeneutical analyses of the historical condition in *Temps et récit* (1983), translated as *Time and Narrative* (1990), with its concept of historical intentionality, will figure in the foreground in Section two. In addition, Edmund Husserl's *Ideen, Buch 2–3* (1952) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945) are central texts in philosophical phenomenology, which both treat the problematic of understanding.²

Considerations of objectivity seem at first glance to require the taking of a position with regard to the extent to which the self's own home-world can be allowed to contribute to interpretation. This question has resulted in several opposing traditions (e.g. Steinbock 1995; 2007, 1). Paul Ricœur has expressed reservations about grounding interpretations of the actuality in one's own subjectivity or arising out of what many conceive as that which is immanent in the cogito (Ricœur 1975; Bleicher 1980, 221). He emphasizes that interpretation points towards transcendence, openness, and multiple meanings. The problem can be resolved, Ricœur claims, by means of the phenomenological reduction (*epoché*), which makes our own contributions apparent and thematic, and may therefore provide the necessary distance from the object of interpretation by means of the eidetic method. In this context the eidetic method entails that the interpreter, by means of an open imagination, reaches a core that is not relative to one's own experiences

2 See also Merleau-Ponty 2008.

or actuality.³ A deep understanding of the constitution of meaning seems important to the idea of a reflection on meaning as *self-understanding*, according to Ricœur (Ricœur 1980, 242).

Paul Ricœur's conception of *historicity* entails seeing the concept more as a form of *being*, which means that the relation to a great extent must be thought of as an ontological trait. I believe his perspective is promising, and that it may be important in this context to develop further the view of subjectivity as fundamentally an *understanding* or *interpreting* of being in encounters with otherness, a theme of great importance in the study of religions.

It is hoped such a hermeneutic phenomenological focus on the subject of interpretation in the study of religious ideas and practices will uncover the presuppositions underlying the study of religions, as Gilhus suggests.

* * *

In Ricœur's theory of history and narrative in *Temps et récit* a narrative understanding based on the internal temporality of the soul indirectly engenders an historical orientation or understanding (Ricœur 1990, 93). If we can begin to understand how such a narrative and temporal historical understanding comes into effect, I would like to show an example of how an historical understanding is phenomenologically possible by our construction and explanation of historical time. It will become clear in the following why Ricœur's theory and concepts are useful in the study of religions in its effort to portray historical or otherwise inaccessible entities. 'My thesis rests on the assertion of an indirect connection of derivation, by which historical knowledge proceeds from our narrative understanding without losing anything of its scientific ambition' (Ricœur 1990, 92). A crucial point in his delineation of historical knowledge is the concept of *intentionality*. Intentionality is one of the key concepts in phenomenological philosophy, and a prerequisite for all perception and cognition. It means the assertion of the fundamental directedness of all perception and consciousness towards something or other. If we are conscious, we are conscious of something. Ricœur explains the bearing this principle has on the historian's work: 'To reconstruct the indirect connec-

3 This ontology of understanding is neither precise nor fully attainable. The problem may also point to the later writing of Merleau-Ponty, who in *Le Visible et l'Invisible* attempted to show the fundamentally unfulfilled character of reflection on the most grounding, constituting elements of being. Merleau-Ponty 1964: 'Réflexion et interrogation': 17–73, 'Interrogation et intuition': 142–171, 119, 171; 1968: 3, 45, 105, 129; 1945; 2008.

tions of history to narrative is finally to bring to light the intentionality of the historian's thought by which history continues obliquely to intend the field of human action and its basic temporality' (ibid.).

There is no possibility of an objectivist conception of history in Ricœur's theory. The historian's subjective intentionality, which stretches to several temporal planes, guides the historical understanding and explanation of the time and/or entity in question. The mind is already historical in the sense that we remember and imagine the past and plan into the future by using stories or *narratives*. Ricœur emphasizes that the inherent temporality of the mind, as Augustine already observed in his *Confessions* with his concept of *distentio animi*, engenders a narrative understanding of the likeness or *mimesis* of the field of human action and value that is already known by the reader/researcher; a practical, lifeworldly understanding regarding any possible human action in any period based on our experience (Ricœur 1990, 55). Mimesis is understood as the act, whether in art or science, in which we model our understanding of something known to us – or imitate it. Understanding a narrative is based on an historical or diachronic, rather than a contemporary or synchronic, order of events. It is a discourse with the text/item in a sequence of temporal depth in an historical context. Ricœur borrows from linguistic vocabulary in describing understanding as syntagmatic: that is, to do with syntax, a broader system of parts to the whole phrase/narrative. The historical context is clearly present here as a vital part of the narrative discourse. Note the origins of Ricœur's inspiration, Augustine's *distentio animi*, 'in whose wake will follow Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty' (Ricœur 1990,16).

To gain a fuller methodological picture of 'the field of human action and its basic temporality', I would add the concepts of *historicity* and *lifeworld*, both to be found in Edmund Husserl's oeuvre, notably in his later work *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie*. Historicity is the term for the fundamentally historical character of the human being, its culture, and religion, encompassing everything in its lifeworld from institutions and traditions to language. By using a language we participate in an historical development that is throughout intersubjective in that we, through the handing-down and internalizing of the language of our ancestors, become immersed in a communal linguistic elaboration and inflection of the language over time. In the following I will demonstrate how these concepts might be useful in interpretations in the study of religions, as we examine more closely the meaning of the goddess Freyja in Old Norse mythology.

Interpreting the meaning of the Great Goddess Freyja

My example in elucidating the method at work is the understanding and explanation of the meaning of the goddess Freyja in Norse mythology to Viking contemporaries between 750 and 1050. Freyja was the goddess of beauty, love, and fertility and had access to the otherworldly, and as such is comparable to the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Greek Aphrodite. The first summary of Norse mythology is the *Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), the Icelandic poet and historian who portrayed the Viking myths of deities and their battles in a skaldic dramatic fashion. The character of the *Prose Edda*, written between 1223 and 1235 as a work on poetics, is also a factor in assessing the reliability of the accounts of the Norse gods, because he based large parts of the account on older poems. Britt-Mari Näsström discusses the meaning of the goddess Freyja in her work *Freyja, The Great Goddess of the North* (1995) and the various opposing qualities associated with the goddess. She is the goddess of beauty, love, and fertility, and an aid to women in childbirth, as well as an erotic adulteress and cunning sorceress. Her promiscuity goes hand in hand with her power over fertility, death and the battlefield, love, seduction, and cunning; a goddess of simultaneously positively and negatively laden qualities. Freyja's twin brother Frey serves as the complementary other, a deity with power over rain and sun, crops, sea, and weather. There is a possibility that the accounts of the Norse myths are biased by the contemporary religious climate in the Nordic countries when Snorri wrote his *Prose Edda* as a handbook for young poets. A reluctance to accept the Christian faith in the eleventh century led Hallfréður Vandræðirskáld to lament: 'The wrath of Freyr and Freyja comes upon me, when I am deserting the belief in Njorðr' (Näsström 1995, 18). Thus, the *historical context* must also be part of the process of interpretation and explanation in the study of religions.

Snorri's presentation of Freyja is both a situated perspective and embedded in an historical and cultural context, with the upheaval associated with the forced imposition of a new religion by the Norwegian king Olav the Great. This calls for a critical analysis of Snorri's context and situation. The novel Christianity (Iceland officially became Christian in 1000) may have coloured Snorri's account of the old myths. Snorri portrays the Nordic Gods as ancient kings with various characteristics. They were mortal, as the following citation from Snorri testifies: 'Freyja kept on with the sacrificial rituals [*blotning*], because she was the only [one] of the Gods who was still living' (Snorri 1979, 19). She was above all the goddess of love and fertility. Both men and women might invoke her name in the pursuit of a love conquest and in erotic

adventures. She lost her husband Od, who left her, and she wandered the world, searching far and wide for him, and crying tears of gold when she could not find him. Snorri remarks that Freyja is to be called for by men who may be confused in relationships with women. In Snorri's *Ynglingesaga* there is a short remark about her promiscuity or straying from the regular path [*lauslyndt*] (Snorri 1979, 15). She was willing to sleep with men for material riches to secure her position (Lyngdrup Madsen 2014, 124). She was proud and offended when accused of undertaking a manhunt: 'Do you think that I am mad for men?' (Lyngdrup Madsen 2014, 130, my translation). She was a goddess and sorceress [a *seid* woman], and might cast good or bad spells on people. She was also a temptress (Lyngdrup Madsen 2014, 127). She was also prayed to in childbirth and thought to aid women in giving children life.

Should one venture an interpretation of the story, it would be that the husband Od's absence may serve as a warning that women are vulnerable in their relationships with men and should not entirely trust their spouses always to be there; love and abandonment go hand in hand, and with great love comes great deceit. Freyja has a temper. Much like the Olympian Gods she is angry, offended, hurt, and she voices her reactions to those insults. A common insult is the allegation that she is a 'whore'. When she is accused of going to bed with several men, she is proud and furious.

With all her concerns she seems very human. Freyja's weakness gives her the reputation of being a 'loose woman'. It also serves as a reminder to women who compromise themselves and risk social exclusion. Thus, Freyja loves but is left by her husband Od, whom she mourns. She is clearly a strong woman, or as I imagine her, simultaneously strong and vulnerable. We are exposed in love, and the female figure of Freyja may serve as a forewarning of the exposures and challenges women may encounter. As a phenomenologist and woman, the figure of Freyja resonates with my experiences and role as a spouse and mother of three children, not an especially religious person, but born into the Lutheran church and concerned about the human condition. Although an explication of my stance and historical narrative in expounding the goddess Freyja would take up volumes, it would be required in a fully structured phenomenological analysis of the meaning of the goddess Freyja (for me as the phenomenological subject). Arriving at an understanding of what Freyja meant to an Iron Age woman is another matter. All my narrative understanding as a reader would need to be set aside in parenthesis – the phenomenological reduction.

According to Ricœur reaching an understanding of the meaning of the goddess Freyja for pre-Christian contemporaries would entail a continuous

exploration of the available narratives in the source material in which the researcher combines a narrative understanding with an historical explanation. Thus, it is hoped various histories complement and can complete one another (Ricoeur 1990, 176). A narrative understanding is not bound to a limited subjective perspective; on the contrary, setting aside at an analytical distance that which may constitute a 'point of view' facilitates the 'passage from the narrator to the historian' (Ricoeur 1990, 178). Ricoeur emphasizes in *Time and Narrative* that the epistemological historical considerations call for a new type of dialectic between historical inquiry and narrative competence to preserve and safeguard the narrative's *epistemological* and *historical* character (Ricoeur 1990, 177). We cannot allow just any imaginative narrative account to represent our historical insight into the past. "The solution to this problem [the simple narrativist thesis] depends on what could be called a method of 'questioning back'. This method, practiced by Husserl in his *Krisis*, stems from what Husserl calls a genetic phenomenology – not in the sense of a psychological genesis but of a genesis of meaning" (Husserl 1970; Ricoeur 1990, 179).

The questions that Ricoeur raises in the historical sciences, corresponding to Husserl's questioning of the natural sciences, concern the *intentionality of historical knowledge*: what is it that singles out an historical questioning into the past? With which faculties does the historian of religions confront his or her material, and ask of what its concrete events or entities consist? The intentionality of historical knowledge is directed at the past and knowledge of the past, and we may therefore ask what the meaning of our asking back (into texts for instance) and conferring with the historical to form an opinion of the historical events are. How does this differ from knowledge of related subjects such as economics, geography, demography, ethnology, sociology, and ideologies? (Ricoeur 1990, 180). History has in a sense already received an interpretation through our narrative competence in matters of lifeworldly human endeavours. Our questioning back refers to a past 'world of action that has already received a configuration through narrative activity, which with regard to its meaning is prior to scientific history' (*ibid.*).

Remembering this in returning to the goddess Freyja, the various textual sources that exist concerning her, and the events in which she figures as a prominent agent, we may clearly see the narrative activity that has occurred concerning the world of action that was Freyja's in the narratives. At the level of the researcher's historical understanding, the intentionality of historical knowledge is at work when we interpret these sources and form a meaning of Freyja's character and position. However, most importantly, Ricoeur

maintains the researcher's narrative activity has its own dialectic, which makes it pass through the stages of *mimesis*, based on elements inherent in the order of action, by way of 'the constitutive configurations of emplotment to the refigurations that arise due to the collision of the world of the text with the life-world' (Ricœur 1990, 180). The collision of the world of the text with the lifeworld refers to our imagination on the narrative plane in accordance with a world of action based on our meaning formation in our lifeworld. Thus, we may say that Freyja mimetically mirrors elements in our lives and allows us to recognize the field of practice in question and its pre-narrative resources in a society long gone (we may, for example, recognize common universal elements in human life in activities such as childbirth, child-rearing, sickness, death, agriculture, fishing, hunting, etc. in distant eras). The historian's process of historically analysing Freyja as an important divine actor is thus modelled on the historian's own imagination of lifeworldly elements.

The question of objectivity revisited

The charges of subjectivity against van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion are certainly relevant in this context. The question of objectivity has been dealt with in the above discussion mainly through the concepts of *historicity* and *reduction*: that is, placing our questioning at an analytical distance from a concrete perspective. The role of reduction, which Husserl calls a suspension of beliefs and prejudice, is to allow a more intersubjective objectivity to be formed in understanding and interpretation. Erik Reenberg Sand raises this question in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, suggesting that to remedy the almost programmatic subjectivity of the classical phenomenology of religion, a situated contextual sociocultural typology of religions is a necessary framework for the comparative study of single religious phenomena, which indicates to this reader that Husserl's concept of historicity would assist greatly in clarifying this question and avoiding psychologism (Reenberg Sand and Podemann Sørensen 1999, 9).

Concluding remarks

My main question has concerned whether hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology in the study of religions may address some of the problems and critiques the study of religions raises. Inspired by Gilhus's proposal in her article 'The Phenomenology of Religion and Theories of Interpreta-

tion', I have explored the possibilities in this strand of thought with regard to interpretation and explanation from the perspective of Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology and language theory, taking Norse mythology and the goddess Freyja as examples of how this method might work. My focus has been on the historicity of the interpretation of religious phenomena, the depth of understanding, and the formation of ideas and meaning in its historical context, taking into account Ricœur's contribution to hermeneutic phenomenology. Although I agree that knowledge of the situated, sociocultural-religious lifeworld(s) is a necessary requirement for building a phenomenology of religion, I would argue that the phenomenology of religion can be more than a typology or an inventory of various classifications of religious phenomena. Rather, if based on the philosophies of Husserl and Ricœur, it can constitute a theoretical basis for an objective science.

* * *

ANE FAUGSTAD AARØ has a MA in philosophy from University of Bergen. She is author of articles in philosophy, editor of anthologies, translator and teacher in philosophy, English and French in Bergen, Norway. E-mail: ane.aaro@uib.no

References

Aarø, Ane Faugstad

2010 Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature and the Concept of Flesh. *Biosemiotics* 3 (3), 331–45.

Bleicher, Josef

1980 *Contemporary Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*. London: Routledge.

Cox, James

2006 *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates*. London: Continuum.

2010 *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion*. London: Continuum.

Crowe, Benjamin D.

2008 *Heidegger's Phenomenology of Religion: Realism and Cultural Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Daniels, J.

1995 How New is Neo-Phenomenology? A Comparison of the Methodologies of Gerardus van der Leeuw and Jacques Waardenburg. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, 43–55.

Deleuze, Gilles

1969 *Logique du sens*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

1990 *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari

1972–80 *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. 1–2. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

1987 *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

Dhavamony, Mariasusai

1973 *Phenomenology of Religion*. Rome: Gregorian University Press.

Eliade, Mircea

1964 *Traité d'histoire des religions*. Paris: Payot.

Flood, Gavin

1999 *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion*. London: Cassell.

Galt Crowell, Steven

2001 *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid

1984 The Phenomenology of Religion and Theories of Interpretation. *Temenos* 20, 26–39.

Goodchild, Philip

2004 Gilles Deleuze (1925–95) and Felix Guattari (1930–92). – John Simons (ed.), *Contemporary Critical Theorists: From Lacan to Said*, 168–84. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Guignon, Charles

2006 History and Historicity. – Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (eds), *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, 545–58. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing.

Heidegger, Martin

(1927) 1993 *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Heiler, Friedrich

1979 *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*. 2nd ed. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

Heinämaa, Sara

- 2002 From Decisions to Passions: Merleau-Ponty's Interpretation of Husserl's Reduction. – Ted Toadvine and Lester Embree (eds), *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl*, 127–46. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Husserl, Edmund

- 1952a *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Die Phänomenologie und die Fundamente der Wissenschaften*. Husserliana: gesammelte Werke. Bd. 3–5, Buch 3. Eds.: W. Biemel, R. Bernet, U. Helle, S. Ijsseling. Dordrecht: Nijhoff.
- 1952b *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*. Husserliana: gesammelte Werke. Bd. 3–5 Buch 2. Eds.: W. Biemel, R. Bernet, U. Helle, S. Ijsseling. Dordrecht: Nijhoff.
- (1956) 2012 *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- 1970 *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, translated by David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- 2002 *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Second Book. Translated R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Kristensen, Brede

- 1960 *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*. The Hague: de Gruyter.

van der Leeuw, Gerardus

- 1933 *Phänomenologie der Religion*. Tübingen: Mohr.

Lyngdrup Madsen, Carsten

- 2014 *Nordboernes Gamle Religion*. Høbjerg: Forlaget Univers.

McCutcheon, R.T.

- 1997 *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2003 *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*. London: Routledge

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice

- 1945 *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.
- (1945) 2008 *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- 1964 *Le Visible et l'Invisible*. Paris: Gallimard.
- (1964) 1968 *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Näsström, Britt-Mari

1995 *Freyja: The Great Goddess of the North* (Vol. 5, Lund studies in history of religions). Lund: Department of History of Religions, University of Lund.

Ó Murchadha, Felix and Ane Faugstad Aarø

2016 Cartesian Soul: Embodiment and Phenomenology in the Wake of Descartes. – Charlene Elsby and Aaron Massecar (eds), *Essays on Aesthetic Genesis*, 43–64. Lanham: University Press of America.

Reenberg Sand, Erik and Jørgen Podemann Sørensen

1999 *Comparative Studies in History of Religion*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, The University of Copenhagen.

Ricœur, Paul

1960 *La symbolique du mal*. Paris: Aubier.

1965 *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

1969 *Le conflit des interprétations: essais d'herméneutique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

1970 Qu'est-ce qu'un texte? Expliquer et comprendre. – R. Bubner (ed.), *Hermeneutik und Dialekt*, 181–200. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

1975 Phenomenology and Hermeneutics. *Noûs* 9 (1), 85–102.

1976 *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press.

1980 Existence and Hermeneutics, In: Joseph Bleicher (ed.), *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*, pp. 236–256. London: Routledge.

1983 *Temps et récit*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

1990a *Time and Narrative, Vol. I*. Translated by K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.

1990b *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

1991–94 *Lectures*. 1–3. Paris: Seuil.

2000 *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

2004 *Sur la traduction*. Paris: Bayard.

Sharpe, Eric J.

1986 *Comparative Religion: A History*. London: Duckworth.

Smart, Ninian

1973 *The Phenomenon of Religion*. New York: The Seabury Press.

1997 *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. London: Fontana Press.

Steinbock, Anthony J.

1995 *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology After Husserl*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

2007 *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Sturluson, Snorri

[1223–1235] 1979 *Noregs Kongesoger*. Translated by Steinar Schjøtt and Halvar Magerøy. Oslo: Det norske samlaget.

2005 *The Prose Edda*. Translated by Jesse L. Byock. London: The Penguin Classics.

Toadvine, Ted

2003 The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences – Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (eds), *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, 139–53. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Waardenburg, Jacques

1978 *Reflections on the Study of Religion: Including an Essay on the Work of Gerardus van der Leeuw*. The Hague: Mouton.

Widengren, Geo.

1969 *Religionsphänomenologie*. Berlin: de Gruyter.