

Gadamer's Philosophical Concept of "Prejudice" and its Use in Comparative Theology

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Hans-Georg Gadamer develops the hermeneutical concept of prejudice by confronting the Enlightenment idea that accomplishing objectivity is possible by putting aside all prejudices. This article explores how the Gadamerian philosophy of prejudice differs from modern understandings of prejudice influenced by the Enlightenment period, and how the term is expressed in modern social scientific definitions. This article surveys Gadamer's philosophy in contemporary comparative theology and asks how hermeneutics in comparative theology can be enhanced with Gadamer's understanding of prejudice. The article ends by sharing challenges and implications from Gadamer's philosophy of prejudice for comparative theology in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: application, comparative theology, Enlightenment, Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics, interpretation, interreligious, prejudice, understanding

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges within the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations regarding a certain meaning. Working out the fore-projections, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates the meaning, understands what is there.¹

There are several philosophical concepts Hans-Georg Gadamer develops in *Truth and Method* that are useful for interreligious hermeneutics and to the comparative theologian. One of these is *Vorurteil* or "prejudice," because it aids the comparativists in the search for understanding through acknowledgment of pre-understandings.² The understanding that one can eliminate prejudice before interpretation dates to the Enlightenment era. This is especially connected to Rene Descartes's *cogito*, rationally observable thought. The Enlightenment-influenced philosophy understood prejudice as partiality or bias without justification that prevents an objective judgment.³ Gadamer counters this Enlightenment ideal by arguing that it is because we have prejudice that we can internally process human experiences, and to subject them to critical reflection is vital to understanding.⁴ The assertion of the constant presence of prejudice is fundamental in Gadamer's hermeneutical theory; as he understands, "no interpreter enters the process of interpretation without some pre-judgments: included in those pre-judgments through the very language we speak and write is the history of the effects of traditions forming that language."⁵

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 279.

² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283.

³ István M. Fehér, "Prejudice and Pre-Understanding," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2015).

⁴ Fehér, "Prejudice and Pre-Understanding," 376.

⁵ Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 156–57.

Within the realm of comparative theology, Catherine Cornille and Paul Hedges⁶ highlight that this theological field is increasingly connecting with Gadamerian philosophical concepts, creating a more robust framework for interreligious hermeneutics.⁷ Interreligious hermeneutics, expressed through contemporary comparative theology, would benefit by applying Gadamer's concept of prejudice even more extensively. Gadamer argues that his philosophical hermeneutics do not imply that we should or should not approach or engage with the past in a particular way; they merely function to describe what does happen in the act of understanding. Gadamer states: "Fundamentally, I am not proposing a method; I am describing what is the case."⁸ He is not necessarily interested in creating a method that will bring about true, correct, or legitimate understanding; rather he is pointing out what occurs when the interpreter understands. One significant philosophical connection to the process of understanding is Gadamer's concept "prejudice." He highlights the importance of prejudice through his "recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice."⁹ Gadamer understands prejudice as the facilitator to deeper truth or knowledge about reality and emphasizes the role prejudice plays in an individual's knowing and being in the world.

An important aspect of understanding is the relevance and realization of these prejudices within one's horizon. By provoking prejudices, the interpreter may recognize how cemented their preconceptions are, and provocation draws the attention of the interpreter. Then the interpreter is invited into the activity of interpretation and searches for a method of understanding to process this new interpretation. Each one stimulates the other—and meaningfully distinguishes between the two. This is where Gadamer's notion of "game of conversation" for the process of understanding arrives.¹⁰ "Game of conversation" recognizes that "the phenomenon of the conversation aptly describes the *de facto* experience of interpreting any classic text."¹¹ The key to any game is the back and forth movements that take over the players. When the players "play," they get caught in the moment of the game. This metaphor is used by Gadamer to understand how "the model of conversation" is used for the interpretation of a text.

Just as the subjects in any game release themselves from self-consciousness to play, so too in every authentic conversation the subject is released by the to-and-fro movement of the subject matter under discussion.¹²

Gadamer encourages testing prejudices by encountering the past, exploring the traditions from which we have come, and encountering the other.¹³ Prejudice is an inevitable part of hermeneutics, not a hindrance to understanding but a necessary prerequisite, because individuals understand and learn from the other through the dispositions and expectations of their horizons.¹⁴

⁶ For more information on Paul Hedges' approach and work on Gadamer see Hedges, "Comparative Theology and Hermeneutics: A Gadamerian Approach to Interreligious Interpretation," *Religions* 7, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7010007>.

⁷ Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), E-book, 70, <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018056440>.

⁸ Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 534.

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283.

¹⁰ Grant and Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation*, 157–58.

¹¹ Grant and Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation*, 158.

¹² Grant and Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation*, 159.

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310.

¹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283.

This article explores Gadamer’s understanding of prejudice as it relates to the process of understanding and asks how it could be applied to interreligious hermeneutics in the “new wave” of comparative theology. The first section situates the use of Gadamer’s hermeneutical understandings within the current theological conversation in the field of the “new wave” of comparative theology. It is argued here that Gadamer’s philosophical concepts, specifically his understanding of prejudice, can be used even more. The second section of this research attempts to survey modern social scientific definitions of prejudice and asks how Gadamer distinguishes his understanding to go beyond their definitions and apply his exposition of prejudice to a philosophical meta-understanding.

The third section explores a more robust theoretical framework that may strengthen the “new wave” of comparative theology by using a Gadamerian hermeneutical model that helps guide the researcher through the process of interreligious hermeneutics for fresh theological insight. There are four main parts of the “Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle.” First, the *interpreter* is met by two very important influencers: the interpreter’s prejudices and tradition. Second, the interpreter encounters the text/tradition through dialogue. *Dialogue* occurs when the interpreter questions the text or tradition and experiences the text or tradition through a communicative process. *Reflection* is the third component of the process of interreligious hermeneutics. Reflection can come in various forms, such as challenges and tensions, reinterpretations, and expansion of understanding. Finally, “fusion of horizons” occurs when new understandings from the religious other become part of the interpreter’s prejudices, ready for the interreligious hermeneutical circle to begin again.

This research ends by focusing on the challenges and implications of Gadamer’s philosophical understanding of prejudice for the “new wave” of comparative theology. This section develops the challenge of “openness” to the other and the interpreter’s prejudices, how prejudice is the condition for understanding the self and the religious other, and the role of prejudice in theological application. Finally, this section ends by explaining how comparative theological reflection can function in dethroning illegitimate prejudices.

Comparative Theology

In recent years, comparative theology has seen a shift in application. This “new wave” of comparative theology is now a process of understanding, learning from, and engaging with other religious traditions both comparatively and theologically for the purpose of seeking fresh theological insights that may be applicable for the comparative theologian. Francis X. Clooney states:

Comparative theology—comparative and theological beginning to end—marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered traditions as well as the home tradition.¹⁵

¹⁵ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 10.

Hugh Nicholson calls Clooney's description "new comparative theology" since Clooney argues that this learning process is for the sake of the fresh theological insights that occur when engaging in and with other faith traditions.¹⁶ The "new wave" of comparative theology is a theological practice that builds on a comparative study of religion with the purpose of reflection on one's own religious tradition because of insights gathered from another religious tradition.¹⁷

Comparative Theology and Gadamerian Hermeneutics

There are several Gadamerian philosophical concepts that have been overlooked in the field of comparative theology. One of these is "prejudice." These terms may be overlooked in part because of the significant attention drawn to Gadamer's metaphors of "fusion of horizons" and the "model of conversation."¹⁸ However, as conveyed in this article, Gadamer's concept of "prejudice" is part and parcel of understanding these significant philosophical concepts and yet it is excluded or briefly discussed by comparative theologians. Hence, there are peripheral philosophical Gadamerian concepts that may benefit our understanding and interpretation of Gadamer for comparative theology in the twenty-first century.

David Tracy

David Tracy, for example, has been influenced by the hermeneutical insights of Hans-Georg Gadamer.¹⁹ Specifically, Tracy highlights that the final moment of interpretation is not one subject understanding another subject, but rather the fusion of horizons. As Tracy gathers from Gadamer, "the reader overcomes the strangeness of another horizon not by empathizing with the psychic state or cultural situation of the author but rather by understanding the basic vision of the author implied by the text..."²⁰ Tracy continues to display how a common religious interpretation of human experience and language is possible and may hold truths.²¹

While commenting on interpreting religious traditions, Tracy acknowledges that interpreting religious traditions involves pre-understandings that the reader brings to the tradition. Also supporting the recognition of the power that the tradition exerts is a willingness to engage dialogically with the tradition by allowing the tradition to take over the conversation, and expanding the dialogue to include other interpretations.²² This is a hermeneutics of "recovery and suspicion." Tracy understands that the hermeneutics of retrieval must be accompanied by a hermeneutic of suspicion and the use of critical theory.²³ "Hermeneutics of suspicion" was presented by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur as an interpretive method to "decoding" what is hidden

¹⁶ Hugh Nicholson, "The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77, no. 3 (2009): 619–24.

¹⁷ Bagus A. Laksana, "Comparative Theology: Between Identity and Alterity," in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (New York: T & T Clark International, 2010), 6.

¹⁸ See in detail Tracy's extensive work on Gadamer's "model of conversation" and "fusion of horizons" in David Tracy, "Western Hermeneutics and Interreligious Dialogues," in *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, ed. Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 1-43.

¹⁹ Howland T. Sanks, "David Tracy's Theological Project: An Overview and Some Implications," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 699.

²⁰ David Tracy, *A Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 78.

²¹ Sanks, "David Tracy's Theological Project," 707.

²² Sanks, "David Tracy's Theological Project," 715.

²³ David Tracy, "Western Hermeneutics and Interreligious Dialogues," in *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, Kindle, 9.

within a text, with the demeanor of distrust or skepticism.²⁴ At this point it is important to emphasize the acknowledgment that the model described here does not give much attention to suspicion. Suspicion is less of a concern to me since the focus is on cultivating openness to the other and new interpretations. Nonetheless, a hermeneutics of suspicion is important work, as Tracy demonstrates.

David Tracy understands that Gadamer’s hermeneutical philosophy is understanding that happens to us through dialogue where we are taken over by the question of the dialogue and through the logic of inquiry. Tracy expands Gadamer’s hermeneutical model to incorporate several different dialogical partners. The two dialogical partners can be two conversational partners, a reader, a text, symbol, ritual, or historical event.²⁵ Tracy highlights that the key to dialogue is the process of question and answers, whereby the emphasis of the dialogue is shifted from the reader to the other, whether that be the other dialogical partner, text, ritual, etc. Regarding dialogue, therefore, “the self-in-dialogue-with-the-other through the ‘game’ of conversation is always a self-interpreting, discovering, constituting (i.e. not inventing) an ever-changing self.”²⁶ Tracy also highlights that in order to have genuine dialogue, the dialogical partner must possess otherness and not just be a projection of the other.

Interestingly, Tracy highlights that “dialogue need not reach full ‘fusion of horizons’ or mutual understanding in order to be a successful dialogue on the Gadamerian model itself.”²⁷ Tracy argues that a “fusion of horizons” is commendable but is not necessarily required for successful dialogue. Tracy goes on to note that Gadamer is so concerned with “fusion of horizons” because of his emphasis on “unity” of the interpretation of the text in order for interpretation to occur. It is important to note that “textual meaning may, in fact, never unify; horizons may not fuse; consensus may not arrive. And yet dialogue still happens.”²⁸ This helpfully shows a limitation of the concept of “fusion.” According to, or at least implied by, Gadamer, something either fuses, or it does not. This does not do justice to the nuanced results of a dialogue. There are two main strengths David Tracy brings to the discussion of interreligious hermeneutics. First, Tracy, like Clooney, incorporates several different dialogical partners to include individuals, texts, symbols, rituals, or historical events. Second, Tracy understands that interreligious dialogue can still be productive even if “fusion of horizons” does not occur.

Within Tracy’s exposition of Gadamerian hermeneutics and its relation to comparative theology, he does not elaborate on how Gadamer’s concept of prejudice plays a role in the “model of conversation.” If it is understood that “fusion of horizon” is the understanding of the comparative theologian, then Tracy asserts correctly that dialogue can happen without “fusion.” There is no saying why Tracy avoids or does not address “prejudice” in his interpretation of Gadamer’s philosophy but it is striking that prejudice, even pre-understandings, is not emphasized.

Catherine Cornille

²⁴ See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

²⁵ Cornille, *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 2.

²⁶ Cornille, *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 2–3.

²⁷ Cornille, *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 8.

²⁸ Cornille, *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, 9.

Catherine Cornille highlights how negative prejudice may distort understanding within interreligious hermeneutics. She highlights four categories to which negative prejudice may influence misunderstanding—essentialization, generalization, exaggeration, and project. She continues by explaining that these misunderstandings “would not likely lead to a constructive desire to see oneself through the other.”²⁹

Although what Cornille highlights holds value for the field of comparative theology, she overlooks and does not conjoin Gadamer’s term “prejudice” with its purpose in the “fusion of horizons.” The most essential piece of Gadamer’s philosophical concept of “prejudice” is that it becomes part of the interpreters’ new pre-understandings and is folded into their horizon. She does lean in this direction by saying:

One’s understanding of the other is always colored by certain prejudices and that the process of learning from the other also involves some degree of transformation or reinterpretation of the self-understanding of the other.³⁰

But the participation of prejudice in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, specifically its role in the hermeneutical circle, is unclear in Cornille’s exposition.

Paul Hedges

Paul Hedges draws on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer to create a Gadamerian interreligious hermeneutic. Hedges prefers to term Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” the “opening of horizons,” for several reasons. First, he critiques Gadamer’s notion of fusing horizons because even if someone gains knowledge from another horizon or worldview, this does not mean that they have fully understood and fused with the worldview of the other. Hedges agrees with Tracy, noting, “our worlds may have come together, but not ‘fused’ or ‘merged’ as one thing.”³¹ Second, he argues that ‘fusion’ seems to suggest merging two separate parts. He notes this is not necessarily applicable to most interreligious dialogue, especially comparative theology as understood by Clooney. Therefore, two religious concepts come together not to create a new religious concept, but more to inform the home religious tradition from the other religious tradition.³²

As Hedges shares, Gadamer uses the metaphor of “play” as an analysis of how he sees language, meaning, and reality itself. Gadamer sees “play” (when defined as playing a game) as a model for ontological explanation. When we “play,” different people and elements come together and follow certain rules that shape the game and unite the people in a shared experience. They are taken up in a shared, complex activity that has a life of its own, and each of the players enters the play of the game. They do not lose their identity or individuality but contribute their individuality in a dynamic new reality. This is a dialectical model of different elements coming together to shape a new pattern.

²⁹ Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 76.

³⁰ Cornille, *Meaning and Method*, 147.

³¹ Paul Hedges, “Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue as the Opening of Horizons,” *Journal of Dialogical Studies* 4 (2017): 19.

³² Hedges, “Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue,” 12.

One is not just an individual that sees the world, but rather is part of a dialectical complex activity, which is the play of the world itself. This is how Gadamer expresses the nature of language. Players are within the larger game; according to Gadamer this leaves space for creativity. Each game is created by the players and is not necessarily something that determines them, and each player is the creation of the elements that make it up.³³

An important aspect of the concept of “play” is that it is not within the “normal seriousness” of the world. It creates its own world in itself.³⁴ Therefore, the movement of play has no end goal but “it renews itself in its constant repetition.”³⁵ An important note that Gadamer makes is that if play is ‘performed’ for another then it becomes something else; it is no longer ‘play’, it is now an ‘art’.³⁶

Gadamer’s suggestion is that there is a “curious lack of decisiveness in the playing consciousness” that it cannot “decide between belief and non-belief.”³⁷ Hedges argues that Gadamer’s meaning here is that it is sometimes difficult for adults to suspend consciousness and lose themselves in another world that they may believe or “perceive as lacking in reality.”³⁸ This is where the metaphor of play may fall short.

Marianne Moyaert

In her article “Interreligious Hermeneutics, Prejudice, and the Problem of Testimonial Injustice,” Marianne Moyaert illustrates Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. Ricoeur is significantly indebted to Heidegger and Gadamer. Moyaert explains that Ricoeur, agreeing with Gadamer, holds the view that everyone has prejudice and adds, “claims to neutrality or objectivity are not only overstated, but should be met with suspicion.”³⁹ According to Moyaert, Ricoeur also emphasizes self-reflection. However, Moyaert argues that Ricoeur insufficiently addresses “the issue of power and how it may affect the encounter between self and other.”⁴⁰ She goes on to note that often the self and the other are “marked by unequal power relations.”⁴¹ In this case it seems as if Moyaert understands that the hermeneutical cycle of understanding is interrupted or disturbed to the point where understanding cannot be achieved. Moyaert highlights this valid observation that is not solely related to students of comparative theology, but also describes comparative theologians.

³³ Paul Hedges views this as a metaphor and model that may not only be suitable for certain areas within the human sciences but especially within comparative theology. Gadamer hints to us that the purpose of play is fulfilled when the player ‘loses himself in his play.’ That is to say, one may become lost in fascination as we are taken over by the game itself, and if “playing fully” we live within the world of the game.

³⁴ Hedges, “Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue,” 10.

³⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 108.

³⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 107.

³⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 109.

³⁸ Hedges, “Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue,” 15.

³⁹ Marianne Moyaert, “Interreligious Hermeneutics, Prejudice, and the Problem of Testimonial Injustice,” *Religious Education*, 114, no. 5, (2019): 613.

⁴⁰ Moyaert, “Interreligious Hermeneutics, Prejudice, and the Problem of Testimonial Injustice,” 614.

⁴¹ Moyaert, “Interreligious Hermeneutics, Prejudice, and the Problem of Testimonial Injustice,” 614.

Some comparativists, over and against others, “have primary access...to means of interpretation and communication in society.”⁴² She encourages the recognition of privileges and examination of their horizon and its relation to social power structures and hermeneutical injustice.⁴³ What Gadamer significantly highlights is the unavoidable relationship between one’s prejudice and one’s tradition. In referring to an encounter with tradition and the experience of tension, “the hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out.”⁴⁴ Connected to this, Gadamer highlights that the tradition of the other is not disconnected or dislocated from the interpreter’s tradition. The recognition of this connectedness may aid comparativists in their journey of self-reflection, awareness of prejudices and privileges.

Although comparative theologians have given attention and credit to Gadamer’s philosophical concepts of “fusion of horizons,” “model of conversation,” and “play” for comparative theological insight, little attention has been given to his concept of “prejudice,” and when “prejudice” is addressed, it is hardly connected to Gadamer’s philosophical understanding and its value for comparative theological understanding.

It is striking that these comparative theologians do not reference prejudice, pre-understandings, or presuppositions in the formation of one’s horizon, as Gadamer lays out in his *magnum opus* in *Truth and Method*. Cornille makes reference to Gadamer’s philosophical concept of “prejudice” in *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (2020), and yet does not connect it to its influence on one’s horizon or to how prejudices, as pre-understandings, are folded into the hermeneutical circle of understanding. Additionally, Cornille and Tracy do not reference temporal distance as a tool for deciphering between unproductive and productive prejudices. This article therefore adds to interreligious hermeneutics by focusing closely on Gadamer’s work in *Truth and Method* and connecting the concepts of “prejudice” and “temporal distance” to the process of “fusion of horizons.”

Prejudice

The German term Gadamer uses for “prejudice” is *Vorurteil*. Etymologically, the term is separated into pre-judice. Therefore, judgment is made possible by the prefix, “pre.” Gadamer explores the juridical use of the Latin *praejudicium*. In this sense, prejudice does not have a negative or positive value attached. This is because prejudice is a provisional legal verdict set before the final verdict in the court.⁴⁵ Thus, all judgments are conditioned by pre-judgments. Gadamer draws our attention to the premodern understandings of prejudice, “whereas the familiar understandings of prejudice is an unreflective judgment or over-hasty reasoning, resulting in bigotry of purely subjective opinion or the unreflective parroting of purely received wisdom.”⁴⁶ In today’s context, the term prejudice usually has a negative connotation. Gadamer highlights that this is influenced

⁴² Moyaert, “Interreligious Hermeneutics, Prejudice, and the Problem of Testimonial Injustice,” 621.

⁴³ Moyaert, “Interreligious Hermeneutics, Prejudice, and the Problem of Testimonial Injustice,” 622.

⁴⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 317.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283. Donatella Di Cesare also makes note of this (*Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, 89).

⁴⁶ Niall Keane and Chris Lawn, *The Gadamer Dictionary* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 115.

by the Enlightenment’s emphasis on eradicating prejudice to bring about absolute knowledge and truth, and specifically links this shift to a “disempowerment of tradition.”⁴⁷

Gordan Allport, an American psychologist, developed extensive research on prejudice theory in *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954). Allport’s work is the manifestation of the transformation of the semantics concerning “prejudice.” At the beginning of the twentieth century, the term “prejudice” was infrequently unqualified. For example, psychologists studied “race prejudice” and “national prejudice.”⁴⁸ This is due to Allport’s understanding of human rationality—that human information processes lead to distorted and prejudiced presuppositions. According to Allport, the human mind is ill-equipped to process the complexities of the social world and therefore distorts information in order to process it.⁴⁹ There is not any less prejudice now than previously, but the term has taken on new meaning; a semantic shift has occurred.

Current understandings have attached a negative connotation to the term prejudice because “its prototype is not an opinion formed without judgment.”⁵⁰ In *The Social Psychology of Prejudice*, Howard Ehrlich researches sixteen definitions of prejudice between 1950 and 1966, coincidentally the same time *Truth and Method* was published, and finds the commonality to be “an unfavorable attitude directed towards others because of their membership in a particular group.”⁵¹ Gordan Allport differentiates between “ordinary prejudgments,” which all of us periodically engage in, and “prejudice,” a special type of prejudgment. Although Allport makes a distinction between prejudgments and prejudice, he concludes, “prejudgments become prejudices only if they are not reversible when exposed to new knowledge.”⁵² Defining prejudice in such a way is not limited to the social sciences; in the second edition of “A Dictionary of Philosophy” (1979), prejudice is defined as any belief, whether correct or incorrect, held without proper consideration of, or sometimes in defiance of, the evidence.⁵³ This definition expresses the interests of rational, scientific reasoning not yet applied to prejudgments.

In Voltaire’s “Philosophy Dictionary” (1764), prejudice is defined as “an opinion without judgment.”⁵⁴ Voltaire’s use of prejudice is distinguished from the current understandings of the term because it is not tied specifically to perceptions of people groups and does not necessarily have a negative intention. This is the reason why Voltaire also mentions justifiable prejudices.⁵⁵ Therefore, as Michael Billig rightly argues, “the processes of reasoning have not been applied to the prejudiced opinion. In this way, an opinion is prejudiced if the judgments on which the opinion

⁴⁷ Hans-Helmuth Gander, “Gadamer: the Universality of Hermeneutics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (New York: Routledge, 2015), 142.

⁴⁸ Michael Billig, “The Notion of ‘Prejudice’: Some Rhetorical and Ideological Aspects,” in *Beyond Prejudice: Extending the Social Psychology of Conflict, Inequality and Social Change*, ed. John Dixon and Mark Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 149.

⁴⁹ Harold D. Fishbein, *Peer Prejudice and Discrimination: The Origins of Prejudice*, 2nd ed., (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 2002), 34.

⁵⁰ Billig, “The Notion of ‘Prejudice,’” 149.

⁵¹ Fishbein, *Peer Prejudice and Discrimination*, 8.

⁵² Fishbein, *Peer Prejudice and Discrimination*, 9.

⁵³ Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York, St. Martin’s Griffin, 1979), 286.

⁵⁴ Billig, “The Notion of ‘Prejudice,’” 147.

⁵⁵ Billig, “The Notion of ‘Prejudice,’” 148.

is based are faulty or even totally lacking.”⁵⁶ However, Gadamer understands prejudice to be more nuanced than the social sciences in his time defined it.

One of Gadamer’s concerns is rehabilitating the term “prejudice,” seized by Enlightenment philosophy, by suggesting that “a person who imagines that they are free of prejudices, basing his knowledge on the objectivity of their procedures and denying that they are influenced by historical circumstances, experiences the power of the prejudices that unconsciously dominate them as a force acting from behind.”⁵⁷ The Enlightenment ideal emphasized the removing of all prejudice to come to the absolute and original truth. In a way, Gadamer understands that the Enlightenment was “prejudiced against prejudice.”⁵⁸ Gadamer’s efforts are not driven by the desire to undermine the idea of the universal; he was merely attempting to “rethink” or “transform,” even deepen, the metaphysical tradition in western thought.⁵⁹ Gadamer understands that prejudice or “pre-understandings” are not a hindrance to understand but a necessary prerequisite. Therefore, eradicating prejudice is both unnecessary and impossible. It is within the realm of understanding that one’s prejudices come to the surface. Although Gadamer holds that one is never fully aware of one’s prejudices, within the act of understanding, they may come into play.⁶⁰

Gadamer asserts that understanding is not a theoretical activity in which one scrutinizes the material before one’s self as a passive object, as shown in Figure 1. The subject-object dichotomy, which was heavily influenced by Rene Descartes, is less effective and an unattainable ideal in the process of understanding. Kemal Ataman writes, “In other words, there is no subject ‘over here’ and an object ‘over there’ standing independent of one another in constant tension. Rather, subject and object belong together and constitute a total unity.”⁶¹ In reality, the “object” in question here is not a passive entity waiting to be understood, but rather an active participant in the actual process of understanding. The subject is not detached from the object while investigating it from afar. According to Gadamer, the subject is not apart from its own perspective, tradition, and process of understanding. The subject’s own connection to its tradition and the prejudices are part of the subject.

Model of Modern Hermeneutics

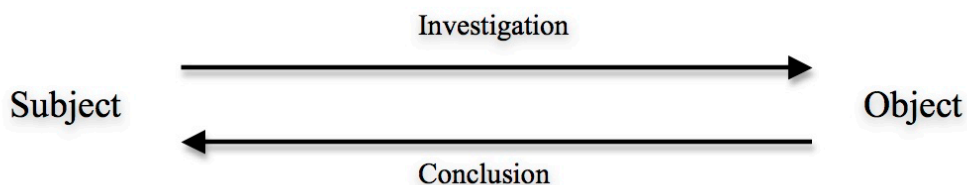


Figure 1: Model of Modern Hermeneutics. A model of understanding influenced by the natural sciences that heavily influenced hermeneutics in western culture prior to Gadamer.

⁵⁶ Billig, “The Notion of ‘Prejudice,’” 147.

⁵⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 369.

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283.

⁵⁹ Ryan R. Holston, “Two Concepts of Prejudice,” *History of Political Thought* XXXV, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 192.

⁶⁰ Keane, *The Gadamer Dictionary*, 142.

⁶¹ Kemal Ataman, *Understanding Other Religions: Al-Biruni and Gadamer’s “Fusion of Horizons”* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 36.

Gadamer states that understanding is more dynamic and fluid rather than static and calculated. Hermeneutics, according to him, is more the art of listening over anything else. In a Gadamerian approach, understanding is achieved through the means of dialogue with the matter in question.⁶² Gadamer used Plato to re-imagine his understanding of dialogue. Plato’s definition of thought was understood as “the internal dialogue of the soul with itself.”⁶³ Dialogical effort with the self is conditional for dialogue with the other. Gadamer understood this because there must be “a deep knowledge of who one is, there must be an interpretation of one’s own way of life, there must be a consensus with oneself to open the possibility of dialoging with the other.”⁶⁴ This dialogue is between oneself and the encounter of another “tradition” or text. In order to fully encounter another “tradition,” Gadamer asserts the importance of understanding one’s own.

The Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle

One area of growth for comparative theology is the development of applicable hermeneutical models; Gadamer’s philosophical concepts can be used to enhance this area.⁶⁵ I am in agreement with Gadamer that the hermeneutical circle is ongoing, whereas scientific methods tend to end at a certain point. At certain phases, the circle can be reversible, while a particular scientific method would discourage that interaction. Gadamer’s theory provides the basis for a model for interreligious hermeneutics.

Figure 2 shows that before interpreters encounter the text/tradition through dialogue, they are met by two very important influencers: the interpreter’s tradition and pre-understandings or “prejudices.” As Gadamer highlights, one’s tradition is imperative to hermeneutics because it is the context and content through which the hermeneutical experience occurs. As we have seen, Gadamer understands that the interpreter always approaches the text with prejudice. Gadamer does not encourage the elimination of these pre-understandings but actually encourages the understandings of these. He notes that these pre-understandings may spark a search for conversation. In this “Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle,”⁶⁶ traditions and pre-understandings are vital to the process of understanding and therefore included in the hermeneutical process.

⁶² The Greek word *διάλογος* (dialogues) could be divided into the prefix *διά* (through) and the noun, *λογος* (word, project, speech, reason, etc.) (80). According to Gadamer, “logos is the essence of people, since it belongs to all and all belong to it (Hermann, 2014).” Gadamer uses philosophy of dialogue through dialogue with texts, dialogue as the mode of language, and dialogue through the “fusion of horizons” (81). See Carlos Alberto Vargas Gonzalez, “Toward Dialogic Administration: A Proposal from Gadamer’s Thinking,” *Journal of Management* 33, no. 59 (September 2017): 79–91.

⁶³ Gonzalez, “Toward Dialogic Administration,” 115.

⁶⁴ Gonzalez, “Toward Dialogic Administration,” 196.

⁶⁵ What I am proposing is less of a method and more of a process, in which hermeneutics is a cycle of understanding that encounters phases. I go into more detail of this in Mariah T. Cushing, “The Circle of Understanding the ‘Religious Other’: Toward a Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Method” (Fresno: Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, 2017), E-Book.

⁶⁶ The Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle is not linear; compared to figure 1, there is no final step in the process. There is only growth and expansion in the interpreter’s understanding of the religious other or, as Gadamer would phrase it a “fusion of horizons.” After this, the interpreter’s tradition has been expanded to include the new understandings and is ready to begin the circle again.

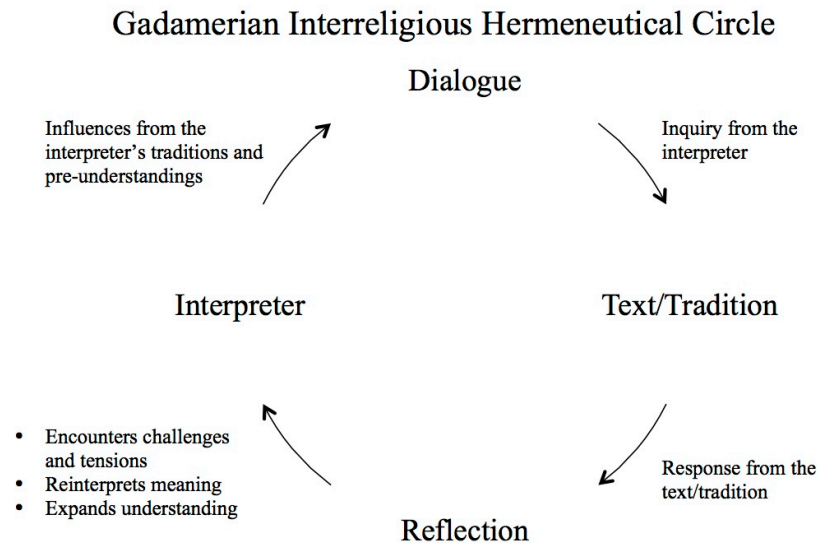


Figure 2: “Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle.” The horizons of the interpreters fuse as they dialogically encounter the text or tradition and process through reflection.

Dialogue occurs when the interpreter questions the text or tradition and, therefore, is experiencing the text or tradition through a communicative process. Whatever the mode, it is imperative that the interpreter is open to the text or tradition in order to gather more insight and answers to the interpreter’s questions. Gadamer understands true hermeneutical understanding to be achieved through dialogue—a question-and-answer open conversation—with the text/tradition. It is important to note here that Gadamer highlights that the text may also present questions to the interpreter and the interpreter should be open to the questions presented by the text.⁶⁷ Dialogue may go both ways, especially if the dialogical partner is human. This is where Gadamer’s understanding of “game of conversation” through the back and forth movements that take over the interpreter through the “play” of the conversation would apply.

Drawing from Tracy, this section of the hermeneutical circle may include different modes: textual research, language study, secondary research, interviews, dialogue with religious others, encountering rituals and practices, etc. The next component in the interreligious hermeneutical process is to allow the *text or tradition* speak to the interpreter. This is achieved by being open to the voice of the text or tradition and absorbing the fresh insights and material that is revealed. The text or tradition has its own pre-understandings, history, culture, rituals, etc., and by letting the text or tradition speak for itself, a hermeneutical space is created.⁶⁸

Everything that is received by the interpreter goes through a process of understanding and this process is reflective. *Reflection* is the next component of the process of interreligious hermeneutics. Reflection can come in various forms such as challenges and tensions, reinterpretations, and expansion of understanding. As Gadamer highlights, “creative tensions” are

⁶⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 383–84.

⁶⁸ Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 82, also adds that “the pre-understandings of the text is a necessary condition for any understanding at all.”

likely to occur because of the “shock or newness” of the interreligious encounter.⁶⁹ The hermeneutical task in reflection is not to masquerade this tension but to consciously expose it for reflection. Reflection can be processed through reinterpretation of the interpreter’s theology. The interpreter may encounter understandings that change interpretation allowing for a reinterpretation of their theology. The interpreter may also encounter understandings that add to their existing theology. Because the method of this hermeneutical process is not conclusion-driven, all forms of reflection are equally valid.

Finally, where does “fusion of horizons” occur? In the “Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle,” I argue that “fusion of horizons” occurs when new understandings from the religious other become part of the interpreter’s “pre-understandings,” their prejudices, ready for the hermeneutical circle to begin again, encountering the religious other through dialogue.

Repeatedly, Gadamer emphasizes that the starting point for interpretation is with the interpreter through the hermeneutical task, including their prejudices. Recognition of prejudices acts as a pre-condition for understanding. Before we understand ourselves through self-examination or reflection, we understand ourselves with regards to the family unit, society, and worldview in which we are located. And that is why Gadamer states that “the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of their being.”⁷⁰ In another way, he explains further,

A person understanding a text is prepared for it to tell them something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s [otherness]. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ concerning content nor extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s fore-meaning and prejudices.⁷¹

Gadamer insists that application is a *productive* activity of interpretation, rather than *reproductive*. Application is not separate from interpretation and understanding: the interpreter understands, and only then can application take place. Rather, the application is part and parcel of interpretation and understanding. Therefore, the application is the very understanding of interpretation.⁷² Gadamer highlights that “understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter’s present situation.”⁷³ Therefore, understanding, interpretation, and application go hand-in-hand as an interrelated process.

Personal and Hidden Prejudices

Gadamer understands prejudice as pre-understandings that may or may not be known to the individual, that stems from the individual’s tradition, and that can be altered through cross-cultural encounters, critical self-reflection, dialogue, and/or temporal distance.⁷⁴ Gadamer

⁶⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.

⁷⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 289.

⁷¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282.

⁷² Francis J. Mootz III & George H. Taylor, *Gadamer and Ricoeur: Critical Horizons for Contemporary Hermeneutics* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 47.

⁷³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 318–19.

⁷⁴ Keane, *The Gadamer Dictionary*, 142.

differentiates between two types of prejudice: personal and hidden. Personal prejudices are biases that are usually recognized by the interpreter, and can actively be confronted or questioned.⁷⁵ Hidden prejudices are understood to be presuppositions specific to the hermeneutical theory that are effective in the world through history and/or tradition, and are not directly accessible.⁷⁶ Gadamer also distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate or productive and unproductive prejudices by highlighting that prejudices can have a negative or positive value attributed to them.⁷⁷ A prejudice is considered "false" or unproductive if the "part" does not fit within the "whole." The "whole" is the existing meaning of something and the "part" is the meaning as it applies in the new context.⁷⁸ For example, metaphorically, before a film begins the audience may already have pre-opinions or pre-understandings of the film. These may be productive prejudices as they help the audience understand the film or unproductive prejudices that do not lead to understanding the film. There might also be hidden prejudices in the audience's worldview that may come unhidden through the film or the audience might have personal prejudices that may be validated or invalidated by the film. As the audience watches the film, they may encounter things that conflict or affirm their pre-understandings and may become more aware of their prejudices.

Legitimate and Illegitimate Prejudices

In the same way that our prejudices direct us to new experiences and understandings, prejudices can also be negative because they dismiss, dismantle, or discourage interreligious studies. This is why Gadamer, as noted above, encourages the testing of one's prejudices. In the same way that prejudices help us recognize similar points of interests in comparative study, they also strike our attention at points of conflict, disagreement, and discouragement. This may be because the comparative study does not fit our prejudice. Dorschel notes that "a critical aspect of science is discovery, which involves novelty and surprise. Yet an empty mind... could not be surprised."⁷⁹ This should encourage the comparative theologian to explore and research the conflicts that arise in comparative studies – they may lead to new pre-understandings that have yet to be discovered. As Robert Sokolowski notes about *Gadamer's Theory of Hermeneutics*, "Prejudgments are harmful only when they are frozen; without prejudgments, we would not be participants in the human conversation and would not be able to react to the insistence of things."⁸⁰

Very similar to the experience of our unawareness to our own prejudices, the unawareness of overcoming illegitimate prejudices may also be present. Often it is when our illegitimate prejudices are no longer part of our horizon that they are recognized. Supporting this, Gadamer writes, "the prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his free disposal. He cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings."⁸¹

⁷⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282–83.

⁷⁶ Malpas, *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, 142. These may be metaphysical notions, cultural, political, aesthetic, religious history, which enable us to form a continuous dialogue between interpreter and text.

⁷⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283, 291.

⁷⁸ Mootz, *Gadamer and Ricoeur*, 107.

⁷⁹ Andreas Dorschel, *Rethinking Prejudice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 52.

⁸⁰ Robert Sokolowski, "Gadamer's Theory of Hermeneutics," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1997), 227.

⁸¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.

It is the comparative process that can often promote the separation of legitimate or illegitimate prejudices. When comparing the horizon of the religious other and our own, we may experience the provocation of hidden prejudices that are unhelpful to our understanding. In this case, invalid or unhelpful prejudices still are part of our understanding and may encourage deeper learning through exposure and reflection. Prejudice may also provoke tension within the comparativist’s horizon, and this now becomes part of their understanding. In this case, the comparativist is encouraged to continue to engage with the religious other in the manner in which they feel most comfortable, because this may lead to further processing, reflection, and understanding within the comparativist’s horizon.

With regard to illegitimate prejudices, it can be challenging to determine how they are discarded from our horizon. It seems that Gadamer does not directly address this outside of his description of temporal distance. However, it is not the lapse of time that naturally separates illegitimate prejudices from legitimate prejudices; it is the continuous reflection on our prejudices that may naturally separate them.

Temporal Distance

To distinguish between productive and unproductive prejudices, Gadamer highlights the helpful process of temporal distance, or distancing one’s self from “unverifiable prejudice.”⁸² Gadamer argues that concerning the past, processing prejudices may be easier because they may personally concern us less than events that may have an immediate impact on our lives.⁸³ There are two points to make about temporal distance. First, distance in time and history does not inevitably lead to critical insight or discernment of productive versus unproductive prejudices. Second, temporal distance is not the sole hermeneutical process to produce hermeneutical insights. Other experiences, such as dialogue, provocation of prejudices through confrontation with otherness, and cultural experiences may also lead to critical insight that may legitimate or illegitimate prejudices.⁸⁴ As Gadamer highlights,

The important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us. Here it is not too much to speak of the genuine productivity of the course of events enabling understanding.... Temporal distance obviously means something other than the extinction of our interest in the object. It is what first lets the true meaning of the object fully emerge. The discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process.... New sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning.⁸⁵

⁸² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 308.

⁸³ Keane, *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, 275. Gadamer originally noted that temporal distance was the “only” way to differentiate between productive and unproductive prejudices. In the fifth edition of *Truth and Method*, he changed “only” to “often”: “I have softened the original text ... it is distance, not only temporal distance, that makes this hermeneutical problem solvable” (391).

⁸⁴ Mootz, *Gadamer and Ricoeur*, 90.

⁸⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 308–9.

Within the “Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle,” temporal distance would be applied throughout this process. The dismissal of unproductive prejudices, possibly encouraged by temporal distance, would occur in the application and recognition of productive prejudice that inform the interpreter’s tradition and therefore, horizon.

Application for Comparative Theology

Challenges for Comparative Theology

Awareness of one’s own bias is central to understanding. Gadamer notes, “one must be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.”⁸⁶ This understanding of prejudice poses some challenges for comparative theology. Gadamer understands that the task of hermeneutics is based on the “polarity of familiarity and strangeness.”⁸⁷ This, for comparative theology, will remain a never-ending challenge of testing and re-testing of prejudices. This space can be uncomfortable for many people and can discourage comparative studies. This may be challenging for parishioners, lay leaders, clergy, and students who do not necessarily have the time to commit to life-long comparative theological study in this capacity.⁸⁸

Also, in connection to Moyaert’s comments on power of privilege in interreligious encounters, deep learning across religious boundaries may not always produce re-evaluation of the comparativist’s prejudices. As shown in figure 2, even challenges and tensions, reinterpretation of understanding, and expansion of understanding are possibilities after encountering the other that may influence the comparativist’s pre-understandings, which transform their horizon for the hermeneutical circle to begin again with the next encounter with the other.

Self-understanding

Gadamer’s philosophical understanding of prejudice also offers useful implications for comparative theology. Gadamer’s understanding of prejudice allows the opportunity to embrace and understand the interpreter’s home tradition and recognize that self-understanding is imperative to understanding the religious other. Prejudice does not have to be viewed as a barrier to understanding the other. This understanding of prejudice can allow for prejudices to initiate the conversation with the religious other and can encourage deep theological study with critical reflection of the comparativist’s tradition.

Conditions for Understanding the Other

⁸⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 282.

⁸⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306.

⁸⁸ In certain cases, prejudices may be rooted in traditions that are invalid therefore understanding your tradition allows the opportunity to recognize prejudices, which influences your questions and dialogue with the religious other. Comparative theologians are encouraged to acknowledge these prejudices by naming them, reflecting on them, and sharing them in research.

In the field of religious studies, the qualified methodological process is the idea that the legitimate way to understand is to “step back from our own understandings.”⁸⁹ This is accomplished by reconstructing the historical world of the author, linguistic usages, and literary forms to enable us to recover the original intent of the religious text. Historical criticism, or historicism, understands that in order to properly and genuinely access the meaning of a text (in our case, a religious text), the interpreter investigates the historical world of the author through the study of original languages, historical events, worldview of author, and historical context. Religious studies scholars tend to focus primarily on studying religious texts, languages, history, rituals, rather than learning from them in the manner of a practitioner. They search for information, not guidance. This type of religious study tends to conceal the relationship between the historical quest and the influence of our own lives by detaching attitudes of the interpreter with their past, tradition, and history.⁹⁰ However, “we cannot quite silence its claim on our own lives.”⁹¹ Sandler highlights how this type of study is similar to “a collection of relics rather than a guide to our own practice.”⁹² Contrary to this understanding, Gadamer affirms that the relationship between history and our current horizon is inseparable.⁹³ The usefulness of temporal distance, recognizing the space that time and history have influenced and which is connected with the interpreter, operates as a filter function that may allow for unfertile prejudices to cease. By embodying a practice of temporal distance, comparative theologians may better recognize and distinguish between understandings and misunderstandings of the religious other. Therefore, it is only by the interpreter’s prejudices—folded into their horizon, influenced and formed by their tradition—that historical understanding of the religious other may be informed, because prejudices are the condition for understanding and also the product of understanding.

Prejudice enables the comparative theologian to understand the religious other, whether that is by sharing similar rituals, symbols, myths, or encountering stark differences in religious encounters. All of these different encounters of religious modes are reflected back upon the comparativist’s horizon through dialogical reflection. Prejudices hold a dual role in understanding. First, they are the immediate way in which approaching and understanding the religious text, symbol, or mode; and yet, prejudices can be exposed through the process of understanding, which may cause conflict, resistance, or inadequate interpretations. The interpreter is presented with and invited to the task of interpretation through dialogue with the “other.” Thus, misunderstandings or errors in understanding are not irrelevant to the task of understanding; these discontinuities of the interpreter’s prejudice may even encourage or alert them to further inquiry.

Direct Our Attention

Prejudice directs our attention towards aspects of the religious other that may otherwise go unnoticed.⁹⁴ Catherine Cornille highlights that prejudices may inform and direct interpretation efforts that aid in determining comparative research. An individual’s prejudice situates them and influences their research questions, interpretations, and understanding. Cornille highlights that to

⁸⁹ Adam A. Sandel, *The Place of Prejudice: A Case for Reasoning within the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 160.

⁹⁰ Sandel, *The Place of Prejudice*, 159.

⁹¹ Sandel, *The Place of Prejudice*, 160.

⁹² Sandel, *The Place of Prejudice*, 159.

⁹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.

⁹⁴ Dorschel, *Rethinking Prejudice*, 52.

avoid the problematic issue of projecting one's prejudices onto the religious other or generalizing, the new wave of comparative theology encourages choosing specific texts or religious modes for comparison.

Comparative theologians involved in the understanding of the religious other (no matter the mode), are already immersed in a given religious context, which supplies their prejudice. Therefore, denying the prejudice of the comparativist is, in Gadamer's words, unnecessary and impossible. Prejudice influences which religious modes the comparativist clings to, focuses on, and creates as foundational narratives to their theology. Prejudices of the theologian influence and shape preferences for areas of study, key questions and findings, similarities, differences, that in turn, can be incorporated within the comparativist's tradition and horizon.

Application

Finally, Gadamer's concept of application may prove to be fruitful for comparative theology. According to Gadamer, application involves "co-determining, supplementing, and correcting [a] principle."⁹⁵ Hermeneutical application is the art, not science, of applying general principles to particular situations. For the comparative theologian, application is as necessary as interpretation and understanding. This is because, as Gadamer asserts, true understanding *is* application. Therefore, comparative theologians should find it important, even necessary, to apply their theological research contemplatively and confessionally to the horizon which informs their prejudices.⁹⁶

Comparative Work in Processing Prejudice

Lastly, comparative work can be an aid in the dismissing and dethroning of illegitimate prejudices. When comparing otherness to oneself, illegitimate prejudices are often brought to the surface. Therefore, comparative theology is a fertile mode that encourages the encounter with otherness against the backdrop of our pre-understandings of the other and our own tradition, which make up our horizon.

The "fusion of horizons" occurs when comparativists incorporate their understandings from the encounter with the religious other as part of their whole understandings, whether that is through agreement, disagreement, or misunderstanding. As previously noted, it is more often than not that the comparativist will encounter disagreement, tension, or misunderstanding, and through these reflective outcomes the comparativist can still incorporate these and learn from these through application within their horizon. It is important to note that within a Gadamerian interreligious hermeneutic, agreement is not synonymous with understanding or "fusion of horizons." However, as displayed in figure 2, various types of reflective outcomes may become part of the comparativist's prejudice.

Viewing prejudice in a nuanced fashion, as described by Gadamer, may aid in interpreters' journeyes through interreligious hermeneutics. By utilizing Gadamer's philosophical concept of

⁹⁵ Mootz, *Gadamer and Ricoeur*, 39.

⁹⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 333. For example, Gadamer uses the law: "It is only in all its applications that the law becomes concrete (335)."

temporal distance, interpreters allow themselves to be pulled into their interreligious quest contemplatively and accept the outcomes of their dialogue with the religious other to affect their own tradition through confessional application.

Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something- whereby what we encounter says something to us. This...does not mean we are enclosed within a wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a pass saying, “Nothing new will be said here.” Instead we welcome just that guest who promises something new to our curiosity... we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true.⁹⁷

The “Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle” is a dynamic process that authentically demonstrates Gadamer’s philosophy of hermeneutics. What is unique to this process is the emphasis on various outcomes of the reflection process being equally valid. Therefore, whether reflection includes tensions that have arisen, reinterpretations discovered, or expansion of understandings, these are all outcomes of the “Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle” that are applicable to one’s prejudice. The “Gadamerian Interreligious Hermeneutical Circle” emphasizes embracing the home religious tradition in order to engage hermeneutically with various religious modes (text, symbols, dialogue, etc.). This is a very unique aspect of interreligious hermeneutics because it does more than respect the home tradition; it supports the idea that understanding your own tradition is imperative to understanding the other religious tradition. Finally, prejudice does not have to be viewed as a barrier to understanding the other with the unrealistic goal of simply being “objective” and ignoring one’s own historicity.

The Gadamerian philosophical understanding of prejudice, as expressed through figure 2 above, aids the interpreter through understanding of self and other, for the sake of fresh theological insight. Comparative theological insight relies on the interpreter’s prejudice and tradition as a starting place for understanding the religious other. This exposition of Gadamer proposes a reinterpretation in the contemporary meaning of “prejudice,” its role in comparative theological understanding and application, and its use for “faith seeking understanding.”⁹⁸

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⁹⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writing*, ed. and trans. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 82.

⁹⁸ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.