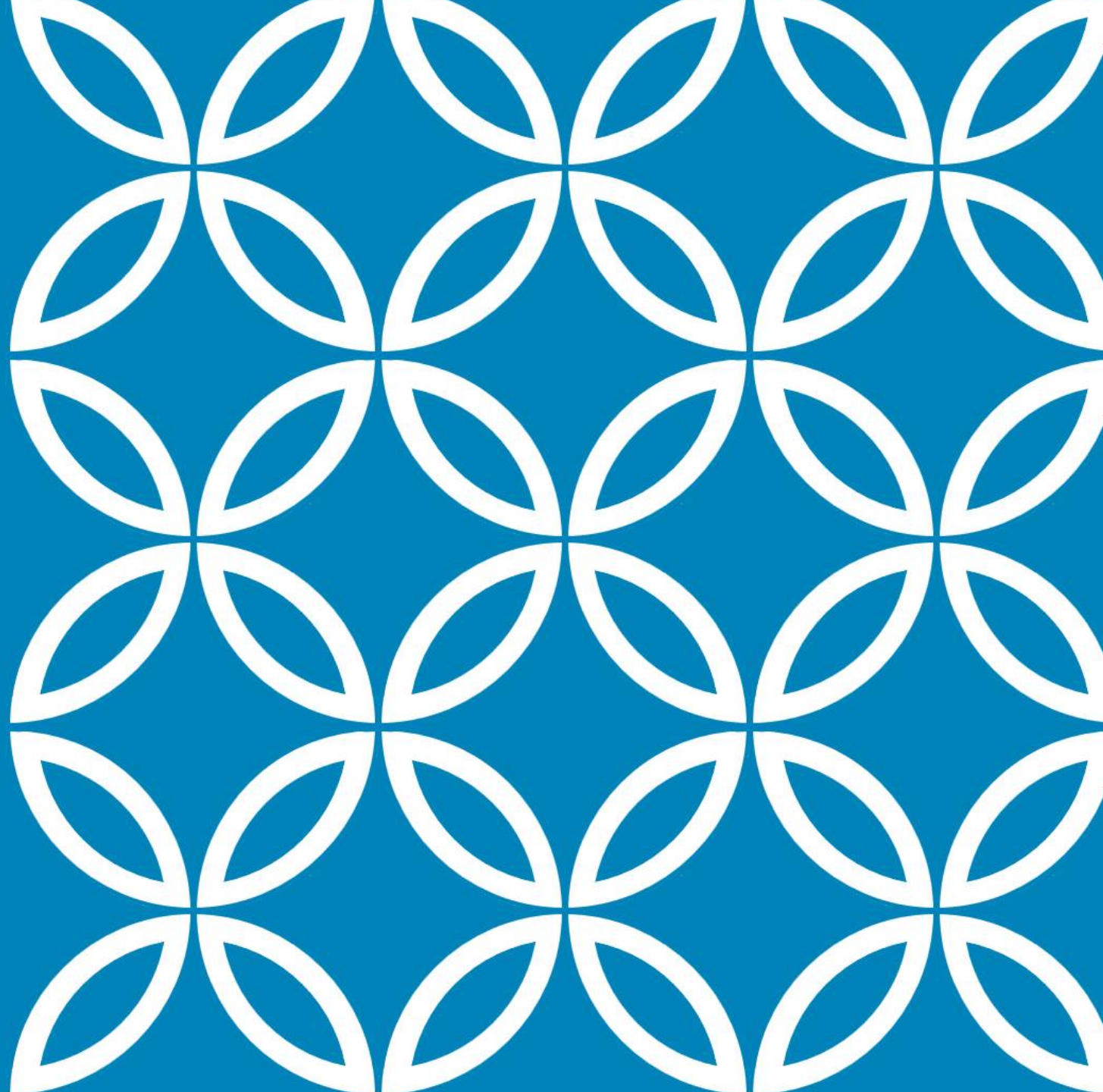
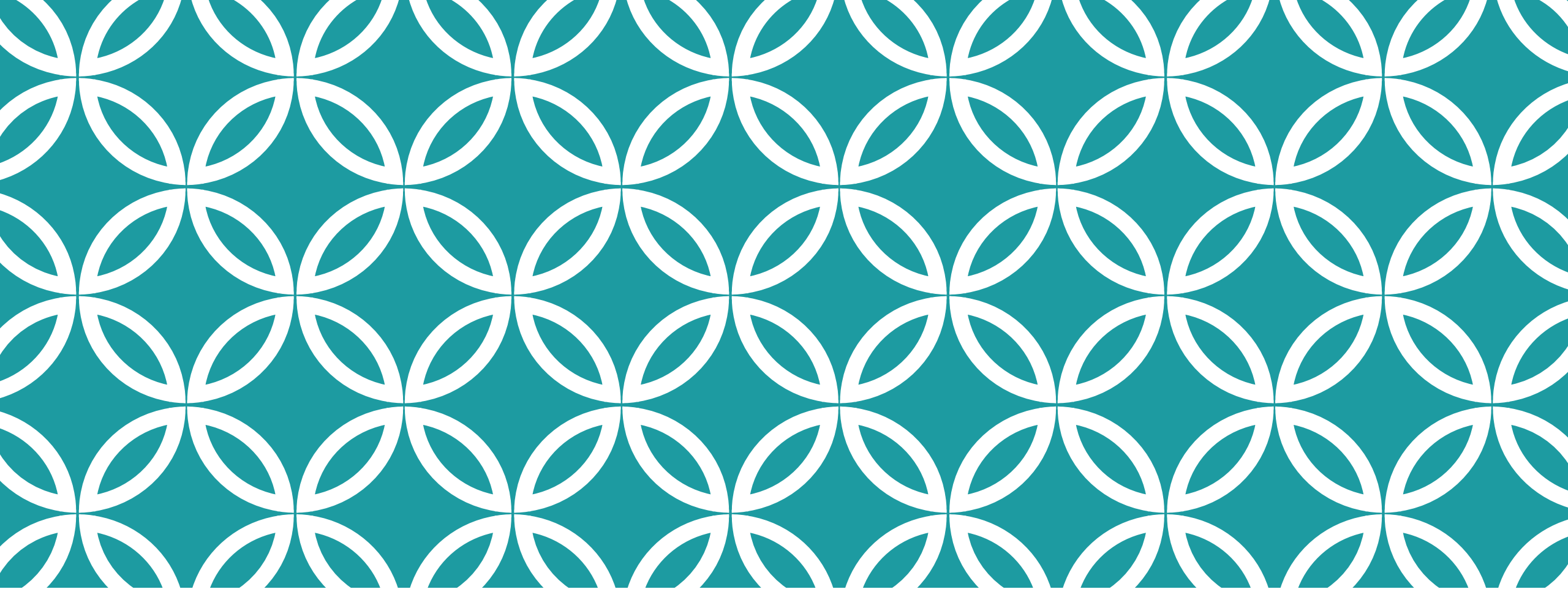


METHODS AND APPROACHES IN INTERFAITH STUDIES

Dr Angus M Slater





HERMENEUTICS & INTERFAITH STUDIES

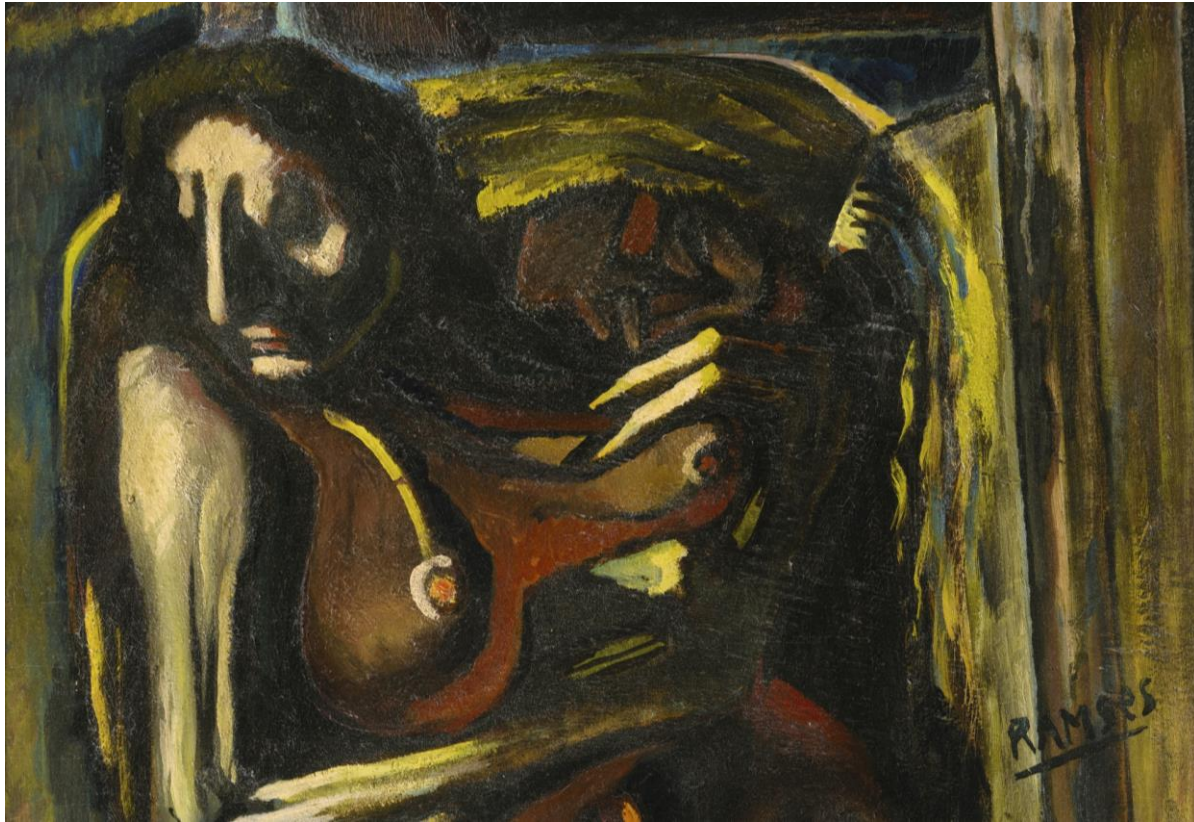




REVISION

In the last section, we engaged in the process of doing some comparative theology of our own, and we examined a number of different critiques that have been offered of the methodology of comparative theology.

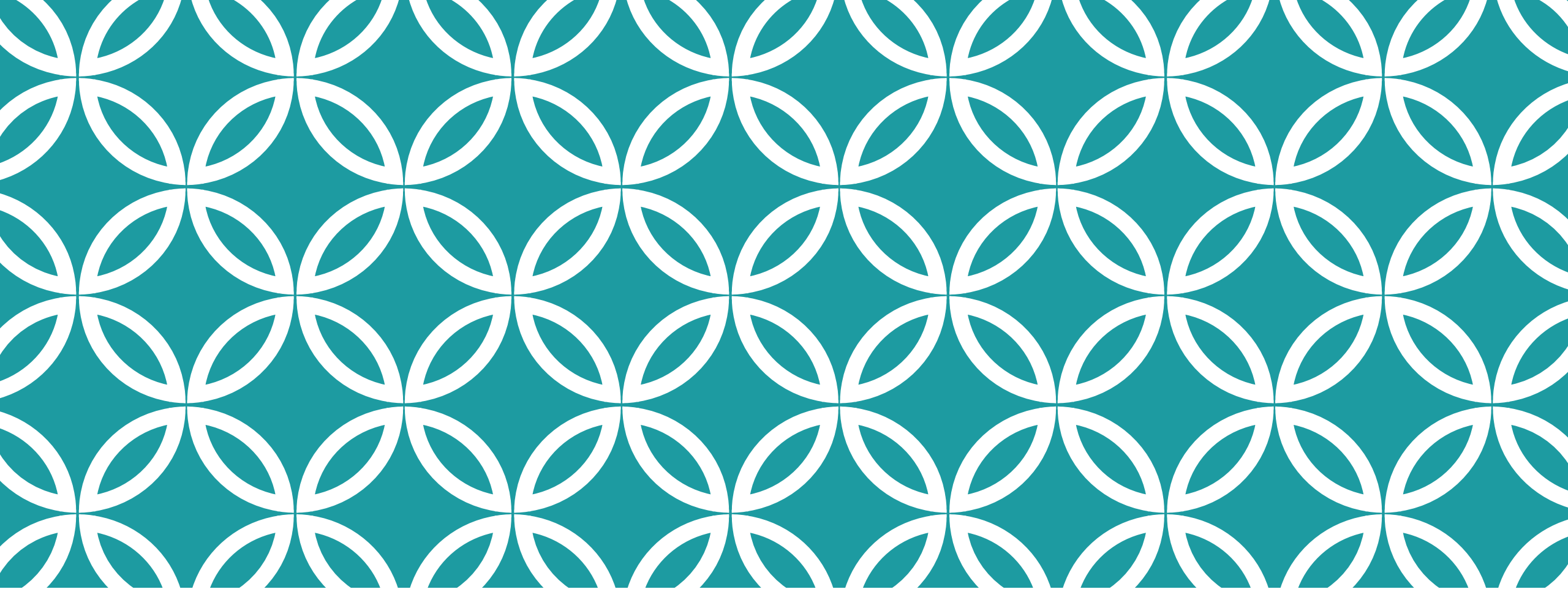
We also bridged the movement between general approaches to matters of interest to interfaith studies and more specific hermeneutical concerns. This is where we continue from this week — discussions related to the reading of texts.



REVISION

You also had four readings to complete (Heim, Moyaert, Ro, & Archer) which both demonstrated comparative theological approaches and placed them into the broader context of ongoing academic discussions about its purpose and objectives.

These readings formed part of the discussion to be had during the section, but do take the time to place your thoughts and responses to them onto the Moodle discussion forum.



HERMENEUTICS & INTERFAITH STUDIES

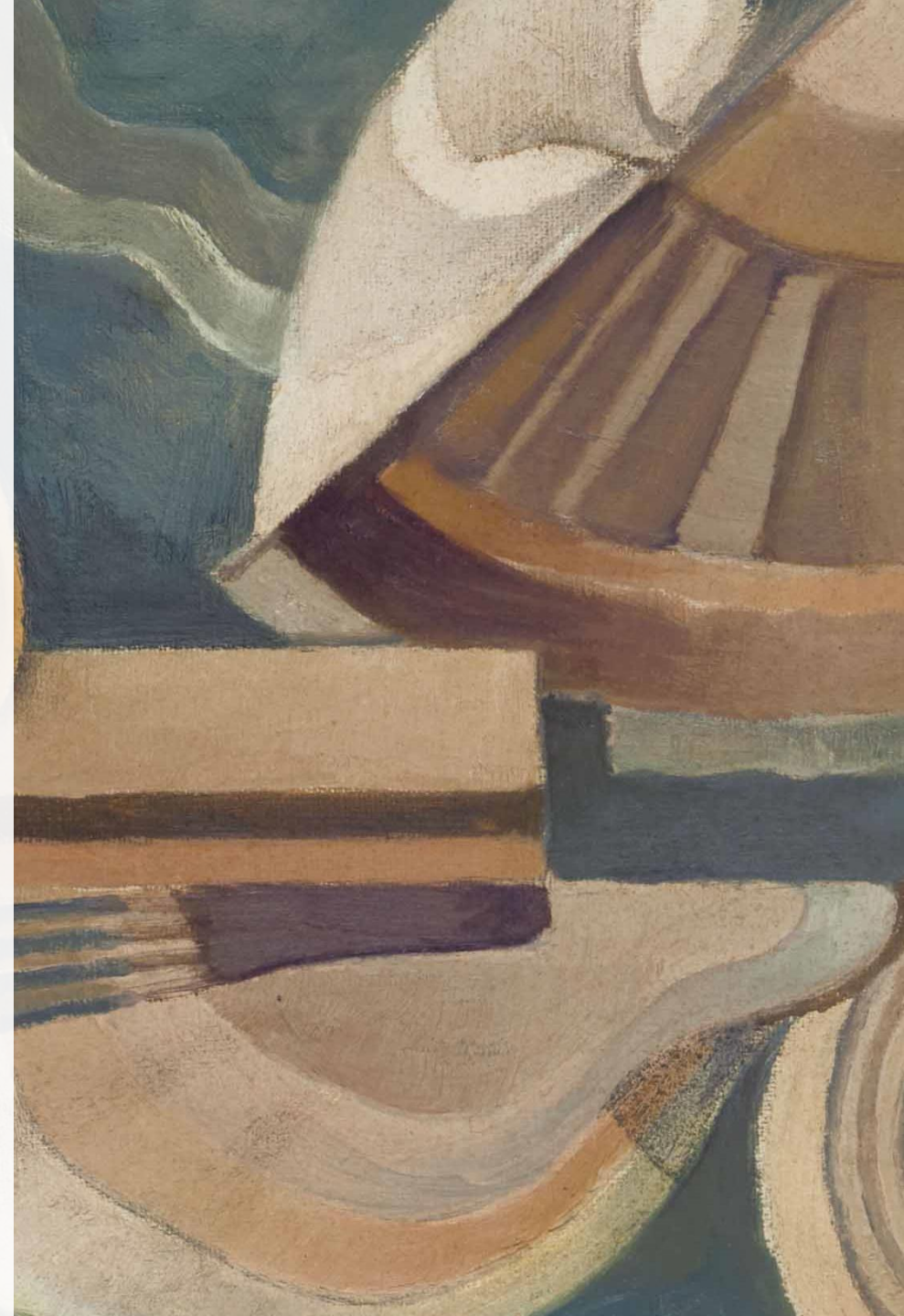


THE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION - HERMENEUTICS

In this next section we turn our attention to the theory and method of hermeneutics.

We have examined a number of theoretical approaches to interfaith issues, but hermeneutics is both theoretical and practical – it forms both a way doing interfaith things and also a way of attempting to understand them.

Appropriately enough, we begin this section with a number of definitions that will assist us in our further study.

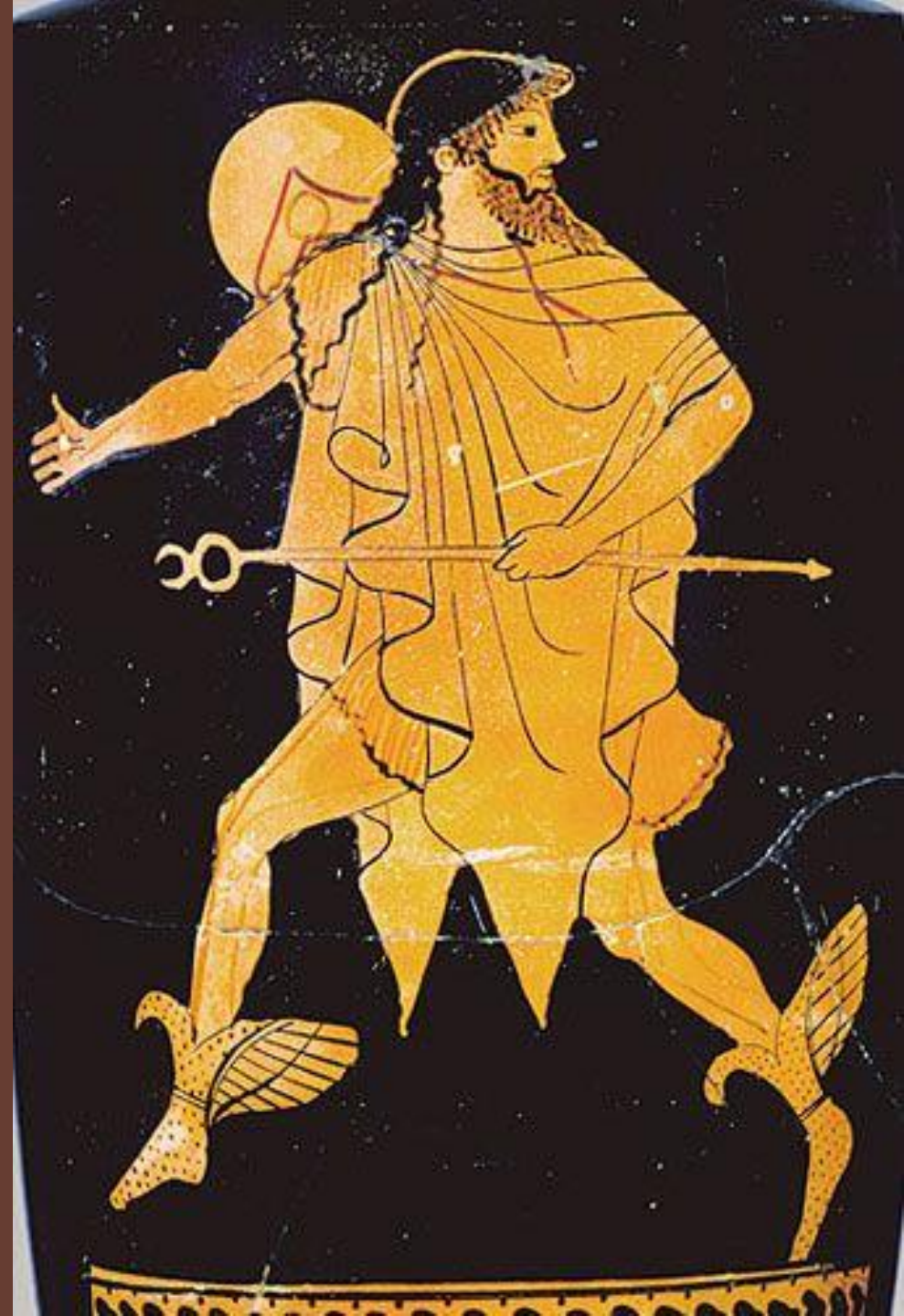


THE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION - HERMENEUTICS

From the Greek verb *hermeneuein* ('to proclaim', 'to utter', 'to translate'), the topic of hermeneutics relates to the theories and methods of interpretation, usually of texts.

The root of the word comes from the same place as the Greek god, Hermes who was the divine shepherd, the god of paths, the mediator between the gods ('messenger'), the god of oratory, literature, the inventor of language. This is important, because the messages from the God required interpretation, *hermeneia*, for human ears to comprehend.

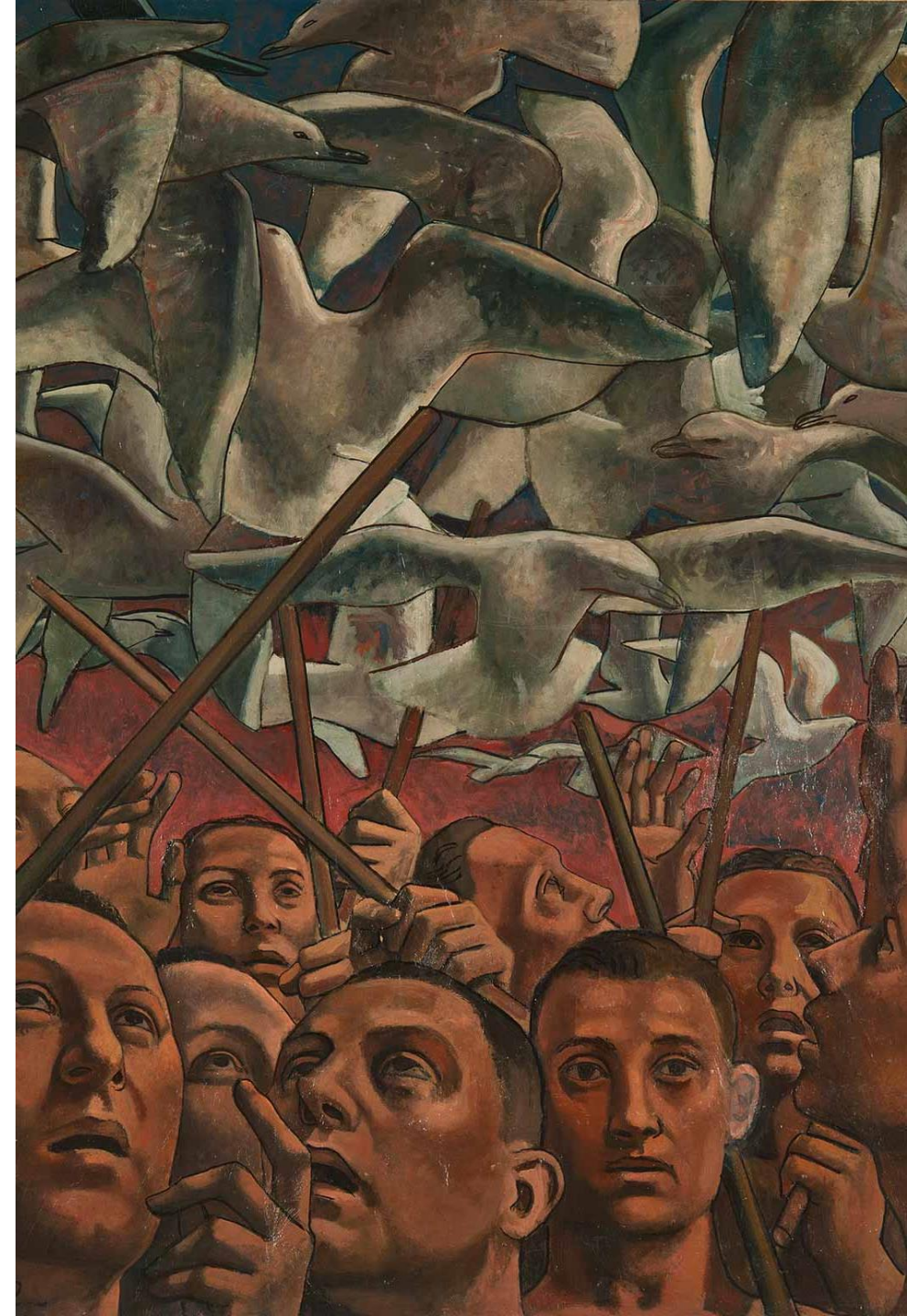
This was Hermes role – how are divine messages to be expressed in human languages? – but also the social role of poets and scholars.



THE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION - HERMENEUTICS

More generally, hermeneutics is understood as the theory of the (act of) interpretation of texts, especially those texts like biblical texts, theological texts, and philosophical texts, which are seen to contain significant meaning.

This includes critical reflection on the basis, character and aims of reading, interpreting and understanding texts (from contemporary situations and the past). How and under what conditions does understanding happen?



THE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION - HERMENEUTICS

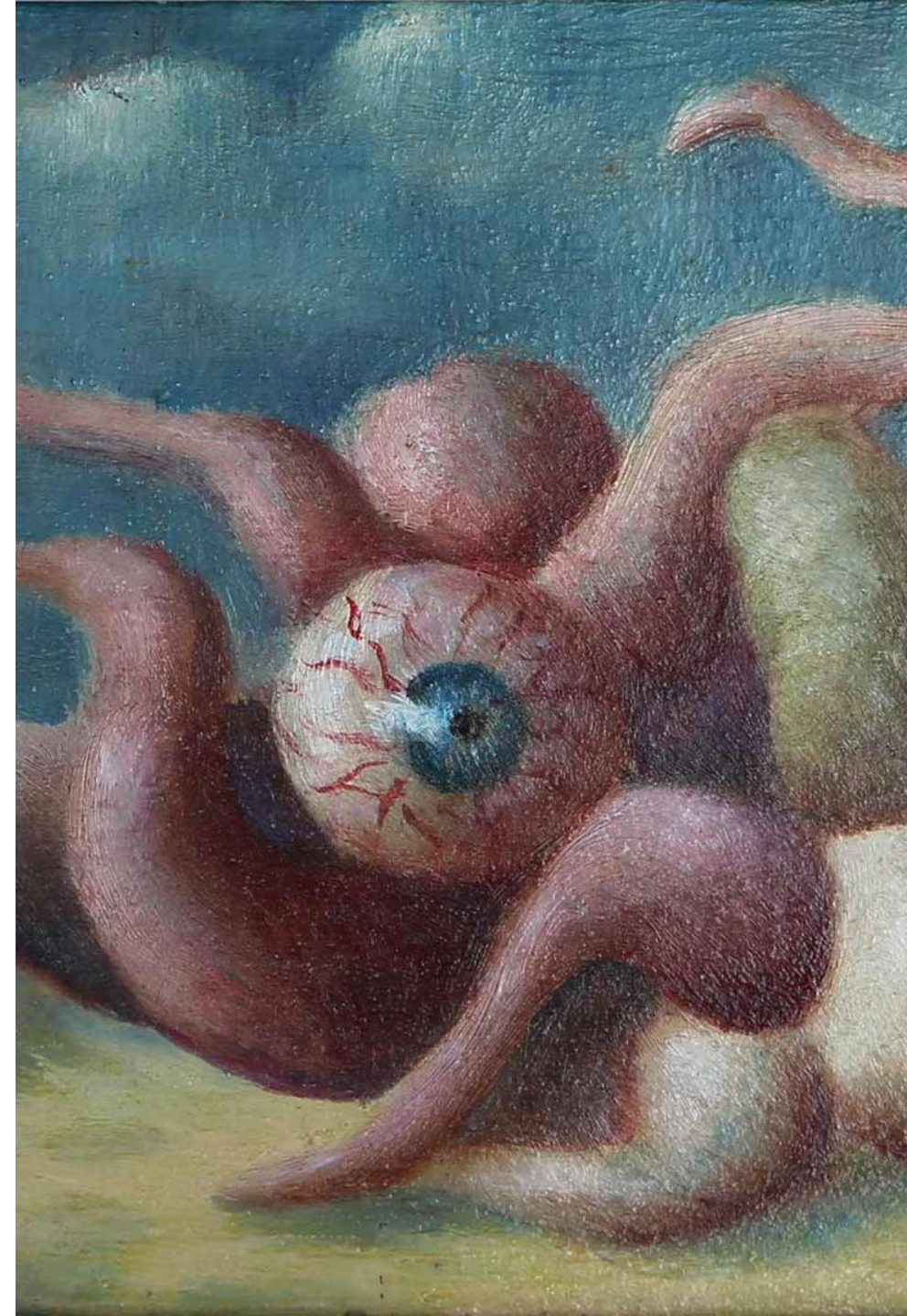
Beyond this quite specific definition, hermeneutics has also been applied in different areas, such as:

the meaning of communication or life situations

verbal and non-verbal texts (communicative acts such as human actions, visual data, institutions).

the study of the theory and practice of the interpretation of texts and traditions from an interfaith perspective.

You may also come across the term 'hermeneutic' as a singular noun. This refers to a single method or strand of interpretation of a text/artefact (but not necessarily the interpreter's reasons for the given interpretation).



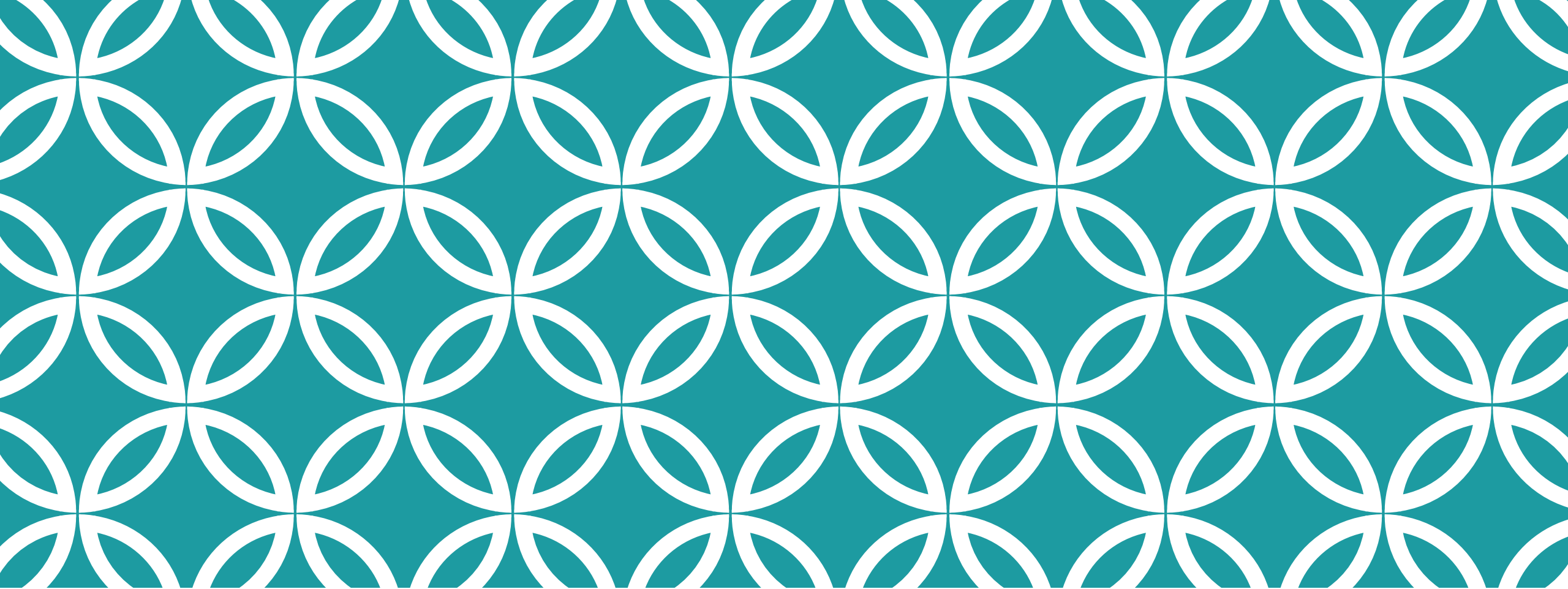
THE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION - HERMENEUTICS

You may also, in your course of study, come across a distinction between the study of hermeneutics and that of semiotics:

Semiotics is the study of the meaning of signs and what they 'signify' for the individual.

Hermeneutics: assumption that the act of meaning will be plural, requiring choices to be made. It is not only concerned with how meaning is constituted, but how one should seek to find the 'right' meaning.





HERMENEUTICS



HERMENEUTICS

The notion of hermeneutics begins with a series of very simple questions that aim to understand the context and setting of the text in question. These questions include, but are not limited to:

What kind of document is it?

What kind of literary form (genre) does it take?

What does it contain?

Who wrote it and what can be known about the author (cultural and social context)?

What is/was the purpose of the text (information, persuasion, encouragement)?

What about the audience?



HERMENEUTICS

Each of these questions is an attempt to better understand the reality of the text through the acquisition of further information about it – this is a realization that the text does not speak alone, but rather through and with all sorts of other contextual factors.

This approach obviously has issues, but it forms the bedrock of what you may come across as the historical-critical approach, an attempt to locate the true meaning of the text.

Issues may include: Authors generally aim to be understood, but there is the possibility of deliberate concealment in texts; Interpretation of a text written in an ancient (and evolving) language and rooted in a past culture; Lack of knowledge of the author, audience or original context.



HERMENEUTICS

Earlier perspectives in hermeneutics largely relied on this idea of uncovering meaning. There was a strong belief in finding the so-called 'original meaning' of a text, which would be eventually uncovered as greater contextual data could be made available.

Hermeneutics meant the process of uncovering the true meaning from an objective point of view, an archaeology of original authorial meaning.

However, today this notion is challenged by recognition that there is no view from nowhere and that each account of the text is itself formed by the context of both the author and the reader.



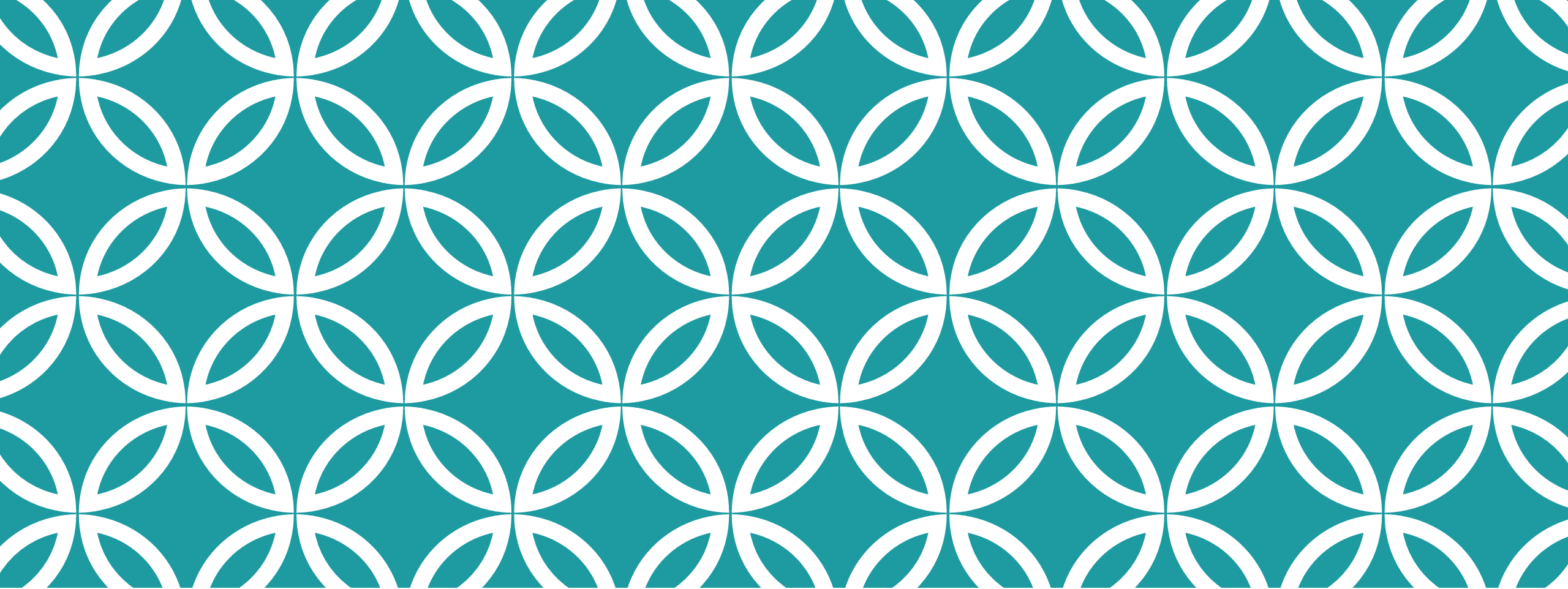
HERMENEUTICS

However, as we have seen in earlier sections, this does not mean that interpretation is arbitrary ('anything goes').

Critical reading and interpreting means *accountable* reading and interpretation based on as reliable information as possible and argued in logical steps of reasoning, using methods which are appropriate in relation to the task of interpretation.

In recognising the choices embedded within interpretative process, we open ourselves up to arguments about the decisions made, rather than denying the interpretative role.





TEXT & INTERPRETATION



TEXT & INTERPRETATION

These central concerns of hermeneutics naturally impinge upon and have relevance to more general questions about the location of meaning. These are important questions to consider in order to locate our hermeneutical approaches, such as:

What is the relationship between the text and the reader?

Can one speak of an objective, value-neutral, 'true' reading of a text?

What is our concern with social context (especially those who are marginalized) in the formation of culture?

What counts as a form of text – do we include cultural performances, virtual media, art and artefacts?



TEXT & INTERPRETATION

Is 'meaning' to be found in the text, placed there by the author in order to be dug out by interpreters?

Is it the interpreter's role to recover the author's original intention?

Are interpreters the 'judges' of meaning?

Are texts 'inert objects' unless/until they are interpreted by 'active subjects'?

Is meaning 'created' through the interaction of text and interpreter?

What is the impact of the pluralization of authority and authoritativeness in post-modernity?





TEXT & INTERPRETATION

There are generally two strands to attempting to answer these questions, one focused on the text itself and its authorship, and the other focused on the interpreter and their relationship with the text.

Each prioritise different accounts and aspects of the text itself and, while they inter-relate to an obvious degree, they offer different readings of the text, usually because they approach the text for different purposes.

TEXT & INTERPRETATION

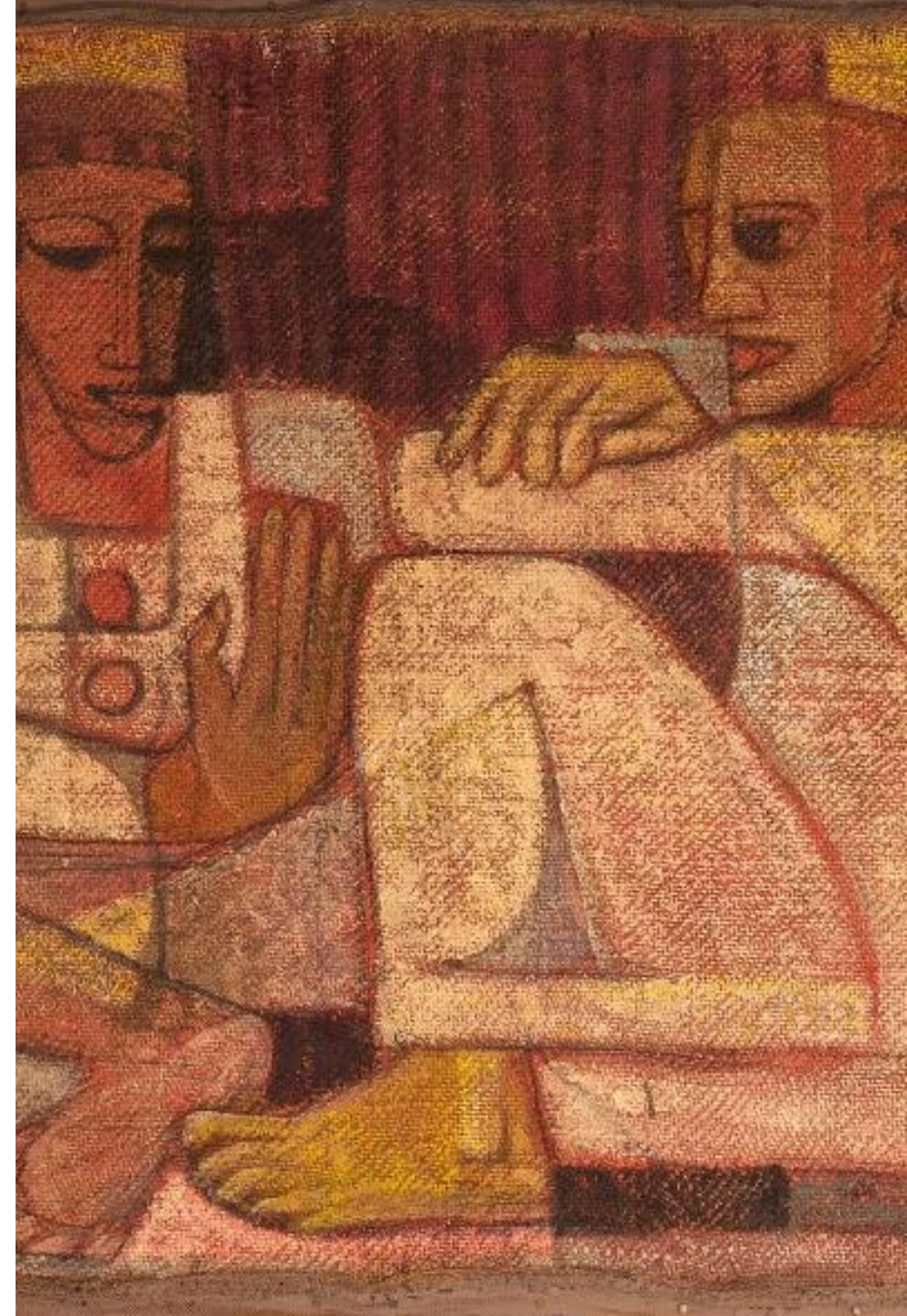
FOCUS ON TEXT (AND AUTHOR)

Most texts communicate the same message to different interpreters.

Secondary or intermediary role of interpreters as those who elucidate the message of the text.

Authority of texts (especially religious texts) is assumed.

Search for the author's original intention is paramount.



TEXT & INTERPRETATION

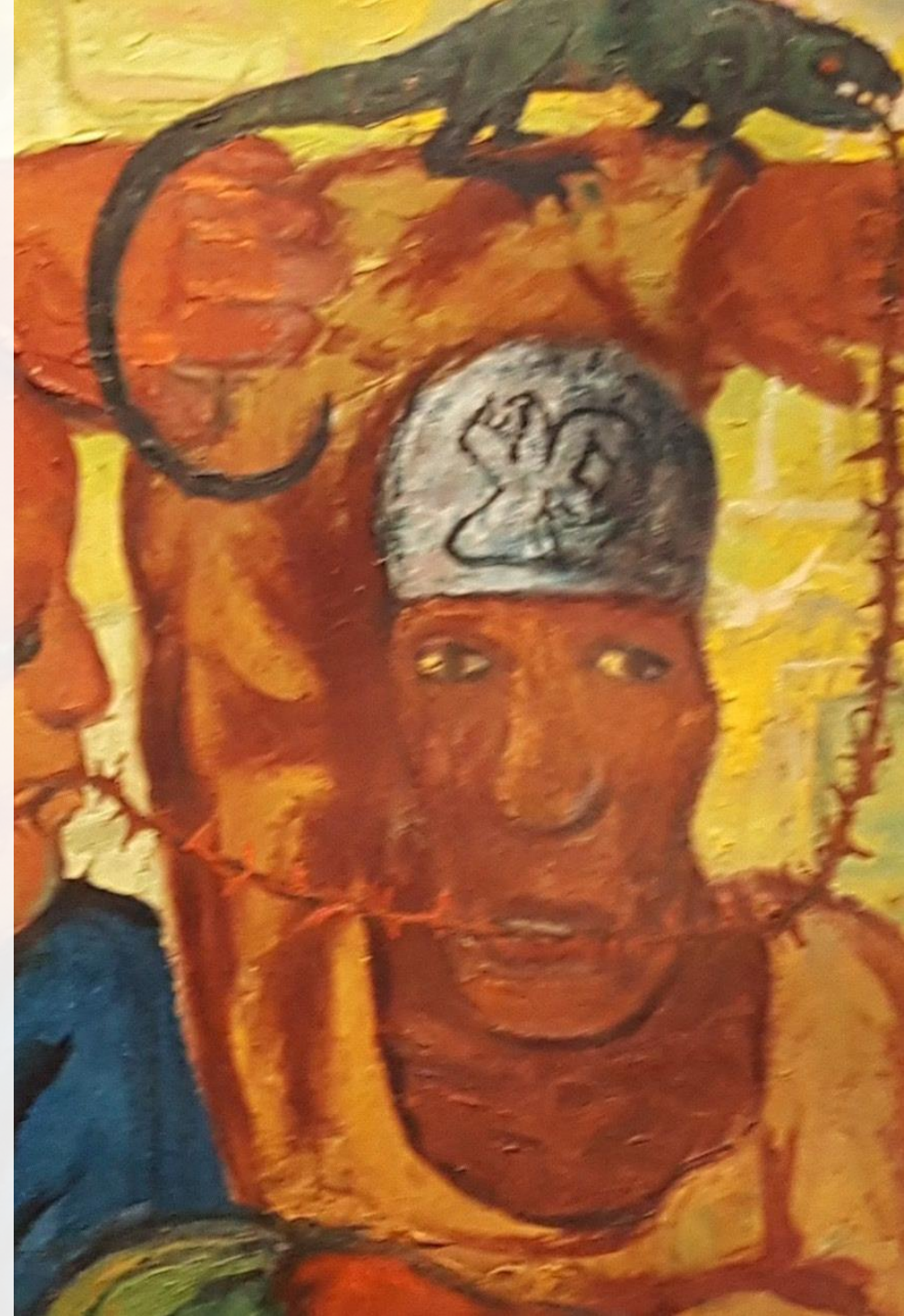
FOCUS ON INTERPRETER

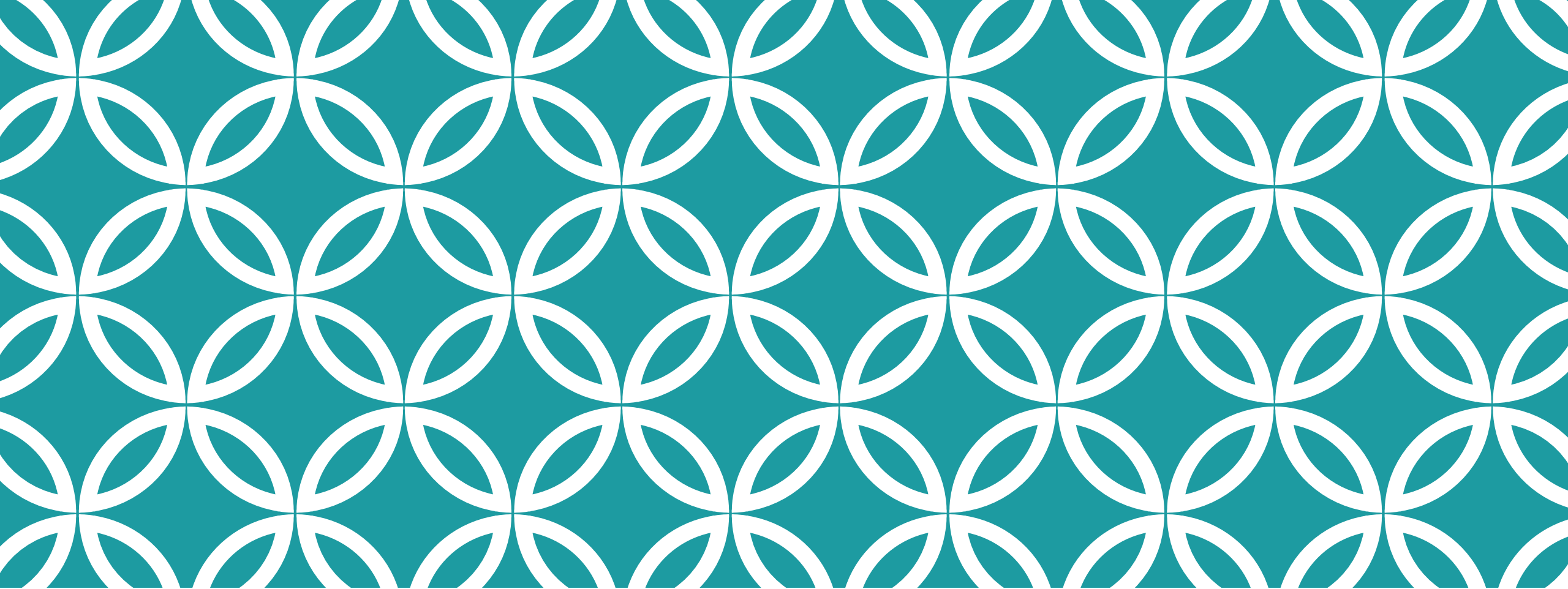
Texts can be used for many reasons and purposes; they are only brought to life by interpreters (exegetes).

Interpreters' interests are decisive (especially for ancient texts which cannot 'respond').

Religious texts mean different things to different people at different times.

Meaning is determined by the impact on the interpreter, rather than strictly confined to authorial intention.





FOUNDATIONS BEFORE THEORIES



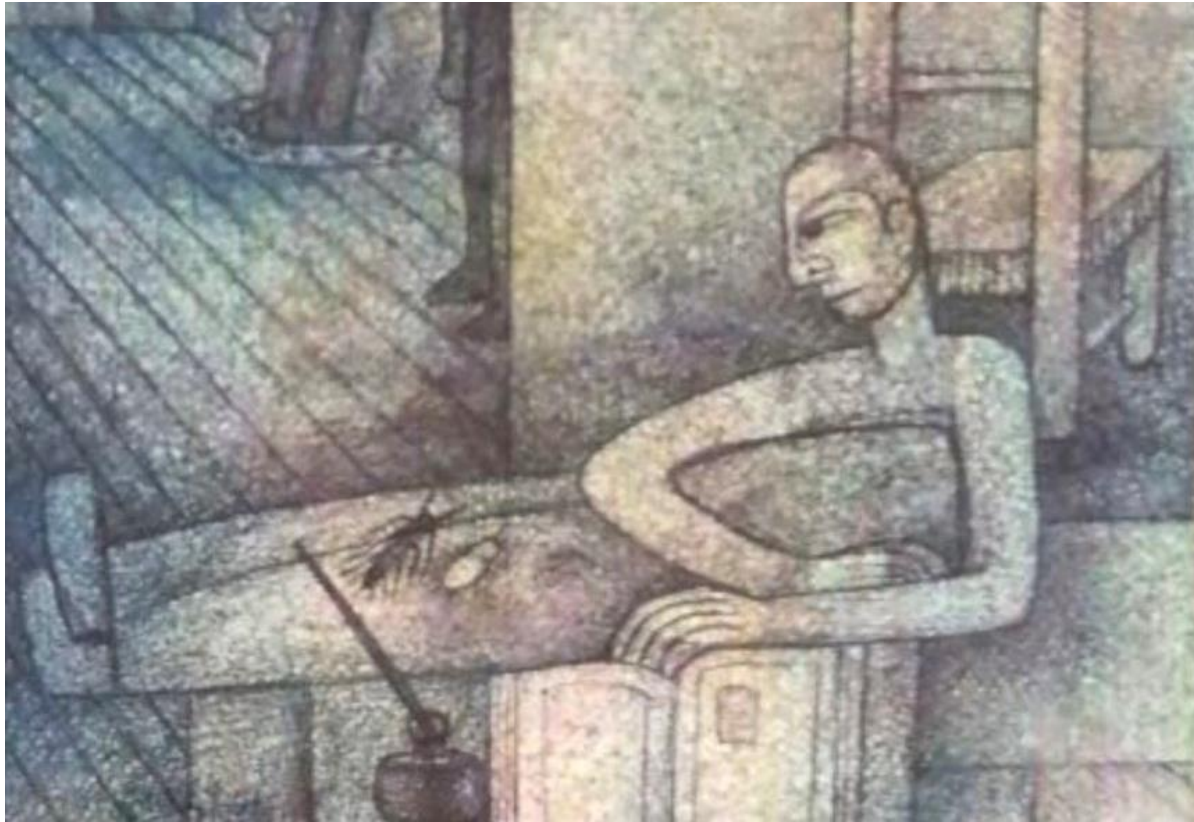


FOUNDATIONS BEFORE THEORIES

Theoretical hermeneutics as a modern discipline emerges during the nineteenth century with the theologian and scholar, Friedrich Schleiermacher.

As a distinct field it derives from the hermeneutical nature of early religious debates: divergent readings of sacred texts resulting in differing forms of belief and practice, becoming particularly acute with the prevalence of scriptural literacy post the Protestant Reformation.

There is an emphasis on *praxis* rather than the *theory* of interpretation from the ancient world up until the post-Reformation period, with praxis gradually being systematised.



FOUNDATIONS BEFORE THEORIES

This practical approach to reading and interpreting can be found even in those texts often subjected to hermeneutical approaches themselves, such as:

Aristotle in *Poetics*, 50b, reflects on 'emplotment' – how narrative plot draws together isolated actions into a purposive 'whole' (highlighted by Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* I: 31-51).

He also showed how spoken and written words were expressions of inner thoughts, reflecting the inner angst and turmoil of the individual.

Another example would be the hermeneutical approaches embedded within the New Testament texts, such as:

Luke 24:27: Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

2 Corinthians 3:15-16: Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.



FOUNDATIONS BEFORE THEORIES

Many examples in the New Testament of scriptural hermeneutics (often closely linked to Jewish exegetical techniques) that find their ‘interpretative key’ in Jesus. This exegetical practice is continued by the Church Fathers and by the Christian tradition more generally.

There are three particularly interesting approaches represented in the earlier Christian tradition – by examining them, I want us to have a better understanding of what makes up a specific ‘hermeneutic’ and why the decisions made in forming them may be made.

All three exist before the discipline of hermeneutics had emerged as a distinct field of study, but they are illuminating!

ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA

Origen of Alexandria (185-254 CE):

His hermeneutic approach is based on the commitment that the gospel exists on two levels: the temporal gospel and the eternal gospel. They are 'one' but both are needed because of human inability to comprehend divine self-communication (revelation).

The Earthly/fleshly gospel offers 'material signs' that provide access to the eternal/heavenly gospel (truth before God - *De principiis* 4.25).

The human mind is changed in the process as it moves from the OT to the temporal gospel to the eternal gospel. It becomes conformed to the divine, creative Wisdom. Believers can only read scripture in the right way by virtue of their possession of 'the mind of Christ' (I Corinthians 2:16; see *Commentary on John* 10.27).



AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE)

Augustine's approach to the matter of hermeneutics attempts to bring together scriptural interpretation and one's own understanding of the world.

Scriptural signs are literal signs pointing to events in history, hence focus on the world in its historical manifestations throughout his work. This demonstrates, for Augustine, that Christ is the true meaning of history, and is therefore the true meaning of scripture.

For both Origen and Augustine the world is theophanic (manifests God) and this is taught and illustrated by scripture. The world itself can be read from within the scriptural text, with God as the author of both.



MARTIN LUTHER

Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE)

He asserts the 'clarity' of scripture and privileges the plain or literal sense of scripture, but without obscuring the role of the Spirit for the purpose of true understanding.

He adopts the principle of *sola scriptura*: normative authority of scripture and the sole source of theology (due to its divine origins). Scripture alone is necessary for salvation. A spirit-guided hermeneutic is the authoritative mediator of scripture's meaning.

As the word of God, Scripture mediated Christ directly to the believer, through the Spirit, and was the guarantee of salvation in the world.





FOUNDATIONS BEFORE THEORIES

Each of these thinkers highlights the process by which reading and interpretation is done, identifying the driving motivations behind their readings, and assessing the value of meanings for their wider projects.

Each has their own particular concerns, which drives the form and content of their engagement with a shared authoritative canon of texts, and, of course, has an impact on the outcome of their engagement.

These early approaches are interesting because they represent very specific hermeneutics themselves, but also because they are emblematic of approaches to sacred scriptures across religious traditions that continue to influence our approaches today.

READINGS

Jasper D, 2004, "A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics", Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, Chapter 1

Jasper D, 2004, "A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics", Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, Chapter 4

Corliss R, 1993, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutics and Its Critics", *Religious Studies*, Vol 29 No 3, pp. 363-379