An important task of every academic practical theologian is to do research and to contribute to the discipline’s knowledge base. We thus do research by tracing the sacred; by exploring, describing, and explaining religious practices of religious actors in particular locations.\(^1\) Our research efforts usually result in a description, explanation, or a theory of lived religion of people, whether in Baltimore, Bangalore, Belhar, Brisbane, or Brussels. Research is not complete if it does not result in some form of communication of the “research findings,” that is, our interpretations and constructions of our research efforts. Whatever form the communication of the research results take, it always entails some kind of interpretation and representation of whatever was researched.

Positivistic approaches want us to believe that our research results can in some way be an accurate representation of what we research. It is the researcher’s task to give an exact representation of the “facts.” If you follow the same procedure, you should be able to replicate the “findings” of other researchers. The assumption is that the researcher is “neutral” regarding the “study object” and that “objective” researchers should arrive at the same representations. Researchers therefore have to strive to eliminate subjectivity (bias and “observation errors”) and to maintain objectivity.

For a long time human science researchers tried to emulate this scientific model of the natural sciences with its perceived objectivity.\(^2\) Knowledge could only be credible to the extent that the researcher’s influence is eliminated.\(^3\)

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2. Due to the limitations of this essay, it is not possible to give a more nuanced description of the various methodological approaches in the human and social sciences. See Norman Blaikie, *Approaches to Social Enquiry* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 11–50, for an overview of some classical approaches in the social sciences.

3. This created epistemological and ontological challenges for theologians who have to "bracket" their faith in the research process.
One way to do this was to focus on “better” (e.g. highly standardized) research instruments and methods. However, despite all efforts to establish the human and social sciences as sciences, the criticism from “interpretivist” scholars remained as a constant thorn in the flesh of positivists.

This positivist philosophy of science was slowly eroded and replaced by philosophies of science that made more room for the unique challenges and opportunities of human science research. Scholars came to realize that it is not possible to escape our “horizon of understanding” as German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has so eloquently described it in his magnum opus *Truth and Method*.

The poststructuralist and postmodern philosophies of science problematized the Cartesian subject-object dualism and destroyed the idea of objectivity. This acknowledgement of the researcher’s subjectivity in the research process opened a Pandora’s box regarding the use and abuse of research and the role of knowledge and human interests.

Feminist scholars further contributed to this discrediting of the researcher’s objectivity with their “standpoint theories” that, amongst other things, emphasize the importance of power issues and the researcher’s “positionality” in the research context. The representation of research findings lost its presumed innocence and became a very contested area.

This situation, namely that all knowledge is mediated knowledge, that there is a conflict of interpretations, and that bias, researcher subjectivity, and positionality play a role in these interpretations, is a basic epistemological dilemma in all research endeavors and the starting point of this chapter.

The usual way to deal with this epistemological dilemma is to advocate some form of reflexivity. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes the epistemological dilemma and the role of reflexivity in the following way:

> The positivist dream of an epistemological state of perfect innocence has the consequence of masking the fact that the crucial difference is not between a science which effects a construction and one which does not, but

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5. “The moment that the researcher distances him- or herself from the conventional belief of positivism, he or she opens Pandora’s box by blurring genres and producing messy research texts,” writes Stefanos Mantzoukas, “Issues of Representation within Qualitative Inquiry,” *Qualitative Health Research* 14, no. 7 (2004): 1000, doi:10.1177/1049732304265959.
