

THEORY IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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My aim in this paper is to assess the role of theory in 'religious studies'.¹ The task is a general one and will not concern itself with evaluating any specific theory or theories of religion but rather with the appropriateness of the very notion of 'a theory of religion'. It will not, however, be an easy undertaking, not only because of its generality but also because of its paradoxical character. To admit of the existence of theories of religion and yet raise the question of the 'possibility' of such theories is somewhat odd to say the least. The history of the study of religion, I suggest however, forces us both to the admission and to the question.

I

The place of theory in 'religious studies' has had a rather chequered history. Theory, it seems, lies at the centre of the formation of this, so called, new science in the form of what Eric Sharpe in his history of the 'discipline' refers to as the 'Darwinian-Spencerian theory of evolution'. In concluding a survey of the antecedents of 'comparative religion' (i.e. the 'new science of religion' of Max Müller) he writes:

... with Comte, Darwin and Spencer we have come to the threshold of the hundred years of comparative religion which we are to survey. We have seen something of the variety of approaches to the religions of mankind which could be held before the coming of evolutionism: the Christian theological approach . . . the philosophical approach . . . and . . . the scholarly approach, that of the philologists, historians, archaeologists and others who were content to cultivate a limited area intensively . . .

What was lacking in all this was, however, one single guiding principle of method which was at the same time able to satisfy the demands of history and of science. Evolution was—or seemed to be—precisely that principle (Sharpe, 1975; 26).

Of the fact that theory dominated the early scholarly study of religion there can be little doubt. This is not, of course, to suggest that historical/empirical research was not carried out, for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

were in fact rich in new discoveries. Nevertheless, as de Vries points out in his *The Study of Religion: A Historical Approach* (1967), such discoveries were seldom considered in their own right; seldom allowed to 'speak for themselves'. As de Vries puts it: 'The nineteenth-century scholars made abundant use of the new materials. In fact, they were perhaps even too eager and hurried. As soon as some puzzling new phenomena were found, a new theory was proposed' (de Vries, 1967; 220). Indeed, a cursory reading of de Vries would suggest that no one theory provided the guiding principle of method for the new study of religious phenomena, for he talks of philosophical, ethnological, psychological, sociological, historicist and symbolist theories. Other historical accounts of this incredibly active period of research and study of religion(s) provide similar pictures. E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion* (1965); A. F. C. Wallace's *Religion: An Anthropological View* (1966); A. de Waal Malefijt's *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion* (1968); amongst others, provide a range of types of 'theories of religion': psychological and sociological theories for Evans-Pritchard with sub-species such as rationalist, irrationalist and structuralist theories; evolutionary, devolutionary and psychoanalytic and anxiety-reducing theories for Wallace; linguistic, rationalistic, sociological, psychological, phenomenological and migration/diffusion theories of religion for Malefijt.

Although there is little agreement amongst historians of the scholarly study of religion in how they characterize and label the early theorists, a close reading will only confirm that, in fact, the major theoretical thrust was inspired by the biological evolutionary model. Sharpe is entirely justified, therefore, in claiming not only that theory dominates the early study of religion but precisely that the Darwinian-Spencerian theory of evolution dominates that early study.

Such privileged status for theory was, it appears however, rather shortlived. According to Sharpe, the 'evolutionary method' dominated the comparative study of religion from the time of Müller's lectures on the science of religion to the Royal Institute in London in 1870—the point from which Sharpe dates the origin (founding) of the new discipline of 'comparative religions'—to the earliest chronicle of the new subject by Luis H. Jordan in 1905. But, writes Sharpe, '... the seventy or so years which separate us from the world of 1905 has seen its virtual abandonment. No new method accepted by all has risen to take its place' (Sharpe 1975; xii).

Of course the waning influence of evolutionary thought on the academic study of religion did not entirely spell the end of theory in the study and interpretation of religion—the histories referred to above make that abundantly clear. The works of Durkheim, Weber, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Freud and others in the early part of this century were, if anything, theoretical interpretations of the nature or meaning of religion. The theoretical/methodo-

logical unity underlying the work of 'early' scholars such as Tylor, Lange, Marett, Spencer, Frazer, *et al.*, it must be admitted however, is lacking. Theory in general seems to have become suspect and energy and attention was focused more upon religions in their historical forms—the aim of the new science became little more than the recovery and description of forms of religious expression and, in general, the elements of the historically accessible tradition. Consequently 'religious studies' ('comparative religion', 'the science of religion'), to all intents and purposes, became identified with philology, history and phenomenology, each intent upon providing 'an accurate apprehension of the phenomena', in whole or in part. The work of G. van der Leeuw, especially in his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1938) sets a new pace for study of religion in its clear and determined opposition to theory: '. . . I have tried', he writes, 'to avoid, above all else, any imperiously dominating theory, and in this volume there will be found neither evolutionary, nor so-called anti-evolutionary, nor indeed any other theories' (van der Leeuw, 1938; 10). The search for 'phenomenological understanding', then, replaced that for 'theoretical explanation' (understanding) and was taken up by W. Kristensen and C. J. Bleeker whose work has dominated twentieth-century 'religious studies': their criterion of understanding which is closely bound up with the 'self-understanding' of the believer clearly demarcates the phenomenological study from theories based on biological/psychological/sociological grounds which are alien to the believer's self-understanding.² Thus, according to Bleeker,

The scientific approach is characterized by its method: it aims at an unbiased and critical *compilation* of religious data with a view to ascertaining their religious meaning. This implies that attempts are made to understand a religion, even in its strange and less attractive aspects, as it stands, viz. as a testimony to an encounter between people and a superhuman reality. The purpose is to attain insight into the belief of the believers. *This approach, which does not permit any explanations attributing religion to non-religious factors*, as for example to psychological or social forces, is customarily referred to as the phenomenological method. . . . (Bleeker, 1966; 62,63; emphasis is mine.)

The reasons for the collapse of early evolutionary theory, and theory in general, in 'religious studies' are not altogether clear. E. E. Evans-Pritchard maintains that '. . . it was because explanations of religion were offered in terms of origins that these theoretical debates, once so full of life and fire, eventually subsided' (Evans-Pritchard, 1965; 101).³ He, quite correctly, points out that neither verification nor falsification of hypotheses concerned with origins or essences is possible, although his claim that the causal explanations implicit in such theorizing was (and is) in conflict with modern scientific thought is less convincing. However, more profound reasons seem to be at work, for Evans-Pritchard argues that theoretical studies of religion were ideological under-

takings intended to discredit religion and were bound, therefore, to be found to be inadequate/illegitimate (Evans-Pritchard, 1965; 15–17). Although Evans-Pritchard, in summarizing his position, does not entirely reject the possibility of a general theory of religion (Evans-Pritchard, 1965; 113), he does never the less, seem to espouse the phenomenological impatience with and fear of theory as inimical to religion not only as explanation for the demise of theory in religious studies but also as his own standpoint for a proper study of religious phenomena:

... if they [religions] are to be regarded as complete illusions, then some biological, psychological, or sociological theory of how everywhere and at all times men have been stupid enough to believe in them seems to be called for. He who accepts the reality of spiritual beings does not feel the same need for such explanations, for inadequate though the conception of soul and God may be among primitive peoples, they are not just an illusion for him. As far as a study of religion as a factor in social life is concerned, it may make little difference whether the anthropologist is a theist or an atheist, since in either case he can only take into account what he can observe. But if either attempts to go further than this, each must pursue a different path. The non-believer seeks for some theory—biological, psychological, or sociological—which will explain the illusion; the believer seeks rather to understand the manner in which a people conceives of a reality and their relation to it. For both, religion is part of social life, but for the believer it has also another dimension (Evans-Pritchard, 1965; 121).

According to R. N. Bellah (1970), even though the early 1920s witnessed the emergence of the elements necessary for an adequate theory of religion it was 'just at this point that the primary preoccupation with religion displayed by most of the great social scientists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries disappeared and other issues occupied the centre of attention' (Bellah, 1970; 9). 'Even today', he continues, 'a theoretical concern with religion is only gradually reviving as a central issue in social science' (Bellah, 1970, 9). He seems, like Evans-Pritchard, to attribute that 'collapse' of theoretical interest to the growth of a kind of theological counter-revolution in religious studies—although he does not describe it as such—a nonrationalist tradition in the study of religion that emphasized the *sui generis* quality of religion which precludes all possibility of explaining religion. Explanation and theory, it appears, were taken to be tantamount to 'explaining away' religion. Bellah writes: '... we may say that while the nonrationalist tradition jealously guarded the specific nature of religion but eschewed any explanation of it, the rationalist tradition provided a number of ways of explaining religion which in the end explained it away' (Bellah, 1970; 6). Consequently, even though scholars like Durkheim and Weber seemed to break through the rationalist-positivist tradition, as Bellah refers to it, in the study of religion and provided at least the elements for a theoretical account of religion without denying either its centrality or its irreducibility (its *sui generis* character) there was no

withstanding the 'collapse' of theory in the rejection of the evolutionary hypothesis.

Svein Bjerke in a recent discussion of method in the study of religion argues that the collapse of the evolutionary theory in religious studies has created a 'nomothetic anxiety' amongst scholars that has sent them into retreat 'behind the safe bastions of historical particularism and relativism' (in Honko, 1979; 242). Indeed, it seems that it may in fact have catapulted the study of religion back to its 'pre-scientific' (i.e. pre-Müller) days and its domination by a theological agenda. Hans Penner and Edward Yonan (1972) for example, maintain that it is such 'theory-shyness' that presents the main obstacle to the realization of a 'science of religion' and their claim finds some support, I think, in the ubiquitous and never-ending methodological debates to be found within the field of religious studies.

A perusal of the detailed proceedings and discussion of the first methodology conference held under the auspices of the IAHR in 1973 (Honko, 1979) reflects a profound polarization between historical and non-historical orientations in the study of religion. By far the greater emphasis is to be found upon the former orientation and it finds its most forceful expression in Kurt Rudolph's 'The Position of Source Research in Religious Studies':

Since the religions in their historical form, with all their historically accessible tradition and forms of expression are the primary object of religious studies (as a disciplinary description), then insofar as they wish to be taken seriously as scholarship, they must first work with the customary philological and historical methods (in Honko, 1979; 100).

Rudolph's main target is not, however, theoretical studies, or, as he calls them, comparative/systematic studies but rather the anti-theoretical backlash to be found in phenomenological/history of religions studies, which involve themselves he claims in a 'hermeneutic circle' that far from providing understanding simply prevents objective perception—such irrationalisms making 'a mockery of scientific verification, which can only operate in terms of articulated and demonstratable judgements' (in Honko, 1979; 105). Nevertheless, the comparative/systematic studies seem to be limited by Rudolph to a merely heuristic role (in Honko, 1979; 109).

The second conference on methodology held in Warsaw in 1979, again under the auspices of the IAHR, reflected the same nervousness about theory.⁴ There seemed to be, especially with respect to Hans Penner's 'Structural Analysis as a Method for the Study of Religion' (1979), a tension between the historians (and phenomenologists) of religion and the 'theoreticians'. The ensuing discussions in many respects paralleled the much older debate between the historians of religion and the theologians a century or more ago at the emergence of the study of religion as an academic enterprise. With respect

to the increasing pressure for more theoretical studies it seems to me that the historians and phenomenologists will, more and more, take over the role once occupied by the theologians—their determined attacks upon the reductionism of theoretical studies becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from apologies for transcendence.

The caution with which matters of theory are broached by the older historians of religion can be seen especially in the coining of a new vocabulary. Not wishing to deny theory any role at all in religious studies, yet fearing the reductionism implicit in such an approach a hybrid terminology has found its way into the literature in the hope of evading both horns of the dilemma implicit in the debate. As far as I have been able to determine it, this 'move' in religious studies was first taken by Joseph Kitagawa (1959) in his distinguishing the sociology of religion, which operates from a purely scientific perspective, from 'religio-sociology' that operates from a 'religio-scientific' perspective that avoids reductionistic explanations of religious phenomena. Ugo Bianchi similarly argues for the necessity of a 'religio-anthropological' approach to religious studies since it, unlike anthropology pure and simple, is likely to show a 'sensitivity to the religious fact as such' (in Honko, 1979; 300). According to Bianchi, that is, such a 'religio-anthropology' 'correctly excludes the programmatic reduction of the "religious" to the social or the psychological. . . ' (in Honko, 1979; 300). Ake Hultkrantz also reverts to such hybrid terminology in his ecologically oriented research on religious phenomena. In several articles (1974, 1979) he takes up the concerns of the implications of the environmental integration of religions and finds himself attributing a decisive influence to the environment in the organization and development of religious forms. He is swift on each occasion, however, to disclaim materialist and other deterministic assumptions in his work—a disclaimer which is obvious also in the switch from 'ecology of religion' in the titles of his papers to 'religio-ecology' in the texts. Such a 'religio-ecology', he insists, 'investigates religion in its general environmental framing and should not be evaluated as a tool for economic determinism' (in Honko, 1979; 223/4).

Such extreme caution appears to amount to a rejection of theory on 'religious grounds'. Further analysis of Hultkrantz's position will, I think, substantiate that claim.

According to Hultkrantz, the aim of 'ecology of religion' is to discover (or generate) the 'mechanism' whereby (especially primitive) religions develop and change. The 'subsistence activities' of a people, he maintains, is the most important means for identifying types of religion. Despite such a search for causal connections between environment and religion, Hultkrantz warns that this is not to be taken as a sign of a materialist interpretation of religion (Hultkrantz, 1974; 5). He attempts to avoid the apparent reductionism by drawing a distinction between 'form' and 'meaning' (or essence, content) in religion: 'We do not touch', he writes,

the religious values as such—they have their anchorage in the psychic equipment of man. We find, however, that the forms of a tribal religion may be meaningfully described in their inter-actions with the ecological adaptation of the culture as a whole and, as a matter of fact, that they are partly produced by this process (Hultkrantz, 1974; 3).

The separation between form and content in this fashion suggests that the environmental conditions give shape to the outer form of religion without involving any change in 'religious value'. Somehow, but inexplicably, such value is safe from change even though the forms that clothe them do undergo change and development. The precise nature of the relationship is never clearly addressed; Hultkrantz simply states: 'We perceive that the forms and patterns of religion often depend on exterior conditions and that much of what we usually conceive to be genuine expressions of religious content is actually fortuitous manifestations' (Hultkrantz, 1974; 10). Consequently the 'ecological theory of religion' can account for the mundane in religion without affecting, so to speak, its transcendental character. That which is most important about religion, therefore, can never be accounted for in a merely theoretical approach to the phenomena.⁵

The contrast between W. C. Smith and M. Harris in their treatments of 'the case of the sacred cow', I suggest, illustrates the internal tensions in the kind of positions advocated by Hultkrantz, *et al.* I set out the contrast here without further comment.

W. C. Smith, an ardent opponent to theoretical studies of religion as I shall point out below, arrives at conclusions on this matter that would be, it seems, entirely acceptable to the 'religio-scientific' researchers in the field. According to Smith:

Religion and modern culture may not be a cosmic issue for us . . . ; but we cannot handle it even as a 'scientific' question (in the European sense) if we do not understand that, and how, it is a cosmic question for those whom we are studying, for those because of whom it is a question at all.

Let no one imagine that the question of what is happening to Islam in Pakistan is anything other than the question of what is happening to man in Pakistan. And even this does not mean only, what is happening to Pakistanis in Pakistan: it is rather, what is happening to mankind in Pakistan—*Let no one imagine that the question of the cow in India, is anything less than the question of how we men are to understand ourselves and our place in the universe.* The Buddhist's involvement in politics in Vietnam is a political question but also a question of our relation to eternity—yours and mine as well as his. Every time a person anywhere makes a religious decision, at stake is the final destiny and meaning of the human race.

If we do not see this, and cannot make our public see it, then whatever else we may be, we are not historians [students?] of religion (in Sharpe, 1975; 284; my emphasis).

Marvin Harris, contrariwise, attempts to understand the meaning of the sacred cow by means of a *theory* of the origins of the Hindu taboo—a theory

that could easily find support in Hultkrantz's ecological analysis of religion. Harris, that is, searches for the probabilistic causes of the taboo; a nomethetic explanation of it in terms of practical, mundane and adaptive processes of community to environment. He sets out to explain, causally, specifically why religions that rejected (or at least restricted) the consumption of animal flesh would have developed in India—especially since it involved a conversion from earlier meat-eating practices (Harris, 1979; 251). According to Harris the conversion can be accounted for in wholly non-religious terms: it simply became too costly as food 'as a result of fundamental changes in the ecosystem and the mode of production' (Harris, 1979; 252). Thus, like the pig in other contexts, the cow became the focus of ritual restrictions. Harris then proceeds to point out why in India the cow is venerated whereas in Mesopotamia the pig became an abomination. Harris writes:

The explanation is this: cost-benefits of the pig involve only its utility as meat. When that meat became ecologically too expensive, the whole pig becomes an abomination because it was useless—worse than useless, a danger in its entirety. But when beef in India became too expensive ecologically, the animal in its entirety did not lose its value. On the contrary, the slaughter and beef-eating taboos actually reflect the indispensability of cattle as a source of traction under conditions of high pre-industrial population densities and rainfall agriculture. Hence, the cow became holy rather than dirty in order to protect its vital function as the mother of the bullock. As Mohandas K. Gandhi once explained: 'Not only did she give milk, but she also made agriculture possible' (Harris, 1979, 252/3).

The Smith and Harris accounts of the 'meaning' of the sacred cow are, obviously, mutually exclusive or incompatible. Nevertheless, it is to precisely such conclusions,—to be held simultaneously—it appears to me, that one is driven by the 'religio-scientific' approaches to religious studies advocated by scholars such as Kitagawa, Bianchi, Hultkrantz and others.

There are some in the field of religious studies today who, it appears, entirely eschew theoretical accounts or explanations of religions and religious phenomena. Michael Novak's introductory *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (1971) enters a plea for a kind of 'existential' approach to religious studies that will *transcend* theory. Indeed, he advocates *action* as the starting place of inquiry: 'Action reveals being. Action is our most reliable mode of philosophizing' (Novak, 1971; 46). The category of 'story' is proposed as an interpretive tool instead of abstract theory for it '... cannot be reduced to a set of principles or criteria. The reason is that man is a dramatic animal. His actions are larger, more comprehensive, and more complex than his capacity for analysis' (Novak, 1971; 63). Consequently, 'whether a person counts a theory as true, or relevant, or useful depends upon his or her own autobiography for only through autobiography do theories touch ground' (Novak, 1971; 86).

D. Z. Phillips more recently in his *Religion Without Explanation* (1976) also

rejects any possibility of a theoretical interpretation of religion. He maintains that theoretical accounts of religion are reductionistic and, consequently, fail to come to a true understanding of the nature of religions (religious discourse). He argues that such accounts are influenced and shaped by an uncritical acceptance of Hume's philosophical legacy—that is, by the adoption of a view of religious discourse as 'referential' and explanatory. In light of modern science, of course, such 'explanations' are seen to be without reality—to be mere, even though important, fictions and as fictions, themselves in need of explanation. The reductionist creed of theoreticians, he writes, can be summed up as follows:

... (a) religion is a fiction; (b) we can understand its genesis; (c) religious beliefs can be restated in the language of the realities which produced them; (d) all talk of religious factors can thus be eliminated (Phillips, 1976; 139).

If Hume's assumptions about the referential character of religious discourse are challenged, however, both the 'explanatory character' of religious beliefs and its need of explanation, according to Phillips, evaporate. In a further discussion of certain 'projectionist' theories of religion he insists that the important questions that need raising are:

What if talk about a supernatural being does not entail the problematic inference from the world to God which, as we have seen, gives rise to insurmountable logical difficulties? What if talk about the supernatural does not entail the postulation of two worlds, one of which is beyond the one we know in the sense Hume found so objectionable? What if talk of being in the world and yet not of it does not entail the kind of dualism that philosophers find so objectionable? (Phillips, 1976; 97).

Such questions, he argues, can only be answered properly by looking at the role which such ideas have in the context of religious belief. If one is careful to do this it can be shown, he maintains, that religion (or magic or metaphysics for that matter) cannot be construed as a mistake or a blunder. Religious discourse is a different kind of activity to that of explaining which, when noticed, can make sense of people, putting it rather paradoxically, 'believing' what it does not make sense to believe. In asking about the sense of such a possibility Phillips comments:

It is important here to resist the temptation to answer in the negative, just as it is important not to deny that the metaphysician means what he says. It is not that these people do not mean what they say. They do. The point to emphasize is that what they want to say cannot be said. Further, the reason why they want to say these things cannot be explained by revealing an error (Phillips, 1976; 109).

Theories, then, are 'shortcuts' to understanding that in the final analysis mislead rather than enlighten, us. The error lies in our accepting 'Hume's

legacy' and failing to pay close attention to the use of language generally, and religious discourse in particular. Phillips summarizes his position, therefore, as follows:

The use of language is of particular interest because it shows that certain theories about what constitutes rational behaviour are inadequate and too narrow. What is needed, however, is not to replace the narrow theory with a wider one, but to stop theorizing about what conditions must be fulfilled for behaviour to be rational. Instead of stipulating what *must* constitute intelligible uses of language, one should look to see how language is in fact used. If one does, one comes across the use of language found in magical and religious rites and rituals. Such language is not based on opinions or hypotheses, but is expressive in the ways I have tried to indicate. Faced by it, the philosopher's task is not to attempt to verify or falsify what he sees, for that makes no sense in this context. His task is a descriptive one; he gives an account of the uses of language involved. He can only say that these language-games are played (Phillips, 1976; 41).

R. H. Bell under the same philosophic influence argues a similar claim in his 'Understanding the Fire-Festivals: Wittgenstein and Theories in Religion' (1980). Bell, like Phillips, points out that Wittgenstein's aim in understanding is 'to come to some personal satisfaction regarding the disquieting situation [and that] therein lies *the understanding* . . . ; in the experiences we have which bring our hearts and minds to rest' (Bell, 1980; 122). More fully, he writes:

Whether there be an explanation or not, nothing is lost, all is contained in the act. Understanding the fire-festivals is like that—they aim at nothing other than the satisfaction of those who participate in them. We understand them in so far as we have acted in similar deep, and perhaps sinister ways, within our own particular form of life' (Bell, 1980; 123).

A search for a theoretical understanding of religion in the light of this is seen, then, to be an evasion of responsibility, an easy detour, but, at the same time, a fundamental distortion of 'the truth'. As Bell puts it:

. . . it shifts the burden of the investigation *on to* an abstract level and *away from* the level where the symbolizing process, the myth or the ceremonial act, is doing something, i.e. its job. The burden of understanding is shifted from ourselves onto a theory (Bell, 1980; 116).

W. C. Smith mounts perhaps the most vehement attack against theory in the study of religion.⁶ In a symposium on method in the study of religion he castigates H. Penner's attempt to develop a semantic theory of religion, claiming that Penner ought rather to have tried *to understand* religion rather than *to explain* it. To theorize is to fail to see that meaning resides in persons and consequently de-personalizes the study of religion, or, as Smith would have it, 'religious persons'. He writes:

The scientific enterprise, as I understand it, is deliberately, successfully, an attempt to de-personalize. It strains, struggles, strives to construct statements whose meaning and whose truth will be independent of the person who makes them, that will be interchangeable among everybody concerned. And this de-personalization works spectacularly well in the understanding of molecular chemistry and spectacularly badly in the understanding of human life (in Baird, 1975; See also 105).

The use of 'abstract theory' rather than concern for 'concrete reality' and the search for 'universal generalization' rather than concern with 'particular fact' shows how much the application of 'science' to the study of religion destroys the object of that study: 'To subordinate one's understanding of man to one's understanding of science is inhumane, inept, irrational, unscientific' (in Baird, 1975;9). Here, and implicitly throughout most of his work, which unfortunately cannot be presently submitted to examination,⁷ Smith charges that *anything* less than—perhaps better, 'more than'—a personalist (non-theoretical) approach is not only ill-suited to the subject matter but blasphemous:

In the humanities . . . and for that matter in the social sciences the subject-matter is greater than the student. It is blasphemous to deny this or to ignore it; it is intellectually an error not to recognize it; it is morally wrong to wish that it were not so. We must recognize, accept, and deal with this over-riding fact (in Baird, 1975; 21).

Before dispensing with this 'sketch' of the role of theory in religious studies it is necessary to reiterate that, nomothetic-anxiety or no, theory has always been *and* still is an important element in the history of religious studies, not only in the sense of the generalizing nature of comparative religious research with its typologies and classificatory work but also in the sense of the formulation of specific empirical theories to account for either some aspect or other of religion or a particular religious tradition or of religion in general. Ninian Smart correctly points out:

that some degree of theory is unavoidable in the study of religion is fairly plain if we attend to the following points: first, the use of general categories (such as the terms *numinous*, *sacrifice*, *god* and so forth) faces us with decisions of classification . . . that includes a theoretical component, second, historical explanations involve some theoretical elements (such as views about patterns of human motivation, the likely effects of certain kinds of experience and so forth); and third, there is a laudable, but admittedly sometimes rash, *nisus* to see whether cross-cultural and other resemblances in the field of religions can be explained (Smart, 1978; 172).

And it is difficult to see why the task of 'generalizing' and 'systematizing' ought to stop here. To deny theory a role in interpreting religion simply because it is an 'extra-religious explanation' is insufficient. Th. P. van Baaren remarks on behalf of a systematic/theoretical study of religion are appropriate:

The first remark *vis a vis* religion as a cultural phenomenon it not meant to deny religion its own specific character within the framework of a culture, neither would I neglect the fact that most religions claim a super-cultural cause for their existence. However, giving attention to what a religion proclaims about its own existence, does not mean that science of religion has to accept these statements without criticism as the ultimate source of our knowledge for the religion in question. Science of religion has no reason to accord higher value to what a religion states about itself than to a report by others, because it is not at all sure that in all cases self-understanding is essentially better than the understanding others may have (van Baaren and Drijvers, 1973; 37).

This is not, of course, to justify all theorizing about religion. Hans Penner, for example, who is most emphatic in the call for a greater emphasis upon the theoretical study of religion, takes issue with broad, untestable theories (see Penner, 1971; 1979). The 'functionalist theories' of religion which Penner finds unacceptable have, of course, been a part of the religious studies scene since its emergence and are still with us, in anthropology, for example, with A. F. C. Wallace's *Religion: An Anthropological View* (1966) or Annemarie de Waal Malefijt's *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion* (1968); or in Sociology with J. Milton Yinger's *The Scientific Study of Religion* (1970). However, these are not the only theoretical proposals to have been made. Hans Mol's *Identity and the Sacred: A Sketch for a New Social Scientific Theory of Religion* (1976), for example, adds refinements to older functionalist themes. And John Bowker's work, both in *The Sense of God* (1973) and *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God* (1978), in interpreting religions in terms of communication theory as systems of constraints revitalizes the evolutionary hypothesis in the study of religion.⁸ Furthermore, a renewal of 'intellectualist' theories of primitive religions is to be found in the work of Robin Horton and others and 'symbolist' theories, such as is to be found in John Beattie's work, as alternatives have gained a wide hearing. An analysis of this work in J. Skorupski's *Symbol and Theory: A Philosophical Study of Theories of Religion in Social Anthropology* (1976) is helpful and enlightening.

Of even more importance than these large scale attempts at theoretical interpretation are the 'micro-theoretical' studies that allow for greater precision and testing. As examples of such theoretical work one might point to E. Thomas Lawson's 'The Explanation of Myth and Myths as Explanation' (1978) in which, following a critique of emotivist, intellectualist, symbolist and functionalist theories of Myth he attempts to formulate a structuralist theory of myth. In applying his structuralist analysis within a limited range of empirical phenomena he hopes to provide a basis for broader claims. 'There is no reason', he writes,

why such progress cannot now be made in empirical studies in the field of religion in general and myth and ritual in particular. We may be on the verge of finally

developing causal explanations of religious behaviour of a genuinely theoretical kind without having to settle for outmoded models including models which accept myths at their face value . . . (Lawson, 1978; 519/20)?

Hans Penner's 'Creating a *Brahman*: A Structuralist Approach to Religion' (1975) and 'Structural Analysis as a Method for the Study of Religion' (1979) in which he applies the analysis to an interpretation of caste in India are further examples of similar work. H. Byron Earhart's recent 'Towards a Theory of the Formation of the Japanese New Religions: A Case Study of Gedatsu-Kai' (1980), although with few pretensions for broader analysis makes a similar theoretical (although non-structural) contribution.

It is obvious, given this picture of present research activity in the field of religious studies, that, despite the 'nomothetic-anxiety' that admittedly exists, theoretical studies of religion are by no means dead or fruitless.

II

The foregoing observations have not been intended as a systematic historical treatment of the role of theory in the study of religion. Nevertheless they do present something of the difficult context within which any discussion or analysis of 'theory' for students of religion must be undertaken. Neither an easy acceptance or rejection of theory in this area of research, quite obviously, will be possible. I shall attempt to argue in the remainder of this paper, however, that without theory the scholarly or academic study of religion is simply incomplete. I do not expect the argument to be conclusive. What I hope to do, however, is to clarify somewhat the notion of theory and to delineate some of the implications of its application in the field of religious studies.

A review of the use of the concept of theory in the literature discussed in section I above reveals a lamentable ambiguity. Even a cursory reading produces a bewildering variety of meanings for 'theory': 'theory' is used synonymously, or nearly so, with method, conjecture, approach, perspective, hypothesis, model, paradigm, explanation, view, way of understanding, conceptual scheme/framework, interpretation, etc. 'Theory' is often used in so loose a manner that it means little more than 'a solution to a problem or a generalization that "goes beyond the facts".' On the other hand, it is also used in so broad a sense as to be undistinguishable from metaphysics and speculative philosophy. Indeed, so confused is the present discussion that the term 'theory' is applied to incommensurable positions taken up by the protagonists. Penner and Yonan, for example, in accounting for the theory-shy nature of most contemporary study of religion suggest that the reticence is due to the acceptance of *theories* of religion 'which speak of religion as *sui generis* and, therefore, irreducible' (Penner and Yonan, 1972; 110). Yet such theorists are

really anti-theorists, it would appear, since according to them ‘the “something” which must be understood cannot in principle be given a definition or a theory’ (Penner and Yonan, 1972; 132). And Larson in his *Prolegomenon to a Theory of Religion* (1978) can refer to W. C. Smith’s position with respect to the study of religion as something of a ‘conversation-stopper’ while also referring to R. Otto and M. Eliade—whose ‘positions’ are, in that regard, indistinguishable from Smith’s—as ‘theoreticians in Religious Studies’. Indeed, Larson even includes G. van der Leeuw, self-confessed anti-theorist as I have pointed out above, amongst the theoreticians.

Nor does this confusion in the great ‘theory/anti-theory debate’ lie simply on one side of the dividing line. W. C. Smith, in his reaction to the scientific approaches) to the study of religion, lashes out at theory in general and in particular attacks H. Penner’s attempt to develop a semantic theory of religion. And yet even Smith consciously acknowledges that such theories of religion are possible and not, as he had suggested, internally incoherent: ‘. . . scientists who look at human affairs that way’, he writes, ‘are disproving my point that it can’t be done. It can be done, and it strikes me as disastrous’ (Baird, 1975; 105). Nevertheless, hard on the heels of this admission he re-asserts the incoherence of the theoretical enterprise and does so, it seems, on the basis of a (Religious?) theory of persons:

I am against the application of what looks to be scientific method—natural science method—to human affairs . . . to the study, the understanding of human affairs. The application of what seems to be the natural science method, in the study of human affairs, insofar as it is impersonalism . . . is intellectually calculated to miss what it’s attempting to understand, because, I think, on theoretical grounds, that you cannot understand persons if you don’t recognize that they’re persons (Baird, 1975; 106).

Consequently Smith’s objections to theory seem to amount to a ‘theory’ against theories of religion—a paradoxical and perplexing result.

Further discussion of theory in the study of religious phenomena is unlikely, I am afraid, to provide enlightenment. Given the present complexity and confusion of opinions already available as to the value of theory in understanding religion it might be wisest simply to remain silent. However, I think there might be some benefit to set about an analysis of the concept of theory where it is most at home, namely, in the natural sciences. Although even in this context there is no unanimity of opinion, some agreement as to the essential character and function of theory can be found which is bound to be of some assistance in analyzing its role in religious studies.

In a strict sense theory in science is a logical structure—a formula or calculus ‘applied’ to the world either in the sense of ‘interpreting’ the world or being ‘imposed upon’ the world.⁹ Such theory is usually introduced in science only after study has already revealed uniformities in the field of research that

can be expressed in the form of empirical laws. Theories, that is, are not invoked to explain particular events but rather whole categories of events and empirical uniformities. Such explanation is achieved 'deductively' by pointing to basic entities and processes that constitute the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the occurrence of the phenomena in question. Although it appears from this account that theories emerge by inductive inference on the basis of the empirical laws derived from 'observation' this need not in fact be so. As I shall point out below it is more likely that theories are the result of the creative imagination in attempting to account for the facts and empirical laws in hand—a kind of reasoning that has been dubbed 'abductive inference'.

The statements characterizing the basic entities and processes invoked by the theory can be expressed as a formal system. Theories are not, however, *purely* formal systems reduced simply to a syntax. They require a semantic dimension because it is intended that the world should be known in such systems of propositions. The semantic element allows for an interpretation of the system by means of 'bridging principles' or 'correspondence rules' that link the processes envisaged by the theory to the empirical phenomena under consideration. It is precisely such principles that make the theory testable.

The assumptions made by scientific theory about the underlying processes, however, must be carefully and clearly specified in order to permit the derivation of specific implications concerning the phenomena that the theory is to explain. The concepts involved must not only deliver a sense of being familiar or 'at home' with the phenomena but must explain presently known empirical uniformities and allow prediction of yet unknown facts.

In fulfilling the task of explanation *and* prediction it becomes obvious that theories are not mere images of the world—not merely a set of particular explanations of particular events—but rather a conjectural reconstruction of reality that represents a kind of foreunderstanding of reality. Indeed, only in this latter sense are theories of any heuristic value for they go beyond the mere task of accounting for the present data. Indeed, theories have an important role to play in making even observation possible as recent discussions of the theory-ladenness of observation show quite clearly. Consequently the theory does not derive from observation (i.e., by some inductivist procedure) but is rather the result of *a priori* reasoning—although not, obviously, without acquaintance with the phenomena. Because of its formal or logical structure it is provisionally taken as valid and true but must be empirically tested.

It is important to point out here that complete formalization of theory is not possible since that aim conflicts with other goals of theories such as empirical testability. (As it has already been stated, empirically testable theories have a semantic component and are not purely syntactical.) This holds true for theories in the natural sciences as in any other field of research. Furthermore, as Richard Rudner maintains, full formalization, although providing deduc-

tive clarity, *may* not be good for, especially in the early stages of theory formation, great rigor might stultify rather than assist inquiry and, he continues, 'the disproportionate allocation of scientific energies available to this one facet of the scientific enterprise might result in the neglect of other equally important aspects of that enterprise' (Rudner, 1966; 52). In any event, it is important to recognize that 'the overwhelming majority of extant scientific theories, especially theories in social science, are not at present susceptible of fruitful or easy full formalization' (Rudner, 1966; 11).

It is not likely that the notion of 'scientific theory' outlined here will find favour in the eyes of the 'humanistic' students of religion adverted to above, and that for obvious reasons. Nor would it be difficult for such anti-theorists to marshal adequate evidence to show that students of religion have not been able to supply any such fully, or even nearly fully, formalized theory of religion. This would not itself be surprising given that even the theories in the natural sciences have not achieved such status and that the social sciences are almost destitute of theory. Furthermore, W.G. Runciman in his *Social Science and Political Theory* (1971) persuasively argues that not only is there no general social theory—there being just too many facets of human existence and behaviour to be accounted for—but that it would be a waste of effort to search for one. He writes:

. . . to wish to lump them [i.e. all aspects of human behaviour] all together under a single explanatory heading is to adopt a kind of pre-Socratic approach. Only in the very early days of natural science was it reasonable or interesting to suggest, like Thales of Ionia, that everything is water; and only in the very early days of systematic social science was it reasonable or interesting to suggest, like Marx and Engels, that every social act, institution, or relation is basically economic (Runciman, 1971; 3/4).

Despite such recognition of the shortcomings of 'social scientific theory' and his abandonment of *general theorizing* by bracketing it with the philosophy of history, Runciman does not entirely give up his notion of a social science. Talk of a social science, he insists, can still be relevant and fruitful if a particular area of human activity is isolated and subjected to examination aimed at a search for 'general explanatory statements' of that behaviour. Such statements, he suggests, will take an 'If . . . then' form that will bear some analogy to theories in the natural sciences.

The religious behaviour of mankind, it seems to me, is one such particular area of human behaviour that may be susceptible of such a theoretic interpretation. Indeed, little sense can be made of the notions of either 'a science of religion' or 'a scientific study of religion'¹⁰ unless and until some generalizations about such behaviour are achieved—i.e. a set of interrelated concepts and propositions from which religious behaviour can be, in a suitably weakened sense, deduced ('made intelligible'). I would argue, that is, that the

mere collection and description of data no more constitutes a 'science of' or 'scientific study of' when concerned with religious phenomena than when concerned with natural or social phenomena. It is for this reason that I have suggested elsewhere (Wiebe, 1974) a crucial role for explanation in the scholarly study of religion and argue the same importance for theory here. The essential connection between explanation and theory is obvious in that each bears the same logical structure. Moreover, the primary function of theories is to make available to the scientist its lawlike statements so as to make possible further and more profound explanatory arguments that go beyond mere empirical classifications and associations. Theories, that is, are simply more general kinds of explanations that account for empirical generalizations and laws which, in turn, account for 'the facts'.

The plausibility of any proposal for a theory of religion, it seems to me, will require a clarification of three central issues: the character of social phenomena, the character of religious phenomena, and the aims of both social and 'religious' inquiry. It has often been argued, for example, that because of the vast difference between natural and social phenomena a method wholly different from that for the natural sciences is required for an understanding of the latter. Similarly it has been suggested, and sometimes argued, that a vast difference exists between ordinary social phenomena and religious phenomena that requires of the student of religion something 'other' or 'more than' a *merely* social scientific understanding. The aims of science and the nature of scientific understanding, furthermore, has often been misread in light of these 'debates'. I shall comment on each of these issues in turn.

According to some the 'self-conscious' subject matter of the social sciences requires of its study a peculiar discipline or, at the very least, special methodological adjuncts to normal scientific procedures. Self-consciousness, that is, raises questions of meaning and meaningfulness that renders social phenomena idiosyncratic and not subsumable under empirical laws. And the uniqueness of historical events excludes any possibility of theoretical generalization. The arguments, however, are not entirely persuasive. Without rehearsing that complex and heated debate here, I think it not entirely implausible, in the light of my earlier analysis of the role of explanation in social studies (Wiebe, 1975), to suggest that the difference between natural and social phenomena can readily be acknowledged without denying the possibility of explanation—of some form of generalized statement about human behaviour. 'Rational accounts' of human behaviour that can be put to empirical testing can still be provided. It is possible, without requiring predictive capacity, to formulate general kinds of propositions about the conditions under which certain kinds of behaviour can be expected to occur; statements which can be used to interpret some specific historical action or other. W. G. Runciman in adverting to the same matter, although in a different context, summarizes the point I am attempting to express here, rather succinctly:

General causal explanations have validity; but history is not reducible entirely to determinate instances of fully articulated sets of laws. The historian (and therefore the social scientist) can never be a thorough-going positivist; but he must, once he has realized this, still try to behave up to a point as though he were (Runciman, 1971; 11).

The difference, therefore, is to be acknowledged as a problem for theorists in the social sciences; however, there must be neither an assumption of complete discontinuity between natural and social phenomena nor must the differences that do exist be ignored as if they were of negligible significance. Such 'acknowledgement' means a giving up of the ideal of full deductive explanation of human behaviour for a 'reasonable account' that provides us with some possibility of testable generalization. This, obviously, imposes limits on a completely positivist approach in the social sciences without, however, landing us in the relativism of 'personal insight' or in mere 'intuitionism'. I can do no better in summarizing this matter than to quote Runciman once again:

I have been agreeing with those who maintain that positivistic claims for the social sciences are *a priori* wrong because of . . . crucial features which distinguish the natural sciences from the social. But the history of science is cluttered with the corpses of arguments of just this kind. The only safe prediction to make about a branch of knowledge is that it is bound to change one way or the other, and probably in a direction that few of its practitioners at a given time would suspect (Runciman, 1971; 19/20).

The assumption that religious phenomena are 'more than' mere social phenomena presents a further and more serious obstacle to serious consideration of talk about a theory of religion. As I have already pointed out above (in section II), religious studies scholars are quick to point out that religion is, for both the 'believer' and the 'unbeliever', a part of social life (and as such accessible to the 'tools' of the social sciences), but that for the 'believer' it is also (claimed to be) something more, making the 'believer's' understanding of it different from that of the nonreligious observer. As Evans-Pritchard, noted above, remarks, the student of religion whether atheist or 'believer' can understand religion as a factor in social life. However, if either tries to understand religion as it really is in itself—essentially or ultimately—their paths must diverge drastically; the atheist seeking theories that will explain the illusion and the 'believer' attempting to understand 'alongside', so to speak, the subject matter under examination (Evans-Pritchard, 1965; 121, as quoted in section I above). It appears that the understanding of the 'believer' derives, then, from either a special technique (other and more than '*Verstehensmethode*' pure and simple, although such method may bear some analogy), that delivers special meanings that lie beyond mere social meanings, or from some kind of privileged status of the believer (such as his/her being the recipient of 'special revelation', for example). If it is the latter that is argued it would

appear that we do not, then, have a scholarly study of religion at all for the very condition supposed that would make such study possible is itself, paradoxically, a religious phenomenon and, hence, a datum. The circularity involved in such a situation would obviously invalidate any conclusion drawn. On the other hand, faith is sometimes referred to as a special technique of discovery open not only to 'believers' but to all students of religion. No clear characterization has ever been provided of it however and it appears, in most discussions, to be indistinguishable from intuition, with the consequence that, if invoked, it would undermine the public and testable character of religious studies. Furthermore there is no recognition that a technique for discovery, a heuristic device, is not self-validating. To 'discover', for example, the real meaning a particular ritual, rite or belief has for some devotee or other is not to 'validate' it nor to confirm its truth or guarantee or ground its explicit or implicit value claim. And if the faith that is such a technique is not distinguishable from religious faith it would appear, again, that in order properly to study religion one must be religious. If it is distinguishable from religious faith it is difficult to see how it can, at the same time, be clearly and specifically differentiated from ordinary *'Verstehensmethode'* as invoked in the other social sciences.

It would seem, given this analysis, that a strong claim to the differences between religious social phenomena and nonreligious social phenomena would make any and all academic (scientific?) study of religion impossible—a conclusion that even the most conservative and theologically oriented scholar would find it impossible to accept. Students of religion need not, however, preclude *a priori* the existence of such a 'religious dimension' of the peculiar social phenomena under investigation—a quality that might well make religious phenomena somewhat elusive. If that esoteric religious quality were wholly inexpressible, however, we would not have what we presently refer to as religious social phenomena as distinct from nonreligious social phenomena. But insofar as that 'religious dimension' of life does find 'embodiment' in various social expressions it becomes available to intersubjectively testable cognitive exploration—and it does so, it appears, without need for any special tools beyond those available to the social sciences. (There is, of course, a sense in which the so-called religious dimension of life is inaccessible because it is a matter of personal experience. But in that case the religious element in (any particular) life would be inaccessible both to the 'believing' and 'non-believing' religious researcher. That kind of 'religiousness', for lack of a better term, is not 'cognitively available'.)

In conclusion it might just be pointed out that the often heard claim that in the field of religious studies a researcher's life *must* be changed by his investigation of religion in ways that it would not be changed in other studies is entirely unsubstantiated. Nor is there any good reason to see why this ought to

be the goal of such research. That this might in fact occur is another matter entirely but in that event would find some analogue in the possibility of anthropologists 'going native'.

The question of the aim of science and the nature of scientific understanding may find an appropriate hearing at this point in this discussion. Although most everyone recognizes that the function of science is not literally to reproduce the 'world' it studies, it seems that many still assume that 'true' scientific statements will, in some sense, convey the very experiences they describe and explain. This seems to be especially so with regard to the social sciences and, as I have just been at pains to show, particularly so with the academic or scientific study of religion. Richard Rudner points out, however, that

it might . . . be argued that this is a function of art—of poetry or painting—but [that] it seems scarcely tenable that this should be an aim in the formulation of scientific statements; for the very thrall in which experiences so conveyed may hold us might be quite incompatible with, and is surely irrelevant to, our predictive, explanatory, or other systemizing uses of such statements (Rudner, 1966; 69).

It is not the task of science, therefore, so Rudner quotes Einstein, to give us the taste of the soup. Nor is the task religious studies to provide us with a transforming religious experience. This is not, obviously, to deny that one can taste soup and/or undergo a transforming religious experience and that a kind of understanding comes along with each process, but neither is it creditable to suggest that this is the only understanding that can be achieved or the only understanding towards which the academic/scientific study ought to be directed.

III

It is obvious from the foregoing discussions that no clear-cut conclusions as to the value of theoretical studies in religion can be drawn. At best agreement seems possible only for the claim that there is little agreement as to its nature and/or its value and that given that inherent ambiguity in the analysis (both historical and philosophical) any further conclusions drawn must be tentative and subject to review.

It is the further *tentative* conclusions that one might draw from the discussion above that I set out for consideration here. They are modest and yet, if found to be 'acceptable', have far-ranging implications.

Firstly, and least objectionably, there can be little doubt that all academic study of religion involves some kind of theoretical element even if not outright theories. Even the historian of religion and phenomenologist, who, according to some methodologists, are not theorists, generalize in the use of typologies, classificatory schemes, etc. Secondly, as this account has shown, many students of religion have attempted to formulate theories of religion and have

found such theories, if not complete explanatory successes, of great heuristic value. Furthermore, there is every indication that such theoretically oriented research will be carried on in the future. To attempt to undermine or block such work in the name of 'humanistic research', therefore, seems to be not only futile but a sad misunderstanding of the wider meaning of the academic or scholarly study of religion.

If the first two concluding observations are anywhere near the truth it would seem that the search for theories proper in religious studies and even for a theory of religion in general is inevitable. If religion is, so to speak, 'cognitively available' to the academic community—as even the work of the historian and phenomenologist indicate that it is—it is in principle capable of theoretical interpretation. And it is only natural that there should be such an impetus to proceed toward greater systematization in the study of religion, as in other scientific disciplines, by bringing under a general law or theory the classifications, typologies and other *ad hoc* generalizations of the historians and phenomenologists. This allows not only for explanation of that of which we are already aware but also provides a guide to further research.

A further conclusion which we are forced to draw I suggest, and this one more controversial than the preceding, is that theory in religious studies is, and must be, social scientific theory. There is no such animal as 'autonomous theory of religion', as some might be tempted to refer to it, for, as I have shown here and elsewhere (Wiebe, 1977), there is no peculiar and autonomous discipline such as 'the science of religion' that somehow hangs suspended between theology and the social/human sciences. It has been shown that there really are no good reasons for the claim that 'cognitively available religious phenomena' are radically different from or 'more than' nonreligious social phenomena susceptible of 'normal social analysis'. On this score H. Penner is quite right to claim that 'the study of religion is an aspect of the study of man and this means that we have no need for unique theories, methods or intuitions' (Baird, 1975; 60).

It must be admitted that religious studies do not provide us with fully formed theories. Indeed, the theories in the whole of the social/human sciences come nowhere near the logical rigor or empirical testability of theories in the natural sciences. Some, in fact, would argue that not only are our theories here few and far between, but that they are also, in general, so loosely structured as to be indistinguishable from philosophy or speculative metaphysics. This certainly appears to be the case, for example, with M. Eliade's so-called phenomenological theory of religion. 'Evidence' such as this might be thought, then, to lend some support to the reticence on the part of the 'humanist scholars' in the field to recognize a role for theory in religious studies. However, even though I agree with the general 'rule of thumb' that it is unwise to put all one's eggs into a single basket and therefore wish to keep an open

mind about the value of 'humanist studies', the difficulties of theoretical analysis do not constitute a conclusive argument against it. That we cannot provide, deductive-nomological explanations of religious (or any other kind of) behaviour is not grounds for jettisoning the search for explanation or for opting for a (psychologically) relativistic personalist interpretation of that behaviour. Similarly, the fact that no fully formed, subsumptive theory of religion or religious behaviour has yet been formulated hardly constitutes sufficient ground for the rejection of a search for something weaker yet still a reasoned, systematic account of how things must be if the behaviour under examination is to be properly understood. There is a lot of truth to M. Harris' response to those who would, for lack of perfection, replace theory and controlled observation with a supposed knowledge gained by undisciplined experience or some kind of personal inspiration. He writes 'Failure to achieve complete predictability does not invalidate a scientific theory; it merely constitutes an invitation to do better' (Harris, 1979; 11). The task of the 'scientist of religion', therefore, is a difficult but not an *a priori* impossible or unfruitful one. An obvious aid, as I have noted above, is the basing of general theories of religion on what one might refer to as 'micro-theoretical' work—theoretical analyses of limited areas of human behaviour and limited even to areas of human religious behaviour that can more easily be tested against empirical reality but which can later become the focus of more general and bolder theorizing.

Because of the 'softer' character of theory in the social as opposed to the natural realm one ought to expect both that a greater number of theories are likely to be proposed and that they will be more difficult to assess and evaluate. However, here again it must be recognized that even though scientific judgement is difficult it is not necessarily impossible. Philosophical reflection, as C. Brakenhielm points out (1975) can help in forging conceivable criteria for any acceptable theory of religion. Without attempting to be exhaustive he suggests six criteria, which, if applied in the situation described here, would be immensely helpful in establishing credibility for a scientific (theoretical) study of Religion. According to Brakenhielm the criteria can be stated in the following six 'ought-statements':

1. An acceptable theory of religion ought to build upon an acceptable general philosophical view.
2. An acceptable theory of religion ought to be intersubjectively testable.
3. An acceptable theory of religion ought to be consistent and tenable.
4. An acceptable theory of religion ought to be simple.
5. An acceptable theory of religion ought to have wide scope.
6. An acceptable theory of religion ought to embrace a correct analysis of religious beliefs belonging to the scope of the theory (Brakenhielm, 1975; 183)

Although Brakenhielm's suggestions emerge from an analysis of philoso-

phical theories of religion, a discussion of such criteria as these might well form at least the basis for more fruitful dialogue between the 'humanist' and the more 'scientific' scholars in religious studies. The first of the criteria, especially, would provide a kind of 'neutral ground' for such a discussion. One might for example, following suggestions to be found in M. Harris' *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (1979), debate the 'research strategies' that underlie the 'humanist' and the 'scientific' approaches to religious studies. That metatheoretical task, however, cannot be undertaken here.

I do not expect the conclusions arrived at here, given their hesitant and unsystematic character, to be widely accepted, nor would I wish to have them escape critical debate. And I have little illusion as to the general persuasive force of the arguments that have been set out in their support. I recognize that the potentiality of theory to distract from or in any way diminish the 'transcendent meaningfulness' of Religion will, for many, count powerfully, if not decisively, against it. Nevertheless, without sound reason for believing that 'religious understanding' (and commitment) must necessarily be right everywhere and always (or, necessarily, even anywhere or at any time) there is no good reason for assuming 'scientific understanding' to be necessarily wrong. Just as 'Religion' has, in the past, found itself in possible and actual conflict with the findings of science so 'Religion' can, potentially, (and does so 'actually' in a number of cases) find itself in conflict with the scientific understanding of religion. Consequently, even though the arguments here may not be entirely persuasive they do nevertheless provide some grounds for the conclusions drawn even should they lead to conclusions that might 'undermine' religion. Further work will need to be done in clarifying, in relation to theory, other key concepts in the study of religion such as definition, reduction, meaning, model, etc., if those grounds are to be strengthened. Analysis and evaluation of existing theories in the field may also prove helpful in this regard, perhaps providing a typology of theories that would allow comparison of explanatory successes and failures.

Whether the argument here, then, is entirely persuasive or not, it seems to me that all the signs point in the direction of future research in the field of religious studies being increasingly theoretical, and, concomitantly, increasingly fruitful.

NOTES

- 1 My attention in this paper will be focused primarily on the emergence of the study of religion as an academic discipline (i.e., a 'university subject') with the rise of the 'phenomenologists'. The 'phenomenologists', I would argue, constitute a dominant tradition in the history of the scholarly study of religion. (See Wiebe, 1981b, especially the introduction and chapter 2). The human/social sciences, although more theoretically oriented in their study of religious phenomena had

little impact, as I shall show, on the members of the community of scholars more directly concerned with research and study of those phenomena.

- 2 It is against this new hegemony in religious studies that the authors of *Religion, Culture and Methodology* (1973; eds. Th. P. van Baaren and H. J. W. Drijvers) find themselves arrayed. H. J. W. Drijvers in his 'Theory Formation in Science of Religion and the Study of the History of Religions' is representative: 'It has long been the fashion in comparative science of religion, especially in the branch called phenomenology, to be content with the understanding of religious structure (*Verstehen*). Since for the practitioners of the phenomenological method, G. van der Leeuw, C. J. Bleeker and others, religion is the revelation of the ultimate and supreme meaning of human existence, whose secret cannot be fathomed because it pertains to a different order, this epistemological view correlates to a theological conception' (64).
- 3 S. G. F. Brandon, in his chapter on 'The Origin of Religion in Theory and Archaeology' (in his *Religion in Ancient History*, 1969), writes:

'The many and diverse theories, advanced during this period by reputable scholars to account for the origin of religion, are generally impressive for their learning and ingenuity. They were mostly patterned on the evolutionary principle, which has dominated Western thinking since the nineteenth century' (10).

R. W. Brockway in an article entitled 'The Victorian Origins of Religion Debate—An Academic Myth' challenges the truth of the claim that early theoretical discussions of religion were intent upon searching out origins. He writes: 'I challenge this [claim] not only as a clichè, but as a fallacy, and maintain that it is an academic fiction created by the mood of anti-evolutionism which overtook the biological and social sciences during the era between the two world wars' (1977; 15). Time does not allow for an exploration of this matter here. A more detailed analysis than the one provided by Brockway would, however, be needed to establish his claim.
- 4 The proceedings of this conference are not yet available, but are soon to be published by the Polish Society for the Study of Religion.
- 5 In correspondence with Professor Hultkrantz about the shift from 'ecology' in the title of the paper to 'religioecology' in the text he responded by saying: 'The import of the title, ecology of religion: there are no assumptions associated with the title of the paper except that religion is, in certain aspects, dependent on ecological aspects. Not religion as such, but the outer forms and structure of religion. I fail to see that this is a materialist assumption.' Of course Professor Hultkrantz is correct in denying a materialist assumption for it is, in fact, an *a priori* 'theological' assumption that prevents him from taking seriously the *implication* of his theory that ecological analysis may in fact account for not only 'outer religious forms' but for 'religion as such'.
- 6 Professor Smith's stand against a scientific and 'generalizing' study of religion is the dominant theme in most of his work from *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (1962) to his *Belief and History* (1977) and *Faith and Belief* (1979). Although I concentrate here on his comments in the Iowa Symposium on method in the study of religion (in Baird, 1975), both in his paper 'against method' and in his response to Penner, one might equally well consult his 'Objectivity and the Humane Sciences: A New Proposal' (1975), an address delivered before the Royal Society of Canada (and reprinted in abridged form in *Religious Diversity: Essays by Wilfred Cantwell Smith*, ed. by W. G. Oxtoby, 1976).

- 7 I have subjected Smith's views to closer, and critical, analysis in my 'The Role of "Belief" in the Study of Religion: A Response to W. C. Smith' (1979a) as well as in my 'Does Understanding Religion Require Religious Understanding?' (1979b) and a review of his *Faith and Belief* (1981a).
- 8 It is interesting to note here that Bowker, who although a theologian, like many of the critics of 'theory in religion', sees no necessary conflict between a theoretical interpretation of religion and a theological one: 'The development of this theory, therefore, does not in any way eliminate or make unnecessary ontological question and comment. Indeed, when one surveys also the continuity of the sense of God beyond the ruin of particular characterizations, such comment seems to be demanded, at least in the phenomenological sense of asking what would have to be the case for such appearances to occur as do occur, particularly in the widely reported human experience of responsive transcendence . . .' (1978; 27).
- 9 This discussion of theory in the sciences is based largely on the philosophy of science to be found in Karl Popper, although keeping in mind Popper critiques such as those to be found in T. S. Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and others.
- 10 I have elsewhere (Wiebe, 1977) argued that there is no peculiar discipline of 'the science of religion', but the term, nevertheless, still has wide currency. I have attempted here to refer to the field of studies implied by that term as, simply, 'religious studies' of which the social scientific studies form one aspect.

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