

Chapter Ten

*Phenomenology of Religion
as Religio-Cultural Quest:
Gerardus van der Leeuw and the
Subversion of the Scientific Study of Religion*

In this essay I will be discussing the fundamental contradiction at the heart of van der Leeuw's phenomenological enterprise; that his phenomenology of religion is directed to both scientific and extra-scientific goals that are mutually exclusive. He responds to the crisis of religion in the radical secularization of Western culture from the vantage point of the academic study of religion, but in so doing he undermines the very foundations on which the legitimacy of the study of religion was established in the Dutch universities. In his attempt to arrest what he sees as cultural deterioration in the West, he draws not only upon Christian spiritual resources but also upon analogous non-Western traditions. This in itself is not a problem. However, his appropriation of the phenomenology of religion in this crusade shows his failure to recognize that it involves a radical transformation of the academic study of religion. In deliberately refusing to draw a clear line of demarcation between religion and the academic, scientific study of religion (which includes the phenomenology of religion), he effectively makes of the latter but another religious quest.

In surveying the approaches to the Old Testament in modern research, Herbert F. Hahn in 1956 concluded that the field was in a state of crisis caused by what I have referred to elsewhere as a "failure of nerve" with respect to the scientific attitude of objectivity that had increasingly come to characterize the field. As Hahn put it:

[T]he crisis grows out of a loss of confidence in the historical approach on the part of many who formerly favoured it. They have come to doubt whether a detailed and objective method of investigation can interpret the inner mean-

ing of religious literature. The historical method had been content to discover the origin and growth of religious ideas in the Bible and to place them in proper perspective in the religious history of mankind. But of late, the conviction has been growing that historical understanding divorced from commitment to belief is unproductive of true insight where religious conceptions are concerned. (1956: xi-xii)

The political and social turmoil of the twentieth century, claimed Hahn, had convinced many scholars that the scientific approach to research on the Old Testament would not contribute to a better social order and that, consequently, it was necessary to replace "the optimistic belief in mankind's progress toward a better social order and a firm faith in the ability of human reason to discover and apply general principles for successful living" (xii) with the eternal verities of religion. It was therefore the failure of society in coping with the social and political problems of the day—rather than objective, scientific considerations—that led to a revival of traditional dogma and the establishment of a new religious orthodoxy as the framework within which a socially and spiritually relevant understanding of the Old Testament texts was to be achieved.

According to Hahn, there was not simply a rejection of the scientific method and principles of objective research hitherto characteristic of the critical approach to the Old Testament (41); there was also a dissatisfaction with the concomitant refusal to deal with "the inner significance" of that literature (43). Such a scientifically critical approach, it was admitted, "contributed greatly to the increase of knowledge," but, the critics of the scientific approach charged, "it did not deepen understanding" (43). Scholarship, that is, came to be considered "meaningless" if it restricted itself wholly to objective claims (129). The following extended passage from Hahn illustrates the dissatisfaction of many scholars with the "objectivity" of the Wellhausen school:

Examination of the Old Testament writings by the same methods as were used in the study of other ancient books did not seem to result in an interpretation that gave significant meaning to those writings. The critical reconstruction of Old Testament religious history, setting forth as it did the ideas of the Old Testament only in relation to the circumstances from which they arose, made the viewpoints of the biblical writers simply an expression of an ancient way of life and the embodiment of a particular historic culture. It did not interpret them in terms that gave them universal validity as the expression of general principles. To those who were aware that the importance of the Bible in human history was not due to the accuracy with which it reflected the viewpoints of an ancient culture, but to the permanent significance of its most basic ideas, the emphasis on descriptive fact rather than normative principle

seemed like "mere antiquarianism." Even when the results of critical study were accepted as scientifically correct, the feeling remained that the real value of the Old Testament, as essentially religious in content and point of view, had somehow been missed. (228–229)

A survey of the approaches to the study of religion in modern research should bring us to a similar conclusion about this field of study. Raffaele Pettazzoni, for example, in his essay on "History and Phenomenology in the Science of Religion," seems to echo the same concern with respect to the academic study of religions that is voiced by the critics of the objective study of the Old Testament. "We have told ourselves," he writes, "that it is not enough to know precisely what happened and how facts came to be; what we want above all to know is the meaning of what happened. The deeper understanding cannot be asked for from the religions; it springs from another religious science, phenomenology" (1954: 217). Phenomenology, for Pettazzoni, must therefore be an independent science whose concern is to achieve an understanding of the interior experience of religion. This understanding (*Verstehen*), however, must be combined with the objective knowledge of the history of religion and not be merely an addition to it. Though phenomenology, therefore, is independent, Pettazzoni nevertheless sees it as part of a composite "Science of Religion" that can breathe life into the other elements of the science—such as the History of Religions—that provides merely historical treatment of the exterior manifestations of religion. A "proper" recognition of the symbiotic relationship between the history of religions and phenomenology, he maintains, will assist in the recovery of the unity of what he sees as the ideal sources of the field of religious studies, namely, theology and the humanist sciences. Given his abhorrence of dualism, the emergence of phenomenology of religion is for Pettazzoni the most important innovation of the first half of the twentieth century, and he encourages further development of this trend of thought.

The phenomenologist Pettazzoni had in mind was Gerardus van der Leeuw. And it seems that Pettazzoni correctly understood both the nature of van der Leeuw's phenomenology and its implications. But what Pettazzoni sees as a most important innovation to revitalize the academic study of religion I argue is essentially its subversion. In his analysis of the reaction to the scientific study of the Old Testament, Hahn raises the question as to whether it represented a "new path forward" or rather signified a return to a "theological exegesis" ultimately obscuring the gains made by the critical historical studies undertaken (1956: xii). The same question is equally appropriately raised with respect to the phenomenology of religion, for here we see the same insistence that the scientific scholarship related to religious phenomena concern itself with questions of meaning that go beyond the scholarly scientific mandate.

Van der Leeuw, I shall argue, was concerned to transcend such a mandate; he was also concerned to show that transcending that mandate constituted not the abrogation of science but rather its ultimate fulfillment. In that respect, his reaction to the detached, objective-history-of-religions approach to understanding religion mirrors the neo-orthodox reaction to critical biblical studies for whom, as Hahn puts it, “[s]cientific detachment was tantamount to divorcing oneself from the possibility of understanding.” For them, he continues, “no merely intellectual understanding was adequate; there [had to] be the kind of ‘spiritual’ appreciation that comes from personal commitment as well” (241–242).

There have been a number of works on the thought of van der Leeuw and particularly on his contribution to the phenomenology of religion—and I do not wish here simply to cover ground gone over before.¹ However, I think it is not unfair to say that his understanding of phenomenology and the phenomenology of religion, especially as found in his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, is far from clear, and that comments on his phenomenology to date have not been a great deal clearer. Further discussion, therefore, is called for. I do not mean this to be as critical a comment as it first appears, for I am not sure that anyone could provide a very coherent account of van der Leeuw’s position since, as Ake Hulthkrantz has pointed out, it is in some places simply incomprehensible (Hulthkrantz, 1970: 72). My intention in this brief recounting of his phenomenology is not to provide a comprehensive and wholly perspicuous description of his position but rather to discover its central thrust—to bring into focus what Pettazzoni considered its critical innovation in the academic study of religion.

Van der Leeuw’s brief history of phenomenology in the epilegomena of *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (1938) displays quite clearly his view of the significance of the phenomenology of religion. He maintains that the latter results from the various investigations undertaken within the framework of the history of religions. Although van der Leeuw links phenomenology with the work produced in the Enlightenment period by historians of religion, he nevertheless sees the chief impetus to the phenomenology of religion in Romanticism. He goes further, however, to identify an even stronger impetus in “Philosophic Romanticism,” which viewed religious phenomena (manifestations) as signs of a primordial “revelation” requiring a mythological apperception—that is, “a religious immersion within the data of the history of religions” (691).² But neither of these movements, in his opinion, contributed significantly to the development of a phenomenological understanding of religion, although each explored new territories with “incalculable results.” He points out that the wealth of discoveries made in these stages of the growth of the study of religion forced scholars to consider

new ways to handle the enormous amount of information needing attention. Thus was the ground prepared for the phenomenological approach, which in its seeking to understand the essence of religion would simultaneously account for its emergence. Consequently, van der Leeuw suggests, the objective and historical study of religions—which is essentially the source of the development of the phenomenology of religion—is also transformed by it; the phenomenology of religion, that is, occasions a “change of direction of the history of religions” (694). The question I wish to raise here is whether that change of direction in fact amounts to a subversion of the objective historical study of religions.

Although the phenomenological study of religion may have been a by-product of the history of religions in van der Leeuw’s eyes, the two are contradictory, and in fact phenomenology could be seen as inimical to any scientific approach to the study of religions. From the preface to the epilegomena of *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, van der Leeuw talks as if the phenomenological study of religion were involved in a power struggle with scientific studies of religious traditions. “Imperious” and “dominating” theory, for example, is entirely banished from his work, for it is detrimental to a study aimed at *understanding* Religion. Explanation differs from understanding when it applies to religious phenomena. In the opening chapter of the book van der Leeuw rejects theoretical approaches to primitive religions characteristic of British scholarship. Although his anxiety about much of the theoretical discussion is to some extent justified, he does not by any stretch of the imagination provide an adequate foundation for its outright rejection—and certainly not for the rejection of recourse to theory overall. Nevertheless, he remarks in a note that the methods characteristic of such scholarship “can in no case attain *our* goal which is the comprehension of the phenomena in accord with their spiritual content” (27n4). Although the reference to “our goal” might be an innocent remark about the peculiar aims of one of many disciplines concerned with religions, I think it is indicative of a deeper intent—that of bringing about a transformation of the generally accepted academic goal of the study of religion: the acquisition of objective, scientific knowledge of religions.

In chapter 5 van der Leeuw elaborates somewhat on his opposition to theory (and to evolutionary theory in particular) and reveals more clearly an agenda tainted with political overtones. He appears to attribute the ready acceptance of the evolutionary explanation of religion to an “unhealthy” view of the nature and power of a science that effectively subordinates religion. Science, and the desire for explanation, it appears, is destructive; it seems religion can only be restored to its proper status if such reductionistic explanation—and therefore science itself—is subverted. In fact, he attempts to persuade us that this has in part already occurred, although the argument

he provides is very much open to debate. He writes: "Today . . . the need to 'explain' religion has substantially lost ground; at all events we realize that reflection on the causes of natural phenomena cannot of itself constitute religion" (52). Clearly then, an important aspect of van der Leeuw's aim is to point out the limits of scientific explanation and thus to see its secondary role when the study of religion is framed by the quest for *understanding* rather than knowledge. He is concerned not only with developing an approach to the discipline that will facilitate an essential understanding of religion but also to show that the new approach both supersedes the old, objective-scientific approach, and actually fulfils it. And he believes the acquisition of such understanding is not possible without undermining the legitimacy of a purely objective and scientific approach to the study of religion. Van der Leeuw does not deny the possibility of studying the historical forms of religion from a scientific point of view, but he claims that scientific students are in error if they ask such explanations to provide them with total knowledge of the nature of religion. Their adoption of objective, "external" approaches to the study of religion amounts to a refusal to see, as he puts it in his chapter on "The Religion of Love," that "religions are not wares that one can spread out on a table" (646)³ for purely objective scientific research; religion can only be understood from the inside and not "by contemplative observation from a distance" (683).

Having shown to his own satisfaction that objective knowledge gleaned by practitioners of the science of religion must necessarily distort the very thing they set out to examine, van der Leeuw posits the existence of an approach that can provide an understanding not only of the historical forms in which religion is manifested but also of its "essence." That approach is the phenomenology of religion.

Analysis of van der Leeuw's understanding of phenomenology and the phenomenology of religion—and especially as found in the epilegomena—is not an easy task, as many scholars have found. In their discussions of the phenomenology of religion, C.J. Bleeker and Ake Hulthkrantz complain about van der Leeuw's use of speculative philosophical ideas and ignore his methodological discussions in the epilegomena, although this may simply be from a lack of understanding.⁴ And it is little wonder that scholars such as Hans Penner ("Is Phenomenology a method for the study of Religion?"[1970]) or Sanford Krolich ("Through a Glass Darkly: What Is the Phenomenology of Religion?"[1985]) display like puzzlement; or that Eric Sharpe insists that van der Leeuw's methodological principles are subtle and not easily followed (1986: 234). J. Waardenburg, on the other hand, has attempted a close reading and explication of van der Leeuw's notions of phenomenology and the phenomenology of religion, as well as to outline the steps in the process of such a study of religion.⁵ Without proceeding to an-

alyze the success of his venture, I wish to draw attention to that aspect of phenomenology of religion seen by van der Leeuw as distinguishing it from all other approaches to the study of religion, making it superior to empirical and theoretical approaches in the field. My assessment of his position, briefly, is as follows.

In the chapter on "Phenomenon and Phenomenology," van der Leeuw writes: "Phenomenology . . . is neither metaphysics, nor the comprehension of empirical reality. It observes *restraint* (the *epoché*), and its understanding of events depends on its employing 'brackets'. Phenomenology is concerned only with 'phenomena', that is with 'appearance'; for [phenomenology], there is nothing whatever 'behind' the phenomena" (1938: 675). But it is important to recognize that the "restraint" of which he speaks is not merely a methodological device but also involves a (subjective) *attitude* to reality. Such an attitude, he argues, should block out all "the accidental coefficients of the existence of objects in the world in order to get at their essence" (676). The "attitude" that does this "blocking out"—allowing the "phenomenological reduction" and intuition of the essence of the phenomenon to take place—involves a persistent application of "intense sympathy" or "empathy" allowing for what van der Leeuw calls the "interpolation" of the phenomena into one's life. By "interpolation" he means a re-experiencing of the event or phenomenon, by which it is *understood* rather than known scientifically. In this respect, he insists, phenomenology is a vital, engaging activity rather than merely an abstract and artificially constructed method of gaining information. This vital activity he identifies as an objective discernment of the essence of things. The phenomenologist, then, is not the "cold-blooded spectator" (684) of the world but rather fully involved in it, assigning to the events both form and meaning:

Phenomenology aims not at things, still less at their mutual relations, and least of all at the 'thing-in-itself'. It desires to gain access to the facts themselves; and for this it requires a meaning, because it cannot experience the facts just as it pleases. This meaning, however, is purely objective: all violence, either empirical, logical or metaphysical, is excluded. (677)

This sphere of meaning, as van der Leeuw puts it, is a realm neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective. The "meaning" derives from a connection between events or phenomena that is neither an abstraction from the data nor directly experienced—rather, it is a structure that is "intuited." In his words, the "structure is certainly experienced, but not immediately; it is indeed constructed, but not logically, causally, or abstractly. Structure is reality significantly organized" (672). The significance or meaning intuited, therefore, belongs "in part to reality itself, and in part to the 'someone'

who attempts to understand it" (672), and it is impossible to distinguish what is one's comprehension from what is "real." Yet in the act of comprehending, these two become one and constitute the gateway to the reality of primal experience.

It is clear from this brief description that for van der Leeuw, what lends phenomenology its superiority over the empirical and theoretical sciences is that it has rejected "the attitude of the cold-blooded spectator" and embraced a subjectivity that clearly recognizes the participatory nature of human existence.⁶ In further elaboration of the subjectivity of the phenomenologist (in the chapter on "The Phenomenology of Religion"), van der Leeuw points out that the sympathetic "interpolation" of the chaotic data that attributes meaning is understood as a "self-surrendering love." For were that not so, he writes, "then not only all discussion of what appears in religion, but all discussion of appearance in general would be quite impossible; since to him who does not love, nothing whatever is manifested" (684). When this is understood in terms of his seeing "meaning" as tending toward the Ultimate Meaning (in the chapter on "Religion"), it is difficult to avoid concluding that any comprehension of religion is (and must ultimately be) religious comprehension. Indeed, van der Leeuw claims: ". . . all comprehension, irrespective of whatever object it refers to, is ultimately religious; all significance sooner or later leads to ultimate significance" (684).

Phenomenological understanding for van der Leeuw, then, is something *other* than the knowledge wrought by empirical facts and scientific theories. Rather, as Waardenburg (1972) points out, it discloses a reality that is not spatio-temporal—consequently it distinguishes the results of the phenomenological researcher from that of the historian of religions (and all social-scientific students of religion). But the disclosed reality must also be distinguished from the reality of the metaphysician and theologian, which transcends the spatio-temporal level of existence. Phenomenology, therefore, is as distinct from theology as it is from the empirical and theoretical sciences. Its "reality," at least at first sight, is a kind of psychological reality, or a reality that is neither empirical nor Ultimate.

From this mode of analysis of what phenomenology of religion achieves, it is obvious that there need be no tension between phenomenology and the objective, scientific study of religion. For phenomenology would serve merely to "complement" the other studies, further contributing to the non-theological academic study of religions. And this is precisely how many scholars (including Bleeker and Hultkrantz, to whom I referred above) have in fact interpreted van der Leeuw. But van der Leeuw explicitly rejects such an understanding of his position. Phenomenology of religion is broader than the psychology of religion because religion is far more than the merely psychological. As he puts it, "the whole man participates in [religion], is active

within it and is affected by it. In this sphere, then, psychology would enjoy competence only if it rose to the level of the science of Spirit . . ." (687). The phenomenology of religion, exceeding the capacity of psychology, gives the student access "to the reality of primal experience [which is] itself wholly inaccessible . . ." (673). Thus even though neither a theology nor a metaphysics, van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion, unlike the other sciences, has implications of a theological and metaphysical kind that makes the *understanding* achieved a more scientific, and therefore, for him, a better knowledge than the knowledge obtained by the objective sciences.⁷

The depreciation of the scientific study of religion, it can now be seen, has effectively been accomplished. Van der Leeuw does not reject empirical analysis—that would hardly be possible given the spectacular achievements of the scientific study of religious traditions. He suggests, in fact, that it plays a critical role in the testing of phenomenological insight, claiming that all phenomenological comprehension must be subject to factual correction. However, this claim cannot be understood in the Popperian fashion—understanding phenomenology to provide theoretical conjecture about the nature of religion that can then be critically tested. On the contrary, van der Leeuw explicitly argues that the objective sciences must be taught the restraint (*epoché*) characteristic of phenomenology if they are to be useful in the understanding of religion. Thus his conclusion regarding the crucial role of the objective, empirical sciences in testing phenomenological comprehension is much more ambiguous than it first appears, for its ultimate result is the undermining of those sciences and the subtle inversion of our understanding of the nature of science. He writes: "[The phenomenological insight] must . . . always be prepared for confrontation with material facts, although the actual manipulation of these facts themselves cannot proceed without interpretation—that is, without phenomenology . . ." (677). Restricted to analysis of religion's *manifestations*, the objective sciences can play a role in bringing the essence of religion into view, but they can never in themselves achieve that end.

I have referred above to the "depreciation" of the objective sciences by van der Leeuw because his phenomenology of religion, even though fueled by empirical research, ultimately undermines the results of that research. This appears to involve him in a contradiction, for he seems to be both accepting and rejecting the validity and value of the scientific undertaking. Moreover, he seeks to evade such a charge of incoherence by "limiting" the role of the objective sciences to relating *wholly* to the externals of religion. For van der Leeuw, only phenomenology can deal with the essence of religion, although he admits it is in some respects dependent upon the results of scientific research. Both the objective sciences and the phenomenology of religion, then,

are necessary enterprises in coming to understand religion, but neither is necessary and sufficient. They are complementary undertakings and together can provide the result for which the student of religion strives—or, according to van der Leeuw, for which the student of religion ought to strive. The “unified science” of religion, he goes on to suggest (without providing an explicit argument, however), resembles his phenomenology, for both reveal the essence of religion. As a conduit to a deeper level of understanding, then, phenomenology is seen as the more important element of the two in the “unified science.” However, the result of combining empirical study with phenomenology leads to the “denaturing” of the essential character of the sciences originating from Enlightenment thought; in other words, in van der Leeuw’s thought the substitution of *understanding* for knowledge as the goal of science amounts to a revolutionary transformation of science itself.

A brief look at the study of religion already extant in Holland will reveal just how radical a change of attitude van der Leeuw’s phenomenology of religion represents and how much his own proposals constitute a politically significant revolution in the academic study of religion—“politically” significant in regard to the existence and role of the scholarly study of religion in the academic, university setting as well as in society at large. Not intending to present a history of the study of religions in Holland overall, I shall restrict myself here to some comments on the work of C. P. Tiele, who, as Waardenburg puts it, “created the study of religion from the sources practically out of nothing and made it to [*sic*] an autonomous and recognized discipline . . .” (1972: 136),⁸ and who, as van Proosdij insists, defined the goals of that discipline for the new century (1970).⁹ I illustrate my point with reference to Tiele’s account of the conception, aims and methods of the science of religion as he sets them out in volume I of his Gifford Lectures, *Elements of the Science of Religion* (1897).

Tiele opens his lectures with the claim that the study of religion has already in his day “secured a permanent place among the various sciences of the human mind” (I: 2), implying thereby that the study of religion as a discipline was confined to an “exclusively scientific ground” (I: 4), whose task was to “investigat[e] religion as a historical, psychological, social and wholly human phenomenon . . .” (I: 5). This is not to say that Tiele denies his own religious conviction; but he believes that the scientific study of religion will ultimately benefit religion, and he strongly opposes those who take up the “science of religion” either apologetically or destructively—that is, in order to support or to undermine religion. To the scientist and the scientific enterprise, such extra-scholarly positions would be unconscionable, since for the scientific student of religion “all religions [ought to be] simply objects of investigation” (I: 9).

Like van der Leeuw, Tiele also speaks of the “limits” of the scientific study of religion, but in quite a different vein. He does not see these limits, for ex-

ample, as a barrier to gaining an objective knowledge about religions, but rather as an indication of the difference of intent between science and theology. Consequently he writes: "The rights of the religious conscience must not be limited; but science, too, vindicates her right to extend her investigations over everything human, and therefore over so important and mighty a manifestation of man's inmost nature as religion has ever been and ever will be" (I: 10).¹⁰ The concern of science, then, is "to explain" and "to know what religion is, and why we are religious"; by contrast, theology's concern is with the development and growth of faith (I: 12). Thus Tiele clearly distinguishes the Science of Religion from Theology, whereas van der Leeuw is less definitive.¹¹ For the latter, the sciences are a propaedeutic to Theology; and for Tiele, the Science of Religion—as distinct from history and other empirical studies of religion—seeks explanations for the development of religion without which theology would remain incomplete.

It may be obvious, but should nonetheless be stressed, that Tiele does not mean by "science" (in the study of religion) the application of the exact methods of the natural sciences, but he does nevertheless (unlike van der Leeuw) insist that this new science operates within the same *general objectivist framework* of the natural sciences (I: 216–217). For Tiele, then, understanding and knowing are not diametrically opposed as they are in van der Leeuw's thought. The following description given by Tiele of this "critical science" clearly sets out the significant difference between his notion of the scientific study of religion and the philosophical notion at the heart of van der Leeuw's distinction. He writes:

I think that we need not hesitate openly to proclaim the philosophical character of our science, and to apply to it the method adapted to all philosophical branches of science—namely, the deductive. Not the one-sided empirical method, which culminates in positivism and only ascertains and clarifies facts but is powerless to explain them. Nor the one-sided historical method, which yields exclusively historical results. Nor again the so-called genetic-speculative method, a mixture of history and philosophy, which lacks all unity. Still less, I must hasten to add, the warped speculative method which has no foothold on the earth, but floats in the clouds. For when I speak of the deductive method, I mean this speculative method least of all. On the contrary, our deductive reasoning must start from the results yielded by induction, by empirical, historical and comparative methods. What religion is, and whence it arises, we can only ascertain from religious phenomena. *Our inmost being can only be known by its outward manifestations.* (I: 18; emphasis added)

The objective sciences, therefore, as Tiele puts it more explicitly a few pages later, are in a position to penetrate to the origin and inmost nature of religion (I: 27)¹². Tiele, like van der Leeuw, may well believe that the results of

scientific study will never clash with religion, but he does not believe that, logically, such a clash is impossible. But what is of overriding interest here is the avowed intent of Tiele to apply as detached an outlook as possible when studying religious phenomena. There are places at which Tiele's Christian theology is clearly evident in his analysis of religion and the nature of the study of religion. But Tiele is not attempting for all that to "theologize" that study—to bring the sciences "into line" with his theological agenda. He identifies the task of the student of religion as the quest for an explanation of phenomena that will satisfy the criteria of scientific investigation.¹³

A similarly scientific understanding of the study of religion is to be found in the work of Tiele's contemporary, Chantepie de la Saussaye, who first coined the phrase "phenomenology of religion."¹⁴ Chantepie divided the study of religion into philosophical and historical components concerned respectively with the essence and the manifestations of religion. Although, as Waardenburg maintains, it appears that for Chantepie the understanding of outward forms of religion is predicated upon an understanding of inward processes (1972: 137–138), it is nevertheless also true as James points out, that Chantepie's work was for the most part a call for "a perspicuous description and arrangement of a specific object of study" (1985: 327). In this, Chantepie seems to parallel Tiele, assuming that the student of religion can get to the essence beyond the phenomena by means of the phenomena themselves. The study of religion dominating the Dutch academic scene until about the third decade of this century (van Proosdij, 1970: iv), therefore, assumes we can "know" religion from the outside in. And it is this assumption and understanding of the nature of the scientific study of religion that is undermined by van der Leeuw.¹⁵ As Sanford Krolich maintains, the call to empirical research seemed to fall on deaf ears, and a resurgent idealism was fostered in the new description of phenomenology emerging with scholars such as van der Leeuw (1985: 199). Jacques Waardenburg similarly notes: "[T]he phenomenology of religion in its classical forms encouraged explicit or implicit views of religion which were not empirically developed and tested, and it brought the data, so to speak, under the spell of religion as an autonomous reality" (1978: 199).

Although van der Leeuw's revolutionary impact on the study of religion has been widely felt, it has not, I think, been ultimately successful in defining the framework of the field. For there have been repeated attempts to recover and develop the academic tradition that he questioned and ultimately undermined. As van Proosdij notes, this program of recovery began immediately with van der Leeuw's successor: "The position of phenomenology as a method, which penetrated the field of religious studies although originally a philosophical technique, has been contested by van Baaren, to name but one" (1970: x). Van Baaren makes this matter very clear in his contribution to the

“papers of the Groningen working-group for the study of fundamental problems and methods of science of religion” collected together under the title *Religion, Culture and Methodology* (Van Baaren et al., 1973). His central concern, he tells us, is to show the groundlessness of a notion of religion that transcends the framework of culture. He therefore claims that the Science of Religion must be seen to be “limited to an empirical study of religions as they are.” And, he claims, “because it does not acknowledge the authority of any religion to influence or determine the results of this research,” the Science of Religion is wholly different from theology (42). Consequently he rejects van der Leeuw’s attempt to replace the “objective knowledge” of the sciences with the “subjective understanding” of phenomenology. “The knowledge arrived at in this [phenomenological] way,” he writes, “is no valid form of science, its scientific exactness or falsity has to be demonstrated and checked by scientific methods” (45–46). Van der Leeuw, says van Baaren, did not possess insight into the cognitive validity of the various methods of acquiring knowledge, although he does not think this alone can account for the path van der Leeuw chose to take. “Why [he] himself transgressed these rules [of knowledge] so frequently,” suggests van Baaren conclusively, “can only be solved by a study in depth of his life and work” (49).

I do not accept that it was for theoretical or philosophical reasons that van der Leeuw rejected the scientific method and the application of the principles of objective research as the essence of a sound academic approach to Religious Studies. Rather, it appears that van der Leeuw had his intellectual sights trained elsewhere and that he deduced the limitations of science by assessing how well or poorly they functioned with respect to his own particular interests. His primary concerns were religious and cultural, and a study of religion that was a purely academic matter simply had no religious or cultural value, being without relevance to the well-being of society. Indeed, as Sharpe puts it, “to be thoroughly empirical [and, we might add, theoretically objective], was, in a manner of speaking, the foremost symptom of what van der Leeuw held to be the typical twentieth-century sickness” (1986: 235). Van der Leeuw gives a clear indication of this aspect of his thinking in the preface to the German edition of *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. Admitting the shortcomings of the book, he nonetheless writes, “I trust that my book will contribute somewhat towards the comprehension of Religion, equally as regards its incalculable cultural wealth and the appeal to faith which it addresses to mankind” (1938: 10).

In keeping with his analysis (in chapter 1) that power forms the basis of most—if not all—religions, van der Leeuw writes in the epilegomena: “He who does not merely accept life . . . but demands something from it—that is, power—endeavours to find some meaning in life. He arranges life into a significant whole: and thus culture arises” (679). However, that search for

meaning is not exhausted by cultural manifestations alone, but rather by the grasping of that "ultimate significance" or "final meaning." And religion is the bearer of final meaning, according to van der Leeuw; with such a conviction, as Waardenburg puts it, van der Leeuw thought to "connect religion and society, christianity and culture, theology and the Arts and Sciences" (1972: 183). His phenomenology of religion was inevitably tied to his theology and his concern for society; it therefore involved extra-scientific goals requiring a transformation of the original academic, scientific goals of the scholarly study of religion. Finally, Waardenburg warns that van der Leeuw "should be seen against the background of the secularization of Dutch society and the theological crisis in Dutch protestantism between the two world wars" (183).¹⁶ It is obvious even in *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* that van der Leeuw saw religion as a cultural—and "more than cultural"—orientation to life, and that a purely objective and academic study of religion could jeopardize that orientation. It is equally obvious that, in what amounts to what I have termed a religio-cultural quest, he attempted to combine his scientific and extra-scientific goals in the new discipline, but that the scientific goals originally espoused in the academic study of religion were undermined (radically transformed) in the process.

Van der Leeuw would not, I think, be left without reply to arguments of this kind. His response is contained implicitly in his discussion of the study of "The Religion of Love" in *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (645–649). He argues there that to exist in the world is to do so in some quite specific way. Consequently, to think that one could study religion—or the character of one's own religio-cultural quest—in a detached, unprejudiced way is simply naïve and, in fact, deceptive; for it prevents the investigator's biases from being recognized and critically (scientifically) clarified. "Unprejudiced" investigators, he maintains, themselves have an ultimate—and therefore religious—interpretation of the world from which they proceed; consequently, his study, which is controlled by a consciously—and therefore critically—espoused "Christian prejudice," is more "scientific" than what has been taken to be the only proper scientific approach. But to argue in this fashion is to proceed arbitrarily (and rather circularly)—he assumes precisely what it is he sets out to demonstrate. It is an exercise in the persuasive redefinition of terminology that ignores the critical differences between religion and the academic, scientific study of religion. In erasing the line of demarcation he had inherited, he effectively destroyed the academic study of religion because he transformed it into the very thing from which it had originally emerged—namely, Theology. With van der Leeuw, therefore, the study of religion not only does not advance beyond the stage already reached by that discipline in Holland, but rather it returns to an earlier theological approach—one that amounts to a sub-

version of the scientific study of religion. The desire to reclaim social, cultural, and religious values in response to crises in one's own culture is one thing; to call that activity "scientific" is quite another. Van der Leeuw's theology—and his intention to arrest the cultural deterioration he sees in modern Western culture—is not problematic, but the use to which he puts his phenomenology in support of religion demands a critical response.

Notes

1. See, for example, John B. Carman, "The Theology of a Phenomenologist: An Introduction to the Theology of Gerardus van der Leeuw" (1965); Jacques Waardenburg, "Gerardus van der Leeuw as a Theologian and Phenomenologist" (1978); and Jacques Waardenburg, "Leeuw, Gerardus van der," in Mircea Eliade et al., eds., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987). Other essays bearing on his work will be cited below.
2. The work of thinkers such as Hegel, Herder, and Schleiermacher, he suggests, reduced the efficacy of Enlightenment thought. He recognizes, however, that there were reactions to Romanticism, although he (rather strangely) refers to these developments as "a period of romantic philology" and "the age of romantic positivism."
3. A little later he insists that religion "is an ultimate experience that evades our observations, a revelation which in its very essence is, and remains, concealed" (683).
4. See Ake Hultkrantz, "The Phenomenology of Religion: Aims and Methods" and C.J. Bleeker, "The Contribution of the Phenomenology of Religion to the Study of the History of Religions" (1972). Hultkrantz and Bleeker both see van der Leeuw as an empiricist. Hultkrantz, for example, sees phenomenology as a systematically descriptive study "identical with the older term 'comparative religion'" (75); and Bleeker insists it is "a systematization of historical facts in order to grasp their religious value" (41) and "meaning" (51).
5. In addition to the essays mentioned in note 1, see Waardenburg, "Religion Between Reality and Idea: A Century of Phenomenology of Religion in the Netherlands" (1972).
6. In this respect, I think Eric Sharpe (1986) is right to draw attention to van der Leeuw's evaluation of Lévy-Bruhl's notion of the primitive mind and the emergence of the "modern mentality" as being an abstraction. An empirical approach to the study of religion resulting from the acceptance of such abstraction was for van der Leeuw, Sharpe claims, merely a symptom of a sick society that failed to recognize its wholeness, which led to "the scholar's [failing at the] most vital and most sensitive point, the point of genuine understanding" (235). I have presented quite a different reading of Lévy-Bruhl's significance for the academic study of religion in my essay "The Prelogical Mentality Revisited" (1987).
7. Eric Sharpe remarks that van der Leeuw's categories (especially that of "holiness") are understood by *homo religiosus*, but not by the academic, who

finds instead that van der Leeuw is embarked "upon a hazardous voyage on a metaphysical ocean." He continues: "But to van der Leeuw phenomenological scholarship was not to be sharply differentiated from metaphysics or from theology" (1986: 234).

8. Though correct on one level, from another point of view this is an exaggeration. Histories of this field of study (such as that of Eric Sharpe cited above) for the most part fail to deal adequately with the history of the intellectual ethos that permitted the development (initiated by Max Müller in England and C. P. Tiele in Holland). An excellent account of the emergence of the ethos (with a history of the diverse institutional development of the field) is provided by S. Preus in *Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud* (1987). (See also my review of the work: "Explaining Religion: The Intellectual Ethos" [1989], and chapter 1 of this volume). Further study of the issue is to be found in Christina Banman, "The Study of Religion: Nineteenth Century Sources and Twentieth Century Misconceptions" (1989).
9. Though this claim may at first appear extreme, I think it justifiable in respect of the work of Müller and Tiele. One might note here the somewhat exasperated response of John Baillic to the emergence of the new discipline in his *Interpretation of Religion: An Introductory Study of Theological Principles* (1956): "Here we seem to have 'science' masquerading in a new guise as compelling us not to make any use in our inquiry of a truth of which we are nevertheless 'convinced,' and which is of such a kind as to bring us to the core of the very issue that is being inquired into"! We are analysing human faith, yet we must not bring the light of our own faith to bear upon the analysis! As a matter of fact, if there is one point rather than another concerning which we should expect the 'Elements of the Science of Religion' to enlighten us, it is just the real inward nature of the very kind of 'conviction' and 'faith' which Tiele claims to possess himself in regard to the truth of Christianity" (123–124).
10. In a later discussion Tiele is more ambiguous, claiming that all academic study leaves religious conviction untouched, and suggesting that it somehow constitutes an insoluble mystery (I: 51,52).
11. See E. J. Sharpe, 1986: 234.
12. There is some ambiguity in later discussion on this subject, in both vol. I and vol. II. For example, in vol. I Tiele talks about "religion itself," which is entirely independent of the historical forms in which it appears, and claims "that [the] forms may change and vary without sacrificing the eternal ideas and the immortal aspirations which constitute the essence of religion" (222). This, taken with the distinction between faith and knowledge in vol. II (36), might make it appear that Tiele's position is significantly similar to that of van der Leeuw. However, he writes further: "Between faith, which strives, on the basis of inward perception, to form an idea of what lies beyond perception, and science, which, kept within its proper bounds, makes the perceptible the sole object of its research, the opposition is not so absolute as is commonly supposed" (II: 37–38). See also vol. II, 191 ff.

13. Tiele believes that objective, scientific explanations will, ultimately, harmonize with a religious truth of necessarily quite different derivation. Baillie (see note 9) acknowledges Tiele's faith and asserts that Tiele does not keep his academic study of religion free of its influence. He writes: "[S]tudents of this science are nearly always far better than their word and do, in spite of all their protestations, bring their own religious intelligence and the light of their own religious experience to bear upon the otherwise chaotic mass of fact which it is their business to set in order . . ." (124). But Baillie fails to recognize that such influence could be inadvertent; he complains that ". . . it is remarkable how seldom in such writing we are able completely to escape the impression that we are here having religion described to us by one who either lacks a religious experience of his own or has left that side of his spiritual equipment behind him at home when he came to this workshop" (124).
14. See George A. James, "Phenomenology and the Study of Religion: The Archaeology of an Approach" (1985): 311–335.
15. Chantepie de la Saussaye's contribution in this matter is somewhat ambiguous, as is shown in Richard Plantinga's brief exposition of Chantepie de la Saussaye on the relationship of the History of Religions to Theology. Plantinga quite correctly points out his influence, for example, on such religious phenomenologists as Söderblom, van der Leeuw, Heiler, and Bleeker (6). Plantinga also notes, however, that whereas Chantepie did not consider Theology a subdivision of *Religionswissenschaft* (4), van der Leeuw did (7). In the latter's inaugural address and in his *Introduction to Theology*, Plantinga states, "van der Leeuw explained his version of the theological encyclopedia in which history of religion plays a key part" (7). This suggests, I would argue, that Chantepie's work shows a significant agreement in structure to that of Tiele. Van der Leeuw was, no doubt, dependent upon Chantepie's work, but, as Plantinga rightly notes, he did more than simply tidy up and expand the latter's work. The nature of van der Leeuw's development beyond Chantepie, especially in the divergence on the place of the History of Religions in the theological encyclopedia drawn to the reader's attention by Plantinga (7), is indicative of a change fundamentally subversive of the conscious framework within which Chantepie seemed to operate. It is equivalent, I think, to the revision John Baillie hoped to bring to the Science of Religion by getting its students to recognize that their personal religious convictions cannot (even on methodological grounds) be kept distinct from their work as scientists (see note 9 above). Not without sarcasm, Baillie remarks: "The candour and ingenuousness with which we are sometimes recommended in the name of this Science of Religion to stand aside from the faith that lives in our hearts when we are trying to understand the faith of mankind as a whole is indeed enough to make us rub our eyes and wonder whether we have read correctly" (1936: 122, 123). Only by seeing History of Religions as an essential element of the theological encyclopedia can we properly understand it: "It is the duty of theological science to provide the

historical study of religion with a proper point of view, proper presuppositions and a succession of proper questions" (131). Van der Leeuw's position is structurally indistinguishable from Baillie's, but Baillie, unlike van der Leeuw, openly recognizes the antagonism of this position to the notion of the new scientific approach to the study of religion that had emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century. A similar conclusion, ambiguously defended, can be found in Lammert Leertouwer, "C. P. Tiele's Strategy of Conquest" (1989: 153–167).

16. A full assessment of the theological roots of his phenomenology is, obviously, to be found in his sermons and religious and theological writings, but their analysis is a task that neither can be nor need be undertaken here.