STUDYING RELIGION:
A methodological introduction to
science of religion

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
PRETORIA
1982
Contents

PREFACE ix

1 INTRODUCTION 1

2 SCIENCE OF RELIGION 5

2.1 Growth and reorientation 5
2.2 Model of a scientific enterprise 6
2.3 Circumscription of science of religion 8

3 METASCIENTIFIC POSITIONS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY 11

3.1 Logical empiricism 11
3.2 Critical rationalism 13
3.3 Critical theory 15
3.4 Phenomenology 16
3.4.1 Characteristics of the phenomenological approach 17
3.4.1.1 To the things themselves 17
3.4.1.2 Intentionality 17
3.4.1.3 Epoche 18
3.4.1.4 Essences 19
3.4.2 Phenomenology in science of religion 19
3.5 The hermeneutical school 20

4 ROOTS OF RELIGIO-SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY 24

4.1 Fundamental science of religion 24
4.2 Being determined 26
4.2.1 Natural reality 26
4.2.2 Sociocultural reality 26
4.2.3 The understanding of objective patterns 27
4.3 Acting 28
4.3.1 Acting upon the world 28
4.3.2 Acting in and via the world 29
4.3.2.1 Signs and symbols 30
4.3.3 Expression and being impressed 32
4.3.4 The understanding of personal and situational cases and patterns 32
4.3.5 Understanding and explanation 34

5
SELF-AWARENESS 36
5.1 Objectivity in the heart of subjectivity 36
5.2 The import of the personal situation 37
5.2.1 General cultural background 38
5.2.2 Religious milieu 39
5.2.3 Intra-scientific values 39
5.2.4 Interests and ideologies 40
5.2.5 Personal religion 41
5.3 Reflexiveness 44
5.3.1 Increased self-awareness 44
5.3.2 Is personal religion changed in the process? 45
5.3.3 “How clear is this to me?” 45

6
THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF ADEQUACY 47
6.1 The encounter with religious persons 47
6.1.1 The problem, the possibility and the need 47
6.1.2 Our common humanity 49
6.1.3 Kinds and levels of understanding other persons 49
6.1.4 Ways to understanding 51
6.1.4.1 Conversion 52
6.1.4.2 Imaginative re-enactment 52
6.1.4.3 Becoming a participant 52
6.1.4.4 Encounter 52
6.2 The controls of expert opinion 53
6.3 The social responsibility of science of religion 54

7
THE CONCEPT RELIGION 56
7.1 Conceptualizing religion 56
7.1.1 The phenomenological heritage 56
7.1.2 The demand for logical precision and empirical reliability in logical empiricism 58
7.1.3 The concept religion as a nexus between theory of religion and empirical research on religion 60
7.1.3.1 Religion as a theoretical concept 61
7.1.3.2 Religion as a classificatory concept 61
7.1.3.3 Dimensional clarification  62
7.1.4 'Substantive' or 'functional' specification?  63
7.1.4.1 Structure and function  63
7.1.4.2 Exclusiveness and inclusiveness  63
7.1.4.3 An intra-religious and extra-religious point of view  64
7.1.4.4 Ideological associations  65
7.2 The dimensions of religion  65
7.2.1 The objective referent of faith  66
7.2.1.1 Concern  66
7.2.1.2 The ideal  67
7.2.1.3 The primary source of salvation  67
7.2.1.4 The notion of transcendence (including the time dimension)  69
7.2.2 The subjective reference  72
7.2.2.1 Ambivalence  72
7.2.2.1.1 The apposition of religion and irreligion  72
7.2.2.1.2 Activity and passivity regarding religious reality  72
7.2.2.1.3 The attitude towards the ordinary world  73
7.2.2.1.4 The esoteric-exoteric quality of religious experience (including the social dimension)  73
7.2.2.2 Totality  73
7.2.2.2.1 Religious feeling  74
7.2.2.2.2 Religious willing  75
7.2.2.2.3 Religious knowing  75
7.2.2.2.4 Religious doing  76
7.2.2.2.5 Religious speaking  76
7.3 Conclusion  77

REFERENCES  78
Preface

This general introduction to the methodology of science of religion is something of a programmatic statement, trying to lure students and others interested to the threshold of actually investigating religion and doing science of religion.

It forms part of a wider project, Southern African Studies in Religion, aimed at investigating religion in Southern Africa in a science of religion perspective, which has been launched under the auspices of the Institute for Theological Research at the University of South Africa. To the Director, Prof. W.S. Vorster and his staff, especially Mrs S. Winckler, I wish to express my appreciation for their invaluable assistance in making this publication possible.

The methodological position taken, is inspired particularly by the phenomenological tradition – at the same time bearing in mind the present task (so I believe) of trying to integrate as far as possible the various religio-scientific approaches to religion into a comprehensive enterprise. For this reason the themes dealt with receive expository rather than argumentative or polemical treatment. It is not a ‘technical’ book, abounding in references and other asides in footnotes. The ideal has been to attain a clear and concise survey of an overall approach. This limited perspective imposes other self-limitations. The practical procedures and techniques to be used in investigations of religion fall outside its purview. In other respects, too, it touches on matters that cannot be dealt with adequately within its framework, especially the problem of a theory of religion and the problem of speaking about the truth quality of religions.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Referring to the study of new religions, Arnold van Gennep once advocated the following approach: 'Ladies and gentlemen, the general ideas that I would like you to take home with you from this lecture, possibly a bit too specialist here and there, are few and simple. In the first place, you should no longer think that the science of religion is only history of religion, and that it is by definition only concerned with dead facts and things of the past. There are, at this very moment, religions springing up and religious systems being born, not only in the United States, in Russia, in Asia, and in Africa, but sometimes before your own eyes ..... We have to stand at their cradles and to notice even their incomplete development; to be able to do that, we have to observe all the details of their environments with a tireless and sympathetic curiosity, and to sharpen our direct vision' (Waardenburg 1973:300).

Without restricting the attention of science of religion to new religions, the aim of this book is to unfold a general strategy which takes Van Gennep’s advice to heart. It wishes to answer, in a basic way, the questions of the why and the how of his invitation to ‘sharpen our direct vision’. It is inspired by the belief that our world offers the student of religion unequalled opportunities to exercise his ‘tireless and sympathetic curiosity’.
Today, even more than in 1910 when Van Gennep delivered his talk, we stand at the cradles of new developments. The ‘facts’ are obvious. Southern Africa in some respects displays characteristics typical of Western countries. One of these is the attraction of Asian religions to many people. The diagnosis of Luckmann (1963) that the West may be experiencing the birth of a new, non-Christian religiosity may be applicable to some extent, as well as the view of Burke (1974:114) that the effective religion of at least the educated West now wears more of a resemblance to early Buddhism, and in some respects to Confucianism, than it does to Christianity: a pre-occupation with the problem of suffering, and the attainment of happiness, with the achievement of harmony in social relationships, and an agnosticism about higher metaphysics.

In terms of a wide-open concept of religion, we may recognize new developments in all sorts of movements. Whether these movements should be called secular alternatives to religion, surrogates, analogues, quasi-religions or para-religions, does not need to be solved now. Thus Martin (1978) has reasons for calling the attitudes of the student movement with its longing for totality and immediacy of experience a form of religiosity. The drug culture includes those who use drugs in order to attain an experience which is called religious by the initiated. LSD was said (by Timothy Francis Leary) to establish contact with the same religious reality within ourselves as the one spoken of by religious mystics in the East and the West - LSD is a sacrament, and the use of it a ritual. Esoteric doctrines, magical arts, occult practices and secret societies, witchcraft and Satanism, magic and astrology, even though branded as heresies, superstitions and delusions by leaders of recognized religious groups, surface from their underground level in Western civilization and flourish ‘on the margin of the visible’ society (Tiryakian 1974). Political ideologies with religious functions (such as nationalism, Nazism and Maoism), science and psychoanalysis have all been studied as religious ware on the market of modern legitimation systems.

The great religious traditions of mankind are facing up to the challenges of modernization. The so-called primitive religions in their pure, pre-modern forms seem to be doomed. The universal religions (especially Christianity, Islam and Buddhism) and the many smaller religions (such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Jainism) have to come to terms with the process of modernization. Each of them has to avoid the extremes of petrification in a dead world of the past on the one hand, and on the other of fading away in the new world. Some are more successful than others in tapping the resources of their respective traditions in order to revitalize themselves and to assert their religious significance to their own adherents and to modern man on a global scale. The changes in Hinduism; the flowering of Zen Buddhism and Yoga in the West; the awakening of social and political awareness amongst Buddhists in the East; religious repression in Communist China and religious vitality in the U.S.S.R.; the expansion of Islam amongst the peoples of Africa; the new self-confidence of Roman Catholic Christianity; the development of African Christian theology; the resurgence of the charismatic movement in evangelical Christianity - these are examples of developments within the great religions.
Of course these statements are too general. Segments of these giant traditions show a multitude of textures, depending on the particular situations in which they occur. The challenge is to be aware of the details of each case and of the parallel developments in the many cases. Each religious tradition may be seen as a dynamic whole in itself, and yet the patterns of interaction between them, and between each and its environment, should not be overlooked. Each is contaminated and compromised by contact with other forces. Even in relations of militant exclusion parallels may be discovered (for instance between Maoism and the moralistic social concern of ancient Confucianism). Subtle forms of borrowing and blending (for instance between traditional African religions and Christianity) defy easy generalizations, and shifting alliances (for instance between some forms of Christian theology and some forms of Marxism, or between nationalism and Islam) cannot easily be pinned down with rough terms such as ‘syncretism’. It takes sensitivity and trained skill to detect the lines of contact and to follow religious developments.

The invitation extended by Van Gennep and the ‘facts’ referred to above point to the need for method and reflection about method (methodology). How can we come to grips with living religion in all its rich diversity? What does studying religion really entail? Of course method is merely a crutch, helping one along on the way to knowledge. It is not the destination. Yet, to be self-consciously and self-critically aware of one’s active search for knowledge is preferable to a mere groping around, which results in a haphazard collection of impressions. Even a seemingly obvious statement, for example that ‘religions are changing in modern society’, is in fact problematic, and raises acute questions. To what extent, and how, can such a statement be checked out empirically? How can we do justice to the peculiarities of each changing religious complex as well as to general features that are common to all changing religious complexes? Speaking of religion and its changes also implies that we bring a cross-section of religion (religion today) in relation to religion as a long historical development - how should we achieve such a synthesis of perspectives? To what extent is it possible to study religion objectively? Speaking of religion begs questions concerning definition: what ‘is’ ‘religion’? Which phenomena does the concept include? Should we try to abstract an essential core of religion? What is a definition? The statement ‘religions are changing’ presupposes answers to these questions. Also, what do we wish to achieve by studying religion? Do we wish to judge the merits of the different religions? Do we perhaps wish to contribute to a better understanding between religions, or do programmes such as these fall outside the scope of the discipline? Do we wish to study religions as understood subjectively by their adherents, or as objective thing-like entities? Should we strive only after an adequate description of religious phenomena, or should we also aim at the forming of explanatory theories concerning religion? What would each of these tasks imply, and how would they relate to each other? These are some of the questions that have to be answered if we wish to do more than merely utter platitudes that might, or might not, be true, and if we wish to take part in actual research in this field. In this book we shall touch on some of these matters.

Within the relatively new discipline which pays specialized attention to the character of science (metascience, sometimes also called philosophy of science) we may distinguish the following aspects (cf Sauter 1973): (a) theory of theory construction which centres in the question: which criteria must scientific theories comply with in
order to be accepted as good?; (b) *methodology*, which centres in the question: how do scientists proceed in finding truth, and how should they proceed?; (c) *ethics of science*, which centres in the question: what role do the values of scientists play in their scientific work, and what role should they play?; and (d) *pragmatology*, which centres in the question: what role does science play in society at large, and what role should it play?

The terms ‘philosophy of science’ and ‘metascience’ refer to the most basic questions that can be raised in connection with the scientific pursuit of truth, to the character of science ‘in principle’. Our interest in this introduction lies in the middle range, between the fundamental thinking about science on the one hand, and the specialized procedures and techniques applied in science of religion on the other - we certainly are in need of practical tools, adapted to the needs and purposes of this discipline, but that is not our concern here. When I speak of ‘methodology’, I shall include the aspects referred to as the ethics of science and pragmatology, and I shall also touch on some facets of theory construction.
2.1 GROWTH AND REORIENTATION

Although science of religion can look back on a long and impressive tradition, it is at present passing through extremely swift rapids in the course of its development. Suddenly, since the sixties, it has become fashionable again to speak about religion and to study religion. Prior to this new interest, religion was for a long time discredited in many circles. It was also thought to be passing away silently. At that time the study of religion appeared to be a somewhat antiquarian pursuit. Today it is a flourishing field, with departments emerging and growing at many universities. The International Association for the History of Religions held its XIVth International Congress in Winnipeg, Canada, during August 1980. The Association for the History of Religion (Southern Africa) is affiliated to this body. A number of international periodicals deal with the study of religion, and in South Africa the journal Religion in Southern Africa is edited by the Association for the History of Religion.

The sudden revival of interest in religion seems to have caught the practitioners of the field unawares. At present many of them are seriously searching for a new, commonly accepted, integrated and methodologically up-to-date frame of reference for doing science of religion, which has not yet acquired a firm research consensus. In the influential terminology of Kuhn (1975) it is still in search of an integrated paradigm (or disciplinary matrix), that is, a constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community of scientists; also,
there is a lack of paradigms in the sense of generally accepted, exemplary models of dealing with the puzzles of the science. The achievements of Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach, Mircea Eliade and the other giants of the field are rightly held in high esteem. But the conviction is none the less expressed in many quarters that we need a unified methodological vision that can give direction and coherence to the vast amount of work done. Smart (1973:4), referring to the flourishing branches of the field, states: 'There is, in fact, no dearth of scientific-seeming inquiries into religion. Nevertheless, an overall strategy of a science of religion is desirable, and has not yet been fully worked out.' Some go even further and, referring to the pervading sense of uncertainty, even crisis, ask: 'Is a science of religion possible?' (Penner and Yonan 1972; Wiebe 1978). Some argue pessimistically that the study of religion is 'faced .... with an invasive relativism and a phenomenal insecurity' and that there 'might be good logical reasons why it is impossible to proceed, but there are also good logical reasons why we must proceed' (Heelas 1978:1, 12). Others argue more optimistically that the apparent failure of nerve is merely the prelude to fresh enterprises and 'that something new and constructive is happening' (Sharpe 1971:1).

2.2 MODEL OF A SCIENTIFIC ENTERPRISE

At this stage the model of a scientific enterprise worked out by Gerard Radnitzky will suit our purpose. In its simplest form this model is presented as follows (Radnitzky 1973:1):
In this figure R refers to the territory or sector of reality covered by a science — in our case, religion. RG refers to the research group (with the individual researcher as limiting instance). IM refers to the intellectual milieu in which the research group operates. The intellectual milieu supplies intellectual resources (tools), for example, scientific ideals, and knowledge systems concerning aspects of reality. The practising students of religion voluntarily or involuntarily draw on these background resources. RS refers to the research strategy adopted by the research group, which steers every piece of actual research. The research results in KS, that is, a knowledge system — in our case, concerning religion. The results are reported to the interressees/users, whom Radnitzky subdivides as follows: C refers to colleagues working within the same discipline, some of whom may coincide with RG. C¹ refers to other scientists, working in other disciplines, making professional use of the results. I refers to intellectuals generally, who may use the results for improving that part of the world-picture that corresponds with R — thus, for example, the work done by scientists of religion is probably destined to become, to some extent, part of the general educated opinion concerning religion, and to flow into the wider intellectual milieu. T refers to those who are concerned with the technologies that can be based on the knowledge systems produced (this, so far, does not apply to the study of religion!). The arrows indicate the directions of influence; for example, the study of religion inevitably will influence its ‘object’ (religion). If we use the model sketched above, the search for the character of science of religion gains perspective.

The territory (field of interest, sometimes called the object) of science of religion has not yet been outlined to everyone's satisfaction. This problem is closely linked to the problem of the definition of religion, to which we shall return later.

Practising scientists of religion generally accept that the terrain of their work should be distinguished from that of theology. What 'theology' is, is of course a moot point amongst theologians themselves, and certainly scientists of religion cannot fix the object of theology. We may, however, distinguish between a narrower and a wider conception of theology.

Taken in a wider sense, theology could partly coincide with science of religion. In this book, however, I shall use the word in a narrower sense, to refer to the committed exposition of one particular faith. This may be the faith of Muslims, Christians, Hindus or any other religion. Science of religion, interested in all religious phenomena, thus has a far wider field of interest. To indicate another aspect of the difference between science of religion and theology, we may use another spatial analogy, that of high and low. Theology treats of the divine, ultimate, sacred, or transcendent reality; the world of human affairs is dealt with under the aspect of eternity. Science of religion deliberately lowers its scope. It limits its interest to religion as a human experience, to the human side of human religiosity. The problem of wide and narrow nevertheless returns, although in a different form. The question now is: how far does religion extend? Do the boundaries of religion coincide with the boundaries of human life as such, and to what extent is it present in, with and under all the manifestations of the human spirit?

Does science of religion have its ‘own’ research strategy? If by this is meant a unique scientific method, a positive answer would go too far. The practitioners of the field
would, generally speaking, not contend that they use some special method. They would claim that their studying of religion stands in the same broad scientific tradition as other disciplines. It is, however, true that it might develop a certain approach and style of its own, as distinct from neighbouring enterprises. Practitioners of this discipline usually distinguish its method from that of theology, in that they take theology to be a normative discipline, deliberately advocating true religion, whereas science of religion describes, understands and explains religious phenomena. But there are those who wish to extend the interest of science of religion to include the religious evaluating of religious positions.

An interesting aspect of the process of reorientation going on in the field is that the different sub-schools are drawing on different resources from the wider intellectual field. For example, those who countenance the phenomenological approach, work in the spirit of the classical humanistic (German: ‘Geisteswissenschaftliche’; Afrikaans: ‘geesteswetenskaplike’) approach, while others try to benefit from another philosophical tradition, the logical empirical one. There are also those who find their inspiration in critical rationalism, while an interest in critical theory is not entirely lacking. These matters will receive more attention in chapter 3. The important point is that the general effort to establish the character of this scientific enterprise cannot be isolated from the wider intellectual processes going on in the world.

At present the most vulnerable side of science of religion is probably its knowledge system. Nobody can doubt that excellent descriptions are given by researchers who associate themselves with the field, but when it comes to the forming of explanatory theories, it is generally agreed that much work lies ahead. This aspect falls outside the scope of this introduction, and will only receive indirect attention.

The aspects of reporting, marketing and interesses/users refer partly to the effects of studies of religion, ultimately on society at large (pragmatology). The assumption is that science is influenced by, and in turn influences, the society of which it is a part, and that it should be aware of its role and place. This surely demands the attention of students of religion.

Where does the undergraduate student, formally enrolled at a university, fit into this schema? Naturally he or she belongs to the category of interesses/users. To a large extent undergraduate study consists of the reception of the more or less accepted ‘results’ of a science, which are reported to the student by the lecturer. But, on the other hand, I believe that the beginner student should be drawn into the ranks of the research group itself, the sooner the better. As a matter of fact, one reason for writing this introduction to methodology is the belief that from the very beginning the teaching-learning process in science of religion should be directed at the actual discovery of religious reality out there in life. Studying religion implies more than the reading of authoritative books; it also implies being trained as a practising researcher taking part actively in the search of the wider community of students of religion.

2.3 CIRCUMSCRIPTION OF SCIENCE OF RELIGION

It is time to clarify what the term ‘science of religion’ will mean in the pages that follow. This might be a good point to start to find a way in the forest we have so
bravely entered. In circumscribing ‘science of religion’ I should like to align myself as far as possible with the ways in which this term is actually used, but in view of the inconsistency in actual usage, somewhat abrupt specification of the use of the term in the chapters that follow, is inevitable. The uncertainty concerning the name of this enterprise reflects the uncertainty concerning its inner structure and coherence. It has been called science(s) of religion(s), comparative (study of) religion(s), history of religions, religion, religious studies and religiology (cf Pummer 1972:102ff), all more or less the equivalents of the German name Religionswissenschaft (Afrikaans: godsdienswetenskap). Wiebe (1978) goes so far as to deny that there is such a science or discipline; at the most he would speak of a ‘field of studies’.

Science of religion is traditionally taken to include the two subdivisions history of religions and phenomenology of religion. ‘History’ does not refer to mere chronology, but to the rich concrete existences of religions in their actual contexts. Phenomenology of religion focuses on the structural similarities spanning the particularities. For example: history of religions would study Islam in its historical development, or (on a smaller scale) the religious behaviour of one particular group; phenomenology of religion would study prayer as a typical religious expression occurring in many religions in comparable fashion, or the structure of ritual as a religious universal. History of religions would study the different religions (big or small, universal, national, local and even individual), each in its historical context, and together in their historical interactions; phenomenology of religion would examine cross-religious phenomena. In fact brilliant work has been done in each of these schools; both have been in existence for a long time; and many very capable people insist that they are and should remain two separate sub-subjects. And yet such a strong subdivision is not really satisfactory. It would be good to insist that science of religion is one coherent body, culminating in a systematic theory of religion. The distinctions sometimes made and used as bases for a distinction of two separate bodies of knowledge (eg historical vs structural, diachronic vs synchronic, particular vs general), refer to different aspects of one and the same enterprise, the production and improvement of knowledge concerning religion. These sets of distinctions interpenetrate one another to such an extent that they cannot be isolated and institutionalized in two separate sub-disciplines. If we wish to study contemporary religious developments, we need to see the full richness and variety of observable phenomena in the past and in the present and we need a systematic frame of reference; and we need both at the same time. We need a store of concrete observations and we need an abstract frame of reference (theory). In each instance of actual research, the one necessarily implies the other.

Science of religion is the centre of its own universe, surrounded by a company of other disciplines which also attend to religion. This of course does not imply that science of religion is the most recent queen of sciences. A series of diagrams could be drawn, in each of which another subject could be placed in the centre. Some overlap between science of religion and these other subjects is inevitable and in any event a good thing. Thus science of religion and sociology have an area of overlap, where sociology concentrates on religion as a social phenomenon (thus becoming the sub-discipline sociology of religion) and where science of religion looks at the social dimension of religion. The same applies when philosophers look particularly at religion (thus becoming philosophy of religion) and when scientists of religion
think about the reflexive implications of their work or construct fundamental theories of religion. In a comparable way, science of religion shares borders with a number of other disciplines, such as anthropology, history, theology, Biblical studies, Islamic studies, geography and languages (eg classical European languages, Semitic languages and African languages). In line with one trend of thinking, I propose that the name 'science of religion' be reserved for the tightly-knot concentration on religion as human phenomenon (as distinct from theology), and on religion as religion (as distinct from for instance sociology, which examines it as a social phenomenon, and psychology, which examines it as a psychological phenomenon). There is an area of overlap between, say, sociology of religion and science of religion, but there is a difference in perspective: sociology of religion studies society, and sees religion under the aspect of society; science of religion studies religion, and deals with the social dimension of human life under the aspect of religion, not society.

The primary category and basic referent of sociology is society; the primary category and basic referent of science of religion is religion itself. This does not imply that religion exists apart from society and the person, but religion is such an important dimension of men's lives that it deserves pertinent attention.

Between science of religion and its neighbours are no tightly-closed gates. Cross-fertilization between the various disciplines is vital. The era of increasing specialization in which we live leads easily to a babylonian confusion of scientific tongues. It is the task of science of religion to learn from the other disciplines, and to integrate as far as possible their contributions to the understanding of religion into its own theoretical framework.
Science plays an important yet ambiguous role in modern society. Its achievements are beyond doubt. But there are grounds for thinking that it has become a mere instrument of technology which does not contribute anything to the burning questions of man concerning the meaning of life. In this vein Husserl (1962) spoke of the crisis of the European sciences, and saw in it an expression of the radical crisis in European civilization as such. As science restricts itself to mere facts, a deluge of scepticism threatens. The question ‘what is the true character of science?’ is essentially linked with the questions ‘what is the true nature of man?’ and ‘what is the true nature of the world?’ As the traditional religious answers to these last questions are eroded, science is often looked upon by many as redeemer, but can science achieve that much? What contribution can science make? Questions such as these have become crucial. Therefore, it would seem important to have a general knowledge of the wider metascientific discussions concerning the character of science. Scientific methods ultimately rest on philosophical grounds. In this chapter a minimum background will be given, and some of the most important positions will be drawn by way of typified simplifications.

3.1 LOGICAL EMPIRICISM

The phenomenal success of modern natural science (especially physics) is the fertile soil in which logical empiricism was able to develop. Logical empiricism developed the practice of physical science into an ideal for all science. Applied to the human
sciences, this school is often referred to as ‘positivism’. This ideal of science rests on two pillars, the one being logic, the other the principle of empiricism. The principle of logic implies that scientific statements ought to be free of all contradiction, precise and clear. The principle of empiricism implies that, in order to qualify as scientific, concepts and the statements linking the concepts ought to pass the test of empirical observation. Sense-perception, in combination with logic, is the ultimate criterion for all meaningful knowledge. (This theme has a number of variants. One of the most important influences in this trend of thinking was the early philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.)

The criterion of sensory verification tends to imply a virulent reductionism. By this is meant that the acceptance of physics as the ideal for all science, leads to a methodological monism (there is only one method, the one exemplified by physics). Other sides of this reductionism are the ontological monism (there is only one world, the world of sensory experience), and epistemological monism (there is only one sort of valid knowledge, the knowledge which can be referred back to sensory perception). People who accept this idea of science as being applicable to the study of man, also get into the bargain an anthropological reductionism: man, in order to become the ‘object’ of science, has to be reduced to a mere part of nature. His qualities have to be measured and formalized in quantitative (numerical, mathematical) terms. What cannot be thus measured and formalized, is left out of account. For the purposes of science, man is reduced to his external behaviour, which is seen as determined by external stimuli. The realm of human freedom and responsibility, and the realization of values (including religion), is either found to be unfit for scientific study, or it is translated into the deterministic terms of cause and effect. The goal of this type of study of man is the formulation of generalizations on a par with the laws of nature, with a view to the prediction of his behaviour or outcomes of his behaviour, and eventually to the control of human behaviour.

In this scheme the scientist is taken to work in a neutral fashion. The ideal is that he should register, independent of any prejudging values, the ‘objective’ ‘facts’. In short, ‘positivism’ is a shorthand term for the type of methodology which views science as a carbon copy of reality, ignoring the contribution of the knowing scientist as a human being. Positivistic science would typically demonstrate a less than lukewarm attitude regarding religion and the science of religion. In effect it could express an anti-religious bias. It will also be clear that scientists of religion will not enthusiastically accept this package deal with all the possible implications mentioned. If we understand by methodology the far-reaching reflection on how the researcher should go about his business (including more than the insistence on logical rigour and the refinement of procedures and techniques) positivism has an inadequate methodology.

On the other hand logical empiricism has contributed much to methodology. The insistence that concepts should be unambiguous and that argumentation should be logically correct ought to be taken to heart. In this vein Hubbeling (1973) argues that science of religion should submit itself to the strictness of classical logic. Logical empiricism also contributed a great deal to the refinement of techniques of observation in the sciences which study man. Science of religion ought to pay more attention than it actually does to the formalization of its procedures and its findings. Here one can think of the importance of rigorous, consistent and generally acceptable
classification schemes. More use could be made of techniques such as sampling, standardized interviewing and the use of questionnaires, the use of scales of measurement which allow us to quantify findings and to relate qualities by measuring them on a scale, the graphic representation of results in tables and diagrams, and the statistical manipulation of findings. As such, counting (and the operations derived from it) does not necessarily imply reductionism in any of the forms mentioned above. On the other hand, the mere use of such techniques will not guarantee that the findings are adequate. Such techniques may, or may not, be useful, depending on the specific aim of a research project. There is also no reason to object against generalizations concerning things religious. For certain levels of interest and for certain aspects of religion this quantifying-generalizing perspective yields valuable results. Traditional science of religion admittedly is still onesidedly philological-hermeneutical (cf par 5) in its outlook.

3.2 CRITICAL RATIONALISM

Critical rationalism is primarily associated with the name of the Austrian born British philosopher, Karl Popper (1972; 1973; 1974), and also with philosophers such as Hans Albert, J Agassi and W Bartley. It has developed from logical empiricism, and there are some similarities between the two, such as the insistence that there is only one scientific method, whether we study nature or man. But critical rationalism has strong accents of its own.

It emphasizes the role of theory. In science we do not start with an empty mind; we always start with preconceived ideas. Generally speaking, before we can even start looking for something, we need at least some idea of what we are looking for. The manner in which we describe the things out there, and even the manner in which we perceive them, is to a large extent influenced by the perspective from which we look at them. Our initial expectation is then either corroborated or annulled when we meet with reality. Tradition plays an important part in the formation of our preconceived anticipations. The formation of knowledge in general, as well as scientific knowledge, thus proceeds by way of trial and error (or, as Popper also formulates it, by way of conjectures and refutations). First comes the initial expectation (hypothesis). This is then checked against the reality. It is exposed to being proved wrong (falsified). In fact, falsification is the whole point of the scientific exercise. Science — and this is the essential difference between science and non-science — consists of statements that are capable of being proved wrong.

Another way of characterizing critical rationalism is to say that it is anti-authoritarian and anti-dogmatic. A dogmatic attitude is one which is determined to be proved right and to be accepted; the critical (scientific) attitude is determined to be tested as severely as possible. It applauds whenever it becomes a stepping stone to further knowledge, but this means that its conclusions are destined to be left behind. In the first instance therefore, science is not a body of knowledge; it is rather the search for knowledge, the process of growth of knowledge. Of course it is also a body of knowledge, but this body is conceived differently: it is not a body of absolute certainties, but only a provisional landmark on the neverending journey to truth. It only approximates truth, and is always open to improvement, which can only be achieved by severe testing. Critical rationalism compares the human mind to a searchlight which probes the unknown, rather than to a bucket which is only a receptacle.
For critical rationalism the dividing line between science and non-science is the principle of falsification. This does not mean that statements which are not open to falsification are false, but rather that they are not scientific statements. Critical rationalism thus leaves open the possibility that religious faith may be meaningful and true, but it insists that this realm (of faith and the acceptance of ultimate values) should not be confused with the realm of critical thinking. There is a sharp distinction between the realm of facts and the realm of values, the realm of rationality and the realm of decisions. Thus, science cannot set the goals for life, nor the values we should adhere to. It cannot prescribe our life decisions for us. Nevertheless values (and here we may also read religion) can become the object of scientific scrutiny.

At this point it is worth bearing in mind that there is some difference in accent between Popper and some of his followers such as Albert and Bartley, who go further in their efforts to push back the realm of mere decision as far as possible. For example, we may study scientifically the possible practical outcomes of our value decisions in life, and in this way science would influence the actual decisions we make. Furthermore we may, nay should, look critically at the final values themselves. Values are not immune to rational criticism; they too have the status of hypotheses, and must be critically examined.

It is clear that critical rationalism would stimulate discussion concerning the merit of various religious positions. This line has indeed been taken up by some, for example Barnhart (1977) and Pannenberg (1976), but since these are clearly philosophical and theological questions, we shall not go into the matter any further here.

Like positivism, critical rationalism emphasizes that the scientific enterprise should proceed in an objective way. But, unlike positivism, by objectivity it does not mean the exclusion of the scientist; rather, it means the exposure of propositions to public critical testing by means of a forum, consisting of other scientists. This is an adequate check against the bias of the individual researcher. Of course the personal values of the researcher should be kept at bay, but since they are points of departure they cannot be eliminated absolutely. Science is always value-impregnated. But values should never be used as arguments in scientific debate. The scientific forum should see to that.

Critical rationalism has an important moral dimension. Its basic principle is criticism — in science, and also in public affairs. Popper therefore pleaded for what he called the open society. This type of society corresponds to open, critical thinking. It is a society in which all standpoints are given the chance to be exposed to refutation. It is the opposite of the closed society, which corresponds to closed, dogmatic, absolutist, authoritarian thinking. The latter type of thinking, in its political form, devises absolute blueprints, which are pushed through whatever the cost. Critical rationalism is presented as the enemy of totalitarianism and oppression. Although values and decisions are not founded in science, science can contribute indirectly to a better quality of life. Just as science is the steady growth of knowledge, so in public life the good society is not enforced by total solutions, but is gradually brought about by the process of piecemeal engineering.
3.3 CRITICAL THEORY

Critical theory stems from a different intellectual tradition than that of logical empiricism and critical rationalism. Whereas the latter two are associated especially with the empiricist tradition of British philosophy, the former is associated primarily with the German tradition. Specifically, critical theory is an extension of the Marxian tradition, which in one way or another appeals to Karl Marx as key philosophical witness. In the thirties critical theory developed as a specific school at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno as leading figures. After the Second World War it was further developed by the next generation, amongst whom Jürgen Habermas (cf 1973; 1978) deserves special attention. At present it is a very influential school. In the sixties it clashed with critical rationalism, led by Karl Popper. This confrontation is known as ‘the positivist dispute in German sociology’ (Adorno 1975), but it played an extremely important role in stimulating metascientific discussions on a broad front. ‘Critical theory’ will be used here for a strongly typified simplification of the thinking of Habermas.

Critical theory is a comprehensive philosophy with wide-ranging ramifications. Its cornerstone is the ideal of free human beings truly communicating with others without any domination. This presupposes the basic article of faith that man is free, and that he should be able to give expression to his potentialities. A second form of action — distinct from communication — is work, by which man adapts to his environment and controls it by technical means.

Measuring reality against the ideal, critical theory’s verdict is pessimistic. Modern society is the technocratic mass society in which work (technical manipulation) is inexorably expanding at the expense of free communication between human beings. This is the case in the capitalist West as well as in the communist bureaucracies of the East. Traditional systems of legitimation are eroded and eventually supplanted by the technocratic ideology which justifies the mass society and thus succeeds in keeping the individual captive within its confines. Man becomes a manipulated part of a closed social system from which there is no escape to freedom. Whereas critical rationalism is guardedly optimistic as regards the gradual improvement of existing Western society, critical theory is extremely pessimistic. Cultural values shrivel; manipulative power lurks behind a front of technical expertise and efficiency; everything is treated within the framework of an instrumentalistic and rationalistic means-ends-schema. Critical rationalism rejects this criticism as being too total and inevitably leading to totalitarian solutions.

Another key element in critical theory is the idea that action is steered by practical interests (interests: not quite instinctual needs, but basic orientations which form the basis of all the activities of the human mind). We may distinguish two kinds of interest, each of which corresponds to one of the two types of action mentioned above. Firstly, there is the technical interest, i.e. the interest the human race has in subduing its environment in order to survive; this interest stimulates technical action (work), and the sort of knowledge which has to do with the manipulation of things. Secondly, there is the interest the human race has in communication and understanding between its members; this interest stimulates communicative action and the
sort of knowledge which has to do with understanding between people. Both these interests are embraced by a third, the emancipatory interest, i.e. the striving of mankind to attain its true freedom.

In opposition to positivism, knowledge is here not reduced to scientific knowledge, taken as an extension of physical science. Also, critical theory does not accept the split between the worlds of fact and value, because then, it is thought, the realm of fact will fall prey to technocratic manipulation and the realm of value will fall prey to blind decisionism. Neither does it endorse the spurious positivistic split between science and life, justified by the norm of value-freeness. Science, like all knowledge, is steered by interests that are deeply rooted in human life itself; all theoretical activity is ultimately linked to man's practical activities in relating to his environment and to his fellow human beings. Therefore, science is responsible for furthering the life of mankind and leading mankind on the way to freedom. In fact, science does play a role in society for better or for worse — whether it knows it or not, whether it wants to or not. If science refuses to become relevant in an emancipatory sense, it becomes the ideological justification of the technocratic society. Positivistic science has in fact become this. Science has the responsibility of unmasking the exploitation of man, and in the process it has to analyse and criticize mercilessly its own role in society. This unmasking activity is called 'the criticism of ideology'.

For critical theory, science can of course not be value-free. The demand to be value-free in effect keeps the world of things (in which man himself becomes a thing) intact from the challenge of the values which might expose the captivity of man. It is important that the scientist should explicitly declare the values that lead his research. Science should commit itself to the freeing of man from the fetters of the past and of nature. If it does not, it plays its part in keeping things as they are.

It is clear that we are here moving in a world which is far removed from positivism. Also, this school breathes a different atmosphere than that of critical rationalism. It might nonetheless be possible to bring critical theory and critical rationalism together in some way. Although critical theory is of great import in the social sciences today, it has so far had remarkably little impact in science of religion. One of the few scientists of religion to take up the gauntlet is K Rudolph (1978).

3.4 PHENOMENOLOGY

The great master of phenomenology is the philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Phenomenology is not a method of empirical scientific investigation, but a philosophy of human consciousness, more fundamental than the empirical sciences can be. Yet it has proved to have important implications for the way in which science is done. Its fruitfulness for the human sciences has been realized anew since the sixties. It converged with and strengthened various anti-positivistic tendencies in the human sciences, and in the opinion of many provided these sciences with a strong foundation. When I here refer to 'phenomenology' I do not think of the philosophy proper in its radical and critical sense. A profile of Husserl's philosophy — especially the philosophical position he occupied towards the end of his life (cf Husserl 1962) — will be applied to the methodology of science. In this way a number of key concepts have been taken from their original philosophical context and carried over into the
world of empirical research. I shall present a foreshortened portrayal of these concepts, in the perspective of science of religion.

3.4.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

3.4.1.1 'To the things themselves'

The best entrance into phenomenology would be to contrast it with positivism. Phenomenology does not doubt the achievements of modern natural science. However, this success has been bought at a high price: science has lost its vital contact with the world as it is experienced in everyday life. The theories of natural science can be compared to an artificial garment, consisting of abstract symbols, which has been drawn over nature. But nature itself, as a pre-scientific field of experience, has been lost sight of, and the garment is mistakenly believed to be reality itself. Science, by losing contact with the primary world of experience which is in fact its true matrix, also has nothing to offer man in regard to his actual life and the vexing questions concerning the meaning of life. Life and its fullness has been reduced to mere 'facts'. The real world is stretched and shrunk to fit on to the bed of mathematical formulas. As far as man is concerned, the problem is compounded when the sciences of man merely copy the ways of natural science, as positivism does.

The urge of phenomenology is to re-establish contact with the raw material of life itself. It is the effort to rediscover and re-experience life itself directly underneath the layer of secondary scientific constructions. It wants to learn again how to see clearly and how to describe accurately what we see, before we start explaining scientifically. It is the attitude of disciplined wonder. It wants to return 'to the things themselves', as the phenomenological battle-cry runs. This does not imply that phenomenology is against science. On the contrary, it wants to be a proto-science, that is, a discipline of the mind coming before science, giving a framework for the sciences themselves. It wants to overcome the irrelevance of positivistic science by showing up the richness of the world which lies smothered underneath abstractions. The ideal is that science itself should profit from rediscovering the soil in which it grows.

3.4.1.2 Intentionality

This of course applies especially to the sciences that study man — since one of the most offensive effects of positivistic science is that man is reduced to mere externality; what cannot be caught in the mathematized sieve of natural science and pseudo-natural human science, is ignored or even denied. Man is reduced to the status of the other objects in nature, determined by causes, not motivated by reasons. This procedure misses the true humanity of man, that is, his subjectivity. It leaves out of account the subtle ways in which the living human being experiences his own life, his own body, his physical environment, his social relations and so on. To bring the point home with reference to the study of religion: one may count many things in connection with man's religion (for example, how often people pray), but that does not necessarily mean that one has penetrated to the core of people's own experience of prayer in their real existence (for example, how they live through their contact with the divine; or the modes and nuances of their certainty that they indeed are in contact with the divine). In the phenomenological perspective, what we want to see clearly and describe adequately is how people themselves experience their own world.
Phenomenology refers to this aspect as *intentionality*. As the word suggests, the basic idea is that every mental activity of man is directed to (intended towards) the world out there; also, that the world out there is the world-as-it-is-experienced-by-man. The bond between man and the world cannot be disjoined. I am I-in-the-world, and the world is the world-for-me. I do not create the world, and yet it is my world, or rather, our world, because I do not live it alone. In this sense the world is in the eye of the beholder. Phenomenology focuses on things as they appear in human consciousness. The word ‘phenomenon’ (literally ‘that which appears’) refers to that something as it appears in human experience. The slogan ‘to the things themselves’ therefore means ‘to the things as experienced things in human consciousness’, to things as constituted by the human mind. For example, my seeing of the pencil in my hand is in fact a very complex issue, involving many mental acts. The perspective from which I look, my past experience and other aspects go into seeing the pencil. Husserl and his philosophical followers paid detailed attention to such matters. If we carry this approach over to the study of religion, we could say that the phenomenologist of religion would focus, not on God in Himself, but on God-as-X-sees-Him, or God-as-group-Y-experiences-Him; on a particular ritual as the adherents of the religion define it; on the meaning Muslims attach to the shahadah; or on the shades of subjective meaning discernible in the Hindu’s worship of Devi.

3.4.1.3 Epoche

Because phenomenology insists on penetrating to the core of things, it refuses to take anything for granted. The observer therefore suspends all his previous assumptions concerning the phenomenon in question. In phenomenological language this is called *epoche*. In order to concentrate better on the human consciousness of something, he even suspends his belief that that something itself is real. He sticks to the experience-of-, and whether the experience corresponds to an objective reality outside of the experience-of- or not, is ‘put between brackets’ as the phenomenological phrase goes (left out of account). The phenomenologist looks at the world of madness and the world of normality with equal attention, because to the people living in them, both are equally real. As he describes a religion he neither doubts nor endorses its truth value; the question itself is put on ice, the better to see, with untrammelled vision, the modes of certainty or doubt of the adherents themselves. In order to achieve as direct an exploration and description of a religious phenomenon as possible, he has to approach it as free as possible from unexamined presuppositions in the form of pre-conceived ideas or pre-judgements. Conscious as it is of the workings of human perceiving, including the perceiving of the phenomenologist himself, phenomenology would of course not demand that the researcher should simply black out his own input in perceiving a phenomenon. This would be impossible. To suspend our previous assumptions is not the same as to deny them. Rather, we suspend them if we become radically conscious of them and if we consciously declare these points of departure. By sorting them out, they can be disciplined. If I look at the world everything may seem to be very depressing; if I then remember that I woke up this morning with a headache, I will bear in mind that I am looking at the world with a clouded vision and that the clouds up there are not really the grey monsters they seemed to be a moment ago. By checking on his own assumptions the phenomenologist wants to allow the phenomenon to stand out sharply. A student of religion will inevitably bring along with him a set of background assumptions; the more he is conscious of these, the more he will be able to keep his own preferences from distorting his observation of something.
3.4.1.4 Essences

Another way of saying that phenomenology is driving at the heart of things, is to remind ourselves of its insistence to look for the ‘essences’ of things. For example, probing the phenomenon of prayer, the phenomenologist is looking for the essential character of prayer, that without which prayer would no longer be prayer. He eliminates the contingent elements that distinguish this prayer from that one. Again, he probes for the essential structure of all prayer in as far as prayer is a human act.

3.4.2 PHENOMENOLOGY IN SCIENCE OF RELIGION

Although the term ‘phenomenology of religion’ is quite old (it was used in 1887 in a science of religion handbook by P D Chantepie de la Saussaye), it really came to the fore in the twentieth century as the result of the work of men like Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, Brede Kristensen and Gerardus van der Leeuw. In the recent past probably the best known representative of phenomenology of religion is Mircea Eliade.

In science of religion the word ‘phenomenology’ is used in two distinct senses. Firstly, it is used to denote that branch of science of religion which systematizes and classifies religious phenomena. In this sense, the words ‘phenomenon’ and ‘phenomenology’ do not necessarily carry the full meaning outlined in section 3.4.1. Some researchers, especially in Scandinavia, Italy, Holland and Germany have insisted that phenomenology of religion should be organized as an independent sub-discipline within science of religion, alongside history of religions. In principle this is the equivalent of the older term ‘comparative religion’, but stripped of the latter’s evolutionary perspective. At present Bleeker (1959; 1971; 1972) is representative of the desire to maintain it as an independent branch. As said in chapter 2, strong arguments can be advanced against this position. The systematic element should not be isolated in a separate sub-division. Those who wish to do so, often wish to sever all links with phenomenology in the philosophical sense as well. This also goes too far. The activity of collecting and classifying is, however, linked with the general phenomenological idea of finding the essences of phenomena.

Secondly, it is used in a wider sense to denote the method, which in broad terms is associated with the philosophical method worked out by Husserl and his followers, as sketched in the previous subsection.

At present there is a sharp division of opinion in science of religion concerning this methodological orientation. On the one hand it is sharply criticized for being merely intuitionistic, for not having any method at all, or for misusing the name phenomenology (cf inter alia Van Baaren and Drijvers 1973; Oosterbaan 1959; Stephenson 1976). The critics of traditional phenomenology of religion rightly point to some of its methodological deficiencies. The heritage of Husserl, still much in evidence in Van der Leeuw’s work, gradually diminished, and terms such as essence, epoché and intentionality are sometimes used without any vital link with their origin. As was said above, one should distinguish between phenomenology in its full philosophical form and phenomenology as applied to empirical research in science. On the other hand, maintaining contact with its philosophical origin should re-invigorate the method. The work of Waardenburg (1978), Smart (1973; 1973a; 1977), Pye (1972) and Allen (1978) points in this direction.
Happily for science of religion, it has valuable allies in some developments in the social sciences. Since the sixties phenomenology has started to make renewed inroads in the methodology of the social sciences as a result of the work of Schutz (1973), Merleau-Ponty (1973), Spiegelberg (1971; 1975), Berger and Luckmann (1975), Tiryakian (1973; 1973a) and others. At the moment it seems opportune for scientists of religion to take stock of its phenomenological heritage and to develop its promises. This effort should, however, take into account the wider metascientific discussions and the various efforts made in the human sciences to stimulate rapprochement between the different schools, where possible. For instance, the relationship between phenomenology and positivism received valuable attention from Luckmann (1973); that between critical theory and critical rationalism, from Radnitzky (1973); and that between phenomenology and critical theory (or rather, Marxian thought generally) by Smart (1976), Paci (1972) and Dallmayr (1973). Science of religion should not select phenomenology or any other approach as the be-all and end-all of philosophy and methodology.

3.5 THE HERMENEUTICAL SCHOOL

The word ‘hermeneutic’ ('hermeneutical', etc) derives from a Greek word which means 'to interpret'. In its modern use it goes back to the 16th century, when the great texts from the Christian and European classical (Graeco-Roman) antiquity were in a sense rediscovered and re-interpreted. In the following centuries the word came to be used for the understanding and application of legal and religious texts from the past. Given the time and place of this activity (Christian Europe, before the meeting with other religions really took place) the hermeneutical interest was restricted to Christian religious texts only, that is the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers.

In the 19th century hermeneutics received new impetus when European man discovered the yawning gap between him and his ancestors, including religious ancestors (the people who lived in Biblical times); a gap which was very real, in spite of the cultural heritage spanning the ages. Especially in Germany, the 19th century saw an impressive line of scholars who worked on the problem of how we are to understand the past. Among these the names of G W F Hegel, (1770-1831), F D E Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) deserve special attention. Even today the term hermeneutics is associated particularly with the understanding of the past and of literary texts; the typical hermeneutical disciplines are history and those that try to disclose the meaning a classical text might have for us today. A prime example is the interpretation of great religious texts. The word should, however, not be restricted to texts only; it also applies to the understanding of works of art, of music, and so on. And it should not be restricted to the understanding of the meaning of something in the past; it also refers to the understanding of contemporary things. In a general sense, its meaning was given to it by Schleiermacher, who understood by it the interpretation of all forms of human expression. The art of understanding is also wider than the forms of understanding practised in the sciences. In fact, one of the aims of modern hermeneutical thinking is to show that modern science is one of the avenues towards the discovery of the meaning of things, but not the only one.
From the remarks above it must be clear that hermeneutical thinking is rooted in the experience of the strangeness of some cultural products, whether they are far removed from us today in time, or whether they are expressed by people who belong to a different culture from our own. It must also be clear why this school of thinking would be of special relevance to science of religion. In the 20th century hermeneutics was further developed by philosophers like Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (born 1900). When I condense hermeneutical thinking in the following pages, I shall do so mainly by simplifying the thinking of Gadamer (1972).

Like some of the other schools mentioned, the hermeneutical school is anti-positivist in its bias. Over against the technological mentality of positivism, with its intention to master the world, hermeneutical thinking is filled with respect for the claims of cultural tradition. One of the criticisms levelled against it by opponents, is that it is inherently uncritical and conservative and that it submits too meekly to the claims of tradition. To hermeneutical thinking the researcher, trying to come to terms with the past, is not a supreme subject, mastering a dead object, lying there. That which he interprets, has a dynamic vitality of its own. It reaches out and challenges the interpreter. The whole hermeneutical undertaking is seen as an extension of communication between people, in which they both speak, and both listen to each other. And even when the people themselves cannot be present, perhaps because they are long dead, they nevertheless ‘speak’ via the cultural products they left behind. What we understand, is the human world, and this understanding (as well as this world) is distorted if it is made to look like the explanation and analysis of non-human things. Whatever we wish to understand, should be recognized as objectivations of the human spirit. In this sense the past ‘speaks’ to us.

This implies that when we understand something from the past, we do not merely reconstruct it as it once was, because this would be tantamount to regarding it as dead. In understanding, the dynamic past and the actual present are integrated. To understand, is not to re-produce or restore something which is dead. It is to experience the spark of meaning when the two worlds meet. I understand something (say the Avesta) when communication, analogous to my meeting with another actually present person, takes place. I do not move back into a dead past; I experience a live relationship with an articulate other. It is the meaningful communication between two partners, of which I am one, the text the other. To do science of religion in this spirit, is to respect the dignity of whatever I am trying to understand, and to allow it to speak for itself. I become an attentive, humble listener to the human spirit reaching out to me across the barriers of time and cultural differences.

It is not a one-way communication, neither from me to the other (the ‘object’- that would be positivism), nor from the other to me. In order to grasp something, I reach out towards it from where I am. Understanding is a circular process embracing both me and the other. If I blot out myself, communication ceases and becomes impossible. In all understanding there is an element of creativity. I am influenced by the other, and the other is influenced by me. It is I, with all my presuppositions, in the context of my life, against the backdrop of my own historical past, who understand. It is I, from my perspective, who reach out. Of course my tentative pre-understanding will be rectified when I make contact with the other, but without such a
pre-understanding (prejudice) I shall not come to an understanding at all. It is I (in the case of the author of this book) who, from the vantage point of a particular kind of Christian experience, venture into discovering the meaning of strange religious experiences — be they the experience of early Muslim religion or of my next-door neighbour.

Hermeneutical thinking cuts two ways. In allowing me, the interpreter, to declare myself, it rules out uncritical dogmatism (dogmatism: when that which I interpret, completely overrules me and becomes as unassailable as a tidal wave). It also rules out the uncritical self-assertion of the interpreter (when I simply stamp my understanding on to that which I interpret). Hermeneutics, as defined, is a typically modern endeavour. It is a rigorous intellectual discipline, and it may be called reflexive or critical. In itself, it is the result of a disturbed historical heritage, and as such it cannot recapture the pre-hermeneutic, ‘primitive’ experience of the sacred. It is critical thinking about such experience. As such, it demythologizes. Yet it holds out a promise. Like phenomenology, it is an effort to regain the vital contact with the well of primitive human experience, although it can never return to primitive naivety. It is not destructive. On the contrary, it wants to hear clearly, or at least as clearly as possible, what was said and heard in a world to which the interpreter is a stranger.

When people talk, they normally talk about something. Hermeneutical thinking emphasizes that when I understand, I do not merely enter into the other person, but into that which he is talking about. In reading the Avesta, I am not merely interested in the subjective states of mind I might encounter there; I am interested in its message, that which it speaks about. If I study Taoism, I should allow myself to be drawn into the world of Taoism to such an extent that I get involved with its message. This means that I am inevitably drawn into thinking about the truth claims of Taoism. Ultimately, understanding has to do with the truth, and science of religion leads to philosophical and theological questions. In the words of Ricoeur (1969:354), referring to the hermeneutics of religious symbolism, the final stage of hermeneutics is reached when the interpreter moves beyond the ‘curious but not concerned’ understanding, and enters ‘into a passionate, though critical, relation with the truthvalue of each symbol’. According to Wach (1898-1955), who took much pains to elaborate the hermeneutical approach, science of religion, understood as a hermeneutical discipline, ‘in its true intention does not dissolve values but seeks for values. The sense for the numinous is not extinguished by it, but on the contrary, is awakened, strengthened, shaped, and enriched by it’ (Wach, 1975:127).

It should cause no surprise that hermeneutics has penetrated deeply into the methodological thinking of science of religion, and that, in the eyes of many, it is the methodology of science of religion. If taken in a wide sense, the vast majority if not all of the great students of religion saw their enterprise as being hermeneutical in one way or another. Obviously hermeneutical thinking comes from the same general philosophical background as phenomenology. The two are so closely related that merging could easily occur, and in fact this has often happened. Also, a synthesis with critical theory is thinkable. One could for instance think of the accent which both place on the committedness of the researcher in terms of values and historical
standpoint, and on their shared purpose of salvaging meaning for modern man from the onslaught of modernization. It is further removed from critical rationalism, but even here somebody who does not belong exclusively to any of the schools, may see points of possible convergence. Hermeneutics is furthest removed from positivism. To each, the other is almost a swear-word. Yet we should remind ourselves once more that the rejection of positivist reductionist anthropology, epistemology and ontology does not necessarily lead to the rejection of all formalization and counting operations. On the other hand, the criticism raised that hermeneutics is subjectivistic and that it is based only on the intuition of the interpreter, is much too sweeping. No doubt hermeneutics sometimes is just that, but this need not be the case.

For a scientist of religion it is possible to align himself to one or other of the schools mentioned. Working within one tradition, which is accepted as a regulating frame of reference, will have its advantages. This one perspective will be truly tried, and the work of the student of religion will fit into an existing system of meaning, gaining much from the common perspective, and hopefully enriching it. Another possibility is to travel with lighter luggage and to move more freely among the various positions, learning and using whatever seems to be helpful and valuable. The danger here could be a superficial eclecticism. But surely we are not condemned either to be enclosed within only one frame or to flit from one position to another. The important thing is to appreciate the wealth of more traditions than one, to respect the unique contributions of each and to be on the lookout for possible points of convergence which might help one to do one’s own particular job better.
CHAPTER 4

Roots of Religio-Scientific Inquiry

4.1 FUNDAMENTAL SCIENCE OF RELIGION

The 'facts' concerning religion are only really intelligible within a theoretical framework of some sort. Such frameworks vary in scope: there are micro-theories, which account for a limited range of phenomena (for example, a theory accounting for Islam in one Black community), and there are macro-theories, which account for a wide range of phenomena (for example, theories of secularization as an epochal development). Theories also vary in level: some remain quite close to the directly observable aspects of religion and may be compounded with the description of such things. Other theories abstract quite drastically from direct observations.

Let us now distinguish two major levels of inquiry in science of religion. The first, lying closest to the surface, consists of the actual understanding of specific religious phenomena. The style in which this research will be conducted, rests on a deeper level of inquiry. I shall call this second dimension fundamental science of religion. Its task is to construct a fundamental theory of religion and of the science of religion. The terms 'fundamental science of religion' and 'fundamental theory of religion' are intended to convey the idea that this level of inquiry is not extraneous to science of religion, and not far removed from the actual business of the practising empirical scientist; in fact, that it is the foundational aspect of science of religion. Its task is to bring to light the deeplying principles operative in religion and in the scientific study of religion.
Our analysis of any religious phenomenon will be closely linked to our basic concep-
tion of religion and of the science of religion. Wittingly or unwittingly, every scien-
tist of religion in fact has some such basic orientation. It may be well thought out
or not, he may be consciously aware of it or not, but it is there, in however rudimen-
tary a form. Even the denial of this fact is itself a position which will give a certain
flavour and colour to his empirical analysis. Man's religion and his science are two
aspects of his total existence as man; so our theories of religion and the science of
religion will necessarily be dependent on a comprehensive, fundamental theory of
man, of wide-ranging scope and penetrating level. At its most radical and general
level this may be called the domain of philosophical anthropology. It would include
accounting for man's experience as it becomes manifest in his art, work, science,
religion, social relations and so on. All these aspects have given rise to branches of
philosophy which deal with the special questions relating to these dimensions of
man's life. Such a general and radical picture of man and his activities is of course a
transdisciplinary affair. In the following pages, however, we shall not move far away
from our immediate concerns, which are religion and its science. Religion is a
complex province of meaning in the human universe. So is science. But in the end
both rest on basic ways of man's being in the world. In this chapter we shall look at
some of the features of this being in the world.

The two levels of science of religion (the empirical and the fundamental) need and
complement each other. As a screw is driven forward by a spiral movement, so the
understanding of religion is furthered by a spiral movement in which empirical re-
search is pushed forward by fundamental theory, and in its turn it stimulates funda-
mental theory which once more influences the empirical work, and so on. Some
scientists of religion will naturally concentrate on the construction of fundamental
theory, others more on the growth of our empirical knowledge. The important point
to bear in mind is that both are necessary. If it is not informed by the facts, funda-
mental theory will be mere speculation or analysis of empty concepts; and if it is not
situated in a panoramic frame of reference, empirical research will be the mere col-
lection of unintegrated data. Each has its own dignity. In this joint project funda-
mental theory provides the necessary comprehensive and foundational framework.
(Perhaps it ought to be said that the term 'empirical', if taken to refer to experience
generally, of course also applies to fundamental theory. Fundamental theory too
reflects on human experience. But in the present context 'empirical' is used as a
shorthand term to refer to the level where we study the manifest religious pheno-
mena, as distinct from the deeper levels.)

As said before, the field in which science of religion in South Africa should concen-
trate its energies and where it could make its own contribution, is empirical research.
In view of this (not in spite of it), the scientist of religion should be aware of the
relevance of fundamental theory.

In this chapter I shall sketch concisely some of the main features of man who utters,
and hearkens to, meaning (including religious meaning), as a first step in what I have
called fundamental theory of religion. This sketch stands in the broadly conceived
phenomenological tradition, including the names of Max Weber, Alfred Schutz,
M Merleau-Ponty and H Richard Niebuhr, who represented this general approach in
various ways. The whole chapter may be seen as an elaboration of the phenomenolo-
gical idea of 'intentionality', introduced in the previous chapter.
If each of us were to look closely at our experience of the world, we should find that we are constrained by the world, and that we act upon the world. How can these two sides of my being in the world be described?

4.2 BEING DETERMINED

There is a world out there, beyond me. I am also part of it and it controls me. I am ‘me’, an object and product of the forces of nature and society.

4.2.1 NATURAL REALITY

This statement is true, on the most elementary level, of nature, by which is meant that large world of events and agencies that we modern men regard as sub-human in character. Together with all the other physical objects, I am embedded in space and time, as an It amongst Its. As far as my senses stretch, and much further, is a world of objects which has an enormous time-span behind it and ahead of it which far exceeds my short life. I am part of this world. It surrounds me, and I bend to the physical forces that operate there. My body involuntarily reacts to the forces of nature within it and beyond it, for instance when I feel pain, am cold, get hungry or blush. Also, my psyche is deeply rooted in the world of physical nature. In my conscious life I am only dimly aware, if at all, of the powers of matter and life that bind me with rocks, water, plants and animals. Yet I am rooted in this deep soil. I am governed by physical and physiological regularities. My reactions, which on this level are out of my conscious control, can be understood by locating them on the field of natural forces.

4.2.2 SOCIOCULTURAL REALITY

Other people are of extreme importance in my life. You might be continually present in my life as a major force even though I might not be consciously aware of your significance. You might also be one of the individuals of lesser significance who act upon me and trigger off unreflective reactions. In increasing impersonality, you become a third person and confront me as such, as he or she. You exert influence on me in the plural, as one of several social groups of varying significance. You become they, those who act upon me in increasing degrees of anonymity and impersonality. Other people form me through the processes of socialization, be they alive or members of a past generation. Even though they might exist in a far away part of the world, they nevertheless are there, co-present with me and in co-presence with all the others shaping me and my world. In the last resort, there is the sum-total of all the other people, which we may call society, which transcends and controls me through its institutions such as language, family, education and religion. Without society, I would not be. I am part of a historically given world which is my social environment, my socio-historical milieu, and it is not of my own making. My behaviour is effected by psychological and socio-historial pressures which operate in conjunction with the natural forces. On this level my conduct is involuntary, passive, affective and unreflective, and it can be understood by retrospectively uncovering its compulsion by factors in my personal past experiences and socio-historical environment.
To the domain of objective structures which are prior to me and which nevertheless enter into me and lay their claims on me by becoming part of me, belongs the objectified world of human culture, including items such as the language in terms of which I come to self-awareness, the system of morality prevalent in the group into which I am born, a centuries-old ritual or myth, a holy book, an idea of God, and so forth. Patterns of conduct, speaking, believing, thinking or feeling can hover over me (if they evoke reactions of fear) or embrace me (if they evoke reactions of glad submission) as mighty, unchallengeable entities without which I cannot imagine my being, or they can become part of my constitution to such an extent that I cannot distinguish them from myself.

4.2.3 THE UNDERSTANDING OF OBJECTIVE PATTERNS

Since this is part of my experience of my position in the world, it can become the focus of attention. Special attention may be directed at these objective preconditions of my conduct, which are then not mere background, mere external circumstances or mere material for my conduct, but effective antecedents. In this perspective my conduct may be explained and understood as a determined factor in the system of nature, a system of society or a system of culture. My reactions to these preconditions are in a sense extensions of them. For reasons of space we have only dealt with me, in the first person singular; but it should be kept in mind that the argument of course equally applies to us, to you, him, her and them; in short, to people generally.

A theory of religion and the science of religion could hinge on this facet of man's life. Causal, functional and structural explanations of various kinds operate on this level. In this perspective, explanation and understanding might for example be interested in the structure of these physical, physiological, psychological, socio-historical or religious preconditions; in the nature and the degree of strength of its effective impact on people's conduct; in the relation between sets of structures; in the formal patterns of people's conduct and the degree of its being affected by these preconditions.

Let us apply the argument to a few examples in the field of religion. It is, for example, possible to concentrate on and to analyse the objective structure of a ritual, a myth, a moral code, a theology, a pattern of symbols or a sacred text. It is possible to investigate the processes of religious socialization, for example the constraining influence of various religious groups on the conduct of their adherents. Or one could focus on the external patterns of religious behaviour, abstracting from the personal intentions and motivations of the people themselves. One could investigate the interrelations between sets of factors, for example the influence of social factors on a religious system, or the dependence of a religion as a transpersonal system on ecological factors (say climate, or the kind of technology used in a society). Many valuable investigations have been made in this vein. It is a valid and fruitful methodological perspective. But we should bear in mind that it is a relative and limited perspective. If isolated and totalized, man becomes nothing but the product of objective forces, and these objective conditions become completely depersonalized. The methodological perspective then becomes a worldview. Terms such as moralism, dogmatism, traditionalism, psychologism, sociologism, historicism,
positivism, determinism, objectivism and fatalism all indicate aspects of such a totalized and exclusive emphasis. The relative value of such investigations can be duly appreciated only if we couple this kind of understanding with the second perspective, which focuses on the experience we may call human action.

### 4.3 ACTING

The term action, which will serve as the basis of this section, was given wide currency by Weber (1972), and was further developed by Schutz (1973), although neither of these authors defined it in a way that was fully adequate for a theory of religion. Apart from this term and some of the others mentioned, for example freedom and responsibility — Niebuhr (1963) developed the latter concept as a useful basis for a theory of religion — there are also others, such as praxis, projectivity and existence which all point to this same quality of man’s life, and which are all used in the broad tradition which puts this quality at the centre of its attention.

Part of my experience is also that I act upon the world. This is not an absolutely original self-expression. I do not start from nothing. Yet, in my feeling, touching, seeing, listening, thinking, working, loving, believing and all my other activities, I am the source of something new. In my activities I express my own unique manner of being human towards nature and society. I express my very personal attitude, which is not reducible to nature and society, and not wholly explicable in terms of natural and social forces. The manner in which I am I, and whatever I do, is pervaded by a subtle personal quality, by a style which differs from somebody else’s. Each one of us is an ‘I’, a responsible person, a free agent producing things and meanings. An action, inspired by my own manner of realizing my freedom, may be overt (like speaking) or covert (like thinking), and it may be an act of commission (like deliberately speaking) or omission (like refraining from speaking). In other words, an action (or an act, if we refer to an accomplished action) is any activity of mine, as far as this activity is taken to be imbued with my subjective meaning.

#### 4.3.1 ACTING UPON THE WORLD

The first field aimed at in my actions is nature, outside of me and within me. I can reach out and handle things, adapt myself to my physical environment, transform it to some extent, and produce things, to mention a few examples of this capacity of man, which in modern society has reached such stupendous proportions.

I also act upon the socio-cultural world. I can stand before you and direct myself at you, thereby revealing myself to you as a source of meaning. You, as another I, can do the same. We then encounter each other as persons, that is, as centres of action and meaning. In this case we might speak of inter-action. The other to whom I express myself is not only an individual other I (you). It could also be you in the plural. The inter-action can also occur indirectly, between me and him, her or them. Not only an individual person, but also a group, consisting of two or more persons, may be an acting unit.
In this line of thinking even the very anonymous, impersonal social forces which constrain people have their origin in personal ways of being in the world, like the fossils of once-living beings, and understanding means to make contact with the forgotten personal impetus. My present, individual character may seem to be fixed, but nevertheless it is the result of many previous decisions and actions, and it has its roots in a very basic and decisive attitude towards the world, which is uniquely mine.

When we interact with one another, we jointly establish patterns of interaction, and to the extent that these become routine, they take on a transpersonal character. We do not have to start all over again each time, because a habit has been formed. When we meet today for the first time, both of us would be uncertain in our behaviour towards one another, by tomorrow we would be more at ease, and in twenty years’ time a set pattern of typical expectations will have grown, but they remain the by-product of our interaction. However old and mighty, complex and wide-ranging such patterns of behaviour (institutions) might be and however strongly they might regulate our behaviour, they nevertheless are secreted by persons’ interaction.

From this point of view society is made up of acting persons and groups who subjectively intend meaning and respond to subjectively intended meaning, and culture is the objectified product or sedimentation of our actions. Thus, the domain of objective structures over against me (including such items as language, a system of morality, a centuries old ritual or myth, a holy book or an idea of God), which from one perspective determines and controls me, is from this second perspective person-made and, what is more, appropriated by me in my own manner as a responsible person. Even if we cannot pinpoint the creation of a cultural item in time, it nevertheless is a creation of men, and it is nevertheless I who today attach a certain meaning to the myth, who act out the ritual in my way, who read the holy book differently from the way you do.

My acting upon the world (the natural world and the world of objectified sociocultural products) shows a remarkable triadic structure. It implies an interacting. Strictly speaking, I never act alone. Wittingly or unwittingly, I simultaneously deal with the world and with other persons, be they alive together with me as my contemporaries who share the same responsibility in the same world, be they my predecessors who acted and responded in perhaps exemplary ways in terms of a comparable world, or be they my successors who will one day respond to my actions today in their world, which will be the product of our actions today.

4.3.2 ACTING IN AND VIA THE WORLD

Our interaction meshes with the world, which is always present as third partner in our dealings with other persons. As my acting upon the world implies interacting with other persons, so does my interacting with other persons imply the world. In this subsection we shall once more pay attention to the indissoluble triadic pattern involved in action.

You and I might explicitly refer to elements of our common world, for example when we talk about something, say the weather or about Buddhism in South Africa. But in any event, a common world is always at least implicitly presupposed as a
frame of reference. Without bodies and things and cultural objects no interaction would be possible. Without night and day, summer and winter, the moon and the earth, birth and death, colours and sounds we would not encounter each other. To fail to appreciate this, and to imagine that ‘pure’ persons could meet, would be the mistake of an abstract personalism. This world of reference may be quite small, consisting of the immediate natural and sociocultural environment surrounding us, the everyday world of family, city, work, friends and so on. But, inevitably, the circle expands before our gaze. There is always a beyond, and in the end our encounter is surrounded by an all-inclusive horizon, consisting of the universal physical nature and universal society (mankind), and the history of mankind’s dealings with itself and with nature. This is the scene of our actions, on which and with reference to which we interact. When we interpret each other’s actions (and of course interpretation itself is a most important element of interaction), we locate it on this map. In encountering you, I am referred to your world, and you to mine, and to a large extent the success of our interacting will depend on the extent to which we share the same world. Every action stands out in relief on this surface.

Sooner or later in the process of reference I might experience the awesome dimension of religious reality, invading the everyday world from beyond. This boundary of our world, and the reality lying beyond it, is the ultimate possible horizon lying around our action.

4.3.2.1 Signs and symbols

The action perspective could be clarified further by applying it to signs, which play such an important part in everyday interaction, and symbols, which are of extreme importance in religion.

Interaction between people is only possible via our bodies and the signs on our bodies, or produced by our bodies. Knowledge of somebody else’s mind is possible only through the intermediary of his body and events or objects in the external world which convey his meaning. In interpreting you I am wholly dependent on external signs. For example, the shrugging of your shoulders, together with other states and movements of your body such as a reddening of your face, might indicate that you are angry. Or, I stare in amazement at the raised arms of a figurine, crudely carved on a stone slab dating from the Upper Palaeolithic era (50/30 000 — 10 000 B.C.), and in this gesture I think that I recognize an act of religious adoration. This I discern via another sign, the carving itself, which is a faint disclosure of Ice Age man’s way of being human in the world, as an artist and as a religious being. Signs such as these make possible a slight acquaintance with those long-dead predecessors of mine. You articulate who you are by the sounds you make (speech, singing), by the characters you write down (books, including holy books), by the objects you leave behind (utensils, instruments of torture, monuments, religious objects), by the elements of nature you infuse with meaning (trees, rocks), and so on. You make yourself known — intentionally or unintentionally — to me, the interpreter, via signs. What the signs reveal, is what you purposively intend, or what you express, or what you identify yourself with, but in all this, you reveal who you are, in your fashion of giving content to your freedom and responsibility in the world.
We may distinguish at least two sides to the meaning of any sign. First, your side, that is, the side of the person who via the sign interacts with me. Second, my side, that is, the side of the person who interacts with you via your sign. After all, in our interaction my interpretation is as much an action as your expression via the sign. My interpretation, as well as your anticipation of my interpretation, are two moves in the same process of interaction. We shall return to the difference in mode between these two sides in the next subsection.

Your subjective meaning could of course become objectified, that is, it could take on a quasi-independent character. But, in the focus on action, what I am after as interpreter, is to defreeze the product, and to decipher it as a secondary form of your action.

By symbol, in this context, we may understand an event or object within the reality of our everyday life (again, on our bodies, produced by our bodies or infused with meaning via our bodies) representing religious reality which transcends the everyday world. A symbol is a sign with an extra dimension, in that it implies a universe of meaning other than the everyday one (Schutz). Apart from religion, it is important in contexts of meaning such as art and science as well. For example, water plays a manifold symbolic role in many religions. Immersion into water, burial libations and ritual washing of newborn babies (to mention a few examples) are on the one hand acts in the ordinary world, but on the other hand they represent the religious washing away of sin and other religious realities. In symbolism the sphere of everyday things (water) and the sphere of religious things (for example purification) are intimately associated. A symbol is saturated with its religious referent. Funeral libations do abolish the sufferings of the dead. The bread is the body of Christ. Our concern is with the religious meaning of a symbol. What do we think of when we speak of the meaning of a symbol in terms of personal action? As is the case with signs, there is the meaning that you attach to the symbol, you who act out the ritual, who invest the snake with religious reference, who express your religious attitude through the medium of water; and there is the meaning I discover in your acting out of the ritual. Of course, the more successful our interaction is, the more we may speak of the same meaning. But still the two sides, the giving and the taking, may be distinguished.

Again, even when symbols take on a quasi-independent character, they remain rooted in a personal context. They are, as it were, your symbols.

Yet there is something more to a symbol. It is permeated with the religious reality it refers to, and when it faces you, you experience yourself as the receiver of a meaning which reaches out to you from beyond the everyday world, and which radically transcends yourself. You do not only express meaning; you are impressed by meaning. But even this receiving is your action, and I could try to understand the mode of your reception of religious transcendence as an indication of your manner of being human.
4.3.3 EXPRESSION AND BEING IMPRESSED

Action, as we saw above, displays two sides. To summarize, we may call the one expression; the other, being impressed. This rough distinction may be referred to by a variety of other terms, and it emerges in many settings of life. I am free, that is, I take initiative in my dealings with others and the world generally; and I am responsible (‘responsible’), that is, I respond to the initiative of others and to the world generally. To some extent I can change the world of things and cultural objects; and I appropriate this world, and by my definition of it the environment becomes my situation. In acting, I have my with-a-view-to-reasons, that is, I make plans, project myself into the future and act accordingly; and I have my because-reasons, that is, I take into account existing states of affairs. I produce things and meanings; and I receive things and meanings. I create meaning; and I interpret meaning. I command and lead; and I obey and follow. I work; and I enjoy. I realize my intentions by converting possibilities into facts; and I realize that my deeds have unintended consequences that I can imagine but not control. I talk; and I listen.

All this, of course, is very general. Yet, it points to a wide field of empirical investigation, not only in ordinary life, but also in religion, which is rooted in ordinary life and yet transcends it. In religion action probably takes on a peculiar style in which a being impressed of a certain sort gains preponderance. In this sense Schleiermacher (to mention one possibility) defined religion as the feeling of absolute dependence. At this stage we merely note that both dimensions occur in religion. I beseech God; and I experience his presence. I pray for the forgiveness of my sins; and I am cleansed of my sins. I construct or reject an idea of God; and I bow to a traditional idea of God as true, or suffer terrible anxiety because it has lost its meaning for me. So we could go on, but this ought to remind us of a world of discovery, where the actions of each specific person and group will have its own shades of meaning. In this line of argument, religio-scientific explanation may be called ‘responsive explanation’, in so far as its main concern is the character of religion as a kind of response to the world and, in and beyond the world, to religious reality.

4.3.4 THE UNDERSTANDING OF PERSONAL AND SITUATIONAL CASES AND PATTERNS

Theories of religion can be devised that hinge on the idea of action. In this perspective, the heart of explanation is the explication of the human meaning of things. What is understood, is this meaning, not necessarily as a consciously meant meaning, but at least recognizable to a person if reconstructed for him by an interpreter. Personal explanation is the heart of the wider situational explanation.

We have come across five factors which the interpreter has to take into account: (a) the religious person or group of interacting persons, existing in many degrees of nearness and farness to the interpreter; (b) the signs revealing the mind of the religious person or group in words, ceremonies, documents and so on; (c) symbols, that is, signals in as far as they reveal an experience of religious reality, for example when the words become invocations, the ceremonies sacred rituals and the documents vehicles of divine revelation; (d) the world in which the religious person or group is situated; (e) the religious reality itself, referred to by the symbol, articulated in the world, experienced by the religious person, as known or unknown to the interpreter.
Each of these could become a relatively independent theme of investigation. But in the end each is significant, relative to the others and together with them illuminating the style of being a religious man in the world. The more fully all five are known to the interpreter and the more significant the relations between them are for him, the more satisfied will he be that he understands. To the extent that one or more of them are unknown to the interpreter, understanding becomes more difficult and less rich.

The subjective meaning meant by the religious persons or groups who interact via a multitude of signs in all the various ways described (and more), is the core around which this kind of understanding turns. Of course the patterns of coherence of the signs as such (the syntactic dimension) may receive attention, but it will be subordinated to the human uses and the human meaning intended via the signs (the pragmatic and semantic dimensions). Hopefully enough has been said to show that it does not necessarily amount to personalistic subjectivism. The different factors are interrelated. Understanding is more than the mere reconstruction of what religious man consciously intends. If he does his work well, the scientist of religion understands the religious meaning of persons and their actions better than the persons themselves in as far as he relates them to all the factors implied, which the religious person does not consciously do unless he has achieved a high degree of reflexiveness. The scientist of religion uncovers the various relations, thereby working towards an integral understanding of a religious phenomenon.

The world could become a relatively independent theme of investigation. If the world is left out of account, the result will be personalism; if it receives isolated and exclusive attention, the result will be determinism. Although a boundary can be drawn between the deterministic and the action perspectives, the reality itself shows an area of ambiguity between being determined and acting. Here the unconscious plays its part. To the extent that one's being determined by natural and sociocultural forces is consciously realized and interpreted, it takes on the character of action as we described it. For example, the physical disturbances of this particular body become my illness, interpreted by me, responded to by me and thus it becomes the medium of my meaning.

A religion is situated in a world. The determinism-perspective might be interested in a religion as a result (dependent variable) of the environment (independent variable). A personalistic perspective would look at the religion removed from its context. This too would not be adequate — the interpreter could, to mention one possibility, tumble into the pitfall of rationalism, taking at its face-value the meaning people offer when asked about their religion and mistaking this for the whole truth about their religion. The action perspective would be interested in the variegated ways, ranging from unconscious to highly reflexive, in which the adherents of a religion respond to their environment. The historical-critical procedure in the interpretation of religious documents finds its place in an approach such as this. Even people's being determined by their environment may be taken up in an action framework: the ways in which people are determined (that is, allow themselves to be determined) can be interpreted as indicative of how they orientate themselves in the world. Therefore the understanding of objective patterns (including, for example, structural interpretations of religious documents — cf par 4.2.3) could be taken up in an action-framework.
Suppose we wish to study the religion of some group. It would then be important to know that this group consists of poor people. Knowledge of their poverty as an objective state of affairs, and of the objective correlation between their poverty and their religion, would contribute much to an understanding of their religious response to their poverty. In trying to understand the religion of Neanderthal men, knowledge of their living conditions, for example that they hunted the cave bear at great peril to themselves, is valuable. Somehow their religion was linked with cave bears, as the religion of any group in Johannesburg is linked with its socio-economic position.

*Symbols* could also become a relatively independent source of interest. For example, the logic of water symbolism as a universal, cross-religious phenomenon could be brought to light, as has been done by Mircea Eliade. But again, such an analysis should not be isolated. It has to be kept in touch with the persons who believe in the symbol, in their respective particular historical worlds, with reference to the religious reality as understood by them. Nevertheless, in the action-framework, an analysis of the structure of symbols generally could shed light on particular textures of religious meaning. And in any event knowledge of a symbol is invaluable in the understanding of a religion. To what religious world might the bear skulls, arranged with such special care by Neanderthal men in their caves, point? We can only conjecture, but at least this meagre evidence, together with the little knowledge that we do have of their life, offers a faint glimpse into a strange world of awe.

The *religious reality* itself is the ultimate referent of a religion. The field of action is bounded by this reality. Whether a theory of religion as action could be the baseline for theology, is another question. In science of religion we are concerned with the religious search of man and his religious response to the ultimate mystery, not the mystery itself. But this boundary joins as well. I should not dogmatically want to rule it out of bounds for a student of religion, dwelling on the meeting between people and the transcending religious reality, to speak to some extent of the religious reality itself. But then he would be moving beyond the limits of the idea of action as drawn here, and the limits of science of religion as drawn in chapter 2.

4.3.5 UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLANATION

'Understanding' may simply be taken to mean satisfactory knowledge. This would of course imply more than a feeling of satisfaction sometimes felt by an individual ('Oh, now I see!'). In the study of religion, as in science generally, knowledge is expected to be satisfactory and convincing to the forum of students as well — but we shall return to this in chapter 6. It is important in the present context that we do not follow the usage, widespread in some circles, of contrasting 'understanding' with 'explanation'. According to that view (called the deductive-nomological or DN model of understanding, and at present associated particularly with C G Hempel and P Oppenheim) explanation is taken to be the subsumption of a particular case under a general law (cf Hempel 1966:51). It obviously rules out the possibility of science of religion ever 'really' explaining anything. In that school of thinking the term 'understanding' (or the German equivalent 'Verstehen') is usually used in a depreciatory way, as meaning mere intuition: a vague and non-rigorous ('soft') sense of sympathetic acquaintance, perhaps useful in the early stages of an investigation, but not yet
‘explanation’. We have to add, however, that some advocates of ‘Verstehen’ have accepted the dichotomy and sometimes contribute to the notion of understanding as being only intuition.

An important trend in contemporary methodology, however, does not accept such a dichotomy between understanding and explaining and a corresponding dichotomy between the human sciences and natural sciences. Following this trend (and linking up more with the everyday usage of these terms) we may see understanding and explanation as presenting two stages in the same process: when our understanding of something is lacking or has become shaky, we are in need of an explanation as a means towards ‘making sense’ of the puzzle, that is, towards understanding (cf Pannenberg 1976:135ff). A successful explanation is one that allows us to understand; a sound understanding is one that, for the present, is not in need of explanation.