

The Politics of Religious Studies

The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy

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palgrave

performed—namely, that of developing an ideology for the society in which they lived. J. Z. Smith points to a similar problem for students of religion in his essay “Map Is Not Territory” (1978). Although for Smith the human sciences (including history and the history of religions) “serve as limiting perspectives” on the understanding of religion—“as boundaries of concreteness over against which to judge more speculative and normative inquiries in religious studies” (289)—he restricts the task of the scientific student to non-speculative and non-normative matters. The philosopher and theologian, he concedes, may have “a standpoint from which he may gain clear vision” (289), but the historian (scientific student of religion) is a person of hints and insights at best, which cannot ground such “vision.” The latter, therefore, approaches religion simply as a human phenomenon, “as one mode of constructing worlds of meaning” (290). Consequently, “Religious Studies are most appropriately described in relation to the Humanities and the Human Sciences, in relation to Anthropology rather than Theology” (290). In summary, then, religion is seen as the power to relate to the natural and social world “in such a way as to guarantee the conviction that one’s existence ‘matters’” (291). Thus, “[w]hat we study when we study religion is the variety of attempts to map, construct, and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation” (291).

23. I have argued this point in depth in my book *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* (1991a). I have also addressed it in: “Religion Transcending Science Transcending Religion . . .” (1985b); “Is Science Really an Implicit Religion?” (1989b); and “Religion, Science and the Transformation of ‘Knowledge’” (1993a).

Chapter Eight

*The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion*¹

My concern in this essay is with the relationship of theology to the study of religion, and, more particularly, to the “academic study of religion.” I shall not, however, focus attention here on how theology has received the results of academic research on religion,²—its concerns may be legitimate—nor on historical and institutional questions about the two communities of scholars,³ or even on the notion that theology as an element of religion overall constitutes a focus of interest and concern to the academic student of religion.⁴ My interest here is in the methodological problems implicit in that relationship—even though the matter thus expressed hardly reveals the depth of the issue. Briefly put, the question of theology’s methodological relationship to the academic study of religion jeopardizes the existence of such an academic study, for it re-opens the debate about who controls the agenda for such study—is it the scholar-scientist or the scholar-devotee, the academy or the Church, scientific procedure or transcendent subject-matter, and so on.

As I shall show here, it was in the precise act of distinguishing itself from theology that the study of religion gained a political identity within the academic community. I shall also show that there is currently an argument being made for an explicit role for theology in Religious Studies in the “interpenetration” of the two.⁵ And I shall argue that, even though under constant pressure from a hidden (if unconscious) theological agenda of many of its practitioners, the re-establishment of such an explicit role for theology constitutes a rejection of scientific, academic goals and, therefore, amounts to a “failure of nerve” by the academic community in Religious Studies.⁶

Some clarification of the term “theology” must precede the argument of this paper—both to counter criticism of my “ambiguous” use of the term

in earlier discussions,⁷ and to correct misinterpretations of my position which would place me within the "theological camp."⁸ Moreover, I would like to pre-empt, if possible, an attack on my perception of historical fact, as might be attempted by those who, like Charles Davis, see the conflict between theology and religious studies as due to a failure of the antagonists to recognize a radical shift of meaning in the use of the concept from medieval to modern times.⁹

In trying to account for the history of "God-talk" ("god-talk") and talk about God (the gods, or any other functionally equivalent Ultimate) I find it helpful to distinguish "confessional theology" from "non-confessional theology." The basis of the distinction is essentially presuppositional. Confessional theologies presume the existence of some kind of Ultimate Transmundane Reality, whereas non-confessional theologies recognize only the cultural reality of "the gods" (that is, of some transcendent reality) and attempt to account for it rationally but without subscribing to the supposition that the Ultimate exists.¹⁰ Such a "theoretical theology"—or theology proper—in attempting to provide a rational account of the reality of the gods, leaves open the possibility for a reductionistic account.¹¹ For as a truly scientific enterprise, theology must hold God (the Ultimate) as problematic, as I shall argue below.¹²

I point out, furthermore, that not all confessional theologies are of the same order. For example, I distinguish "small-c" *confessional theology* from "capital-c" *confessional theology*—the latter being commonly used to refer to (exclusivist) theologies of particular creeds and confessions in the history of Western religious thought.¹³ "Small-c" confessional theology, however, is used to cover even the more general acknowledgement of the ontological reality (existence) of the "Focus" of religion—that is, the independent existence of some Ultimate or other to which religious discourse points.

Such distinctions, I suggest, will help students of religion recognize the radical difference between those persons who acknowledge the claim of a transcendent and sacred reality on their lives and those who do not—even when that claim is not tied to a particular historical and exclusivist understanding of some form of divine revelation. Such a non-exclusivistic "confession" I nonetheless take here to be "confession" despite its lack of specificity.

To clarify further the notion of theology as it is used in this essay, I shall respond briefly to Charles Davis' claim that a properly critical theology, which emerged with medieval Christendom, is wholly compatible with Religious Studies. Even for Davis there is a form of theology from which the academic study of religion should be separated, namely, the theology which is nothing more than an elaboration of a particular religious tradition or faith and which, therefore, merely presupposes and reconfirms that tradi-

tion. This corresponds to what I have referred to above as capital-c confessional theology, and is rejected by Davis in favor of a critical or theoretical theology. The distinction between such a confessional (or naïve in Davis's terms) and critical theology is not, however, clearly drawn; his conception of critical or theoretical theology will be seen to differ vastly from mine and to reveal in fact the character of the "small-c" confessional theology described above.

Confusion is generated in Davis's discussion of this matter by several apparent contradictions in his use of theological terminology. This occurs, for example, when he compares and contrasts concepts of "theology as a whole," with "the properly theological," and with the various theologies—historical, systematic, theoretical, foundational, confessional, etc. And at one point Davis insists that capital-c confessional theology is not really theology at all (1975: 221). Furthermore, his claim that systematic theology is concerned essentially with the ordered exposition of the doctrines of a particular tradition which rests on revelation and authority (212) is contradicted by his further claim that the science of religion is simply a more advanced stage of systematic theology rather than something essentially different (219), though he still maintains that he has kept the term "theology" simply to refer to "reflection" upon religion as opposed to the process of expression and communication proper to religion as such (220).

His claim to be using "theology" in a non-partisan, critical fashion is undermined in the underlying assumption of his work that "the religious"—whether it be experience, expression, or activity—is sufficiently different from other social phenomena for it to become the object of a distinct and special science.¹⁴ The assumption excludes reductionistic explanations of religion for the rather circularly-argued reason that "[r]eligious phenomena [...] call for a direct [special] investigation to analyze their common elements . . ." (1975: 214). This specious and ultimately tautological argument reappears later in the essay in the claim that "the science of religion is an empirical enquiry distinguished from sociology and psychology by its primary concern with religious data as religious" (219). All of this amounts, of course, to the patent non-sequitur that since theology, as "rational discourse about God," exists, then God too must exist; and this effective "presumption of theism"¹⁵ I would argue, makes of Davis a "small-c" confessional theologian.¹⁶ To conclude: I do not take issue here with theology of the theoretical kind which recognizes the Ultimate as problematic; for such a theology leaves open the possibility of a reductionistic account of it. All uncritical thinking about God or the gods which relies on revelation or on the "presumption of theism"—therefore, refusing to countenance the possible non-existence of the divine—is "confessional theology." Such theology constitutes a species of what I call "religious thought," operating within the

framework of general religious assumptions or traditions and is therefore incompatible with what will be referred to below as the basic minimum presuppositions for the academic study of religion.

The study of religion as a scholarly exercise has a very long history;¹⁷ antedating by far the institutionalized, academically-legitimated study of religion which emerged in the late nineteenth century.¹⁸ And it is important to see that its acceptance in the academic domain was not occasioned by a natural, spontaneous recognition either of its academic style or methodological significance. Rather, it came about as a result of a quest for such recognition that required establishing the scientific objectivity of religious studies—a quest which, as has often been pointed out, is the product of the Enlightenment. This in turn required giving up the theological interests and confessional stance so characteristic of that study in the past.¹⁹ Indeed, in some countries—France being a case in point²⁰—the teachers of the new discipline replaced the Theological Faculty altogether. In this sense Jacob Neusner is right to suggest that the new academic student of religion attempted to overcome an unwanted past, although I think he exaggerates when he claims that the attempt was successful (1977b). Similarly Joachim Wach (1951, 1958) and Joseph Kitagawa (1958) speak of the study of religion as being emancipated from a theological agenda, and Robert W. Friedrichs (1974) talks of the “detheologizing” of the subject. The study of religion, they assert, was becoming more neutral, objective, and scientific. This meant adopting a notion of a universally applicable mode of inquiry, implying that religions could be studied in exactly the same way as any other social phenomenon. The scholar *qua* scholar, therefore, was to eliminate religious commitments from all scholarly analysis. The several concerns of the “new” discipline included: (1) morphology of religion, involving primarily a description of rites, rituals, beliefs, practices, art, architecture, and so on of the various historical religions; (2) stages of religious development; (3) parallels among the various traditions; and, later, (4) the phenomenology of religious meaning and the structure of religions. The discipline, then, was primarily empirical, heavily centered on philological and historical concerns, and resulted in the production of scholarly monographs and interpretive studies.

The institutionalization of this new discipline was not only to be found in universities; an international association (The International Association for the History of Religions [IAHR]) was eventually formed in the 1950s although International Congresses had been held from 1900 on, and under the pressure of various religious sentiments—especially as the Association expanded membership to include religion “scholars” from the Far East²¹—theological and religious matters began to appear on the agenda of its Con-

gresses. This unforeseen regression led to a stricter formulation of the scientific goals and intentions of the new discipline (*Religionswissenschaft*) by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky. His five-point enunciation of the “basic minimum presuppositions” for the pursuit of historical and comparative studies of religion was reproduced in *Numen*, the official publication of the IAHR (Schimmel, 1960).²² A summary of that statement here will provide a kind of benchmark for the “retreat to theology” I shall attempt to document below:²³

1. “Comparative religion” or *Religionswissenschaft* is a scientific discipline;
2. *Religionswissenschaft* is a branch of the humanities, and as such it is an anthropological discipline, studying the religious phenomenon as a creation, feature and aspect of human culture. The common ground on which students of religion, *qua* students of religion, meet is the realization that the awareness of the numinous or the experience of transcendence (where these happen to exist in religions) are, whatever else they may be, undoubtedly empirical facts of human existence and history, to be studied like all human facts by appropriate method;
3. *Religionswissenschaft* rejects the claim that religion is a *sui generis* phenomenon that can only be understood if ultimately seen to be a realization of transcendent truth;
4. Although the study of religion may arise from non-academic motivation, it needs no such external justification (and ought not to rely on one);
5. The IAHR must keep itself free from all ideological commitments.²⁴

Some critics have seen this program as Comtean *ersatz* religion.²⁵ But Werblowsky’s review of Wach’s “theological” approach to the study of religion counters that: “Of course historical analysis can never yield the norms without which life is not worth living . . . but, then, nobody ever supposed historical analysis to do just that. There is, after all, a world of difference between study and living, between studying history and making it” (Werblowsky, 1959: 354).

Religious Studies did in fact gain the academic legitimation it sought. But it failed to live up to the commitments it had given the academic community to pursue its agenda in a religiously non-partisan fashion. E. J. Sharpe (1986 chapter 6) points out, for example, that in the early days of the “discipline,”²⁶ Religious Studies was still considered by many to be religious instruction even if not on the confessional scale found in theological faculties—an impression bolstered by the close association of some of its leading practitioners (such as F. M. Müller) with movements such as the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. Kitagawa has

noted, in a review of the subject as taught in the United States, that although its early formation followed European scientific lines, it eventually submitted to the pressures of conservatism and orthodoxy (1959, 1983). This seems less surprising when one considers that the majority of those in the field hail from a religious background and likely entered the discipline with theological baggage if not an agenda.²⁷ The situation is further compounded by the connected complaint—voiced by C. J. Bleeker (1961, 1975) and still heard today—that the IAHR has not been able to attract social scientists interested in the study of religious phenomena. As Oxtoby put it, Religious Studies was simply “not scientific enough” (1968: 591).

I do not mean to suggest here, however, that scholars were being duplicitous—in fact, they made the conscious effort to “bracket” their own beliefs and made this “bracketing” a requirement of the discipline. In so doing there emerged a general methodological agreement that the truth-question not be raised in Religious Studies—that is, that the academic study of religion forego the philosophical-metaphysical justification of the various historical religious traditions which had thus far been such an unsuccessful and divisive exercise. So it is not that those who adopted the bracket—*epoché*—denigrated that metaphysical exercise or denied its value in other contexts but just that, for the sake of achieving a convergence—however short-range—of scholarly opinion on general religious issues from a wide range of competing theological frameworks, they restricted their concerns to less speculative, more positive matters where all could agree on the criteria for assessing claims.

The *epoché* (or bracketing) freed the student and the study of religion from ecclesiastical domination, although there was still a certain amount of theological suspicion attached to those so engaged (Oxtoby, 1968: 591). However, there are methodological corollaries implied in the *epoché* to suggest that such a study of religion, even though free from a certain ecclesiastical—and therefore capital-c confessional—domination, is nonetheless influenced by religious or theological commitment. The most damning corollary, as I have indicated elsewhere, is the “descriptivist doctrine”—whereby the substance of the Science of Religion is reduced to phenomenological description—especially when connected with the widely-held belief that such a study constitutes a new discipline, (namely, the “Science of Religion.”²⁸) The corollary requires that the study of religion remain free from theory and forego explaining religious phenomena. For to explain is to grant that the phenomenon is somehow illusory or veridical—in other words, to invoke the very category of truth which the *epoché* banished in its attempt to achieve academic neutrality. However, the enterprise, if it is to be scientific, must necessarily move beyond mere ideographic description to a more nomothetic explanation and theory.²⁹ This can be done without entering the

metaphysical or theological fray—and so, without contravening the conventionally adopted stratagem of the *epoché*—by means of analysis of the cognitive components of the religious tradition concerned compared with the cognitive universe of the investigator. If the cognitive “worlds” clash, the student of religion then proceeds to consider alternative accounts of the religious phenomenon by regarding factors or aspects of human existence not in themselves religious. It is this potentially reductionist accounting for religion that the “descriptivist doctrine” is meant to preclude. For descriptionists, “to explain” is “to explain away” and that, it appears, must be avoided at all costs. But to avoid that possibility altogether is to assume that it can never be “explained away.” That assumption, however, indicates a religious or theological bias, for it grants an ontological reality to religion which the latter may not really possess.

The first corollary—the descriptivist doctrine—is complemented by the doctrine of “the autonomy of religion.” The obviously circular argument is given that since the discipline of Religious Studies exists, it must have a peculiar subject-matter inviting an equally peculiar method of analysis. Religion being a *sui generis* phenomenon, it is to be treated “on its own terms.” Ultimately, to see it as anything other than “religious” is not to take religion “seriously.”³⁰

To reiterate, the *epoché* and its corollaries, taken together, imply that Religious Studies is a science with a methodology peculiar to itself, distinct from theology-religion on the one hand and the physical and social sciences on the other. I have shown elsewhere, however, that this argument is flawed because it is based on mutually exclusive sets of assumptions and because it fails to delineate clearly the methodology assumed peculiar to itself (Wiebe, 1978).

My arguments on this issue have been criticized as distortions of the original intent of the founders of this “new” science as well as of their successors (Widengren, 1983). It has been claimed that the science is not restricted to the descriptive or ideographic level but rather that it extends to “understanding.” Widengren chooses as illustrative of such an approach the work of C. J. Bleeker, who goes beyond mere “fact gathering” in his study of religion to phenomenological understanding (Bleeker, 1954, 1971). I do not deny that Bleeker wishes to go beyond the fact-gathering stage—as do most of his colleagues—but I must point to the problems inherent in that exercise. The “understanding” Bleeker seeks quite obviously presumes the validity of the devotee’s position, for the bracketing is still very much in effect in this exercise. The devotee’s self-understanding in effect provides the point of departure for this task. This principle was accepted early on in “Science of Religion” circles which we see in F. M. Müller’s adoption of “Comparative Theology” as an element of that science. The student, he insists, must deal

with the facts as discovered, so that "if people regard their religion as revealed, it is to them a revealed religion and has to be treated as such by every impartial historian" (Müller, 1893: 74).³¹

There is no doubt that the understanding sought by phenomenology "goes beyond" descriptive, historical and philological fact-gathering. The question which needs raising, however, is whether that "understanding" is still description (perhaps at a deeper level), or whether in fact it goes beyond that ideographic to a truly nomothetic grasp of religious phenomena. And if the latter, its *epoché* in fact amounts to an *a priori* acceptance of an ontological reality although it refuses to commit publicly—or even privately—to that reality. Therefore, it is assumed that reductionist accounts are unable to provide an understanding of religion; and that means, conversely, that religion necessarily involves persons with what is ultimately "real," and "good." *Understanding*, then, would by definition preclude causal explanation; because the latter, where applicable, is of limited value, for this kind of understanding is broader than explanation.³² Such an "understanding," to conclude, amounts to a non-specific theology, for it assumes the ontological reality of the religious phenomenon without consciously espousing any particular historical religious tradition's view of that reality.³³ It rests uncritically on the assumption of the metaphysical validity of "religion in general."³⁴

What I hope to show in this section of the paper is the hidden theological agenda of Religious Studies.³⁵ Neusner's relatively recent suggestion (1977b) that the academic study of religion in the United States and Canada has developed a set of norms which exclude religiosity from the classroom, and that there has developed a consequently detached and objective approach to the study seems a fairy tale, which ignores the significance of the literature produced, as the discussion to follow should demonstrate. Furthermore, with respect to "what goes on" in our Departments of Religious Studies and in our other academic institutions, the evidence simply does not support his claim, but documentation of this will have to be left for another paper.³⁶

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of all the positions and arguments against what amounts to a "detheologized" academic study of religion; nevertheless I shall attempt to delineate here the major stances taken. I am not sure that the two major arguments (and their subdivisions) I shall deal with are clearly distinguishable from each other—nor are they set out by their authors in a pure and pristine form. However, the typology I shall offer should be of some use in assessing what has grown to be a large body of literature; and the overview provided should at least indicate a trend in Religious Studies which threatens to jettison the gains it has made since the Enlightenment.

The most common type of argument to be found in this literature might best be designated the "complementarity thesis." The claim usually put forward in this case is not that Religious Studies is of no use to our search for understanding religious phenomena but simply that it is inadequate. The "heart of religion," that is, cannot be perceived if the subject is approached "in purely informative, descriptive, scientific terms" (Kegley, 1978: 280). According to Mostert: "One must go beyond the historical and socio-scientific approach that adheres simply to empirical methods of data collection and description or even explanation" (1976: 8–9); or as Ladner puts it, the proper study of religion "entails more than employing the intellectual instruments of criticism and analysis to investigate various forms of faith and belief" (1972: 216)—something which has been neglected recently in the shallowness fostered by an expansion of Religious Studies, while it blindly vaunts "that we are finally getting our intellectual foot in the academic door of secular education . . ." (Ladner, 1972: 216).

In an early essay in this genre, Bernard E. Meland raises questions about the assumption that the student of religion need only be concerned with "objective methods" (1961). According to Meland, the student of religion must be distinct from the regular historian or the run-of-the-mill social scientist. The student of religion "is not *just* a historian or a scientist in the sense that defines the anthropologist or social scientist. He is a student of religions in a specific and specialized sense" (269–270, emphasis added), involving "deeper" dimensions of religion. And Kees Bolle, while admitting that the study of religion—historically at least—is an enterprise in its own right, and that emphasis on such study in the early days assisted the establishment of Religious Studies in university centers and departments, denies that it alone will "make our field acceptable in a modern academic framework" (1967: 98). Indeed, he predicts that, without complement, the pure academic approach would bring the discipline to an end: "Religious phenomena are never just intellectual propositions or just individual affairs. Hence neither can the manner in which religious phenomena are approached have its centre in logical investigation and a resulting synthesis of general laws *alone*, even if the individual following this method is a master in the fields of logic and anthropology" (100).

Such complementarity might best be characterized as "incremental," the academic study of religion being supplemented by theology as, say, physics is "exceeded" by chemistry. Theology, that is, is an entirely different way of "knowing" than the "knowing" of science which increases our information. As Kegley expresses it, the student of religion cannot remain detached in an information-gathering exercise but rather must share in the religious experience of the devotee. And, he maintains, "this [. . .] is not a call for indoctrination but for the wooing of the spirit" (1978: 280).³⁷ Kegley, however,

does not see the complementarity as unilinear but rather as a "mutual benefiting" of Theology and Religious Studies: "Theology without serious religious studies tends to pious arrogance; religious studies without theology tends to parasitical aloofness. In a dialectical encounter, both may thrive" (1978: 282).

A similar "mutual complementarity" thesis is to be found in the work of R. H. Drummond: "If theologians need the history of religions to give full-bodiedness and contemporary relevance to their own work, the historians of religion need theology in order to come to grips with that which they are really supposed to deal—the central elements of the religious life of humankind" (1975: 403). J. P. Mostert insists "it rests with theology to illuminate [religion's] ultimate depth dimension" (1976: 12); as do Meland and Bolle (among others), although Bolle at least calls for a "deprovincializing of Christian theology" in the process (1967: 116).³⁸

"Incremental complementarity," however, is not the only response to the issue of the relationship of Theology to Religious Studies; there is an alternative, which I will refer to as "incorporative complementarity." It is a position halfway between the simple "complementarity thesis" and the "identity thesis" (to be discussed below), which does not fully insist on the distinction between Religious Studies and Theology but instead points to the subordination of the former by the latter. The position seems well expressed by A. Jeffner in the conclusion to his paper on "Religion and Understanding":

[R]eligion can be seen as a kind of understanding and explanation of a part of reality. Such religious understanding is parallel to other kinds of understanding, e.g., the scientific one. But religious understanding aims at an understanding of our total situation, in other words an all-inclusive understanding. The religious all-inclusive understanding need not be opposed to a scientific understanding of a part of reality, but it is opposed to a scientific world view and a scientific all-inclusive understanding. (1981: 225)

Science, then, has a place, but it is secondary; it can only make its contribution within a wider frame of reference. Theologians taking up this stance effectively "hybridize" disciplines, tending to talk of "religio-sociology," or "religio-ecology," or "religio-history," and so on.³⁹ As J. Kitagawa (himself a proponent in this category) puts it with regard to J. Wach's work, there is an attempt to "combine the insights and methods of *Religionswissenschaft*, philosophy of religion, and theology" (1958: xxviii). As one sees in Wach's writings and activities, this implies that although as a student of religion one does not wish to give up the ideal of objectivity, one comes to recognize that such objectivity falls short of the broader vision in which neutrality is precluded. "What is required," he writes, "is not indifference, as positivism in

its heyday believed [. . .] but rather engagement of feeling, interest, *metaxis*, or participation" (Wach, 1958: 12). And to settle for less is to adopt a form of scientism.⁴⁰ Kitagawa echoes Wach in this matter, advocating the exploiting of such "new" disciplines as religio-sociology and religio-science to show the possible "syntheses" and "interpenetration" of disciplines sought by Wach.⁴¹

But Wach and Kitagawa are not the only scholars to hold this position. Indeed, as Kitagawa points out, the line of thought goes back to Wach's Marburg teachers, including F. Heiler and Rudolph Otto (Kitagawa, 1971: 49). What Wach envisages in his redefinition of Religious Studies, according to Kitagawa "is the interpenetration between constructive theology, which is informed and purified by careful studies of history of religions, and history of religions, itself liberated from the 'narrowly defined' scientific approach to the study of religion" (1971: 52). Other scholars in this tradition include Paul Tillich,⁴² Mircea Eliade,⁴³ and Eliade's many followers.⁴⁴ What all have in common is what Kitagawa found essential to Wach's attempt at a deep penetration into the nature of religion—namely, "the recognition of the objective character of ultimate reality" (1971: 46). In other words, what is implied (if not sought) is a concept of "meaning" as a "transcendent something" unaffected by the dictates of science.⁴⁵ The sciences (including the scientific study of religion) are thus in effect contaminated by the religious vision. Science, it appears, cannot ultimately comprehend religion; the latter remains, in Wach's words, "one of the inexplicable mysteries which have accompanied the ascent of man . . ." (1944: 307).

This mysteriousness, I maintain, is essentially a religious attribute—and proof of a confessional stance. And I would argue that such a pronouncement reveals a similar approach wielded by all those methods for the study of religion which subordinate the detached, scientific "outsider" approach to religion to the confessional "insider" approach.⁴⁶

The last type of argument for a re-theologized Religious Studies mentioned above as the "identity thesis," amounts to a variation of the preceding forms. Its claim is that following analysis of the nature and task of Theology and Religious Studies the two will in fact be pronounced essentially the same enterprise. This position has been set out elaborately by W. Pannenberg (1976) within the framework of a defense of theology as a science (and therefore as an academic discipline). He allows that theology can be described as the "science of Christianity," but if Christianity is seen as only one religion among many others in the context of the history of religions, it should rather be placed under the general heading of the Science of Religion (1976: 256). The kind of unity which "reduces" theology to a sub-discipline, however, he rejects, arguing that theology does justice to Christianity only as a science of "God," where "God" stands for "reality-as-a-whole" while admitting that an

"anthropological turn" has taken place in theology to make both the concept and theology itself problematic. He then goes on to ground such a hypothetical theology in the Science of Religion (346), theology's concern being, as he puts it, "the communication of divine reality experienced in [religions . . .]" (365). This amounts to a critical theology of religions "in virtue of its attempt to examine the specifically religious theme of religious traditions and ways of life, the divine reality which appeared in them, and not some other psychological or sociological aspect" (365–366). Theology, therefore, he equates with the Science of Religion when that task is being properly carried out. In an earlier essay Pannenberg describes an identical characterization of Theology and the Science of Religion, but there he admits that the exercise is not simply historical but rather a kind of "religious-historical" research and therefore a religious exercise. Such an admission unwittingly supports the thesis that academic and religious pursuits are mutually exclusive (1971: 116).

Pannenberg's kind of stance is taken up by a number of other scholars as well. A similar but much briefer statement is presented, for example, by B. Hebblethwaite (1980). Carl-Martin Edsman contends that Religious Studies, when placed in Faculties of Theology as it has often been, has not fared badly; and he maintains that those who call for a separation of the two disciplines are propagandists ignorant of the strictly scientific scholarship of both fields (1974: 70). A. D. Galloway maintains that it is in the human quest for truth that we see "the unity and integrity of our discipline" (1975: 165). And Paul Wiebe, while disclaiming any connection with the systematic theologies taught at seminaries, maintains that Religious Studies is a constructive science, not merely self-reflective and historical, and therefore indistinguishable from theology (1975: 18, 23). He states his position: "the creation of norms is the final good of religious studies. This is to say that the real impetus behind the investigation of religion is not a mere intellectual or aesthetic curiosity, but is a desire for existential truth" (23). This of course makes it obvious that the so-called academic discipline is at the same time a religious activity. And it is certainly reminiscent of Paul Tillich's nebulous view of the History of Religion's being merely a form of theology in the process of transformation into "the religion of the concrete spirit" (1963: 87). Charles Davis similarly maintains that once one recognizes theoretical theology for what it really is—and has been since at least the Middle Ages—the modern development of the science of religion will be seen to be in continuity with that medieval progression (1975: 207).⁴⁷ On one level he insists that to study religion is not in itself a religious exercise (207), but on another he maintains that theology cannot simply be seen as a datum on a different level from the science of religion (208). Consequently he advocates a convergence of the two disciplines, with each having as its primary concern religious data *qua* religious (219), even though this seems to contradict his

earlier disclaimer about the religiosity of that study. In conclusion he states "the science of religion is [. . .] a more advanced stage of systematic theology, [and] not an essentially different enterprise (219).

A twist on the identity thesis is often found in the literature as well. It is often claimed, that is, that the so-called academic study of religion is itself a religion and therefore simply rivals religious faith of the established traditions. This was the thrust, for example, of W. C. Smith's 1984 presidential address to the American Academy of Religion (1963).⁴⁸ The most vocal exponent of this thesis, in my opinion, however, is R. N. Bellah. He readily admits that he has no anxiety about blurring the boundary line between religion and the teaching of religion—of infecting the study, so to speak, with its own subject matter (1970c: 4). Indeed, boundaries cannot be erected since "whatever fundamental stance one takes in teaching about religion is in itself a religious position" (4), though he does elsewhere refer to it as implicitly religious (1970a: 95).⁴⁹ In the latter article he refers to his position as one of "symbolic realism" which is both academically sound, according to him, and self-consciously religious. Indeed, he maintains that it "is the *only* adequate basis for the social scientific study of religion" (1970a: 93, my emphasis).⁵⁰

Paul Ingram captures the sentiments of Bellah well in his methodological statement against the "cartesian methodology" that is "basically a technology for manipulating 'religious data' into precise intelligible patterns that can be understood by anyone who followed the same technical procedures" (1976: 392). Rather than attempting to seize the truth about religion the students must be seized by truth and insight in spite of the methodologies they may hold (1975: 394). And Walter Capps also talks about the need to fight against "the monopolizing compact between the Enlightenment and religious studies . . ." (1978: 104). Religious studies, that is, must involve itself, as does theology, in the process of the formation of the truth (1978: 105). This, then, is the dominant story one hears from an ever-expanding circle of spokespersons for Religious Studies.

Although rather lengthy, this review does not at all exhaust the bewildering variety of arguments calling for a return to Theology in Religious Studies—calls to turn to religion and the Supermundane, to Ultimate Reality and the Truth. There is, however, sufficient documentation here to support the claim that the objective, detached, and scientific study of religion, so eagerly sought in the heady days of the late nineteenth century, is no longer a major factor in the study of religion in our universities. We have now a return to religion under the apparent pressure of a breakdown of our culture,⁵¹ but to believe that we are returning to our "origins" is sheer illusion. The "limitations" of the classroom in our attempt to understand religion⁵² have not so

much led to a misunderstanding of religion, I would suggest, as they have fostered the creation of what R. Michaelson calls "classroom religion."⁵³ Bellah's symbolic realism is an example of precisely that, but it is arguable as to whether—with respect to the religious traditions originally studied by the academic community—such an interpretation is not itself reductionistic.⁵⁴

Before leaving this matter I should like to focus special attention on my own academic community in Canada which I think is aptly described as having "lost its nerve" in this enterprise—if it ever had it—as evinced in the work of Davis discussed above. In a more recent essay on theology and religious studies Davis categorically insists that a scientific study of religion cannot operate devoid of religious faith (1981: 13). That view, moreover, presents itself in a more general fashion in Davis's work as editor of the Canadian journal *Studies in Religion (SR)*. The conclusion drawn by P. B. Riley after close analysis of the journal's content over the first ten years of its existence is that the journal has been devoted to (quoting Davis) "collaboration between theologians and religionists" (1984: 427). Indeed, he correctly suggests that this is the distinctive contribution of the journal and, I would maintain with only slight qualification, that the groups for whom the journal serves as official organ are quite happy with the ideological direction it has taken.

The editorial policy of Davis, moreover, perpetuates a long tradition. In this regard it is interesting to note that, in some sense, *SR* is a continuation of the old *Canadian Journal of Theology*. That journal, experiencing financial difficulties and being unable to secure Canada Council funding because of its "religious character," signed away its existence to the new religious studies periodical able to secure such financial support. In return, however, the *Canadian Journal of Theology* received assurance from W. Nicholls, the first editor of *SR*, that the new journal would not abandon its theological readership. That promise has been kept (Riley, 1984: 444).⁵⁵

This is not, of course, the only indication of the state of Religious Studies in Canada. The influence of Wilfred Cantwell Smith on the Canadian scene is almost all-pervasive, and it most certainly influences the "re-theologizing" of Religious Studies. Riley, in his look at *SR* claims that Smith's "work and influence perhaps more than that of any individual, permeates the pages of *SR*"⁵⁶ and the claim applies, I think, to his general influence on Religious Studies elsewhere as well,⁵⁷ although space does not permit substantiating that claim here. Finally, other events in the emergence and operation of departments for the study of religion in Canada could be cited to support the claim.⁵⁸

It was with some surprise that I found myself taken to be an exponent of the very position I have argued against here and elsewhere.⁵⁹ It is true that in my discussion of the possibility of a Science of Religion I admitted that

Religious Studies might well contain theological elements (Wiebe, 1978). But the theology I had in mind was of a scientific nature, capable of accepting the demands of intellectual honesty to the point of abandoning any absolute or ultimate commitments, and leaving itself open to radical change (1978: 125).⁶⁰ In this sense, which I may not have explained clearly enough, theology (philosophical, theoretical, or scientific) as "the rationale of God or the gods" permits the possibility of reductionism, although, quite obviously, it does not necessitate it. It is for this reason that I found it justifiable to talk of the possibility of the study of religion as proceeding from the point of view of the "critical participant" (or "detached devotee") while refusing to recognize an "autonomous discipline" presupposing an independent subject matter—that is, God, the gods, the Transcendent, Ultimate Reality, and so on. For the *a priori* acceptance of the reality and existence of the Ultimate is a species of religious thinking and, if it is to be called theology at all, ought to be referred to as "confessional theology." And it is this kind of theologizing which I argue is incompatible with Religious Studies since it in fact constitutes the subject matter of that study. As I have pointed out in my discussion of Davis and others above, to accept without question (as a condition of the study) the existence of an Ultimate Reality is to espouse confessional theology, even if it is of a more "ecumenical" variety than in the past. So, to avoid any further ambiguity, I reiterate here: theology, when it commits itself to the existence of the Ultimate, constitutes a form of religious thought which cannot complement the academic study of religion but can only "infect" it.⁶¹

Imprecision on this matter may unfortunately have been fostered by my failure to point out clearly there that the "critical insider" and "sympathetic outsider" converge—and ought to do so—on the descriptive level only and not necessarily on the explanatory and theoretical level.⁶² The confusion is due, it appears to me now, to my earlier, predominant apologetic concerns.⁶⁵ In my work on the role of explanation in the study of religion (Wiebe, 1975), however, even though showing some sympathy for the argument of the "insiders," I expressed nagging doubts about the matter but did not pursue the issue at that time.

In this paper I have taken up a matter which has challenged me over many years, and I think I have assessed it here a little more clearly. I have shown that the explicit agenda adopted by the founders of Religious Studies as an academic (university) concern committed the enterprise to a detached, scientific understanding of religion wholly uninfected by any sentiment of religiosity. I have also pointed out that the study was—and still is—dominated by a hidden theological agenda, but that the *epoché* invoked by its practitioners had nevertheless provided the ground for beginning a new tradition of thought on matters religious. Finally, I have shown

that the crypto-theological agenda informing that study is becoming more overt, actually being touted as the only proper method for the study of religion. This last step, I argue here, dismisses the tentative move toward the development of a scientific study of religion that was heralded by the first generation of *Religionswissenschaftler* and, therefore, constitutes a failure of nerve in the academic study of religion.

Notes

1. This essay is a revised version of a paper prepared for the Eastern International Regional Meeting of the AAR held at McMaster University in the spring of 1984. I wish to thank the participants (especially Lorne Dawson) for helpful comments and criticisms. I am also grateful to Peter Slater, whose criticisms of an early draft of this paper were also of assistance.
2. See R. H. Drummond, "Christian Theology and the History of Religions" (1975); A. R. Gualtieri, "Confessional Theology in the Context of the History of Religions" (1972); and D. Wiebe, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" (1978).
3. See Carl-Martin Edsman, "Theology or Religious Studies?" (1974); W. Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (1976); Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (1975) and *Understanding Religion* (1983); and B. Hebblethwaite, "Theology and Comparative Religion" (1980).
4. See N. Smart, "Resolving the Tensions between Religion and the Science of Religion" in *The Phenomenon of Religion* (1973); R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "The Comparative Study of Religions: A Review Essay" (1959), and "On Studying Comparative Religion" (1975).
5. For examples of such imagery see Drummond, "Christian Theology" (1975); and J. M. Kitagawa, "Verstehen und Erlösung: Some Remarks on Joachim Wach's Work" (1971).
6. The phrase "failure of nerve" is borrowed from G. Murray (*Five Stages of Greek Religion* [1955]). For Murray, a "failure of nerve" characterized the shift from confidence in human effort and the enlightened mind from the presocratics to the rise of asceticism and mysticism after Plato and Aristotle. See also S. Hook, *The Quest for Being* (1961). Other scholars have used the phrase in quite a different way, even to the point of reversing its original intent. See, for example, Carl A. Raschke, "The Future of Religious Studies: Moving Beyond the Mandate of the 1960s" (1983); Eric J. Sharpe, "Some Problems of Method in the Study of Religion" (1971); and, especially, J. C. McLelland, "Alice in Academia: Religious Studies in an Academic Setting." The Enlightenment, as I point out below, constitutes the source from which the academic study of religion emerged. If Peter Gay's (1966) interpretation of that period as the re-establishing of the derailed presocratic Enlightenment is anywhere near the truth, then Murray's "failure of nerve" concept applies particularly well to the subject of my essay.

7. See J. P. Mostert, "Complementary Approaches in the Study of Religion." In the hope of avoiding confusion I use the concept "theology" in a less specific sense than do theologians, so that its rejection as a part of Religious Studies ought not to be taken as an argument for the rejection of theology *per se*. As used here—and in general methodological literature pertaining to Religious Studies—"theology" denotes religious thought, whether carried out by the naïve devotee or by the systematically reflective, intellectually sophisticated devotee. The term "theoretical theology" will be used to refer to a "religiously neutral" discipline—although, as will become clear, there is question as to whether that constitutes a discipline—a distinct mode of thought—as its supposed task is indistinguishable from that of the philosophy of religion.
8. See especially Phillip B. Riley, "Theology and/or Religious Studies: A Case Study *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses 1971–1981*" (originally presented at the 1983 meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion). A version of the paper that revises his 1983 judgment somewhat appears in *Studies in Religion*.
9. Charles Davis, "The Reconvergence of Theology and Religious Studies" (1975). If space permitted, I would dispute this claim. I agree with Davis that theoretical theology emerges in the Middle Ages, but I would argue that he does not adequately grasp the import of that development. Bernard of Clairvaux did see the significance of the "new theology" of Peter Abelard (and others) more clearly than Davis. A descriptive account of this state of affairs can be found in J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (1961), and a persuasive alternative interpretation of the Bernard-Abelard conflict can be found in B. Nelson, *On the Roads to Modernity: Conscience, Science and Civilization* (1981). The tension separating "new" and "old" theology, I would maintain, resembles that found between religious and scientific communities of recent Western history. I have addressed this problem more comprehensively in a monograph, *The Irony of Theology and the Nature of Religious Thought* (1991a).
10. On the distinction between the reality and existence of the Focus of the devotee's attention see N. Smart, *The Phenomenon of Religion* (1973).
11. The kind of theology I have in mind here is to be found, for example, in the work of L. Feuerbach or, more recently, in the Christian atheism of the 1960s.
12. Such a scientific theology is undertaken, for example, by W. Pannenberg in his *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (1976).
13. It might be argued that a further distinction within "capital-c" confessional theology is also necessary in order to account for the differences between the main confessional churches of the Reformation and the left-wing or more extreme groups who explicitly distinguished themselves from the mainstream and did not consider themselves confessional in that sense. This is not, however, a problem to be settled here. (I wish to thank Thomas Yoder Neufeld for drawing this point to my attention.)

14. Similar arguments are to be found in E. J. Streng, "The Objective Study of Religion and the Unique Quality Of Religiousness" (1970), and K. K. Klostermaier, "From Phenomenology to Metascience: Reflections on the Study Of Religions" (1977).
15. For a philosophical discussion of this matter, see A. Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism" (1972).
16. Davis's argument here might on first sight seem to find support in the attempt by R. Morgan and Michael Pye to recall the argument of Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch maintained that the positivist or materialist method of study was unacceptable in this field because, in an *a priori* fashion, it precludes the possibility that religion is veridical rather than illusory. A closer reading of Troeltsch, and of the commentaries by Morgan and Pye, however, reveal Troeltsch's methodological idealism to be guilty of a similar *a priorism*. Unfortunately, space does not permit elaboration of that critique here. See the essays by Troeltsch and the Morgan and Pye commentaries in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion* (1977).
17. The scholarly study of world religions has, for many, been a religious exercise. On this point see K. K. Klostermaier's "The Religion of Study" (1978). On the suggestion that the academic study of religion should substitute as a religious exercise, see E. R. Goodenough, "Religionswissenschaft" (1959).
18. Likely the best source for details on this development is E. J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (1975). See also M. Jastrow, Jr., *The Study of Religion* (1981), and J. de Vries, *The Study of Religion: A Historical Approach* (1967).
19. See C. Dawson, "Natural Theology and the Scientific Study of Religion" in *Religion and Culture* (1948); also S. M. Ogden, "Theology and Religious Studies: Their Difference and the Difference It Makes" (1978). Some may argue that the early practitioners of the new style of Religious Studies wished to liberate that study from direct ecclesiastical control and therefore were ready to "give up" only "capital-c" confessional theology while seeking to integrate the new study with their "small-c" confessional stances. Yet even a superficial reading of the methodological literature of the period shows that the rejection of confessional theology was much more radical in intent. For it was to allow students of religion to avoid having to settle the apparently unresolvable ontological and metaphysical questions that preclude "convergence of opinion (belief)" even on the level of "small-c" confessional theology. Nevertheless, as I point out below, it is true that much of the work of the early practitioners in this field could appropriately be described as a species of confessional theology.
20. See Sharpe, *Comparative Religion* (1975).
21. See Sharpe, *Comparative Religion* (1975), ch. 6.
22. Many influential members of the IAHR signed the document. It is important to note that Eliade and Kitagawa did sign this positivist-sounding statement despite their sympathies lying elsewhere, as I point out below.

23. My use of this phrase recalls William Warren Bartley's "retreat to commitment" in *Retreat to Commitment* (1962).
24. These sentiments are also expressed in the following essays by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky: "Revelation, Natural Theology and Comparative Religion" (1956); "The Comparative Study of Religions: A Review Essay" (1959); "Marburg And After" (1960) and "On Studying Comparative Religion" (1975).
25. See, for example, C. Davis, "Theology and Religious Studies," *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 2 (1981): 11-20.
26. I apply quotation marks to the word "discipline" to show that it is being used for convenience—I am reluctant to call the academic study of religion a discipline in the formal sense. See my essay "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" (1978); and *Religion and Truth: Towards an Alternative Paradigm for the Study of Religion* (1981).
27. See, for example, W. C. Oxtoby, "Religionswissenschaft Revisited" (1968); and U. Drobin, "Psychology, Philosophy, Theology, Epistemology—Some Reflections" (1982).
28. See D. Wiebe, "Is a Science of Religion Possible?" (1978).
29. See D. Wiebe, "Explanation and the Scientific Study of Religion" (1975), and "Theory in the Study of Religion" (1983).
30. On this see especially C. J. Bleeker, "The Relation of the History of Religions to Kindred Religious Sciences, Particularly Theology, Sociology of Religion, Psychology of Religion and Phenomenology of Religion" (1954); "Comparing the Religio-Historical and the Theological Method" (1971); and "The Phenomenological Method" (1963).
31. See also Bleeker (1974), W. B. Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion* (1960), W. C. Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither and Why?" or *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963); or "The Modern West in the History of Religions" (1984).
32. The concept of "understanding" used in this fashion has an existentialist, religious connotation, for it suggests that "understanding" constitutes not simply knowledge about religion but perception of a reality that surpasses knowledge or, succinctly put, that constitutes a special kind of knowledge beyond ordinary knowledge. This state of affairs certainly demands further analysis—unfortunately not a task that can be taken up here. On this matter consult J. Waardenburg, "Introduction: A View of a Hundred Years of Religion" (1973).
33. See Oxtoby, "Religionswissenschaft Revisited" (1968).
34. This constitutes, I think, a kind of "theology of humanism" and, therefore, an implicit religion. It is clearly on display in, for example, D. R. Blumental, "Judaic Studies: An Exercise in the Humanities" (1977).
35. I do not wish here to assess why the agenda is becoming apparent—nor what is behind these attacks on the scientific study of religion. Some discussion of these issues can be found in C. W. Kegley, "Theology and Religious Studies: Friends or Enemies?" (1978); or G. D. Kaufman, "Nuclear Eschatology and the

- Study of Religion" (1983). The image of an "attack" on the scientific study of religion is appropriate given the level of hostility evident in the work of a number of authors. Much of this approaches invective and is thus not worth analysis, but it does display the vehement reaction to what I have referred to as a "failure of nerve," as well as a fear (initially generated by the Enlightenment) that academic life might transcend, and thereby threaten the "intellectual" work of the faithful. Among others see M. Marty, "Seminary/Academy: Beyond the Tensions" (1983); M. Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove: An Introduction to Religious Studies* (1972); and "The Identity Crisis of Us All: Response to Professor Crouter" (1972); and B. Ladner, "Religious Studies in the University: A Critical Reappraisal" (1972), and David Burrell, "Faith and Religious Convictions: Studies in Comparative Epistemology" (1983). Other offenders, such as R. Bellah and W. C. Smith, are discussed below.
36. I have in mind here the example of the development in Canadian universities of rather close, official ties to church-related colleges characterized predominantly by their "advocacy-learning" environment. See R. W. Neufeldt, *Religious Studies in Alberta: A State-of-the-Art Review* (1983). It is also important to note that some Canadian universities have funded appointments financed by religious groups in the community, since such a procedure contributes to a blurring of the distinction between religion and the study of religion. This type of funding activity has received some attention with respect to "study conferences" underwritten by the Unification Church in a recent "Symposium on Scholarship and Sponsorship" involving I. L. Horowitz, B. R. Wilson, J. A. Beckford, E. Barker, T. Robbins, and R. Wallis.
 37. See also R. Holley, *Religious Education and Religious Understanding* (1978).
 38. Bolle in effect is asking that "capital-c" confessional theology be replaced by "small-c" confessional theology.
 39. On this subject see my "Theory in the Study of Religion" (1983).
 40. See as well Wach's "General Revelation and the Religions of the World" (1954): 83-93, and "Introduction: The Meaning and Task of the History of Religion" (1967).
 41. See especially J. Kitagawa, "Theology and the Science of Religion" (1975), and "Verstehen und Erlösung" (1971).
 42. Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (1963), and "The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian" (1966). See also Howard R. Burkle, "Tillich's 'Dynamic-Typological' Approach to the History of Religions" (1981).
 43. See, for example, the essays in M. Eliade's *The Quest: History and Meaning of Religion* (1969).
 44. See, for example, *Imagination and Meaning: The Scholarly and Literary Worlds of Mircea Eliade* edited by N. J. Girardot and M. L. Ricketts.
 45. The concept of "meaning" is complex and ambiguous, requiring a good deal of clarification if it is to be of use to the student of religion. Minimal bibliographical orientation would take more space than is available at present, and must, therefore, be left for another essay.
 46. The literature, I suggest, shows an increasing number of the latter, which, however, neither time nor space allow for analysis here. See, among others, F. Streng, "Objective Study of Religion" and his "Religious Studies: Processes of Transformation" (1974); N. Ross Reat, "Insiders and Outsiders in the Study of Religious Traditions" (1983); C. Vernoff, "Naming the Game—A Question of the Field" (1963); J. Arthur Martin, "What Do We Do When We Study Religion?" (1975); and Blumental, "Judaic Studies" (1977). There are several essays by J. Neusner which seem to support this kind of position—but they do so ambiguously. For this reason I reserve discussion of his position for another context. Further studies, moreover, seem to be in preparation for publication. The *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, I understand, is soon to publish papers on this topic by J. Neusner, W. May, J. Cahill, W. Capps, and L. O'Connell. (See L. O'Connell, "Religious Studies, Theology, and the Undergraduate Curriculum" [1984]). O'Connell's article appeared after this paper was written and so no account of it has been taken into consideration here, although the paper is wholly in "the failure of nerve" stream as I have developed it above. O'Connell does, however, refer to the forthcoming articles that he prepared for publication (146). [These papers were published in that journal as what Strenski calls "The Report of the Saint Louis Project" (see I. Strenski, "Our Very Own 'Contras': A Response to the 'St. Louis Project' Report"). W. Nicholls's recent paper to the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion annual meeting in Guelph (1983), entitled "Spirituality and Criticism in the Hermeneutics of Religion" and J. Wiggins' paper on "Theology and Religious Studies," read to the Eastern International Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion at McMaster University (1983), are also likely to see publication in the near future (to my knowledge, neither paper has appeared in print).
 47. See also G. Baum *et al.*, "Responses to Charles Davis" (1975).
 48. It is, in fact, the bulk of Smith's methodological message to the community of academic students of religion. Since I have discussed his position on a variety of occasions I shall say no more here; see especially my essays "The Role of Belief in the Study of Religion: A Response to W. C. Smith" (1979), and "Three Responses to *Faith and Belief*: A Review Article" (1981).
 49. See also the response by James Tunstead Burtchaell to this paper and Bellah's reply in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 9 (1970: 97-115).
 50. For similar statements see also his "Religion in the University: Changing Consciousness, Changing Structures" (1972), and "Religious Studies as 'New Religion,'" (1978).
 51. See, for example, T. J. J. Altizer, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology* (1961): 161, 172-174.
 52. See Neusner, "Being Jewish" (1977).
 53. See R. Michaelson, "The Engaged Observer: Portrait of a Professor of Religion" (1972). A slightly different view can be found in J. C. McLelland, "The Teacher of Religion: Professor or Guru?" (1972).
 54. Bellah's attempt to salvage religion from the students of religion, I am afraid, is about as effective as Durkheim's attempt to rescue the reality of religion

- from its "demise" at the hands of the intellectualist (largely British) anthropologists. But this argument cannot be taken up here. See, however, R. Aron's parallel critique of Durkheim (Aron, 1967: 56).
55. In fairness, it must be noted that clarification of this whole matter is needed, as Professor Nicholls recently informed me that the "theological turn" taken by *Studies in Religion* was not an intentional policy of his nor the result of any promise freely given by him. Whether or not his disappointment and mine with that "theological turn" converge is something we need not explore further here.
 56. The sentence appears on page 13 of a draft of the essay distributed by Riley at a 1983 meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion. For some reason, it was deleted from the published version.
 57. In support of this claim see, for example, A. R. Gualtieri, "Faith, Tradition and Transcendence: A Study of Wilfred Cantwell Smith" (1969), and "Faith, Belief and Transcendence' According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith" (1981). Gualtieri's work itself provides a good example of the results of that influence; see, for instance, his "Descriptive and Evaluative Formulae for Comparative Religion" (1968); "Confessional Theology in the Context of the History of Religions" (1972) and "Normative and Descriptive in the Study of Religion" (1979). There are a number of other prominent Canadian scholars whose thought shows a like influence and even others who argue a similar case quite independently of Smith. I regret to say that these scholars appear jointly to dominate the Canadian scene.
 58. See note 36 above.
 59. See note 8 above.
 60. I expressed that understanding of theology earlier in my essay "Comprehensively Critical Rationalism' and Commitment" (1973).
 61. W. Burkert expresses this conflict between religion and the study of religion most succinctly in his *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (1983), which is worth citing here: "The language that has proved the most generally understood and cross-cultural is that of secularized scholarship. Its practice today is determined by science in its broadest sense, its system of rules by the laws of logic. It may, of course, seem the most questionable endeavour of all to try to translate religious phenomena into this language: by its self-conception, a religion must deny that such explanations are possible. However, scholarship is free to study even the rejection of knowledge and repudiation of independent thought, for scholarship, in attempting to understand the world, has the broader perspective here and cannot abstain from analyzing the worldwide fact of religion. This is not a hopeless undertaking. *However, a discussion of religion must then be anything but religious*" (xxi; my emphasis).
 62. This was the primary focus of my doctoral work at the University of Lancaster (1974). My early views and subsequent re-evaluation of them are to be found in the volume entitled *Beyond Legitimation: Essays in the Problem of Religious Knowledge* (1994e).

Chapter Nine

The "Academic Naturalization" of Religious Studies: Intent or Pretense?

Initial reaction to my argument in "The Failure of Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion" was not encouraging.¹ There was no appreciation of the essay's aim to draw attention to the possibility of fundamental contradiction in our practice of Religious Studies in the university setting—which contradiction may be responsible for the identity crisis the field suffers, threatening not only the future development of the enterprise but its very existence.² Nor was there any apparent recognition of the essentially historical character of my thesis—let alone refutation of the argument and evidence provided.³ Although my account of the emergence and academic establishment of Religious Studies was left unchallenged, my essay nevertheless came under sustained attack. It drew this fire, I suspect, because of the methodological and political implications for Religious Studies stemming from that analysis. To follow my methodological tack could leave me open to charges of reductionism, of being "intent" on explaining religion away in terms of nonreligious social factors rather than understanding it on its own terms; my political argument incites apprehension that the truth and value of religion will be undermined by persons unsympathetic to its aims if they gain control of departments and centers established for its study. Reflecting on the thesis of my essay—that the academic study of religion (Religious Studies) should concern itself with objective knowledge about religions and religion—Charles Davis complains: "We are not led by this philosopher of religion so as to find ourselves at 'the still point of the turning world'" (1984: 393), apparently quite oblivious that that had never been my intention. He continues in his critique: "What . . . is the point of religious discipline if any worldling of a philosopher has access to the same level of religious meaning as the tried ascetic?" (394)—as if