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The Phenomenology of Religion

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The Phenomenology of Religion

The pressures of the immediate post-war years in Europe and America led in many ways to a more careful and certainly more critical attitude to the materials of comparative religious study than had been usual, or perhaps even possible, in the first period of our study. But they also had the unfortunate effect of widening an already existing breach between scholars of different inclinations and temperaments. On the one side were the specialists—historians, philologists, archaeologists and others—who had little interest in creating a synthesis out of the material at their disposal. On the other were those who considered that the times required some fresh attempt to achieve an integral understanding of the overall nature and essence of religion, making use of the more refined and accurate methods and findings of historical scholarship in so doing. The recently-celebrated hypothesis of the unilinear evolution of religion was now felt, particularly following the trauma of the war years, to be a positive hindrance to the achievement of such an understanding, since it involved the imposition of so many alien value-judgements on the material. Instead, a method was sought which would eliminate such value-judgements, allow the believer to speak clearly for himself, and in this way arrive at an objective assessment of the role of religion in human life. So while the specialists, each in his individual field, continued to work intensively and fruitfully on their texts and editions, and went on producing indispensable monographs on all manner of subjects, a small company of scholars, mainly in Holland and Scandinavia, began to investigate the possibilities of a method already known as *Religionsphänomenologie*, or 'the phenomenology of religion'.

The method, as we shall see, was not new, having been known at least since the 1880s; nor was it in its original form especially remarkable, being little more than a thematic counterpart to the history of religion. But during the inter-war years certain claims came to be made on its behalf. The most significant of these was that it provided a path to the understanding (*Verstehen*) of religion, and to a grasp of its essence (*Wesen*), by means of an as far as possible value-free examination of its manifestations (*Erscheinungen*).

The first real milestone of the discipline in its newer form was

the publication in 1933 of the Dutch scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw's book *Phänomenologie der Religion* (Eng. tr. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, (1948). Since the appearance of this book, the term 'the phenomenology of religion' has gradually acquired a certain vogue, and indeed now occupies in a few quarters the kind of position once held by the older term 'comparative religion'. The label is, however, far from explanatory, and simply to use this form of words without further definition would be unwise, since even the scholars who use this term, and claim to apply this method to their work, are not always sure as to its precise definition. Moreover the general impression seems to have been conveyed here and there that it means little more than 'the sympathetic study of religion'—an assumption which is not false, but which is scarcely adequate. In fact a number of separate strands have been woven together to create this new approach, and we shall examine a few of these briefly before considering the work of some of its more outstanding representatives.

* * *

We have mentioned the attempts made by scholars of the late nineteenth century to understand the 'essence' or 'nature' of religion along genetical lines. Even then, this was not the only possible approach to this problem, though it was that which proved most attractive to the 'scientific' mind, dominated as it was by one or another form of the historical method. An alternative approach was tested by the philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, notably Hegel. Hegel's ultimate objective was that of discerning unity behind diversity, of reaching an understanding of the one essence of religion behind its many manifestations. Kant before him had made use of the term 'phenomenon' (from the Greek *to phainomenon*, that which shows itself) to describe the data of experience. He had further contrasted phenomena with 'noumena' (things-in-themselves), i.e. objects and events as they are by virtue of their own nature, independent of what our faculties and senses make of them. Hegel went further, asserting in his first major work, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (The Phenomenology of the Spirit, 1806) that the mind as it is in itself can be known through the ways in which it experiences reality. Or, to put it somewhat differently, essence (*Wesen*) can be approached through a study of appearances and manifestations (*Erscheinungen*).

Gerardus van der Leeuw has claimed that at this date, the phenomenology of religion was already in existence, although not known by that name. Certainly there were scholars who were already

in the late eighteenth century classifying religious phenomena in order to attempt to understand the underlying essence of religion. Van der Leeuw suggests that the phenomenological line should be traced back to President de Brosses and *Le Culte des dieux fétiches* (1760), though this seems a little far-fetched. Elsewhere he cites Christoph Meiners of Göttingen as the first phenomenologist, on the strength of such statements as this :

> Since a series of the histories of all religions is either impracticable or is at least inadvisable, there remains for the historian of religion no other course than to resolve the known religions, especially the polytheistic, into their elements . . . and then observe how each essential factor of the popular religions of ancient times was, or still is, constituted.[1]

Van der Leeuw, then, considers Meiners to be 'the first systematic phenomenologist', not only because he classified various religious phenomena—fetishism, worship of the dead, sacrifice, purifications, fasts, etc.—but because 'his entire attitude . . . is in principle phenomenological', that is, he attempts by this means to discover what is essential in religion. The work of Benjamin Constant is also cited with evident approval.[2]

On such criteria as these, there are other works which might qualify for inclusion in the history of the discipline; but it is now generally agreed that the actual term 'the phenomenology of religion' (*die Phänomenologie der Religion*) was coined by the Dutch scholar P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, Professor in the University of Amsterdam, in a book published in 1887 under the title *Lehrbuch de Religionsgeschichte* (Handbook of the History of Religion). But although he introduces the term, he offers no philosophical justification for its use, apart from making the general observation that the task of *Religionswissenschaft* is to investigate both the essence and the empirical, visible manifestations of religion.[3] He does refer back with evident approval to Hegel as the first scholar to have recognised the close link between the conceptual and empirical aspects of religion, and states in a later passage that 'the phenomenology of religion is intimately connected with psychology in so far as it has to do with the facts of human consciousness'.[4] But he nowhere

[1] Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (Eng. tr. 1948), p. 691.

[2] ibid.

[3] Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* (1887), p. 6: 'Die Einheit der Religion in der Vielheit ihrer Formen ist die Voraussetzung der Religionswissenschaft.'

[4] ibid., p. 48.

gives—nor does he intend to give—the impression that he is introducing a new scientific method; all he is doing is to bring together 'groups of religious phenomena' (*Gruppen von religiösen Erscheinungen*)—the object of worship, idolatry, sacred stones, trees and animals, nature-worship, the worship of men, the gods, magic and divination, sacrifice and prayer, holy places, times and persons, the community, scriptures, doctrines, mythology, dogmas and philosophies, ethics and art. Evidently in its earliest form 'the phenomenology of religion' was meant to be no more than a systematic counterpart to the history of religion, an elementary method of cross-cultural comparison of the constitutent elements of religious belief and practice, as opposed to their treatment in cultural isolation and chronological sequence.[5] In order to distinguish this from later and more philosophical methods using the same term, we might call Chantepie's initiative 'descriptive phenomenology'.

Oddly enough, when the second edition of Chantepie's *Lehrbuch* appeared ten years later, the phenomenological section was missing. This circumstance, which has caused some puzzlement among later commentators, can in fact be explained quite simply: faced with certain difficulties about reconciling the section in question with the demands of philosophical method, Chantepie had determined to devote an entire volume to the phenomenology of religion—a volume which regrettably never saw the light of day. It has also been suggested with some justification that Chantepie was also in some difficulty about reaching a satisfactory synthesis of scientific objectivity and Christian commitment.[6]

* * *

Chantepie was a theologian, and not primarily a philosopher; his method was largely a method of systematic description. But in the years around and after the turn of the century the term 'phenomenology' was beginning to be expounded with rather different connotations by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, in his massive *Logische Untersuchungen* (Logical Investigations, 1900–1) and later in his *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie* (Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology, 1913). Husserl's major claim was that philosophy must divest itself of all metaphysical presuppositions: it must investigate what actually confronts it, not allowing any distorting factor to intervene

[5] Among recent discussions, see especially Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (1969), pp. 1ff.; Hultkrantz, 'The Phenomenology of Religion: Aims and Methods', in *Temenos* 6 (1970), pp. 68ff.; and Waardenburg, 'Religion between Reality and Idea', in *Numen* xix/2-3 (1972), pp. 128ff.

[6] Hallencreutz, *Kraemer towards Tambaram* (1966), p. 110.

and prevent it from achieving its goal of direct analysis of essences or general structures.

Husserl's influence, and that of the school he founded, was widespread, but he did not affect greatly the course of the phenomenology of religion, except in the area of general approach.[7] Few historians of religion were willing or able to follow the philosophical phenomenologists into the obscure hinterland of their thought; a partial exception was van der Leeuw, though even in this case it is difficult to be sure of the extent of the Husserlian influence. Nevertheless Husserl did provide future phenomenologists of religion with two important concepts, or principles of understanding: *epochê* and *eidetic vision.*

Epochê is derived from the Greek verb *epechô*, 'I hold back'. In effect it means 'stoppage', suspension of judgement, the exclusion from one's mind of every possible presupposition. It is also called 'bracketing' (*Einklammerung*), whereby (in John Macquarrie's words) 'an object which is present to consciousness is reduced to the pure phenomenon by 'putting in brackets' or excluding from further interest those elements which do not belong to the universal essence'.[8] Its importance in this connection is that it emphasises the need to abstain from every kind of value-judgement, to be 'present' to the phenomenon in question purely as an impartial observer, unconcerned with questions of truth and falsehood.

The term 'eidetic vision' is also derived from a Greek noun, *to eidos*, 'that which is seen', and hence 'form', 'shape' or 'essence'. In phenomenological parlance, eidetic vision is the observer's capacity for seeing the essentials of a situation, or in the case of a phenomenon, its actual essence as opposed to what it has been, might have been, or ought to be. The important thing here is that 'eidetic vision' means—and is meant to mean—a form of subjectivity. It implies, given the acquisition of objective and undistorted data, an intuitive grasp of the essentials of a situation in its wholeness. 'Objective eidetic vision' is quite literally a contradiction in terms—a circumstance which can cause a certain methodological embarrassment.[9]

* * *

[7] Waardenburg, op. cit., pp. 168ff. On Husserl generally see Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology* (1967).

[8] Macquarrie, *Twentieth-Century Religious Thought* (1963), p. 219.

[9] This point has been made most forcefully by Oxtoby, in his article 'Religionswissenschaft Revisited', in Neusner (ed.), *Religions in Antiquity* (1968), pp. 590ff.

Some years were to elapse before these principles were seriously applied to the study of religious phenomena. Of more direct and immediate relevance was the wider application of the principles of biblical interpretation, or hermeneutics, to the data of comparative religion. Again the underlying question was that of the interpreter's understanding of the data.

Writing in Hastings' *ERE* in 1914, Ernst von Dobschütz traced the modern discipline of hermeneutics back to Schleiermacher, who created out of the interpretation of Scripture a philosophy of understanding (*Philosophie des Verstehens*), and maintained that:

> The interpreter's task is to understand the religious personality of the writer as manifested in every single word, to look from the details to the whole, and from the standpoint of the whole to see the details in their true light.[10]

From this point of view, which has obvious affinities with phenomenology, hermeneutics is

> . . . a science built upon a theory of comprehension . . . [which] proposes to explain why a given work is to be understood in one way and not another.[11]

The scholar working in this field, mainly, of course, on written documents, has not completed his task when he reaches what he considers to be an adequate personal understanding of the material under his hand. He must proceed to the task of making the material comprehensible to others: 'The decisive proof of one's having understood is the ability to reproduce with clearness.' In this connection he must learn to compare, to make every possible use of comparable material; the scholar, '. . . in order to grasp the peculiar significance of details, must assign them to their proper place in the whole, and compare them with as many similar facts as possible.'[12]

It is also significant that von Dobschütz should conclude his article by stressing the subjective element in the work of the interpreter, though again only after having emphasised to the full the scholar's need to make the best possible use of all the available material.

> Exegesis is an art; and of exegesis, as of all art, it is true that its highest merit consists, not in originality, but in the sureness with which the right thing is seized . . .[13]

[10] Von Dobschütz, 'Interpretation,' in *ERE* VII (1914), pp. 392a-b.
[11] ibid., p. 392b.
[12] ibid., p. 393a.
[13] ibid., p. 395b.

It is true that hermeneutics is here being seen as a technique for use within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. But its comparative principles were those already laid down by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, and once allowed, they might in principle be applied to any body of material from any religious tradition—as many scholars had already begun to discover.

The hermeneutical line in the history of religions was developed particularly by Joachim Wach, first in Germany and later in the United States. We shall return to Wach shortly. But in the meantime, we must follow the tradition of descriptive phenomenology, as carried further by three Scandinavians, the Swede Nathan Söderblom, the Dane Edvard Lehmann and the expatriate Norwegian William Brede Kristensen.

* * *

We have already written at some length about Söderblom,[14] and here we may simply observe that all his work in the field of comparative religion was aimed at deepening a personal understanding of man's will to believe. His personal preference was for a historical approach to the material, rather than for that type of systematic approach connected with descriptive phenomenology, and he retained a generally evolutionary scale of values. But the debt owed by subsequent phenomenologists to Söderblom was incalculable. Friedrich Heiler of Marburg was perhaps his closest disciple,[15] but it was Gerardus van der Leeuw who later wrote that of all scholars, 'the great name of Nathan Söderblom' typified most clearly the phenomenological approach :

> For without his acute insight and his deeply penetrating view of what 'appears', we could not advance another step in our territory; and the change of direction in the history of religion, plainly set forth in the current phenomenological viewpoint, finds its symbol in this thinker's name.[16]

In the same year as the publication of Söderblom's major work of comparative religion, *Gudstrons uppkomst*—1914—there appeared a slim volume by the Danish scholar Edvard Lehmann (1862–1930), who had previously served in Berlin but who was now Professor of the History of Religion in the University of Lund

[14] cf. above, pp. 154-61.
[15] cf. above, pp. 167-8.
[16] Van der Leeuw, op. cit., p. 694.

in Sweden. The book was called simply *Religionsvetenskapen* (*The* Science of Religion). The third part of the book, based on an earlier article in the *RGG* (2nd ed.), he called *Den synliga religionen: religionens fenomenologi* (Visible religion: the phenomenology of religion).

Lehmann divided his material into three main sections, 'Sacred actions', 'Sacred words' and 'Sacred places'. In the first he dealt with magic and with ritual—the cult object, cultic actions, sanctuaries and festivals. In the second he considered, among other things, incantation and prayer, song and sermon. The third section shows the influence of Söderblom in its concentration on the phenomena of holiness (still before Otto) as associated with persons—kings, priests, prophets, mystics, pilgrims and others; it also takes up to consideration 'sacred (holy) behaviour' in ecstasy, asceticism and the like, peculiarly transferable instances of holiness (blessings, sacraments), and the complex of ideas connected with the saints and with the sacred community.

This was a very capable systematisation of the phenomena of religion, and it was not surprising that when Chantepie de la Saussaye's *Lehrbuch* was reissued in a fourth edition Lehmann should have been asked to contribute a phenomenological section, as well as a history of the development of the science of religion. In essence this later work merely recapitulates his earlier material, though on this occasion the simplified title 'visible religion' is changed to *Erscheinungs- und Ideenwelt der Religion* (The world of religious phenomena and ideas).

Shortly after the turn of the century, the academic succession at the University of Leiden, Holland, passed from C. P. Tiele to the Norwegian scholar William Brede Kristensen (1867–1953). Tiele might actually have been succeeded by Söderblom, who had already carried out a useful revision of Tiele's *Kompendium der Religionsgeschichte*; but in the event Kristensen, who had been Tiele's pupil and who had written under his supervision a doctoral dissertation on the Egyptian conception of life after death, was elected in 1901. He remained in the same post until his retirement in 1937.

Kristensen's recognition as a phenomenologist of importance was curiously delayed. During his lifetime, he was not well known internationally, though he was of course highly respected in the phenomenological strongholds of Holland and Scandinavia. Not until seven years after his death did the publication of his phenomenological lectures, translated by J. B. Carman, as *The Meaning of Religion*, bring his work to the notice of the English-speaking world. Even then, the fact that the volume had an introduction by Hendrik

Kraemer, who was widely known as a Christian theologian of an uncompromising type, caused some puzzlement.[17]

A few years earlier, there had appeared a similar book in his native Norwegian, entitled *Religionshistorisk Studium* (The Study of the History of Religion, 1954), in which equally important statements of principle are to be found.

Kristensen's main methodological concern, and one which can be traced back to his early years in Leiden, was with the problem of value judgements. The evolutionary theory he believed to have been responsible for inducing scholars to pass premature judgement on material which they had learned to understand only in part. Again and again the scholar had come to assume that his own scholarly presuppositions were adequate for an understanding of any religious phenomena. Not so, maintained Kristensen; our presuppositions are seldom as adequate as we suppose. Certainly, written sources are first-hand material, produced without a view to the needs of the outside observer; but even then we must be cautious. When such material is missing, as in virtually every case the evolutionists had used as pillars of their theories, we can do nothing but admit our own ultimate inability to understand. In either case the believer's own understanding of his faith must be given absolute priority:

> Let us never forget [he wrote] that there exists no other religious reality than the faith of the believer. If we really want to understand religion, we must refer exclusively to the believer's testimony. What we believe, from our point of view, about the nature or value of other religions, is a reliable testimony to our own faith, or to our own understanding of religious faith; but if our opinion about another religion differs from the opinion and evaluation of the believers, then we are no longer talking about their religion. We have turned aside from historical reality, and are concerned only with ourselves.[18]

[17] On Kraemer, see Hallencreutz, op. cit., passim, and cf. Waardenburg, op. cit., pp. 145ff. Kraemer's best known works are *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938), and *Religion and the Christian Faith* (1956). In the latter work Kraemer had written that while comparative religion had graded religions on an ascending evolutionary scale, this technique had now been shown to be wrong: 'Now, strictly speaking, honest research has come to the conclusion that the many religions are *incommensurable*. . . The only meaning that the phrase 'Comparative Religion' (*Vergleichende Religionswissenschaft*) can have is: not evaluating and grading, but contrasting and elaborating the peculiar character and structure of different religions.' (p. 77f).

[18] Kristensen, *Religionshistorisk studium* (1954), p. 27.

It is perhaps necessary to emphasise in this context that Kristensen was writing about the scholar's interpretation of the religions of the past, rather than the dialogician's interpretation of the religions of the present. But the principle is an important one. If it is true, as Kristensen claims, that we can never experience someone else's religious tradition as the believer experiences it (a point of view with which it is difficult to argue), what then is left for the phenomenologist of religion, other than tamely to acknowledge that 'the believer is always right'—even though the believer may on an occasion appear to have been disastrously wrong?

What he must do, according to Kristensen, is to respect the integrity of the believer, to refrain from imposing on him his (the scholar's) own value-judgements—but then to aim at the ideal of integral objective knowledge and total understanding, however well he may know that the ideal is an unattainable one.

> It is true that our own historical understanding never is, and never can be, perfect; but that is precisely the path we must follow, continually working in the direction of a realistic understanding of the forces of religion in history. Every historian of religion, whatever his individual abilities, can contribute towards the attainment of this goal.[19]

Religionshistorisk studium is in no sense a work of Husserlian phenomenology; but it is a work of hermeneutics, the testimony of a historian of religion tired of labouring under the burden of evolutionary value-judgements. Perhaps, too, it is the work of a believer who is concerned to protect the integrity of other believers against the unintentional distortions of scholars who, while not unfriendly, had never learned to understand.

* * *

In considering this work of Kristensen's, produced at the very end of a long and fruitful life, we have passed over the contribution of the man who was long, and rightly, considered to be the doyen of the phenomenologists. We must therefore now retrace our steps slightly.

Between 1925 and 1950, the phenomenology of religion was associated almost exclusively with the name of the Dutch scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), and with his book *Phänomen-*

[19] ibid., p. 28.

ologie der Religion (1933; Eng. tr. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 1948).

Van der Leeuw is in many ways reminiscent of Söderblom, whom he admired greatly. Both were historians of religion and Christian theologians; both were public personalities (one an Archbishop, the other Minister of Education); both had a great gift of imaginative sympathy, perhaps resting ultimately on highly developed aesthetic faculties, in which music played a large part. The parallels cannot be extended indefinitely—for instance, Söderblom was more the historian and van der Leeuw more the philosopher—but in both cases it is well-nigh impossible to sum up their work in a few sentences, and a variety of distortions have been perpetuated by those who have tried to do so.

Similarly, it is difficult to estimate 'influences' on van der Leeuw, since he had a vast gift of assimilation. Some there undoubtedly were, however: in Holland, his teacher Brede Kristensen, under whom he began his career (like so many other Dutch scholars) as an Egyptologist,[20] and Chantepie de la Saussaye; in Germany, Rudolf Otto, Edmund Husserl and Wilhelm Dilthey, the modern father of the science of hermeneutics, whose views underly a great deal of van der Leeuw's phenomenology. Mention should also be made of the close friendship between van der Leeuw and the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, who assisted materially in the preparation of van der Leeuw's *magnum opus*, and who may well have received fruitful impulses in return. Van der Leeuw also acknowledged his debt of gratitude to Rudolf Otto, to Nathan Söderblom and his disciple Friedrich Heiler, and to the French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.[21]

Van der Leeuw was appointed Professor of the History of Religion at Groningen in 1918, and (again like Söderblom) devoted his inaugural lecture to a discussion of the relationship between comparative religion and Christian theology.[22] In this lecture he stressed—in generally evolutionary terms—that it is necessary to

[20] On van der Leuw, see Waardenburg, op. cit., pp. 161ff. Van der Leeuw wrote of Kristensen that he, '. . . possédé par l'idée aussi profonde que grandiose de la vie spontanée surgissant de la mort, le cherchait et trouvait un peu partout et m'inspirait pour toujours l'amour de l'histoire des religions' ('Confession Scientifique', in *Numen* 1, 1954, p. 9). It is also interesting to note in this connection that Waardenburg is of the opinion that van der Leeuw knew Husserl only slightly, from secondary sources, and that Husserl's influence on him has often been overrated.

[21] Van der Leeuw counted himself a defender of the views of Lévy-Bruhl (cf. above, pp. 190-4). This is especially clear from his book *L'Homme primitif et la religion* (1940).

[22] *Plats en taak van de godsdienstgeschiednis in de theologische wetenschap* (1918). For Söderblom's inaugural, see above, pp. 155-6.

arrive at some form of Christian theological understanding of religious phenomena. The influence of Lévy-Bruhl is especially evident in this paper. In later years he was to moderate his evolutionary position somewhat, particularly under the influence of comparative religion and philosophical theology.

This may seem at first sight to be incompatible in principle with what is generally taken to be the ideal stance of the phenomenologist, and it may be freely admitted that there were always certain tensions in van der Leeuw's work, which were never satisfactorily resolved. However, to attempt to discuss these in this context would lead far beyond the bounds of this survey. The problem, though, was that which always faces the committed adherent of one religious tradition when he attempts to cross the frontiers of his own tradition in a quest for understanding (*Verstehen*), particularly when that quest involves a consideration of 'religion-as-such'.

It was in this quest, he later wrote, that he followed the example of Chantepie de la Saussaye and Edvard Lehmann in attempting to blaze a trail through the multiple phenomena of religion in order to give a systematic description of 'religion':

> In doing this I realised that this phenomenology of religion consisted not merely in making an inventory and classification of phenomena as they appear in history, but also a psychological description which necessitated not only a meticulous observation of the religious reality, but also a systematic introspection; not only the description of what is visible from outside, but above all the experience born of what can only become reality after it has been admitted into the life of the observer himself. In other words, I realised that in carrying on the magnificent, but essentially unphilosophical, work of Chantepie and Lehmann, I was in the very centre of the great phenomenological stream which was at that time flowing through philosophy, psychiatry and other sciences.[23]

With this in mind, we may turn to a brief consideration of some of the principles underlying *Religion in Essence and Manifestation.*

Van der Leeuw is not writing merely descriptive phenomenology—a systematic catalogue of religious 'things'; to him, a phenomenon is emphatically not a 'thing': it is 'what "appears"' (*dasjenige, was sich zeigt*), 'an object related to a subject, and a subject related to an object' (*ein subjektbezogenes Objekt und ein*

[23] *Confession Scientifique*, p. 10. cf. what he says about 'der Religionsgeschichte des Verstehens' in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (3rd ed.), IV, col. 1897.

objektbezogenes Subjekt).[24] A phenomenon, therefore, is given in the interplay and interpenetration of subject and object, in the very act of understanding: 'The phenomenon . . . is not produced by the subject, and still less substantiated or demonstrated by it; its entire essence is given in its "appearance", and its appearance to "someone". If (finally) this "someone" begins to discuss what "appears", then phenomenology arises.'[25] He goes on to claim that phenomenology is neither metaphysics nor the comprehension of empirical reality; it is 'man's vital activity . . . standing aside and understanding what appears into view'.[26] The conditions on which such understanding can take place never vary in essence; van der Leeuw acknowledges that perhaps we can know nothing, and understand very little; still, it is no harder in principle to understand an ancient Egyptian than it is to understand one's next-door neighbour—assuming that the data are present to one's consciousness. In order that sufficient data may be obtained, the phenomenologist must continually submit to historical correction; if phenomenology is to do its job properly, he wrote,

> . . . it imperatively requires perpetual correction by the most conscientious philological and archaeological research . . . as soon as . . . [phenomenological understanding] withdraws itself from control by philological and archaeological interpretation, it becomes pure art or empty fantasy.[27]

But he stresses that the phenomenology of religion is something more than pure history nevertheless; when the phenomenologist ceases to understand the material under his hand, his work is at an end, but when the historian ceases to understand, he can still go on recording and cataloguing for the sake of others.[28]

Nor, despite the fact that van der Leeuw always held himself to be a theologian above all, is the phenomenology of religion identical with theology. For theology speaks about God, and this the phenomenologist cannot do—for theological reasons, oddly enough. Because God, to be grasped by phenomenology, would have to be either subject or object; and he is neither. So to the phenomenologist, though he may study religious experience (and in fact does so constantly), and may observe men and women responding (or claiming to respond) to divine revelation, the revelation itself

[24] *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. 671.
[25] ibid.
[26] ibid., p. 676.
[27] ibid., p. 677, cf. *Confession*, p. 9.
[28] ibid., p. 686.

remains inaccessible. As van der Leeuw has written, 'We can never understand God's utterance by means of any purely intellectual capacity: what we can understand is only our own answer. . . .'[29] This is, of course, a theological statement, claiming as it does to define an aspect of 'God's utterance', and it is apparent from whole tracts of van der Leeuw's phenomenology that, although he may not be 'doing theology' in the narrower dogmatic sense, his whole approach is basically theological (quite apart from his treatment of Christianity). Again, to take an illustrative statement from his fragment of autobiography:

> I have never felt the need to forget that I am a theologian, and naturally I have attempted to enable theology to profit from phenomenological method. Certainly not in order to make a science of religion out of theology, but on the contrary, the better to show forth theological method, which is in my opinion absolutely autonomous. Nevertheless, theology is concerned with history, since it is history which gives theology both its foundation and point of departure: revelation. Now phenomenology can assist theology to organise facts, to penetrate their sense, to find their essence, before theology is able to evaluate and use them for its doctrinal conclusions.[30]

Phenomenology, then, while not *per se* concerned with theological evaluations, may be regarded as a form of theological propaedeutics.

Not specifically theological, but fully understandable from within the Christian tradition, is this statement, in which he epitomises the understanding attitude as:

> the loving gaze of the lover on the beloved object. For all understanding rests upon self-surrendering love. Were that not the case, then not only all discussion of what appears in religion, but all discussion of appearance in general, would be quite impossible; since to him who does not love, nothing whatever is manifested. . .[31]

Clearly for van der Leeuw, the exercise of love and the exercise of *epochê* were in no sense mutually exclusive. It seems to be the case that *epochê* serves largely to guard against the making of premature and unfounded truth-claims (another point, incidentally, on which phenomenology and theology differ), as well as eliminating the need for the phenomenologist to concern himself with questions

[29] ibid., p. 680f.
[30] *Confession*, p. 13; cf. Waardenburg, op. cit., p. 183.
[31] *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. 684.

of origin and development in religion. Religion is neither more nor less than *given*. And this being so, the total task of the phenomenologist resolves itself into the following five stages:

1. To assign names to groups of phenomena—such as sacrifice, prayer, saviour, myth, etc.
2. To interpolate the experiences within one's own life and experience them systematically—a point which seems at first sight hard to reconcile with the claim that the aim of phenomenology is 'pure objectivity'.
3. To exercise *epochê*, i.e. to withdraw to one side and observe.
4. To clarify and comprehend.
5. To confront chaotic reality and testify to what has been understood.[32]

It is evident that van der Leeuw's phenomenological work can be understood on a number of different levels. It *can* be taken and used merely as a collection of materials. As a work of hermeneutics, on the other hand, it has been more admired than imitated, entirely on account of the subtle methodological principles on which it is based—principles which few subsequent scholars have shown any real wish to assimilate. But *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* is a superb compilation, and to very many students has long been a stimulating guide through the world of religion. Its basic religious category of 'holiness' (in which van der Leeuw acknowledged profound indebtedness to Söderblom and Otto alike) is one which *homo religiosus* himself at once understands, but one which the academic mind has always regarded with some doubt, feeling that here he is invited to embark upon a hazardous voyage on a metaphysical ocean. But to van der Leeuw, phenomenological scholarship was not to be sharply differentiated from metaphysics or from theology.

We have already seen that van der Leeuw was a resolute defender of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and in *L'Homme primitif et la religion* (1940) he not only defends Lévy-Bruhl and his theory of 'primitive mentality' against the remarkable number of misrepresentations to which both have been subjected over the last sixty years, but he also undertakes a valuable criticism of 'modern' culture. Van der Leeuw rejects out of hand the idea that 'primitive mentality' is a term which can be understood only on the basis of unilinear evolu-

[32] This important relationship—between understanding and testimony to what has been understood—is treated in Hermelink, *Verstehen and Bezeugen* (1960), with reference to van der Leeuw's theology. Once more it must be stressed that to attempt to interpret van der Leeuw other than in theological terms is ultimately a self-defeating procedure.

tion. He points out that Lévy-Bruhl himself had repeatedly insisted that 'primitivity' and 'logical' thought coexist on all cultural levels—a circumstance easily verifiable. Where he does criticise his mentor is in the latter's unspoken assumption that there is a monolithic 'modern' mentality which must of necessity be normative for all anthropological, social and religious studies. This modern mentality is an abstraction. Consisting as it does in removing the subject as far as possible from the observed object, it may well, thinks van der Leeuw, be regarded as pathological and aberrant, and he cites an impressive array of modern thinkers, from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to G. K. Chesterton, who share this view in some form. To think in 'primitive' forms is to experience reality directly, subjectively, intuitively—and is ultimately to find one's Self.[33]

He concluded that no religious phenomenon can be understood without reference to 'primitive' structures in the mind of man. When the attempt is made to study religion solely on the basis of logical and social categories, the whole enterprise so often moves in the sphere of abstractions, revealing nothing of the mind of *homo religiosus*, and failing at any point seriously to make contact with the personality of the researcher. Perhaps this goes some way toward accounting for what some have held to be the disturbingly subjective elements in van der Leeuw's phenomenology. Hultkrantz, for instance, has written, concerning van der Leeuw's *magnum opus*, that although it is still the classic study in its field,

> . . . it is too speculative, in some places even incomprehensible, to be of much use to the seriously working empirical religious researcher . . Van der Leeuw's phenomenology comprises—maybe—an 'Einklammerung', a parenthesis, in the development of the phenomenology of religion.[34]

The crux lies perhaps in this word 'empirical'. To be thoroughly empirical was, in a manner of speaking, the foremost symptom of what van der Leeuw held to be the typical twentieth-century sickness. He did not, as we have seen, look down upon empirical research. Far from it. But to be narrowly and exclusively empirical was to deny one's own wholeness, and hence to fail at the scholar's most vital and most sensitive point, the point of genuine understanding.

* * *

[33] In this particular book van der Leeuw does not cite C. G. Jung, but as a participant in the *Eranos* Conferences he was clearly receptive to the general message of the 'Jungians'.

[34] Hultkrantz, in *Temenos* 6 (1970), p. 72f.

Among van der Leeuw's successors in the Dutch phenomenological tradition, the most influential has been C. Jouco Bleeker (b. 1899); as well as being Professor in the University of Amsterdam, he served for twenty years as Secretary-General of the International Association for the History of Religions (1950–1970), and still remains Editor of the Association's journal *Numen*. Like van der Leeuw, Bleeker's specialist field is Egyptology.

Statements of Bleeker's approach to the phenomenology of religion are to be found in a variety of publications; typical are, however, the essays collected and published in 1963 as *The Sacred Bridge*. The first of these is entitled 'The Phenomenological Method'. In this essay, Bleeker admits that the problem of the subject is that it appears to many to be a hybrid between the history and the philosophy of religion; but, he insists, it is 'an empirical science without philosophical aspirations',[35] which should make as little use as possible of philosophical of psychological terminology, in order not to be fettered by their own peculiar presuppositions. He recognises that at this point he is departing from the position occupied by van der Leeuw—for whom he otherwise shows respect tempered by healthy criticism. Phenomenology, he insists, can never consider the 'philosophical' question of the truth of religion; all it can do is to take religion seriously, observing and recording what it sees:

> It only maintains its position of impartiality by demanding that all religion should be understood as what it stands for, namely as a serious testimony of religious people that they possess a knowledge of God.[36]

Perhaps it is not possible to go beyond this approach to the multiple phenomena of religion:

> If there exists a chance of reaching the sole aim, deserving the hard labour of painstaking research, namely a profound understanding of foreign religions, it is solely by means of this method.[37]

Bleeker's method does not in fact differ greatly from that of his mentors, save, as we have seen, in his express rejection of any 'philosophical' claims. But he does use a distinctive vocabulary to express his views. Like van der Leeuw, he speaks often of *epochê* and eidetic vision, insisting that both are 'objective' criteria (a point on which more than one opinion is possible); but he uses three other

[35] Bleeker, *The Sacred Bridge* (1963), p. 7. cf. Waardenburg, op. cit., pp. 183ff.

[36] Bleeker, op. cit., p. 9.

[37] ibid.

technical terms. The phenomenologist, he says, must be concerned with *theôria*, the implications of aspects of religion; with *logos*, the structure of different religious traditions; and with *entelecheia*, 'the course of events in which the essence is realised by its manifestations'.[38] The latter term is particularly interesting, since it is an attempt to coin a replacement for 'evolution', a term which recognises that religious traditions are not static, but which refuses to be bound by the specific assumptions of evolutionism, unilinear or otherwise. *Entelecheia*, says Bleeker, is not evolution; rather it seems to work according to a law of challenge and response. And he concludes:

> Each relapse seems to evoke in religious people strong desire for and an attempt at restoring religion. Actually this effort results in a rising of the religious level. The phenomenology of religion is man's inseparable companion. It is an invincible, creative and self-generating force. So there is good reason for applying the old proverb: *magna est veritas et prevalebit.*[39]

Thus far the mainstream of the Dutch-Scandinavian phenomenological tradition. From Chantepie de la Saussaye to Bleeker, most of its representatives were Christian theologians, for whom phenomenology appeared to provide a theoretical justification for their work in religious traditions other than Christianity. Theologians in such a position are always open to the criticism that they cannot possibly 'understand' any tradition to which they are not personally committed; the contention of the phenomenologists was that they had found a means of removing, or at least of suspending, the value-judgements (at first theological, but also evolutionary) which had previously stood in the way of full understanding. They had adopted at least some of the vocabulary of Husserlian phenomenology, but their aims were simple. They wished to combine complete accuracy of scholarship with complete sympathy of treatment to ensure complete understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of other human beings.

* * *

The period which saw the rise of phenomenology in Holland was not one of Germany's most productive intellectual periods, and the history of religions in particular was carried out in an idiosyncratic manner. But before 1933, considerable interest was shown among

[38] ibid., p. 14.
[39] ibid., p. 24.

German scholars in the parallel field of hermeneutics, along the lines which we have already associated with von Dobschütz. Representative of this trend, first in its German form and subsequently in its transplantation to America, was Joachim Wach (1898–1955).

Wach has found a faithful and sympathetic commentator in Joseph M. Kitagawa, and we shall not attempt here to do more than give the briefest outline of his career.[40] Of Jewish extraction, Wach was descended both from Moses Mendelssohn and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. He was however a Christian. Educated at the University of Leipzig, he was introduced to the comparative study of religion by Friedrich Heiler, and counted among his mentors Troeltsch, Harnack, Söderblom, Weber and Otto. In 1935 the Nazis deprived him of his teaching post at Leipzig, and he emigrated to the United States, where he taught for the rest of his life, first at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, and after 1945 at the University of Chicago. Among the most important of his publications are *Religionswissenschaft* (1924), *Das Verstehen* (1926–1933), *Sociology of Religion* (1944), *Types of Religious Experience* (1951), and two posthumous works, both edited by Kitagawa, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (1958), and a collection of essays, *Understanding and Believing* (1968).

In an article first published in German in 1935, and subsequently translated into English as 'The Meaning and Task of the History of Religions', Wach attempts to delineate the ethos of his subject, and particularly to consider the scholar's motives for entering into the study. The idea of scholarship for its own sake he dismisses out of hand: '. . . if *Religionswissenschaft* is only an aesthetically interesting or purely academic matter, then, indeed, it has no right to exist today.'[41] But if it is not 'purely academic', then what is it? Wach answers that the discipline serves to broaden and deepen the *sensus numinis*, to deepen the scholar's own faith (if he has one), and to encourage 'a new and comprehensive experience of what religion is and means'.[42] Religious traditions must be seen, using the very best techniques that scholarship can offer, as living totalities; and all the living relationships within those totalities must be seen and evaluated. But in the last resort, '. . . the central concern of *Religionswissenschaft* must be the understanding of other religions'.[43]

[40] The full details will be found in Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (ed. Kitagawa, 1958), Introduction, pp. xiii-xlviii. See also Kitagawa, *Gibt es ein Verstehen fremder Religionen?* (1963).

[41] Wach (ed. Kitagawa), *Understanding and Believing* (1968), p. 126.

[42] ibid., p. 127.

[43] ibid., p. 130.

But how does the scholar 'understand'? It seems that there is no absolute guarantee that he ever will. For in the last resort there must be a creative intuition, which cannot be counterfeited: either the scholar possesses this, or he does not. Wach seems to want to say that any scholar *could* possess such an intuition, however:

> . . . in principle there could resound in each of us something of the ecstatic, the spectral, the unusual—something of that which to us, the children of another age, of another race, and of other customs, appears strange among the religious expressions of distant lands. Where this natural disposition is developed through training, there also the prerequisite for an actual understanding of foreign religiosity exists.[44]

Hermeneutics therefore demands a religious instinct—and there, perhaps, lies one divergence from phenomenology. For while the phenomenologist is liable to attempt to discount his own subjectivity, the hermeneut accepts and uses his. This extends to the question of values, for while the phenomenologist attempts to eliminate judgements of value, Wach is able to say that 'we now have found again the right and the courage to evaluate.'[45] Presumably, however, the hermeneut would not object to being asked to state the precise criteria on which his values were based.

Wach adhered strongly to his fundamental hermeneutical principles throughout his career. In his *Sociology of Religion*—a work, incidentally, in which he claims to be supplementing van der Leeuw—he speaks of the need for such principles, and states that 'the inquirer must feel an affinity to his subject, and he must be trained to interpret his material with sympathetic understanding'.[46] And in his book *The Comparative Study of Religions* he sets out the ethos of the comparative study as being to complement the insights of theology, writing that 'a comparative study of religions such as the new era [has] made possible enables us to have a fuller vision of what religious experience can mean, what forms its expression may take, and what it might do for man.'[47]

It was this latter book which called forth such a scathing criticism from R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, who stated in effect that Wach neither knew nor cared where comparative religion ended and theology began. We shall consider this review later.[48] In the meantime, we can do no more than suggest that the methodological diffi-

[44] ibid., p. 135.
[45] ibid.
[46] Wach, *The Sociology of Religion* (1944), p. 10.
[47] *The Comparative Study of Religions*, p. 9.
[48] cf. below, pp. 275-6.

culties raised by Wach's hermeneutics are essentially those which have plagued the comparative study of religion from its very beginning—how, if at all, to balance a profound commitment with an equally profound desire to do justice to that to which the scholar is *not* specifically committed.

* * *

Following Wach's death, the hermeneutical tradition was carried on at the University of Chicago by Wach's disciple and interpreter Joseph M. Kitagawa, and by Mircea Eliade.

In a 1968 article entitled 'The Making of a Historian of Religions',[49] Kitagawa remarks on the 'strange popularity' of the history of religions in American colleges and universities, but is also forced to say that '. . . there seems to be rather widespread ambiguity about the nature of the discipline in spite of, or because of, its popularity'.[50] While dismissing the idea of a perpetual interfaith conference as naive, and lamenting that the history of religions is coming to be understood only as the history of non-Western religions, he aligns himself with the hermeneutical position of Wach, pleading for accurate scholarship allied to breadth of vision. He writes:

> We must . . . be crystal clear concerning the basic distinction between the study of specific religions and the history of religions. We are all aware, of course, that in the popular mind the history of religions [comparative religion] is often thought of as a convenient semantic umbrella that covers all the independent studies of specific religions. But the objective of the history of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*), in the technical sense in which we use this term, must be nothing short of scholarly inquiry into the nature and structure of the religious experience of the human race and its diverse manifestations in history.[51]

We have already spoken of Eliade's work in the context of new developments in the psychology of religion. Here, for the sake of continuity, we may simply quote a representative statement, from the Foreword to *The Two and the One* (Eng. tr. 1965):

> Now, the proper frame of mind for discovering the meaning

[49] Kitagawa, 'The Making of a Historian of Religions', in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (September 1968), pp. 191–202.
[50] ibid., p. 191.
[51] ibid., p. 199.

> of a typical human situation is not the 'objectivity' of the naturalist but the intelligent sympathy of the exegetist (*sic*), the interpreter. . . . The will properly to understand the 'others' is rewarded . . . by an enrichment of the Western consciousness. The encounter might even lead to a renewal in the philosophical field, in the same way that the discovery of the exotic and primitive arts half a century ago opened up new perspectives for European arts.[52]

It will be clear from this brief quotation even that Eliade's commitment is not identical with that of Wach; Eliade's 'new humanism' differs somewhat from Wach's Christian idealism. Yet the value of the hermeneutical exercise remains—enriching the human condition by means of an interpretative exercise of the very highest order.

* * *

We must again retrace our steps, this time to Great Britain between the wars. There, evolutionary comparative method had hardly as yet been seriously challenged, and comparative religion, perhaps partly owing to the strength of accepted religious tradition, was passing through lean years. Of the prophets and pioneers, Frazer and Marett were among those still writing.

At the outbreak of war, the burden and heat of the day was being borne by two of their heirs and disciples, both Anglican clergymen, E. O. James (1888–1972) and A. C. Bouquet (b. 1884). The debt which scholarship in Britain owed, and owes, to these two men is quite incalculable. James was an anthropologist and historian of religion, a man of great erudition and breadth, who already had many solid works to his credit—a list which was to be substantially complemented in the post-war years. His technique might perhaps be characterised as that of descriptive phenomenology allied to straight history. His earliest phenomenological works such as *Christian Myth and Ritual* (1933), *The Origins of Religion* (1937) and *The Origins of Sacrifice* (1937), represent a continuation of the Frazerian line and method, albeit greatly refined. The same methodological presuppositions are evident in his brief work *Comparative Religion* (1938), which differs only in respect of material (not in method) from earlier handbooks by Menzies, Carpenter and Geden. That this approach genuinely represented the position of British scholarship at the time is further shown by A. C. Bouquet's popular work *Comparative Religion*, which began its long and useful life in 1941. This is not so much phenomenology as a series of brief

[52] Eliade, *The Two and the One* (1965), p. 12f.

regional characterisations of the history of religion, with a Christian *logos* theology (which Bouquet expounded at length in his later book *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions* (1958)) at no great depth beneath the surface. But it should be remembered that intellectual commerce between the English and German-speaking worlds was at this time less extensive than formerly, and certainly less extensive than it was subsequently to become; there was still only one chair of comparative religion in Britain, and the subject as such was scarcely in the forefront of debate, historical, anthropological or theological.

Thus when in 1940 Eva Hirschmann evaluated the current position of the phenomenology of religion in her book *Phänomenologie der Religion*, no scholar from the English-speaking world found a place in it. Of the thirteen scholars dealt with, four were Dutch, two Scandinavian and the remainder (not all of whom have been considered in this chapter) Germans.[52a]

Since 1945, a number of developments have taken place, some healthy, some perhaps less so. On the most obvious level, there have been a number of books published which have analysed the data provided by the history of religion into themes and types—substantially on the same lines as Chantepie's *Gruppen von religiösen Erscheinungen*, though according to methods and orders of classification dictated by the presuppositions and background of the scholars concerned.

Chronologically, the first of these to appear after the war was by the Swedish historian of religion Geo Widengren: *Religionens värld* (1945 and later eds.; Ger. tr. *Religionsphänomenologie*, 1970). Widengren, who succeeded Tor Andrae at the University of Uppsala in 1943, was (and has remained) an outstanding representative of the Scandinavian branch of the 'Myth and Ritual School'. He is passionately opposed to evolutionism in the study of religion, and a great deal of his research has centred upon the question of high gods, on the sacral kingship, and on myth and ritual patterns in the Ancient Near East. All these matters are dealt with in outline in *Religionens värld*, in an order which makes plain the author's priorities in the study and exposition of religion. Beginning with a statement of the distinction between religion and magic, Widengren then deals, in order, with high gods; pantheism, polytheism and

[52a] Hirschmann, *Phänomenologie der Religion: Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung von 'Religionsphänomenologie' und 'religionsphänomenologischer Methode' in der Religionswissenschaft* (1940). The scholars treated in this book are: Chantepie de la Saussaye, Tiele, Söderblom, Lehmann, Pfister, Scheler, Wobbermin, Winkler, Wach, Otto, Frick, Mensching and van der Leeuw.

monotheism; myth; ritual; sacrifice; sacral kingship; death and burial, spirit and soul; eschatology and apocalyptic; Gnosticism; individual and group; and finally, mysticism (these are the chapter headings in the first edition; later editions expand somewhat).

To Widengren, the phenomenology of religion is a classificatory science, the science of the various forms in which religion manifests itself, and thus the systematic counterpart of the history of religion, with which, however, it should not be confused:

> While phenomenology deals with all the expressions of the religious life, wherever they may appear, the history of religion, with its purely historical discipline, examines the development of separate religions. The phenomenology of religion attempts to give a coherent account of all the various phenomena of religion, and is thus the systematic complement of the history of religion. The history of religion gives the historical analysis, while the phenomenology of religion provides us with the systematic synthesis.[53]

We have already seen that Widengren is one of the most powerful advocates of the 'purely historical' approach to the study of religion, and he emphasises again and again that no phenomenologist can ever claim to abandon historical method. Nevertheless in his very selection of types and patterns for his phenomenology he has moved some steps beyond plain and unadorned historical exposition; there is a higher degree of subjectivity in this procedure than he would perhaps want to allow. But it is no part of our present purpose to decry that element in phenomenology; indeed, it is hard to see how phenomenology could otherwise exist at all, if there is to be even the slightest trace of the 'eidetic vision' involved in its conception and execution. We would merely remark that it is at this point that the phenomenologist who wants at the same time to claim objective status for his work may well find himself in something of a dilemma.

* * *

The dilemma is perhaps less acutely felt in the phenomenologies that have emerged from post-war Germany, partly because the tendency there has often been to acknowledge the subjective element. For instance, Gustav Mensching in *Die Religion* (1949), follows substantially the van der Leeuw line. Similarly Alfred Bertholet, *Grundformen der Erscheinungswelt der Religion* (1953) and Kurt

[53]Widengren, *Religionens värld* (1st ed. 1945), p. 9.

Goldammer, *Die Formenwelt des Religiösen* (1960). But the full range of the difficulties facing the phenomenologist are epitomised in Friedrich Heiler, *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion* (1949), which forms a methodological prologue to the massive Kohlhammer historical series *Die Religionen der Menschheit*. Heiler's work is certainly a *tour de force* : more than 600 pages long and copiously documented. But in the attempt to include everything of significance, Heiler is apt to induce acute intellectual indigestion in his readers (those, that is, who do not take the easy way out and read selectively, *via* the indexes). Certainly the systematic outline is clear enough, but within the framework of sacred objects, sacred places, the sacred word, sacred scriptures, and so on (in which one can still sense the influence of Söderblom, Otto and van der Leeuw), the sheer mass of material is simply overwhelming. Again, although in his introduction Heiler states that 'there is no science which is free from presuppositions', nevertheless 'every philosophical *a priori* must be excluded'—prompting the reflection that the dividing line between a presupposition and an *a priori* attitude may be a very delicate one. In Heiler's view, it is necessary to find the *right* presuppositions, viz., those that are contained in the use of a strictly inductive method. One must immerse oneself in the totality of religion before one begins to construct theories or frame hypotheses. This is all very well, but is such an encyclopaedic ideal not self-defeating? And in reality, Heiler's own presuppositions (which some might want to call a form of *Apriorismus*) stand out with uncommon clarity, even from amid the forest of 'facts' that go to make up his book.[54]

The difficulties facing the phenomenology of religion are, as we have said, essentially those that have faced comparative religion throughout its hundred-year history. They concern the limits of scholarly objectivity above all. We may establish that the vast majority of phenomenologists are concerned, as far as is possible, to apply the principle of *epochê*, and to ensure that their material is gathered and verified according to the strictest principles of historical scholarship. All would agree with Heiler, that the phenomenologist must be a philologist,[55] and that he should have that total

[54] Ultimately he acknowledges this, in effect, when he writes on p. 559: 'Die mannigfalten religiösen Erscheinungsformen, Vorstellungen und Erlebnisse wiesen über sich hinaus; sie richten sich auf eine letztes Gegenständliches das transzendent ist, das hinter und über allen sinnlichen und geistlichen Phänomen liegt. Diesen Gegenständliche ist das Heilige . . .' For another view of substantially this problem, see Goldammer, 'Faktum, Interpretation und Verstehen,' in *Religion und Religionen: Festschrift für Gustav Mensching* (1967), pp. 11ff.

[55] Heiler, *Erscheinungsformen*, p. 15.

mastery of some specialist field of research which enables him to judge other specialisms with sympathy and accuracy. But supposing him to be capable of this, how does he then proceed?

Whatever he does, in writing (or teaching) the phenomenology of religion he is doing something other than 'straight' chronological history, historian though he may be. He selects, systematises, interprets. He establishes types, patterns, morphologies—all with a view to penetrating the 'essence' of religion. He then arranges whatever material he happens to have available (and no one can have *all* the material) around those patterns. Now clearly there is very little reason here for the scholar to claim an ideal (an in any case wholly unrealisable) state of freedom from presuppositions. Presuppositions are writ large across the whole phenomenological enterprise. Materials have been acquired under strictly scientific conditions, and the phenomenologist may wish to claim that his systematising activity is equally scientific. But in this respect at least, science must be content to acknowledge its affinity with art.

It is this tension between scientifically acquired 'facts' and subsequent interpretation of those facts which has given rise of late to a certain amount of rather inconclusive methodological debate, partly between adherents of varying subjectively-determined schools of thought, but also to some extent involving those who wish at all costs to defend the objective and empirical status of the phenomenology of religion. It is this tension which prompts Bleeker to write that to some, the phenomenology of religion appears to be a hybrid between the history of religion and the philosophy of religion, but that in his opinion, 'the phenomenology of religion is an empirical science without philosophical aspirations'. It is furthermore an impartial science, demanding nothing more (or less) than that 'all religion should be understood as what it stands for, namely as a serious testimony of religious people that they possess a knowledge of God'.[56] It saves the scholar from barren specialisation, and has the further advantage that it provides the only means of reaching 'a profound understanding of foreign religions'. Thus the ideal is of impartiality striving to understand. Overt *a priori* judgements are abandoned, and the resultant activity cannot therefore be classified as either theology or philosophy. It must be science.

One cannot, however, altogether avoid the feeling that the debate has been unnecessarily confused by a fundamental failure to clarify the terms in which it is being conducted. 'History' and 'philosophy' are used as though they referred only to the proper activities of separate university departments. But they are not the

[56] cf. above, pp. 236-7.

radically, eternally separate sciences that they have sometimes been made to appear; after all, the historian cannot even begin to be a historian (though he may be a chronicler) unless he is prepared, first, to ask the right questions, and secondly, to interpret (creatively) his material so as to provide cogent answers to those questions. And this is suspiciously like a type of philosophy!

* * *

There is, however, one species of 'phenomenology' which perhaps escapes from the methodological dilemma by refusing to concern itself too deeply with 'religion-as-such'. The species in question is perhaps best characterised as the 'comparative monograph', in which a study of one phenomenon, or one group of phenomena, is undertaken 'across the board'. In the English-speaking world the trend was set in the early part of the century by the thematic articles in Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, since when there have been very many such studies, in most of the European languages. A well-known German example would be Heiler's *Das Gebet* (1918), while in England, E. O. James was for many years a specialist in this type of study—covering kingship, sacrifice, high gods, and so forth. Also in this category come several books by S. G. F. Brandon (1907–1971), among them *Time and Mankind* (1951), *Man and his Destiny in the Great Religions* (1962), *History, Time and Deity* (1965) and *The Judgment of the Dead* (1967).[57] It is true that all these works, and the first and third of them in particular, involve a particular theory of the origin of religion in man's developing time-consciousness, and of the nature of religion as consisting in man's response to the awareness of the passing of time; nevertheless the treatment throughout is historical and thematic, and the series as a whole is an epitome of what we might call 'selective phenomenology'.

The present writer has in his possession the original manuscript of Brandon's first book, *Time and Mankind* (dated 1949). Its first page contains the moving story of how its author, then serving in the army in North Africa, visited the ruins of the ancient city of Hippo Regius. There, '. . . an overwhelming sense of the enigma of Time's interweaving of human affairs possessed him. Had the

[57] On Brandon, see Simon, 'S. G. F. Brandon (1907–1971)', in *Numen* XIX (1972), pp. 84ff.; Sharpe, 'S. G. F. Brandon (1907–1971)', in *History of Religions* 12/1 (August 1972), pp. 71ff.; and cf. Sharpe and Hinnells, *Man and his Salvation: Studies in Memory of S. G. F. Brandon* (1973), which contains personal appreciations by H. C. Snape and E. O. James, and a bibliography of Brandon's works.

curious complex any meaning?' As a trained historian, he saw a pageant of the ages pass before him, bringing together 'Libyans, Phoenecians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, French, Germans, British, Americans—what connected them all across the ages with this place?'

This intellectual vision prompted Brandon to undertake the scholarly task of tracing out the various ways in which mankind had reacted to the awareness of the passage of time. This task occupied him throughout his career, and gained him the respect of the scholarly world.[58] Brandon was content to call himself only a historian; and there were those who felt that greater acquaintance with alternative modes of phenomenological and hermeneutical inquiry would have deepened still further his treatment of this theme. As it was, his conclusions in *Time and Mankind* were, as he said, 'austere and perhaps not very original'—that man has been obsessed by the passage of time and has sought various ways to overcome its terrors. He was unwilling to pass beyond the evidence as it presented itself to him. In Palaeolithic religion he saw the attempt to overcome time by the ritual perpetuation of the past (a line of inquiry which had points in common with Eliade's theory of the eternal return). In Ancient Egypt he saw a struggle to defeat time; in Ancient Mesopotamia an act of resignation to time's annihilation; in Ancient Israel a belief in history as the revelation of Divine Providence—and so on, throughout the religions of the ancient world. He was subsequently to sum up in the words:

> Because of its fundamental, or primordial character, man's reaction to his awareness of Time has been single and constant in its primary impetus; but the forms in which that awareness has found expression and man has sought solution of the problems he has sensed, have been various, being conditioned by many differing psychological and cultural factors.[59]

Those factors he traced out with great energy through the sources of the ancient world.

With the 'modern' material Brandon was less happy; indeed, to all intents and purposes his hermeneutical exercise came to an end in the High Middle Ages. He believed religion to have reached a climax at that time, and that the subsequent history of religion can only be a record of decay and compromise. But the problem remains.

[58] This was marked particularly by his appointment as General-Secretary of the International Association for the History of Religions in 1970. It is strange that Brandon should find no place whatever in Waardenburg's symposium *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion* (1973).

[59] Brandon, *History, Time and Deity* (1965), p. 2.

Thus the problem of Time abides, confronting all our seeking for significance with its chilling logic of the inevitability of decay and death. From the existential philosophy of life which it thus seems to thrust upon us our instinct still is to turn and seek other and transcendental values. Hence the continuous effort, finding expression in an unceasing series of books, to explain the nature of history or to make sense of mankind's past.[60]

* * *

It seems that the phenomenologist of religion must, if he is honest, confess that the enterprise on which he is engaged cannot but involve the subjective faculty of interpretation if it is to avoid degenerating altogether into a barren catalogue of what are taken to be religious 'facts'. But this once having been admitted, it seems that the would-be phenomenologist is plunged into unfathomable depths of epistemological theory. But he may not always realise this. Since van der Leeuw and perhaps also Joachim Wach, few specialists in the field have shown any inclination to attempt to pursue the findings of the philosophical phenomenologists; and additionally, as Oxtoby has said, 'the philosophically non-technical masses are fair game for initiation into the rites of the phenomenology of religion'[61]—which is to say that there has arisen of late a regrettable tendency to seize on the term 'the phenomenology of religion' and use it in all manner of approximate senses, some of which may suit the present 'age of approximation' in their general lack of clarity, but few of which bear any real relation to the work of any of the scholars we have been discussing.

An example would be an anthology called *The Phenomenology of Religion* collected and published by J. D. Bettis in 1969. Bettis distinguishes three types of phenomenology of religion: first, philosophical phenomenology; secondly, the application of phenomenological method to the history of religions; and thirdly, the application of general phenomenological methods to the whole spectrum of religious ideas, activities, and so on. Phenomenology, he says, is descriptive; and one may agree in part. But after having observed that the selections include, as well as pieces of van der Leeuw and Kristensen, morsels of Maritain, Feuerbach, Schleiermacher, Tillich, Malinowski, Eliade and Buber, and having read Bettis' 'definition'—'Phenomenology of religion is an effort to focus

[60] ibid., p. 210.

[61] Oxtoby, 'Religionswissenschaft Revisited', in Neusner (ed.), *Religions in Antiquity* (1968), p. 596.

the perception of religious symbolic data to the degree of clarity demanded by the sharply focussed questions of the inquiring modern intellect'[62]—there is little that one can say, except that either the door has been thrown open to random subjectivity, or that a respectable scholarly ideal has disappeared behind a verbal mist. The aims of the book are so unclear that either interpretation seems equally feasible. Phenomenology may be more of an approach than a method, but there is no excuse for such treatment.

Turning, finally, to wiser counsels and saner opinions, among the many recent methodological explorations are two coming from opposite sides of the Atlantic. From America Willard G. Oxtoby draws attention to the extreme fragmentation of the field; this he holds to be an inevitable consequence of a consistent application of the principle of eidetic vision, which, as he puts it, 'suspends objectivity'. And he goes on :

> The phenomenologist is obliged simply to set forth his understanding as a whole, trusting that his reader will enter into it. But there is no procedure stated by which he can compel a second phenomenologist to agree with the adequacy and incontrovertibility of his analysis, unless the second phenomenologist's eidetic vision happens to be the same as the first's. For this reason phenomenological expositions of religion are in fact very personal appreciations of it, akin more to certain forms of literary and aesthetic criticism than to the natural or even the social sciences. As an approach phenomenology can be characterised, and yet when it is used for presenting phenomena there appear to be as many phenomenologies as there are phenomenologists. . . .[63]

Oxtoby has in mind here the type of phenomenology which passes far beyond the early descriptive ideal—that type exemplified by van der Leeuw and still more by Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. And there can be little doubt that he is right. If Husserlian principles are consistently applied, then this must be the consequence; and there must be a similar consequence if the historical approach is used with sensitivity. But it is significant that from the American horizon, phenomenology has these implications.

Returning to Europe, Åke Hultkrantz of Stockholm is by training an ethnologist as well as a historian of religion. He sees the phenomenology of religion as consisting essentially in the systematisation of given material within its own appropriate cultural context (here using methods derived from Frobenius, via Jensen).

[62] Bettis (ed.), *The Phenomenology of Religion* (1969), p. 4.
[63] Oxtoby, op. cit., p. 597f.

This he calls typological, or morphological comparison. And he writes:

> I believe that it is possible to find a common attitude among many religious researchers of the present day, perhaps especially in the Nordic countries and in Italy, toward the aims and methods of the phenomenology of religion. As I see it only a strict, positive research along the lines which these researchers have drawn up has prospects of forming durable scientific results. Characteristics of this phenomenology are firstly the seeking of objectiveness and neutrality in questions of value, and secondly the connection with the problems within anthropology (including ethnology) and folklore. . . The phenomenology of religion is thus the systematic study of the forms of religion, that part of religious research which classifies and systematically investigates religious conceptions, rites and myth-traditions from comparative morphological-typological points of view. In principle the phenomenology of religion is identical with the older term 'comparative religion' . . .[64]

So it would appear that in some sense the wheel of comparative religion has come full circle. But at the same time, comparing this statement with that of Oxtoby, there are obviously some profound disagreements of method dividing, say, the United States from 'the Nordic countries and Italy'. We shall return to these in our final chapter.

[64] Hultkrantz, in *Temenos* 6 (1970), p. 74f.