

Michael Pye  
Strategies in the Study of Religions

# Religion and Reason

Founded by Jacques Waardenburg

Edited by  
Gustavo Benavides and Michael Stausberg

Volume 51

De Gruyter

Michael Pye

# Strategies in the Study of Religions

Volume One: Exploring Methods and Positions

De Gruyter

ISBN 978-1-61451-249-3  
e-ISBN 978-1-61451-189-2  
ISSN 0080-0848

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

*Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek*

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2013 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston  
Printing: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen  
∞ Printed on acid-free paper  
Printed in Germany  
[www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)

## Dedication

This work is dedicated to  
Christine Pye  
who has accompanied my comings and goings for so many  
years and supported my endeavours with endlessly faithful  
criticism and good-will



## Preface

The idea for this collection was first proposed by Jacques Waardenburg, the former editor of the series Religion and Reason, with whom I have been privileged to be acquainted for nearly half a century. Our approach to the study of religions is in many ways similar and we have both sought to ensure the stability and long-term welfare of this discipline in our writings and other work in the academic world. My thanks are gratefully extended to him. In addition, my sincere thanks are due to Albrecht Döhnert, Alissa Jones Nelson, and Michael Stausberg, on the publishing and editorial sides respectively, who have shown both patience and persistence in helping this work forward to the stage of its *de facto* appearance. I would also like to acknowledge the support of various academic institutions, notably the universities of Lancaster and Leeds in England, the University of Marburg in Germany (formally known as the Philipps-Universität Marburg after the landgrave who supported the protestant Reformation), and most recently the Buddhist-oriented Ōtani University in Kyōto, Japan.

There are many individual persons throughout the world who have helped me in my work over the years, whether with critical commentary, linguistic expertise, practical research arrangements, contextual conferences, and in some cases co-publication. This is noted at the various relevant places below, but my heartfelt thanks go also to many others who have helped me in indirect ways but who are not personally named in any particular papers selected for inclusion. I am extremely grateful to all those understanding colleagues and advanced students who have both listened and responded to my efforts in various contexts. I hope that I have sometimes given something back. One sometimes experiences the loneliness of the long-distance runner in training, and yet when it comes to the real marathon there seem to be more and more of us who follow the great route, and not necessarily in competition. My hope is that, if only in small ways, the papers collected here will encourage others to follow through some of the strategies which are outlined below, and which require much more than the efforts of a mere individual.

Michael Pye  
Marburg, April 2012

## Editorial Note

The papers selected for inclusion in these volumes have arisen over the course of many years and have appeared in extremely varied places, often not readily accessible. The central intention here is to present each paper as it was conceived at the time, while setting it in the context of a wider pattern of thought. In most cases therefore hardly any changes have been made during the compilation and editing process. Typological errors have been corrected and the orthography of non-English terms and names has in some cases been up-dated. Sometimes a sentence has been polished for greater clarity without changing the sense. Where an article has been abbreviated to avoid undue overlap with others, this is signaled. In the original articles references were sometimes made to earlier publications, and these have been left in place; new here is a certain amount of cross-referencing between the articles, using the numeration shown in the contents pages.

Each article is provided with a brief indication of its original context, at the head, and the details of its earlier publication, if any, at the end. In quite a few cases (as academics often experience) a paper was “presented” at a conference in one year only to have a much later first publication date. In a few places, a clearly marked “retrospective footnote” may also be found which gives some relevant updated information or signposting.

Bibliographical streamlining using the “author-date” system has been undertaken throughout, and this has reduced the number and length of the original footnotes. In some cases bibliographical details could be improved or completed. References to writings of the present author are differentiated alphabetically within any one year, as required; but to avoid clashes between the reference lists of different articles, the alphabetic designation follows a systematic list which is given at the end of each volume.

This editorial process means that the individual articles no longer look quite like photocopies of the originals. Nevertheless, no significant revisions of content have been undertaken. Consequently, thought sequences across the forty years from 1972 up until 2012 will be readily discernible for any readers who are interested in that aspect. In sum,



any one article can be read in its own right, as originally intended; yet the coordinated arrangement over seven well-defined parts maps out the author's understanding of various options, strategies and opportunities in the study of religions.



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## General Introduction

The papers drawn together in these two volumes reflect many years of work in the study of religions and have been selected in particular to illustrate methodological and theoretical aspects of this academic discipline. The strategies documented below have found particular application, in the course of the writer's own research, in the field of Japanese religions and Mahāyāna Buddhism. For reasons of space however the number of detailed papers on such subjects has been kept to a minimum. It is hoped, nevertheless, that even with restraint in detail a certain picture will emerge of what it is like to study any religions at all. Various questions are high-lighted which arise in similar ways whichever religious traditions and systems are being studied. Indeed, as will be seen below, the approaches taken have in fact been tested with respect to a wider range of religions throughout the world. If at various points a certain amount of detail is allowed to show through, this is because it is considered inappropriate to expatiate on matters of method and theory without ever studying religions in the historical or contemporary field.

While there is no normative orthodoxy in the study of religions, certain perspectives have gradually been establishing themselves over the years. There are general ways of going about things, or "strategies" as we call them here, which in spite of variations are nowadays widely understood by researchers in this field. The papers selected below reflect several such strategies, illustrating the manner of their emergence, some of the ways in which they are applied, and how they hold together. It is believed that this broad coherence in the discipline here called "the study of religions" will be more important in the long run than the inevitable disputes and indeed interesting debates over particular initiatives taken from time to time.

Since these papers are drawn from a long period of activity, some of the older ones may seem old-fashioned – depending on the reader's academic formation. The writer is well aware of this. However the more recent papers may not seem particularly fashionable either! In some cases a certain development may be seen, a strengthening of perceptions and a widening of the range of reference points. Any readers interested in such developments should also take account of other writings not in-

cluded here, for this is by no means a comprehensive collection. At the same time there is an overall consistency. This arises not least because the field – the phenomenon of “religions” – has not gone away during recent decades. Indeed this writer, against the trend of some older sociology, and thanks to numerous impressions gained in Asia and in Eastern Europe during times of presumed secularization, never expected it to do so.

Consistency will also be remarked because now, as before and indeed perhaps more than ever, it is necessary to study religions as they are, as far as possible without prejudice or distortion. It is often claimed that this cannot be done, that “we” all have our childhood assumptions, prejudices arising from religious indoctrination, massive training in western philosophy of the Greek variety, or other distorting assumptions, which we bring to bear on religious systems of innocently unsuspecting peoples. This problem is usually exaggerated and often functions as an excuse for not even trying to study phenomena as they arise before us. Of course there are procedural difficulties. Of course there are also failures. However, the many years of work reflected here, mainly research-related but also institutional and organisational, has been dedicated to precisely such an objective. Whatever an individual’s long-term or changing personal judgements about particular religions may be, the corporate achievement of reliable knowledge and analytical perceptions about the religious systems in the world cannot but be a worthwhile matter.

We distinguish here between an academic field and an academic discipline. The study of religions, or to use the convenient single German term, *Religionswissenschaft*, is understood here to be an integrated academic *discipline*. There is of course also the *field* with which this discipline is concerned, which is, quite precisely, religions, i. e. religious systems in all their complexity. Note that the plural “religions” is used to designate this field. By “field” is meant, in this context, the whole of the history of religions together with the contemporary range of religions in today’s world. This field is studied by people with varying expertise in a range of disciplines, especially in the social sciences and in history, who focus with greater or lesser clarity on religious systems as such, and show considerable interest in contextual and often quite extraneous matters. However, a vague multi-disciplinary approach not infrequently leads to analytical confusion. By contrast it is contended here that the study of religions can be understood and carried out in practice as a coherent discipline in its own right, and that it should be. Of course it is fructified



by other disciplines, and quite rightly so. However it is a discipline which arises in relation to the academic, or more precisely the scientific study<sup>1</sup> of its own particular field. This discipline can be learned and, of course, improved.

In general, the clarification of what is required methodologically, and what is necessary or feasible theoretically, is best carried out in the context of specific studies. Supposedly pure theory or pure methodology can easily be out of touch with the field itself. By contrast it is characteristic of most of the essays below that there are various references to the on-going study of particular cases or examples, even though such studies are not themselves presented in extensive detail.

The seven parts of this work in two volumes will each be introduced specifically as we come to them, and so only a few words will be said about them here. We begin with a number of “methodological orientations” in Part One. As explained in the first essay, entitled “Methodological integration in the study of religions” (1.2), delicate correlations are required between the various methods which can be drawn upon for working out the study of religions as an integrated discipline. Some of these are more relevant to contemporary studies of religion, and some are more relevant to the study of religions in history. For example, the contemporary field of religions may be studied partly, and not least, by means of field-work. Yet this does not imply that the whole field of religions is restricted to that which is accessible by means of “field-work” in the style of anthropology. The latter discipline does not always reach the relevant parts of what may be called *deep tradition*. Another methodologically sensitive matter is the problem of the relations between the work of those who specialize in the study of religions and the frequently powerful religious traditions and systems themselves, with their often articulate representatives. These relations, sometimes summed up as the insider/outsider problem, are often perfectly harmonious but can also be quite tricky. They can be best understood by methodologically alert specialists who have actively pursued their own

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1 It would not be wrong to refer to this discipline as “the scientific study of religions” if the notion of “science” is taken to include historical and related research as well as social-scientific and other approaches such as cognitive studies. However the simpler expression “study of religions” is marginally preferred for the sake of its simplicity. It should always be taken as understood that we are referring to an academic discipline which is ruled by the appropriate scientific methodology and is not some kind of religious “study” intended to support a particular religious program of some kind.

work in real situations. It is only those who in fact study religions who will experience “getting into trouble with the believers” —the subject of the concluding paper in Part One.

Part Two is about the international character of the study of religions in an intellectual sense. As hinted already the study of religions is usually somehow rooted in deep-seated assumptions about what “religion” might be, varying in different cultural regions. These assumptions therefore have to be brought out and reflected upon if the discipline is to have any kind of world-wide coherence. But difference is not everything. One of the major assertions in this work, as in the previous publications drawn upon, is that the study of religions is not and should not be thought of as entirely culture-bound. Part Two therefore, entitled “East Asian starting points,” is devoted to an exploration of ways in which this is not so, with special though not exclusive reference to the case of Japan. While this matter has often been overlooked, in spite of a longer sequence of papers than can be reproduced here, there should no longer be any excuse for that.

In Part Three, entitled “Structures and Strategies,” we turn to the international character of the study of religions in an organizational and institutional sense. If the study of religions may be thought of as a discipline in its own right, then it needs its international organizational and institutional bases, just as it needs its lectureships and professorships in various countries. As a relatively underprivileged discipline there is always the danger of its being taken over and subsumed by larger interests such as (in some countries) theology or by one of the social or behavioural sciences such as sociology, in which the canons of such an institutionally stronger discipline are regarded as the norm, with distorting effects for the study of religions. These problems have often been debated in the relevant organs, journals and electronic lists, and the writer’s own positions regarding them have remained quite stable over the years. In part, the papers relating to this reflect my active participation in the work of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) and its various affiliated national and regional associations.

It might be thought that “comparing and contrasting,” the theme of Part Four, is also an aspect of methodological orientation, and so indeed it is. Methodological orientations continue to be unfolded as strategies are worked out. As is often noted, the phrase “comparative religion” has had a chequered history, and while it was once used in some quarters as the name of the subject itself (without differentiation between field and discipline), it has since become deeply unfashionable. The writer

is not in favour of its re-introduction as the name of an academic discipline, for in fact it can only be a part of a discipline. Religions or elements of religions can only be compared if those religions are first, or at the same time, studied in their own right. The question of balance in this regard often comes jumping out as a problem in the delineation of dissertation topics. Students may wish to “compare” things which they have not studied, or they may wish to study particular cases without well-considered reference to more broadly, and hence comparatively based terminology. In fact, the process of comparing and contrasting is unavoidable if a serious analysis of religions is to be attempted. While illustrating these matters in Part Four the process of methodological reflection will be continued.

Indeed, acts of comparison continue to inform Parts Five and Six. If throughout the years there has been one set of features of religious systems which has been of particular interest to this writer, it may be summed up as the “dynamics of religion.” The expression refers to the operating patterns of religious systems in motion, which in some way or other they always are. While somewhat distinctive understandings of terms such as “tradition” and “syncretism” are documented here, these understandings have, as usual, been worked out in a variety of specific contexts, and are broadly based. While much of the writer’s work has been centred on Japanese religions and on Buddhism in wider Asian contexts, he has carried with him a grounded knowledge and a continued interest in various branches of the Christian tradition. Moreover, the task of teaching about a variety of religions has quite appropriately been accompanied and underpinned by wide-ranging, though otherwise unpublished personal observations of Islam, Sikhism, Cao Dai, Chinese religions and others. The concepts discussed in Part Five and Part Six have therefore been carefully considered with regard to their viability and heuristic value in various contexts, even though the presentation of case studies is limited here for practical reasons.

Finally, while it is asserted again and again that “the study of religions” should maintain a clear profile as an academic (or as some might say, a “scientific”) enterprise, it is not inappropriate to take a look at the borderlands of this discipline. The present writer takes what will probably seem to be a relatively hard line in the identification of the discipline as such and seeks to avoid the woolly approach which often characterises “religious studies” in the popular mind. Nevertheless, the essays in Part Seven take up a number of contextual matters: “identity, plurality, dialogue, education, peace”, which are understand-

ably matters of great concern to many in the contemporary world. Such themes, or variations upon them, go beyond “the study of religions” more precisely conceived, and yet, unsurprisingly, are often highlighted in particular conferences around the world. It is hoped that, with all due attention to the varied substance addressed here, readers will also appreciate how “the study of religions” can maintain its own disciplinary integrity in such a complex world, contributing to our understanding of it and even, if only by extension, to its better management. At the same time, several of the previous, more analytical topics will be found to resurface in the papers in Part Seven. This is because responsible discussion of such further questions should presuppose serious study of the field in the first place.

Coming full circle, the overall aim of the seven parts of these two volumes is to present a view of certain working academic orientations, procedures and strategies in a world-wide perspective. It is hoped that by assembling these hitherto rather far-flung papers under one title, a contribution will be made to the conceptual strengthening and further development of “the study of religions” as an academic discipline which can find widespread assent and bear fruit in future generations.

Part One  
Methodological Strategies



## 1.1 Introduction to Part One

The study of religions as an academic discipline has attracted at least its fair share of methodological debate, especially in the western world, during the process of its extraction and crystallization from within the wider range of scholarly endeavour. It is quite natural therefore that here in Part One some articles should first be assembled which set out the way in which the study of religions is to be understood. This discipline has emerged over many years in the context of universities all over the world in a process which has required continual critical reflection. A major feature of this process of “discipline identification” (as it is referred to in 1.2 and 3.2 below) has been the drawing of distinctions with regard to other academic perspectives, while at the same time the study of religions draws perforce on many of these for methodological and theoretical stimuli.

In the western world, a major distinction which should be noted immediately is that between the normative, partly normative, or would-be normative perspective of Christian theology, and the observational, exploratory, comparative, analytical and explanatory undertakings of “the study of religions” or, to use the convenient German term, *Religionswissenschaft*. Unfortunately, in Britain and in North America the use of the expression “religious studies” has often had the effect, either deliberately, or just vaguely misleadingly, to slur over such a difference. Institutional and organizational complications of this necessary distinction will be further considered in Part Three below. It may be gladly admitted that Christian theology in its various academic forms has itself included, at least in modern times, certain forms of study which are non-normative, or largely non-normative, especially in the areas of historical, textual, contextual, and philosophical enquiry. Obviously, the specifics vary greatly across the world, and to some extent in accordance with denominational orientation.

In terms of academic history, this relationship is complicated by two further features. First, the study of religions arose in the west not only in the context of Christian theology, but has also been derived quite massively both from philologically grounded oriental studies addressing major world civilizations and from various social sciences such as social

anthropology. Professionally speaking, academics continue to enter the discipline of the study of religions from these very diverse directions and consequently, whether they recognise it or not, they need to redirect or re-acquire their academic orientation to take account of the field with which they newly concern themselves. This process may be spoken of as discipline identification.

For the comprehension of what follows, a few autobiographical elements will be mentioned here to illustrate the writer's own appropriation of the study of religions as a sustained academic task. Having benefited at Cambridge University (England) from the Modern and Mediaeval Languages syllabus which contained not only literature but also "history of ideas" elements, I turned to a range of subjects in a Theology syllabus which was not (and today also is not) denominationally defined. These studies were undertaken as a humanistic exercise without any related professional intentions. A far-sighted supervisor in theology also directed me to a decidedly non-theological course on the historical development of social anthropology, which was running at the same time. Following these studies came an extended sojourn in Japan (1961–6) which led to an encounter with, and observations of the plurality of religions in that land. Some years later a further personal process of discipline identification was induced and clarified because of new teaching duties at Lancaster University in England, under the leadership of Ninian Smart. Autobiography is not the intention here, but it may be helpful for the reader to know that, in effect, the writer experienced, through individual discovery, a kind of recapitulation of the wider development and crystallization of the study of religions as an emergent discipline in its own right.

In the early days, that is, in the 1960 s and 1970 s, it was still necessary to work out a positioning *vis-à-vis* the phenomenological school of religion, partly rejecting it and partly respecting it. It was partly rejected precisely because its representatives often failed to separate the normative from the descriptive, the programmatic from the comparative and analytical. It was partly accepted, on the other hand, because its representatives sought to understand matters lying outside the regular thought patterns of the investigator, but within the thought patterns of those being investigated. The idea of empathy was similar to the readiness of anthropologists to respect emic viewpoints. But the further baggage of philosophical phenomenology had inhibited the necessary clarifications and seemed to have little methodological relevance. The basic argument over this will be found in the introductory chapter of my early



work *Comparative Religion. An Introduction through Source Materials* (1972a).<sup>1</sup>

The very idea of “comparative religion” has often been presumed to be inherently value-laden, but this does not have to be so. Rather, the act of comparison itself is a perfectly normal feature of any kind of investigative research, a point which will be further developed in Part Four. On the other hand, it has for long been common to refer to “religion” in the singular, as if we automatically know what that is, even though various religions have increasingly been held in view. It is therefore quite appropriate that more recently the plural form “religions” has come to be preferred, as far as grammatically convenient. In fact the plurality of religions has always been recognized by the present writer and is presupposed in the essays presented here, even where the singular form may sometimes be found. Indeed, it was the recognition of religions in their plurality at the time of the European Enlightenment which provided one of the first important motivations for a different, non-theological kind of investigation, a modern, relativized, non-normative one. However, there are Asian parallels to this, as will be seen later in Part Two. It is in general significant that comparative and historical studies belong naturally together in the study of religions.

It is argued at many places below that the study of religions can and should be understood as an independently functioning academic discipline, and not just something which can be subsumed according to taste under theological, sociological or other discourses. This need was the subject of “The study of religion as an autonomous discipline” (1982a), published (appropriately) in the journal *Religion*. The title of this article has sometimes been carelessly misread as suggesting that “religion” is some kind of autonomous item in a semi-platonic universe, leading even to accusations of “essentialism”. This is a gross misunderstanding. There is no intention here, or anywhere else, to turn the study of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) into a search for some unifying “essence” of religion, making it a kind of surrogate theological endeavour, as some associated with the phenomenological school did. The idea that there is a common “essence” of religion is itself no more than an interesting datum in the history of religions. It is fascinating that people have tried to search for it! It should also be clearly understood that the idea of an “essence of religion” (*Wesen der Religion*) is not at all the same as the

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1 Cf. also the short article from the same period entitled “Problems of method in the interpretation of religion” (Pye 1974).

idea of “the essence” (also *Wesen*) of a particular religious tradition such as Christianity; the latter simply summarizes a task of interpretation which raises itself again and again for those involved in particular traditions, i. e. above all for its theologians. Since this question, in some form or other, does not go away for the religious persons themselves, it needs to be followed with interest by those who study the processes of religious tradition (cf. Part Five below).

If the study of religions is to be “autonomous,” and refers to a specific field, what is the field? The reader will find that normative definitions of religion are consistently eschewed here. They would simply bring all the problems back in again. Nevertheless the field of study can be adumbrated in various ways, so that an investigator can begin to attend to it. The verb “to adumbrate” appears to be not widely understood; according to *Chambers English Dictionary* (Schwarz 1990) it means “to give a faint shadow of” or “to shadow forth” and so I use it to imply a tentatively sketching out. The question of whether or not particular “cases” of religion<sup>2</sup> or similar phenomena are to be included in such a preliminary sketch should be considered pragmatically on the basis of the concept of family resemblances. The field has fuzzy edges. Nevertheless, strict attention should be paid to a consistent morphology. Moreover working definitions of sub-concepts (such as syncretism, on which see further in Part Six) can be profitably used. The various distinctions touched on here were also summed up, it may be hoped conveniently, and a little combatively, in “Religion: shape and shadow” (Pye 1994b, not included in these volumes).

The question of the relations between the study of religions and other disciplines may seem to remain. The discussion is sometimes haunted by the supposition that if there is a particular field to be studied, there must be a particular, special method with which to study it. However the answer to this is simply that there simply is no special or unique method which is somehow peculiar to the study of religions. The older espousal of the so-called “phenomenological method” may have been an attempt to find one, suggesting that special knowledge could be gained by researchers who disposed not only of widely based information but also had special personal insights. In spite of that red herring, or

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2 The former Cambridge philosopher of religion Donald MacKinnon once chuckled at length over the idea that one could speak of “a case of religion,” which however seemed to me then as now to be a completely natural expression if one is studying phenomena which are tentatively designated as religions.

distraction, it is certainly necessary to cluster the available scientific methods in an appropriate manner, as explained below in “Methodological integration in the study of religions” (1.2). It is this selection and clustering of methods which is specific to the study of religions. Every field of study requires its appropriate methods, but this does not usually mean that they are unique. It is the particular combination of otherwise known and available methods which is special to any one academic discipline. The further significance of this is set out in the second essay below, entitled “Field and theory in the study of religions” (1.3).

On this basis, more practicalities are worked out in the further papers selected for Part One. The writer’s exposure to Japan led progressively to the prosecution of field observations, over many years as occasion permitted, and hence to methodological reflection on the relation of fieldwork on contemporary religion to historical perspectives, the theory of tradition and so on. Fieldwork itself gave rise to an interest in particular concepts such as primal religion or civil religion, and to the rejection of some worn-out but ill-defined phrases such as “folk religion.” In field-based studies it is also necessary to consider the nature of various kinds of source material, and the value of ephemera is highlighted in this regard, particularly but not only for Japanese situations. Ephemera provide a particularly helpful way of resolving certain problems of access, a matter discussed below in “Philology, fieldwork and ephemera in the study of Japanese religions” (1.4, dating from 1990 in an earlier version). The two concluding papers in Part One offer more widely ranging discussion of the opportunities and sensitive areas of field work: “Participation, observation and reflection: an endless method” (1.5, from 2000) and “Getting into trouble with the believers. Intimacy and distance in the study of religions” (1.6, from 2004, but previously unpublished). Themes such as insider/outsider relations have frequently been discussed on an “armchair” basis, but the discussions presented here arise substantially out of the practice of the discipline itself.

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N.B. Publication details of articles cross-referenced within these volumes will be found at the end of the article in question and in the list at the end of each volume.

## 1.2 Methodological Integration in the Study of Religions

*The following was first advanced at a symposium on methodology in the study of religions at the Donner Institute in Åbo (Turku), Finland, in 1997 and published in its proceedings in 1999.*

### Methodological clustering

These pages present a call for an integrated approach to the academic study of religions which does justice to its specificity, but without separating it artificially from other related avenues of research. For a discipline to reflect upon its methods is a normal part of academic endeavour, and this applies to the study of religions (or *Religionswissenschaft*<sup>1</sup>) as much as to any other scientific research. This statement implies, and is intended to imply, that the study of religions may be regarded as a “discipline”. “Religions” constitute a field of study and accordingly “the study of religion (or religions)” is a discipline. What is a discipline, that is, in the scientific sense? It is no more, and no less, than a methodically ordered approach to the study of a field. The field “religion(s)”, no less than any other fields, requires a methodically ordered approach for its study. The methodically ordered approach, the discipline, takes on particular characteristics as required for the best study of the field. Consequently, the discipline of the study of religion(s) is not necessarily quite the same as the discipline required for the study of other fields, though it may be rather similar to the discipline required for the study of closely related fields.

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1 The German term (like its equivalent in various languages) has the advantage of including the element “science” in it, but the disadvantage of referring to religion in the singular. Care should be taken to avoid the term which puts the sciences into the plural, namely *Religionswissenschaften*, for this suggests on the one hand that “religion” is one, idealised entity, while on the other hand avoiding the strenuous task of being clear about what the appropriate science for its investigation is.

The view of the field and the understanding of the discipline interact with each other. A stable methodological perspective corresponds to a stable view of the field. The destabilisation of either leads to the destabilisation of the other. However, an advance in methodology may lead to a correction in the view of the field, and on the other hand, newly perceived or newly emergent features in the field may lead to pressures on currently held understandings of method. While openness to the recasting of perspectives is desirable, one may hope nevertheless for a certain, relative stability in the understanding of both field and discipline, for otherwise the critical interaction between individual investigators typical of a “science” cannot function at all. It is to be hoped that conferences on the subject of methodology in the study of religions, as famously held in Turku, contribute to the stabilisation process.<sup>2</sup> When there is relative stability, the discipline can be learned, practised, taught, corrected and developed.

The understanding that there is, and indeed must be such a process of methodological development and reflection does not imply that the study of religions has some one special method, unique to itself. At the same time the discipline of the study of religions requires its own particular gathering, or as we might better say, clustering, of methods. Though the methods at our disposal are in themselves known in the context of other disciplines, they are brought together in a particular way in order to facilitate the study of the precise field in question, namely religions. The resultant discipline is not quite the same as the disciplines required for the study of other fields, or of fields differently defined.

It is desirable to clarify, at this point in the argument, the nature of the specificity which the discipline requires and the reasons for which it should be affirmed. It arises firstly for the simple reason that there does not seem to be any other one, single discipline which could plausibly claim to be, alone and precisely, the discipline required for the study of religions. For example, “history” does not quite fit the requirements, because it does not usually include the methodological niceties of carrying out fieldwork among living people. Nor however does “sociology”,

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2 I am referring to the IAHR conferences on methodology in 1973 (cf. Honko 1979) and in 1997 (cf. Ahlbäck 1999). On the whole I believe that these conferences have in fact tended to stabilise methodology, even though in each case some contributions might provide illustrations for some of the difficulties discussed in the next section of this paper.

because in general, quite correctly in its own terms, it subordinates the study of religious ideas and behaviour to wider questions about the nature and functioning of society. Such questions are of course valuable, but there are other questions of interest concerning religious idea-complexes, for example questions about their internal structure and dynamics, which are not necessarily “sociological” in nature. For analogous reasons the disciplines of anthropology, art history, archaeology, political science, and so on, also do not amount to just that discipline which is required, overall, for the study of religions. Unfortunately the use of the words “autonomy” or “autonomous” have sometimes been subject to misunderstanding or to misuse in this connection. This is because they have frequently been associated with an “essentialist” or “*sui generis*” view of religion as a unitary phenomenon, that is, with the idea that behind all the various religions there is some unifying essence which only specialists in religion can understand and which makes their study different in kind from the study of anything else. This position is by no means adopted here. Nor shall it even be discussed at this point, since such a view of religions is not relevant to the argument being advanced.<sup>3</sup> It is quite a different matter to point out that none of the other disciplines currently practiced in the human and social sciences specifically and adequately relate to the field of “religions”. In some way or other they fail adequately to explore or elucidate the subject matter. Some do too little, and some, it might be said, do too much. This does not mean that the study of religions requires a special method which is unique to itself. What it does mean is that the right selection of available methods must be made and that these must be clustered together in a manner appropriate to the subject matter.

While it is necessary to realise that a specific clustering of methods is necessary to maintain and develop the discipline of the study of religions, it is not necessarily important to achieve complete agreement about what this clustering of methods should look like. Consequently there is no intention to offer a dogmatic statement about it here. Nevertheless, after clearing the way with some notes on present difficulties and the reasons for them, the following presentation will seek to

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3 To avoid any misunderstanding it may be added that the intention behind the usage in the phrase “The study of religion as an autonomous discipline” (Pye 1982a) is consistent with the approach being taken here. Unfortunately the word “autonomous” may have too many misleading associations and so should perhaps be avoided.

show what such a clustering of methods might reasonably be expected to look like. The statement is formulated in what may appear to some to be disappointingly uncomplicated terms. However, this is intentional and is regarded here as an advantage. Simplicity is a strength, not a weakness. It is anticipated that those who are themselves engaged in the study of religions, in practice, will find it relatively easy to reach broad agreement along these lines. And indeed it is important, while continuing the methodological discussion within the discipline, that there should be a widely recognisable tradition of study which can be identified as “the study of religions” (or whatever formulation is preferred). Indeed, it may be maintained that to some extent there is already such a recognisable tradition of study, even if it is in need of greater crystallization.

### Reasons for some present difficulties

Unfortunately, in spite of much attention to methodological questions in the study of religion there continues to be uncertainty, vagueness, and even irresponsibility in not a few quarters. Why is the methodological identity of the study of religion so widely misunderstood? There are various reasons.

First, it is deplorable that basic distinctions which ought to be easily understood continue to be slurred over or dismissed as trivial. A classic example of this is the difference between studying religious statements and making religious statements. It is remarkable, but true, that even today, after decades of methodological clarification, it is still necessary to make this distinction clear. Again and again, theologians appear who confidently assert that they are making statements which pertain to *Religionswissenschaft*, when they are in fact giving a *religious* analysis of some cultural situation. It is not surprising that other members of the public, even of academe, cannot take the trouble of making this distinction. However, as most real specialists in the study of religions would agree today, it is quite significant for the study of religion that it should not be identified with the making of religious statements. That would be a matter for theologians, Buddhist apologists, neo-shamans, and many others.

Second, there is a certain amount of intellectually obstinate compartmentalization furthered by the use of conventional phrases such as “comparative religion”, “phenomenology of religion”, “anthropology



of religion", "psychology of religion" and so on. Though these are usually recognised to have a certain history, which is rehearsed from time to time, it is not so common to see them assessed conspectually and critically, with a view to their correlation, integration or abandonment as might be required. More commonly they are just listed as options which people may take up as they please. However if the field is regarded as coherent, then a greater degree of methodological coordination, or even integration, is intellectually desirable and ought therefore to be sought. For example "comparative religion" or "comparative study of religions" cannot really exist by itself. Nor can "ethnology of religion", in spite of the immensely valuable contributions of those working at the interface between ethnology and the study of religions.<sup>4</sup>

Third, persons coming freshly to the subject often bring with them methodological perspectives which have been strongly formed in other disciplinary contexts. This is often enriching, but can also perpetuate mistaken assumptions and misunderstandings about the study of religions. Thus it sometimes happens that a person who has been trained as an anthropologist or ethnologist, and who goes on to specialise in religion, simply does not go to the trouble of acquiring a methodological orientation in the discipline of the study of religions. Humanly speaking, this may be acceptable in itself, depending on the case and the situation, but it becomes irresponsible when younger students, new to the subject, are told that the study of religions as such has no particular method. In such cases it appears that the researchers in question feel a professional need to continue to be identified above all as whatever they were before. Anthropologists, for example, once they have undergone their double initiation through field work and first publication, are sometimes a bit like boy scouts who have the saying "Once a scout, always a scout". The result is a failure to achieve "discipline identification"<sup>5</sup> or integration with respect to specialised, or new fields of study such as "religions".

A fourth reason for a certain amount of confusion is the development of serious methodological divergence as the result of an interest

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4 Phrases built on the pattern "ethnology of x" and equivalents in other languages such as "X-ethnologie" are easily framed but usually very imprecise in their meaning.

5 Although it may sound somewhat forbidding, this phrase (Pye 1991b, see 3.2 below) refers to a normal and appropriate process in any discipline which is enriched by recruits from varied quarters.

in new lines of thought which seem to make their own methodological claims. Sometimes new insights in a particular direction seem to demand to take over the methodological discussion entirely, while earlier gains are despised or forgotten. For example, because it is interesting to consider religion as a pattern of brain operations, we are tempted to regard cognitive science as *the* appropriate method for studying religions. If we are not careful, the need for fieldwork, for textual studies, and for disciplined comparison may then be forgotten. Putting it more generally, it is not infrequent for interesting figures such as Claude Lévi-Strauss or Michel Foucault to make the running, creating a bandwagon effect which disregards some of the everyday methodological requirements of the study of religions. The impact of various intellectual currents must surely be taken up keenly by specialists in religion, as in the case of other disciplines, but at the same time it is necessary to work out carefully where the possibilities of integration lie. Otherwise tested and worthwhile methods will simply be scorned or forgotten in favour of a series of fashions.

Fifth, in recent years there has been an increasing recognition that the “history of religions” is not, and indeed never really was quite the same as “history” in a looser or more general sense. The adumbration within the field of history implied by the adjunct “of religions” implies an incipient theoretical horizon. It has therefore been asserted not infrequently that “history of religions” somehow brings along with it the systematic, comparative or typological study of religions. However, this is not enough. Simply to make this connection does not provide the methodological integration which we require. Moreover this stance deflects attention from the possibility of extremely valuable field research among the numerous religions open to direct study today. It is adopted, typically, by those who prefer to reject out of hand the methodological contributions of the various social sciences in favour of “the historico-philological” method. The approach also obscures the important point that “comparison” may be carried out both with respect to the internal characteristics of religion (leading to the typologies typical of the phenomenological school) and also with respect to functionalist explanations over the much wider range of sociological and psychological research. One cannot simply say that it is the “comparative” part of research which somehow makes the study of religions systematic and therefore scientific, or that this feature in itself makes it a distinctive discipline.