The Scientific Study of Religion: Pitfalls and Promise

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I

A religion of study has long been part of the various religious traditions of humanity. One has only to think of the word svādhīṇya in Hinduism, which means scriptural study; the monastic tradition within Buddhism which was responsible, at least in part, for some of the finest educational institutions of ancient India such as Takṣaṇaṇī and Nalanda; the Jaina tradition of maintaining and patronizing libraries, which archive some of the most ancient and best preserved manuscripts found in India; the Sikh tradition of the devout study of the Guru Granth Sahib, carried on by the giyānīs; the legendary Jewish devotion to Talmudic study; the preservation of the intellectual tradition of the West in the medieval monasteries in Christianity, and the cultivation of the study of Hadith in Islam: to conclude that a religion of study, as it were, has been, in one way or another, central to the religious traditions of humanity for centuries.

II

The study of religion, however, by way of contrast to a religion of study, is a relatively modern phenomenon. Professor Eric J. Sharpe places its origin during the decade of 1859 to 1869. He writes:

The decade from 1859 to 1869 witnessed the rapid development of an entirely new situation in the world of religious study, a situation over which may be set as a rubric one word, ‘evolution’. Before 1859 the student of the religions of the world, although he might have ample motive for his study, and more than enough material on which to base his researches, had no self-evident method of dealing with the material; after 1869, thanks to the developments in the intervening decade, he had the evolutionary method.¹

Another consideration to be placed alongside is the fact that Eric Sharpe also accords to Max Mueller the honour of being ‘the father of comparative religion’. He writes:

There are perhaps, perhaps only two serious contenders for the title ‘the father of comparative religion’ – the Dutch Egyptologist C. P. Tiele and the great
philologist, German by birth, British by adoption, Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900). In choosing to give the accolade to the latter, we have to wish to minimize Tiele’s outstanding work. But Max Müller was the more universal figure, much of whose work was carried out during the critical decade, 1859-1869; we have already quoted him on two occasions: from what we have presumed to identify as the foundation document of comparative religion, his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), and from the slightly earlier preface to *Chips from a German Workshop*. In both we see him not only as a scholar, but also as the advocate of a new science – and it is for this advocacy that we select him. Far more effectively than any other among his contemporaries, he was able to convince the Western world that in matters of religion, as in matters of language, ‘he who knows one, knows none.’

This description by Eric Sharpe, of the beginnings of the study of religion or religious studies as we call it now, (having taken piety out of the word, ‘religious’), used three key words – namely, evolution, comparison, and science, all of which are crucial to the first major point to be made regarding the scientific study of religion. Evolution is important on account of its impact on the study of religion despite Max Mueller’s initial suspicions about it, because as an anthropologist put it in 1908:

> Not since the material world became an object of human study and reflection has there been accomplished such a complete and far-reaching revolution in current philosophical opinion. From the standpoint of evolution, the entire organic world, not excluding man, reveals a unity, a harmony, and a grandeur never before disclosed under any system of speculative philosophy.

As we shall soon see, the study of religion was profoundly influenced by the evolutionary perspective. The other word was comparison. Max Mueller noted: “It was supposed at one time that a comparative analysis of the languages of mankind must transcend the powers of man: and yet by the combined and well directed efforts of many scholars, great results have been obtained and the principles that must guide the student of the Science of Language was now firmly established. It will be the same with the Science of Religion.”

As Eric Sharpe explains, the point to note here is that “as in language, *as in any science*, the absolutely vital principle is that of comparison. To argue from one single religious tradition is to cut oneself off from the springs of
the new knowledge. To be a devoted Christian, Jew, Muslim, or Hindu is admirable; but it is not science. In the science of religion, in short, as Max Müller often said, ‘He who knows one, knows none.’ Comparison is important because it was foundational to the scientific method; Darwin had developed his evolutionary hypothesis by comparing various species. Similarly, around the time which has been identified as the time when the study of religion arose, scholars were being “forced to formulate new theories, or to refurbish old ones, to account for the persistence of religion as an element in human culture, and for the actual plurality of the religions of the world. In either case appeal was made entirely to the inductive historical method, in short, to ‘science’.”

We can now pull these various threads together by concluding that it was a new method which set the study of religion, as distinguished from a religion of study, on a new course, and that this method:

- can be characterised as scientific, critical, historical and comparative: scientific because of its inductive pattern and its belief in universal laws of cause and effect, and because of its distrust of *a priori* arguments; critical because of its fundamental attitude to evidence; historical because of the new sense of continuity between the past and the present to which it gave rise; comparative because it claimed comparison to be the basis of all knowledge. It compared the known to the unknown, it compared phenomena in apparent temporal sequence, it compared phenomena belonging to different areas but having features in common. All this, in true scientific spirit, it set out to determine, with regard to religion, the genus ‘religion’ which underlay the species ‘the religion’?

This method was the method of science. In other words, the study of religion and the *scientific* study of religion were virtually interchangeable terms. In this sense, the study of religion has been, from its very inception, the scientific study of religion.

However, when we say that the study of religion was in effect the *scientific* study of religion, we refer not to the subject matter of science but to the *method* of science. Religion has
its own subject matter. For religion at this time, the evolutionary hypothesis on which the
scientific method rested, was anathema because such science did not accept the finality of the
Christian revelation. For Christian revelation as then understood, the evolutionary hypothesis and
religion were almost irreconcilable opposites; while Max Mueller proposed that science and
religion, far from “being irreconcilable opposites,” might be brought together in “a ‘Science of
Religion’ which would do justice to both.” As a result of Max Mueller’s pioneering work,
“comparative religion (at first a synonym for the science of religion) did not exist in 1859, by
1869 it did.”

This is the first point then we need to keep in mind when we identify the study of religion
with the scientific study of religion at its inception, that it was a scientific in terms of the method
rather than the subject matter. This new discipline did not look for science in religion, as some
revivalist moments in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam were destined to. The other
point to take note of is that, at this time, in the development of Western science, science was
primarily identified with the physical sciences, such as geology or botany, or biology, or physics
and chemistry, in which comparison of data has led to their classification, which had enabled the
formulation of general laws, of which evolution was one. There is, however, one basic difference
between these sciences and religion, namely that, with the exception of biology, and perhaps
botany, the data these sciences dealt with consisted of dead matter, while the data of religion
consisted of living subjects. This glaring discrepancy, and its implication for the study of
religion, escaped the notice of scholars who were beginning to develop the science of religion,
because of the historical orientation of the science of religion at this stage and its preoccupation
of origins, which meant that although the subject of the study of religion was constituted by such
religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and so on, which were living
religions, the *focus* of the interest of the science was on their past, or what was historical and, in that sense, involved dead facts, similar to dead matter. This was even accompanied by the tendency, on the part of such scholars, to see the object of their study as dead! Max Mueller thus saw Hinduism as a dying religion. Even when anthropologists’ studied small scale societies, the assumption was that they were dying, or as good as dead.

The political dominance of the rest of the world by the West further ensured that the voices of the living members of the tradition could be ignored, as argued by Edward Said in his well known work *Orientalism*. This constituted one of the dangers of the application of the model of the *physical sciences* as the main model for the study of religion.

III

The rapid decolonization which followed the Second World War saw the emergence and rapid spread of what has been called the phenomenology of religion, or the phenomenological method, in the study of religion and is a tribute to the persistence of the scientific dimension in the study of religion, a fact which may not be immediately obvious. The phenomenology of religion emphasizes the fact that the student of religion must place himself or herself in the shoes of the believer in order to appreciate the significance of a religious phenomenon, and must suspend his or her own judgment while doing so. This principle came to be applied to *both* dead and living religions. The scholar who is often cited as a pioneer of this method is W. Brede Kristensen (1867-1953), who was an Egyptologist. He wrote:

> All evolutionary views and theories therefore mislead us from the start, if we let them set the pattern for our historical research. Believers have never conceived of their own religion as a link in a chain of development. Perhaps they have thought of it sometimes as the goal, but never as an intermediate link; yet in the evolutionary view, this is an indispensable concept. No believer considers his own
faith to be somewhat primitive, and the moment we begin so to think of it, we have actually lost touch with it. We are then dealing only with our own ideas of religion, and we must not delude ourselves that we have also learned to know the idea of others. The historian and the student of Phenomenology must therefore be able to forget themselves, to be able to surrender themselves to others. Only after that will they discover that others surrender themselves to them. If they bring their own idea with them, others shut themselves off from them. No justice is then done to the values which are alien to us, because they are not allowed to speak in their own language. If the historian tries to understand the religious data from a different viewpoint than that of the believers he negates the religious reality. For there is no religious reality other than the faith of the believers.¹⁰

What one needs to appreciate here is the implication, the nature of the data involved has, on the nature of the scientific method. So long as one is dealing with inert objects, as in geology or physics or chemistry for instance, the scientific method can be objective in nature, because the object is inert and can be manipulated at will, and observation and experimentation can proceed accordingly. But what is the implication for the scientific method when the data involves a live object, alive or dead? Let us consider two facts about a human being here – a person’s heart rate and a person’s belief system. A person’s heart rate can be measured through a device, and although the person is a living person, the person’s body can be treated virtually like an object. Accurate data does not require taking a person’s subjectivity into account. But, for a psychiatrist, objective data consists of the subjective feelings of the patient; it is full access to the patient’s subjectivity which now constitutes objectivity. No one doubts that psychiatry is a science and it is interesting to see how radically our understanding of what is considered data is altered, when we move from physics to psychiatry. Once the religions of the world came to be looked upon as living traditions, and specially those which had hitherto been studied only textually or philologically, then proper scientific objectivity required that the outsider scholars’ appreciation of a belief correspond to the insiders’ appreciation of it. Political developments may also lie behind this methodological development as indicated by Professor Eric Sharpe, who coined the
expression “response threshold” to deal with this new situation. He explains the concept as follows:

A “response threshold” is crossed when it becomes possible for the believer to advance his or her own interpretation against that of the scholar. In classical comparative religion this was hardly a problem, since most of the scholar’s time was spent investigating the religions of the past and often of the very remote past. Interpretations might be challenged, but only by other specialists working according to Western canons and conventions. Today, by contrast, a greater proportion of study is devoted to contemporary, or at least recent, forms of living traditions. The study of religion often shades into a dialogue of religions, in which the views of both partners are (at least in theory) equally important. The response threshold implies the right of the present-day devotee to advance a distinctive interpretation of his or her own tradition—often at variance with that of Western scholarship—and to be taken entirely seriously in so doing.\(^\text{11}\)

If the believer considers an icon sacred, then the scientific study of religion required that it be studied as such, otherwise the data under observation were being falsified. It just won’t do to say that the object is just a piece of stone, if it is worshipped by the believer. What needs to be emphasized is that this turn towards phenomenology of religion in religious studies is fully in keeping with its commitment to being a scientific disciple. What counts as evidence in some human sciences may involve accepting the subjectivity of human beings as the correlate to objectivity in the physical sciences.

This represents the second major phase in the scientific study of religion, in which the model of the human sciences provided the model for the study of religion. The danger this model presents is that of random subjectivity.\(^\text{12}\)

It is customary to refer to the historical and phenomenological dimensions of the study of religion virtually in the same breath. Both represent two faces of the scientific method. Bracketing them therefore seems justified. Some aspects of religious life can be studied in relative isolation from what the followers of the tradition now believe, although in studying even
these aspects we may need to make imaginative leaps; other aspects of it must involve a direct engagement with the present believer as believer. There is a scientific method appropriate for each of the two situations – although it involves a switch between objectivity and subjectivity. At stake is what constitutes a fact in the human sciences, as compared to a fact in the physical sciences. The totality of these developments represents the second major phase in the scientific study of religion, as characterized by the historical and phenomenological method in the study of religion. The anthropological method can also be included herein within the umbrella of the scientific in both its phases; as it passed on from the stage of mere outside observation to the use of the observer-participation method. The study of religion these days also covers the hermeneutical method; while one would hesitate to describe as unscientific is not scientific in the way we have used the term. By contrast, the phenomenologists of religion always insisted that they were following the scientific method in the study of religion. They could do so because of their interest in typologies, that is, in classifying data and generalizing on that basis, which is a hallmark of the scientific method. Where they claimed to go beyond the first stage in the use of the scientific method in the study of religion was in eschewing the evolutionary assumptions of that stage and in incorporating the significance the data have for the believers in their understanding of the data. Thus we arrive at the self-definition of the study of religion as multi-traditional and polymethodic, as subsumed under the label of History of Religions or religionswissenschaft as practiced by masters of the craft, like Mircea Eliade and others.

This trend to look upon the human sciences as constituting the proper model for the scientific method in religion, rather than the physical sciences, was further advanced by Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000). He even proposed that half the examiners of a thesis involving another religion should be drawn from scholars from that religion. His position has this finer
III

Disquiet with the status quo, however, soon emerged, mainly along the lines that the study of religion had bent too far backwards to accommodate the views of the believers. In an essay published in 1983, significantly entitled “In defense of reductionism”, Robert Segal wrote:

However crude the generalization, twentieth-century analyses of culture phenomena often differ sharply from nineteenth-century ones. Far more than their predecessors, twentieth-century anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, historians, and philosophers seek to understand those phenomena in the participant’s own terms. Whether earlier scholars were less tolerant of the participant’s point of view or simply less interested in it, they were not the least reluctant to analyze human beliefs and actions in their own terms rather than the participants. Indeed, they were not averse to pronouncing those beliefs and actions harmful or false. What contemporary sociologist J. D. Y. Peel says of his nineteenth-century counterparts holds for other disciplines as well: “Early attempts to understand social phenomena were so tied to the peculiar interests of the social world of the sociologist himself, that he only tried to understand what seemed odd, deluded, perverse or unusual; and his understanding consisted in showing how the odd, deluded, etc., came to be believed, in contrast to the true and usual – what his own society believed.”

By contrast, contemporary scholars typically strive to overcome their own professed biases and to accept the participant’s point of view. What Mircea Eliade says of myth applies to culture generally: “For the past fifty years at least, Western scholars have approached the study of myth from a viewpoint markedly different from, let us say, that of the nineteenth century. Unlike their predecessors, who treated myth in the usual meaning of the word, that is, as ‘fable,’ ‘invention,’ ‘fiction,’ they have accepted it as it was understood in the archaic societies, where, on the contrary, ‘myth’ means a ‘true story’ and, beyond that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant.”

After citing Eliade he adds: “It is surely not coincidental that Eliade is widely regarded as at once the leading contemporary scholars of religion and the leading defender of its irreducibility. For by its irreducibility he means the inability to analyze religion from other than the standpoint of believers themselves. According to Eliade, religion is analyzable in only...
religious rather than, say, psychological or sociological terms because for believers it is.”

Segal was to retreat from this position by subsequently stating: “Since writing this essay I have come to realize that Eliade is not identifying the irreducibility of religion with the irreducibility of the believers, in whom Eliade is in fact interested only secondarily. Eliade is primarily interested in the irreducibility of religion in and of itself.”

Despite this caveat, the main point holds that religious studies, in the second phase, when it followed the model of human sciences in its pursuit of the scientific method, placed a premium on the insiders’ or believers’ perspective, even as it “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.”

If one asked: what was wrong with privileging the believer’s view, there were several responses. One, for instance, was that if pushed to its logical conclusion, the study of religion becomes indistinguishable from theology. The Historians of Religion themselves always took pains to distinguish their role very clearly from that of the theologian. They took theirs to be an empirical science, while theology involved the systematic investigation of revelation. It was now argued that if one gives veto power to the believer within the field of religious study, then this brings it perilously close to theology. It not only complicated the relationship of the study of religion with theology, but also the application of critical faculties of the mind, which constitutes the essence of academic study itself. As Eric J. Sharpe wondered:

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?
In methodological terms, the debate takes the form of whether the study of religion should adopt the model of the human sciences or the social sciences? One can of course put the shoe on the other foot and ask: should the “social sciences parallel the natural sciences or the humanities”, but to try to do so would be to exceed one’s brief.

At the moment, the study of religion is divided into these two camps – of those who wish it to follow the human sciences model and those who favour a social sciences model – and the debate is almost visceral so that the word ‘confrontation’ might be more appropriate for describing the state of affairs than the more anemic word debate. At stake in this confrontation (or debate) is a fundamental issue – whether religion is irreducibly ‘religious’ or is it reducible to something other than religion, such as psychology, or sociology. The method of the social sciences introduces the intriguing possibility that the ‘essence’ of religion may not be religious. It is true that early anthropologists often consciously or unconsciously harboured this view, but such naïve reductionism is to distinguished from the sophisticated reductionism of the social sciences, which have learnt to take the believers view into account ever since Bronislaw Malinowsky introduced observer-participation method in the study of social sciences. The following statement captures some of the force with which the social sciences model of the scientific is being advocated in the study of religion:

If it is in the effort to overcome the alien nature of religion that contemporary scholars strive to approach it in its own terms, it is exactly the refusal of nonbelieving contemporaries to dispense with those terms that makes religion all the more inescrutable and therefore all the more alien. Contemporary scholars perceive that to reduce religion to something nonreligious terms [sic] is in that respect to keep it alien. What they overlook is that to refuse to do so is, for nonbelievers, to keep it much more alien.

Doubtless no reductive analysis of religion to date has proved adequate. Doubtless all have failed to make sense of some, if not much, of religion. But then they have failed not, as Eliade would say, because they have ignored the
believer’s point of view but because they have not reduced that point of view to another one. They have failed not because they have been reductive at all but because they have not been reductive enough. Their failure, moreover, is that of individual analyses. It is not, like that of nonreductive analyses for nonbelievers, the failure of the approach itself. Where all nonreductive analyses are doomed for nonbelievers, future reductive ones may succeed.\textsuperscript{25}

The model of the social sciences is also scientific in its most drastic sense, in that just as modern science reduces all reality, including that of the mind, to the reality of matter (or what is otherwise called scientific materialism), the social science model is not merely methodologically reductive but also ontologically reductive in dealing with religions, by suggesting that the essence of religion may not be religious.

IV

This may be a good point to review the ground covered so far. It was pointed out at the very inception that the study of religion set out to be scientific from the very start and that it was on this basis that it has always distinguished itself from theology, history, psychology, and philosophy, fields with which it might seem to overlap. In the first phase, this urge resulted in the use of the physical sciences as the appropriate model of the scientific method. This was followed by a period from the 1950s onwards, when the model of the human sciences was deemed to be the appropriate model to follow, as one pursued the scientific method. We are now in a third phase, from the 1970s onwards, when the model of the social sciences is being urged as the proper model to follow. These are of course broad and even crude generalizations, and admit of many qualifications, but serve to capture the overall dynamics of the application of the scientific method in the study of religion in a few bold strokes. The question to address next is: where do we go from here?

V
In this final phase of this essay one could propose that the model of scientific method the study of religion should now adopt is the model of the *medical sciences*. At least two reasons may be urged in support of this proposal.

One reason for making this suggestion is the obvious fact that, after the events of September 11, 2001, religion in general has come to be viewed increasingly in pathological terms, as is obvious from the stream of books which have appeared since those cataclysmic events, which are openly critical of religion. Members of the audience are bound to be familiar with them as some of them belong to the category of best sellers. This then is one reason one might adduce for urging the model of the *medical sciences*, namely its contemporary relevance. To offset the emphasis on religion as pathology, one might need to draw attention to religion as therapy. Most religions have to offer something by way of healing and retrieving that could be one way of understanding this proposal. A second reason, more philosophical in nature may be of greater interest and is now presented.

Let us begin by imagining a scenario in which a patient is late for the doctor’s appointment and arrives there in a mad rush. The doctor has been waiting for the person and examines her blood pressure. The doctor pronounces it high. The doctor then examines the pulse and pronounces it rapid. The patient is asked to calm down while the doctor examines a few other patients. When the turn of the original patient comes again after half an hour, the doctor examines the patient once more and says: “Good. Your blood pressure and pulse are normal. What can I do for you?”

The question one would wish to raise now is: how did the doctor determine when the patient’s blood pressure was high and when normal, and the pulse rate was high and when
normal. How did medical science form this notion of normal? It was not revealed from on high; it was identified on the basis of empirical observation. Please note that one’s blood pressure varies during the course of the day, not to mention the night when it is lower than during the day, as we sleep. The same holds for the pulse rate. Apparently medical science arrived at its concept of the normal range of blood pressure and pulse rates by comparing the blood pressures and pulse rates of numerous individuals over different periods of time, through observations carried out over a long stretch.

The doctor can examine a patient in the office and can diagnose him or her as suffering from high or low blood pressure, even when the patient may himself or herself not be aware of the pathology, because the condition could be asymptomatic. Similarly, one could be diagnosed, for instance, with tachycardia or relatively rapid heart action, or its opposite, bradycardia. The doctor can determine whether the reason for a particular development, say tachycardia, is physiological (as after an exercise) or pathological, requiring medical treatment. If the patient, who came running into the doctor’s office, had told the doctor that he or she had fears that their blood pressure and pulse rate were abnormal, the doctor would not be concerned because the patient had rushed in panting. But if the patient still had a high blood pressure and rapid pulse an hour later, the doctor would take it seriously as possibly indicating a pathological condition. The doctor is able to make all these therapeutic judgments on the basis of norms developed out of empirical data. This transition from theory to therapy as it were, or from observation to treatment needs to be recognized and emphasized. It is nothing less than fascinating that empirical data should yield results of therapeutic significance.

Hence the proposal that the study of religion might benefit from using the model of the medical sciences for its scientific method in our times. The ability of the medical science to
convert the *average* into a *norm* and generate a therapeutic context may hold special significance for the study of religion.

Let me examine a concrete example of how this *might* work in the study of religion. The study of world religions is a well established field in the academia, specially the Western academia and reasonably sound knowledge about the history, doctrines and practices of the world’s religions is now available. And some aspect of each of these religions seems to stand out as a special and potentially pathological case.

In order to be fair, let me take one example of a possible pathology from Eastern religions, in this case, Hinduism, and one from Western religions, in this case, Christianity. All religions struggle with issues of purity and pollution, but untouchability in Hinduism seems to stand out. In some parts of India even the *shadow* of a particular group of people was considered polluting; in some cases even the *sight*. Something is out of line here when compared with other religions of the world, who do not carry concepts of pollution to such lengths. This was an example drawn from Hinduism, the next one is related to Christianity. In the case of Christianity again there is the case of “stolen generations” both from Canada and Australia, when aboriginal or tribal children were taken away from their mothers to be brought up in civilized Christian homes. There is something deeply disturbing about this not just because we feel so, but because although all religions want to see their flock increase, they have *not* resorted to such tactics. Similarly, although all religions want to retain their followers, only classical Islam makes apostatizing punishable by death. One of course needs to distinguish idiosyncrasy from pathology. Hinduism has no founder or no ritual for conversion, while most religions have them; primal religions have no scriptures, while most religions have them – are these idiosyncrasies or pathologies? And does the fact that, in their classical formulations, both Hinduism and Judaism
did not allow women access to what constituted revelation within them indicates that the two were infected by the same virus, or that they were fighting the same virus? Such issues will have to be dealt with but one strike in favour of the medical model could be that it will mainstream the growing interaction between religion and neuroscience, between religion and alternative medicine, and the recent findings about the placebo effect of faith, which brings us back to the first reason proffered for making the proposal.

This issue is a delicate one. It was customary to pass judgment in the light of Christianity on other religions in the early days of the study of religion and it took some time for comparative religion, as a science, to free itself from this perspective. The study of religion prides itself on being non-judgmental and rightly so. It seems, however, that with the health of religions increasingly in question, it might be helpful to use the model of medical sciences to evolve independent norms from the data themselves, in order to form therapeutic judgments about religious beliefs and practices.
ENDNOTES


5 *Ibid.*, p. 31, emphasis added


8 *Ibid.*, p. 28


10 W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion* (Trans. John B. Carman. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960) p. 13. Also see p. 15: “The evolutionary point of view is therefore an unhistorical view-point. It is extraordinarily rare. For most people it is a difficult task to do justice to the viewpoint of others when the spiritual issues of life are at stake. In historical research, we confront religious data as observers: most people find this attitude difficult to achieve, and so place themselves directly in the stream of life and adopt only those ideas which fit the realities of practical life. When this has been done, a condemnation of the other point of view on the basis of our own is inevitable. From a practical point of view these people are right, for in practice we show our disapproval of that which is alien by not adopting it ourselves. From a theoretical point of view, however, they are wrong.”


Robert A. Segal, *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the Confrontation* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989) p. 5-6. Segal considers the generalization crude because “On the one hand behaviorism and structuralism, for example, are twentieth-century movements which conspicuously spurn grasping human phenomena in participants’ own terms. On the other hand, romanticism and rationalism, for example, were nineteenth century movements which equally clearly sought to grasp human phenomena in participants’ own terms.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 6
20 Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, p. 237. This is how Sharpe defines the goal of the phenomenology of religion.