I shall assume in this paper that a scientific study of religion must concern itself with more than the description of religious phenomena, that it must move beyond mere description and classification to explanation and theory if it is to provide us with an understanding of the phenomenon of religion.\footnote{According to Hempel and Oppenheim (‘The Logic of Explanation’ in H. Feigl and M. Brodbeck (eds.), \textit{Readings in the Philosophy of Science}, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953, p. 319): “To explain the phenomena in the world of our experience, to answer the question ‘Why?’, is one of the foremost objectives of all rational inquiry; and especially, scientific research in its various branches strives to go beyond a mere description of its subject matter by providing an explanation of the phenomena it investigates.” Space does not permit further delineation of the distinction between description and explanation here. One might, however, profitably consult on this matter Harre, R., \textit{An Introduction to the Logic of the Sciences}, Macmillan, 1960, chapters 1, 3 and 5.} Collection and description of data, that is, no more constitute a science when concerned with ‘religious data’ than when concerned with natural or social phenomena. Thus Penner and Yonan, in assessing the possibility of a \textit{science} of religion, rightly point out that:

The intention of this paper is to set out as clearly as possible the nature and role of explanation (and theory) in the 'science of religion' and the implications it has for our understanding of religion.

Perhaps part of the reason for the recent neglect of explanation in the study of religion lies in the feeling on the part of many that to explain religion is to 'explain it away' — a reaction not totally unjustifiable in the light of the host of simplistic reductionistic theories of religion that made it 'nothing but' the projections of man and the 'discovery' of the ulterior motives that lay behind much of the early 'scientific' study of religion. In any event, the explanation of religion seemed to imply a denial both of the autonomy of the subject matter — the gods, to put it crudely — and of any specific discipline appropriate to its study. Yet without explanation there is no understanding and without understanding one has no science. The question of explanation in the study of religion, therefore, cannot be evaded.

I shall be speaking in this essay primarily of explanation although, quite obviously, the issues raised here concern theory as well. To delineate the precise relation of explanation and theory is a task that goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, on this point, see, among others, C. G. Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science*, Prentice-Hall, 1966, chapter 6; E. Nagel, *The Structure of Science*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961, chapter 5; and R. B. Braithwaite, *Scientific Explanation*, Harper and Row, 1960, chapter 11. (It must be kept in mind however that as the understanding of explanation espoused by these men changes under criticism, so also will their understanding of theory change.)

Evans-Pritchard, in discussion of early nineteenth century theories of primitive religion, wisely points out that "we should... realize what was the intention of many of these scholars if we are to understand their theoretical constructions. They sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way" (in *Theories of Primitive Religion*, O.U.P., 1965; p. 15. See also his Aquinas lecture for 1959, 'Religion and the Anthropologist,' in his *Essays in Social Anthropology*, Faber and Faber, 1962). Smart in his *The Phenomenon of Religion*, (Macmillan, 1973; p. 37) recognises the danger that religion might in fact be 'explained away' in the move beyond description but does not take it seriously enough. (In the light of this, one might well suggest that one ought to seek for a theory about those who propounded, and still propound, theories about religion.)

This conclusion, however, is still not universally accepted. Some scholars in the field of religion have thrown out all possibility of moving beyond description to explanation and theory. This is clearly implied, for example, in W. Cantwell Smith's rejection of the very category of religion (*The Meaning and End of Religion*, Macmillan, 1962). The same is implied in his discussion of the truth of religion when he claims that religions are not the sorts of things one can become well enough informed about to make such a judgment. The same, it seems, would hold for those who attempt to formulate theories about it. (*Questions of Religious Truth*, Gollancz, 1967; 'A Human View of Truth' and 'Conflicting Truth Claims ...' in *Truth and