AN INQUIRY INTO THE NATURE
OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE HISTORY
OF RELIGION
AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

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I

This paper sets out to examine the basis on which the History of Religion and the Phenomenology of Religion could be distinguished from each other. These two terms, however, mean different things to different scholars and it seems desirable to clarify at the very outset the specific sense in which these two terms will be used in this paper.

The expression 'History of Religion' has been used in at least three senses: it has been used in a narrow sense, in a broader sense and in the broadest sense. In its narrow sense the expression is used to allude to "the history of individual religions, envisaged in their historical settings and chronological order". 1) In its broader sense the expression 'History of Religion' includes History of Religion in its narrow sense as well as the Phenomenology of Religion; it refers to "a combination of historical studies and phenomenological studies". 2) In its broadest sense the English expression 'History of Religion' is used as a synonym for the German word Religionswissenschaft and includes "not only history properly speaking but also the comparative study of religions and religious morphology and phenomenology". 3)

The expression 'Phenomenology of Religion' has similarly been

2) Frederick J. Streng, What does History Mean in the 'History of Religions', Anglican Theological Review, 1968, p. 3.
used in different senses. The sense in which it is more often used relates to the application of the *Epoche* and the *eidetic vision* to the study of similar phenomena in religions. This may be called its narrower connotation, to distinguish it from the broader connotation it is in the process of acquiring, namely, the application of the *Epoche* and the *eidetic vision* to the study of not only similar but all religious phenomena, including the “understanding of a single phenomenon (and not necessarily comparable phenomena) within a single tradition”.

In this paper the expressions ‘History of Religion’ and ‘Phenomenology of Religion’ will both be used in their narrow senses (unless otherwise stated).

II

Now ever since its inception, the Phenomenology of Religion has been concerned quite self-consciously with its distinctness from such adjacent fields as the History of Religion, the Philosophy of Religion, the Psychology of Religion, etc., and these allied sciences have been similarly concerned with their distinctiveness from the Phenomenology of Religion. Although scholars are not quite agreed as to what the lines of demarcation exactly are, they are all agreed that the Phenomenology of Religion is sometimes confused with “the well-known philosophy of Husserl and his disciples which bears the same name and from which it differs totally” (see C. J. Bleeker, *The relation of the History of Religions to the kindred religious Sciences, particularly Theology, Sociology of Religion, Psychology of Religion and Phenomenology of Religion*, Numen I, p. 147).


7) See W. B. Kristensen, *op. cit.*, p. 8-10, 418, etc., and G. Van der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 685-689, etc.

8) For instance, an investigation into the essence of Religion properly belongs to the domain of the Philosophy of Religion according to Kristensen who remarks: “That which is really essential is shown by philosophical investigation. Essence is a philosophical concept and it is the chief task of the Philosophy of Religion to formulate that essence” (*op. cit.*, p. 9). Mircea Eliade, on the other hand, regards this investigation into the essence as an aspect of the History of Religion, unlike Kristensen. See *The Sacred and the Profane*, *op. cit.*, p. 232. Even though in this case the differences could be verbal, at least in part, these statements indicate the kind of “border problem” Phenomenology of Religion is