BELIEF: A REPLY TO A RESPONSE

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In the attempt to understand and to interpret, or even to refute or to defend, religious ways of living, the role of belief as a central category used to be major in Western scholarship but has 'recently come under heavy criticism', as Prof. Donald Wiebe in his recent article in this journal rightly observes ('The Role of "Belief" in the Study of Religion', Numen, 26 [1979]: 234-249). Resolute to champion the traditional view, he sets out to answer that recent criticism; and specifically to show that those with the newer outlook are 'confused' (234 et passim). He specifically gives his article the sub-title, 'A Response to W. C. Smith'. His review of my Belief and History constitutes, however, so massive a misunderstanding of my expressed position that one wonders how, or even whether, to reply. I could either berate him for undertaking publicly an 'analysis and criticism' of a thesis that he has manifestly come nowhere near to comprehending, or else I could berate myself for having set forth that thesis without, apparently, making it at all clear. Certainly there has been a radical failure of communication; and I am left unsure whether the most appropriate might not be simply to weep. Let me attempt a rejoinder, however; even if with heavy heart.

One may be allowed to feel that the failure was perhaps not altogether mine, since Wiebe, although focussing on my work, includes in his strictures Bellah's surely lucid and powerful Beyond Belief, and the anthropologist Needham's brilliant Belief, Language, and Experience, so that evidently there is a clash of two ways of envisioning our subject, rather than simply a 'naiveté' (238; cf. 237) or obtuseness or confusion that 'bedevils' (238) the exposition of one of them. To me, it would seem clear that Wiebe's mind is operating within the confines of a prevalent 'paradigm' (his word, from Kuhn) 'for interpreting the meaning of religious phenomena' (234); and although he begins by explicitly recognizing that this is being challenged by a proposed alternative, he nonetheless continues by assessing the new within the confines of the old, and by its stan-
dards. He succeeds in proving only that there it does not nicely fit. The history of religious movements abounds, of course, with instances of an encounter between two outlooks where the proponent of one simply failed to understand the other, and proved to their own satisfaction and on their own premisses that the conclusions of the misrepresented other appeared illogical. One would have hoped, however, that an historian of religion (but perhaps Wiebe is rather a philosopher of religion?) would have by now become sufficiently sophisticated to be able to handle such a situation intellectually, and would not simply re-enact it.

It is perhaps a whit curious that I elaborated the matter of diverging world-views in my opening chapter, which is addressed specifically to modern-Western philosophy of religion and considers its adequacy or otherwise to interpreting the history of religion—yet this is the one chapter of the work on which Wiebe has nothing to say. It is not even mentioned.

The magnitude of the proposed revision of modern-Western-academic theories (especially philosophic) about religion is recognized; and indeed is proffered as a substantial—though admittedly, not a decisive—argument against adopting it, on the grounds that it would require 'costly' (234) rethinking of cherished ways. I found this a trifle amazing, as if Columbus' report of having discovered America were rejected on the grounds that to think in terms of a round world with new continents would involve too troublesome a refashioning of prevailing thought. The fundamental contribution of my book, and the central substance of its argument, is the report of a major empirical discovery. The unexpected, rather monumental, fact is demonstrated, that the words 'belief', 'believing' have drastically changed their meanings since they were used as central religious terms. Wiebe, like everyone else, had obviously been unaware of this previously (as indeed had I); but he does not dispute the painstaking and substantial evidence, nor question the conclusion. The fact as presented means a radical new awareness for us. I go on then to attempt to digest it; and propound a new way of looking at religious life in the light of this new knowledge. It seems rather pathetic to be told that we should not pay attention to the discovery, since the requisite shift in our established academic outlook would be too demanding. (There is even a slight suggestion