In the Introduction to this volume we tried to point to the distinctive features of the explanatory theories of religion that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Comprehensiveness and radicalness were picked out as characteristic of the grand enterprise of constructing and advancing theories of religion in authors such as Marx, Freud and Durkheim. Unlike the more limited attempts to describe and explain religious phenomena in disciplines such as the history of religions, the focus of such theories of religion is not upon specific facts and developments in religion. Rather, the type of theory we are interested in seeks an explanation of religion as a whole – hence comprehensiveness. An explanatory theory of religion which has this aim cannot take the existence and character of religion for granted. The very existence of religion is something that in some way requires explanation. The theorist cannot then be finally content with the small-scale explanations of specific facts in the history of religion, explanations which account for one religious fact in terms of other facts and features of religion. He must suppose that even the most apparently fundamental features of man’s religious life themselves require explanation in terms of things outside religion altogether. His explanatory theory of religion will in consequence show the radicalism we mentioned in our Introduction. It will seek to explain the existence and fundamental character of religion in terms of facts which are outside the surface life of religion and which religious believers are unaware of and would have difficulty in acknowledging. As we pointed out this radicalism in modern explanatory theories of religion is strengthened through their association with scepticism about religion and the inheritance of the Enlightenment.

The possibility of critical questioning of the aims of explanatory theories of religion has already emerged in our discussion of the definition and essence of religion. For if we have cast at least some
doubt on the degree of unity to be found in the class of religions, we have thereby questioned the possibility of seeking a comprehensive explanatory theory of religion. In this chapter we shall examine the general nature of explanation, and of the explanation of human institutions in particular, to see again if some initial comment can be offered on the enterprise of explaining religion.

The philosophical literature on the nature of explanation is enormous and the issues raised within it manifold. A full survey will not be offered here. Enough will be done to present a thesis and antithesis on the possibility of radical explanation of a human institution such as religion, enabling a synthesis to be offered of opposing views in Chapter 3, which will in turn provide a perspective for finally appraising the pretensions of radical, comprehensive theories of religion.

One particular model of the nature of explanation will be seen to license radicalism in the explanation of human behaviour and to be centrally connected with the analogy between the theory of religion and scientific theory we have already seen to be important in discussing religion's essence. To this model we shall oppose one developed especially for the explanation of human action. This second model has the contrasting implication that religion cannot be explained by facts outside itself.

EXPLAINING AND ACCOUNTING FOR

The concept of explanation is a difficult one to pin down. Very generally, what links the many types of explanation together is the fact that explanations are attempts to meet requests for understanding. Complexities and diversity among types of explanation exist because of the wide range of things concerning which we seek understanding and the manifold ways in which understanding of these things may be lacking.

If successful explanations provide understanding of the thing explained, then it is possible in some contexts to distinguish explanation from describing and interpreting.

An explanation of something may also be a fuller description of it; but not all descriptions are explanations. We may say of a narrative 'It describes what took place when Britain declared war on Germany in 1939 but it does not explain why it took place.' We may conclude of an empty explanation of an event that it merely re-describes it in