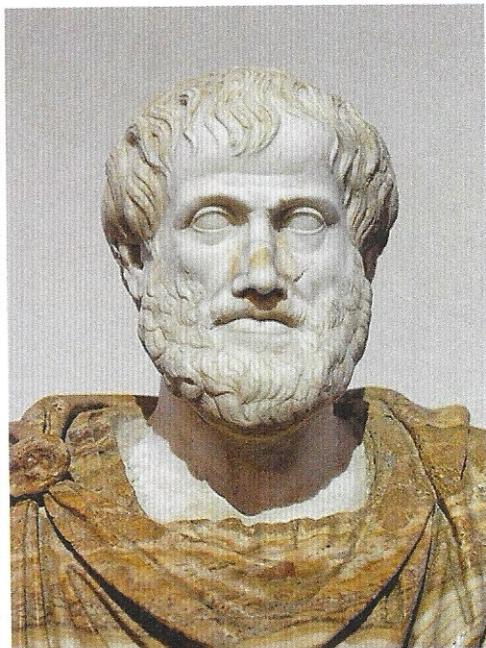


# THEORY AND METHOD IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES



**FIGURE 2.1** Aristotle. Jastrow/Wikimedia Commons/  
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*Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.*

SENECA, 1ST-CENTURY ROMAN PHILOSOPHER

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## Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies

Religious Studies as an academic field is recent – there have been departments of Religious Studies in universities only since the 1960s. Long before then, however, people were studying the beliefs, rituals, and history of their own traditions, as part of their religious training. Some spent years in training in order to qualify as religious authorities within their traditions. This kind of study involves a great deal of time and effort, but it is different from being trained in Religious Studies.

As noted in Chapter 1, Religious Studies examines religion scientifically, without concern for the credibility or truth of its teachings or the rectitude of its practices. It is descriptive rather than normative. Like physics, biology, and psychology, Religious Studies does not claim to have a set of truths that will never be refuted. The best we can have, as in the natural sciences, are solid claims that are backed by data and subject to revision in light of new discoveries. Religious Studies examines what people believe about the ultimate concerns of life, their practices, the reasons people believe and practice as they do, how beliefs and practices have developed and changed over time, and the nature of religion itself.

Studying religion scientifically requires close observation, careful thinking, defining important terms, and developing explanations for what we

observe. Our explanations must have the same clarity, coherence, and credibility demanded of other scholarly claims. This approach to the study of religion can be traced all the way back to classical Greek philosophy. The word “philosophy” comes from the Greek *philia*, love, and *sophia*, wisdom. Philosophy is the love of wisdom or the pursuit of wisdom.

## **The Relationship Between Philosophy and Theology**

For the ancient Greeks, philosophy covered the pursuit of all organized knowledge. This included all the sciences, logic, ethics, and political theory, as well as theology. (It is because philosophy originally included all branches of academic knowledge that the highest degree in any of them is a “Ph.D.”, a Doctor of Philosophy degree.) *Theos* in Greek means “god,” and *logos* in this context means “study of.” So theology was the study of the gods.

As the Greek philosophers thought about the gods, they called into question many popular beliefs and stories about them, such as those found in the great epics (hero stories) of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. For example, almost all philosophers rejected the way their culture’s religions described gods as like humans. That’s called **anthropomorphism**. An early critic of anthropomorphism was the poet Xenophanes (d. 480 BCE), who disapproved of the way “[m]ortals suppose that gods are born, wear clothes, and have a voice and body.” In one poem, he sounds as if he is mocking anthropomorphism.

The Ethiopians say that their gods are flat-nosed and black,  
But the Thracians say that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.  
Yet if cattle or horses or lions had hands and could draw...  
then the horses would draw their gods  
Like horses, and cattle like cattle.

[http://www.thehumanist.org/humanist/  
09\\_jan\\_feb/March.html](http://www.thehumanist.org/humanist/09_jan_feb/March.html)

Worse than just describing the gods as if they were humans, Xenophanes said, people tell stories about the gods in which they have human vices. The great Homer was especially objectionable when he “attributed to the gods all sorts of things that are matters of reproach and censure among men: theft, adultery, and mutual deception.” Homer tells stories, for example, in which Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, deceives her husband and has affairs with other gods.

Xenophanes does not offer positive details about what the gods might be like, but he is positive that they would not have the vices and shortcomings humans have:

One god greatest among gods and men,  
not at all like mortals in body or in thought.  
[http://plato.stanford.edu/  
entries/xenophanes](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/xenophanes)

Xenophanes appears to think of this supreme deity as aware of everything, able to influence everything through his thought, and able to change things without himself changing, a view close to later monotheistic ideas about God as Perfect Being.

Two centuries after Xenophanes, Aristotle (Figure 2.1) worked out a more detailed theology. He agreed with Xenophanes that anthropomorphism is a mistake because the divine would not have the imperfections of material things. He also presented one of the first philosophical arguments for the existence of God. The changes happening in the natural world, he says, point to a First Cause of change, and this First Cause could not itself change – otherwise it would need yet another cause. Anything material changes, furthermore, so the First Cause must be nonmaterial. Unlike material things, too, this First Cause has no “potentiality” (meaning that it will not change or develop from a lesser to a greater form), but is a pure “act.” This means that, like energy, this First Cause is entirely active. Also like energy, it is neither created nor destroyed; it is timeless, eternal. The essential activity of the First Cause, Aristotle says, is thinking. And since the highest thing to think about is itself, the First Cause contemplates itself.

We can use the word *God* for this unchanging, eternal, nonmaterial First Cause. Simply put, God is Perfect Being. This understanding of God as Perfect Being carried over to early Christian thinking and helped shape Christian theology.

## **Two Kinds of Christian Theology**

While the word *theology* started out with the meaning “philosophy about the gods,” it came to have another meaning when it was adopted by early Christians. So we need to explain the different ways in which Christians came to use the term “theology.”

Christianity started in the Roman Empire, where the international language was Greek and where Greek philosophy was admired. In the early centuries of Christianity, when its members were spreading their message around the Roman Empire, leaders often used Greek philosophical terms and ways of arguing. This was useful because they lived in a culturally diverse world where a number of religions and philosophies competed for people’s attention. There were Greek and Roman religions, with their dozens of gods to worship. “Mystery religions” promised practical benefits to people upon being initiated into their secrets. According to the philosophy of Stoicism, the best way to be happy was to reduce emotional attachment to things, while the philosophy of Epicureanism held that the goal of life is pleasure. In this competitive marketplace of ideas, Christians used Greek concepts and arguments to show that their new beliefs could answer the three C questions – about clarity, coherence, and credibility. They tried to make clear what they believed, especially about Jesus. To explain what they meant in calling Jesus “the Son of God,” for example, they said that, unlike ordinary sons, Jesus is *agenetos*, uncreated. Christians also wanted to show that their beliefs fit together into a coherent whole, so that, for example, Jesus’ divinity is compatible with his humanity. Thirdly, they tried to show that their beliefs were credible, so that it was reasonable to accept them.

In the 4th century, Christians’ ability to articulate and defend their beliefs became even more important. Until then Christianity was seen as an upstart religion, a deviation from mainstream Judaism at best. Many Christians suffered persecution. Then, as we shall see in Chapter 4, the emperor Constantine (r. 306–337) made it legal to practice Christianity. However, in the light of day, it turned out that various Christian groups around the Mediterranean held divergent views. This is when Christians began trying to work out their differences and agree on a single set of beliefs. In 325, Constantine called together various Christian leaders (bishops) at Nicea (in today’s Turkey) to develop this creed (list of beliefs). This list of beliefs, known as the **Nicene Creed**, then

became the criterion for belonging to the religion. Those who accepted it were Christians; those who did not were heretics (people holding beliefs that are considered incorrect).

In their deliberations at Nicea and at councils after that, the leaders of the Church used Greek philosophical language and arguments. They talked theology. Once the bishops had agreed on the dogmas (official teachings) of Christianity, however, the word “theology” came to be applied to these dogmas themselves, understood as a fixed set of truths. This is sometimes called dogmatic theology. Roman Catholic seminarians, for example, spend four years studying this kind of theology. They do not analyze and critique the doctrines they are taught, the way Aristotle would have. They learn the official teachings and rational defenses of these teachings as part of their training.

Dogmatic theology is not considered a part of Religious Studies. But theology in the original sense – philosophizing about God – remains part of Religious Studies. An activity in which people consider various alternatives and look for reasons to adopt or reject them, it is sometimes called natural theology, since it starts from observations about the natural world rather than from religious beliefs derived from the Bible. Another heading to put it under is the philosophy of religion.

The work of medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) is a good example of natural theology. In his *Summa Theologiae* (*Compendium of Theology*), Aquinas starts each section not with a doctrine to be accepted but with a question to be discussed. The most obvious question to him: “Does God exist?”

Aquinas begins the discussion by saying, “It seems that God does not exist,” and giving the strongest arguments he knows for atheism (rejection of belief in gods). One of them is a version of the Problem of Evil. If there were an infinite, all-good being, Aquinas says, that being would not allow evil to exist. Infinite good would crowd out evil. But obviously, there is evil in the world. Another argument he gives for atheism is that, if something can be explained in a simple way or in a complex way, we should prefer the simple way. And, Aquinas says, we can explain everything in the world either through natural causes, as in the sciences, or through human causes. So there is no need to appeal to a God.

After presenting these arguments for atheism, Aquinas presents five arguments for theism (belief in the existence of a god or gods). The first one he got from Aristotle, and we saw it above. It is that the changes in the world must be traceable to a First Cause of change. Aquinas’ “second way” is similar. The things we see around us have causes for their existence, he says, and these causes themselves have causes. But the chain of caused causes cannot go on forever. There must be a First Cause, itself uncaused, for the existence of everything in the world. Aquinas begins his fifth argument for the existence of God with the observation that animals and plants act in ways that show intelligence, even though they are not intelligent themselves. Birds fly south for the winter, and this helps them survive, even though they do not understand that cold weather is coming and would probably kill them. So, Aquinas says, there must be an intelligent agent who is directing all the unintelligent animals and plants – and this is God. (For a full discussion of the Five Ways, see Copleston 1956, 114–130.) Having presented his five arguments for the existence of God, Aquinas goes back to the two arguments for atheism with which he started, and he responds to them.

The philosophical method of rational analysis of various beliefs, as we said, remains a component of Religious Studies. In fact, some schools house their Religious Studies programs in departments of philosophy or theology. But the philosophical

method is only one approach to the study of religion in the modern discipline known as Religious Studies.

## Scriptural (Biblical) Studies and the Impact of the Printing Press

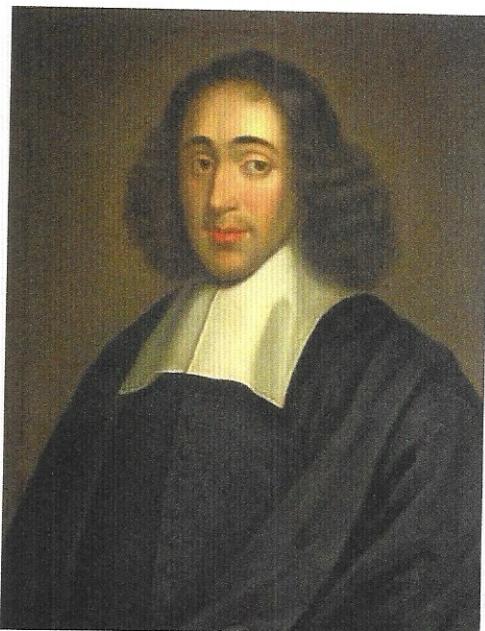
The multidisciplinary field of Religious Studies as we know it today developed under the impetus of a number of innovations in early modern Europe. The first of these was the printing press. The printing press, developed in Europe in the mid-1400s, had a profound influence on Christianity. In this deeply religious world, people considered the Christian Bible to be the most important book and wanted to put it in print form. Before that, each Bible had to be copied by hand. This task kept the scribes (people who write) employed, but there was little in the way of systematic quality control. Copying from their own master copies, different monasteries used diverse writing styles and ways of abbreviating terms. And given human fallibility, slight differences inevitably developed among the many hand-copied versions available at the time.

But human error was not the only source of variations among the manuscripts. The Bible had been translated into Latin from its original Hebrew and Greek as early as the 2nd century BCE. An official translation had been produced in the 4th century CE. But even then scholars had worked with diverse sources. So scholars began the process of comparing manuscripts, determining the sources of variations among them, and producing a text they believed was accurate according to the earliest available version. During this process, they discovered another complication. They recognized that it was hard to recapture the meanings of terms as they were used at the time the Bible was first written down; meanings and usage of terms can change over time. Asking questions about the accuracy of transmission and translations of biblical texts in order to produce an accurate copy for the newly invented printing press, then, was the first step in the development of Religious Studies.

Eventually, scholars began to identify variations in both the substance and style of even the earliest versions of scripture they could find. These observations led to the development of new fields in scripture study. Scholars involved in “source criticism,” for example, figured out that books previously assumed to be the work of a single author may well have been the work of several authors, or that work attributed to diverse authors may well have been based on a single source. Through advanced methods of study, scholars were also able to determine that some books of Judaic and Christian scripture were written long after the events they reported, raising questions about their historical accuracy and purpose. These developments represented another step away from the insistence on the timeless truth of scripture – and our ability to access it – that is characteristic of traditional theological studies.

## Baruch Spinoza (d. 1677): The Beginnings of Source Criticism

Baruch Spinoza of Amsterdam (Figure 2.2) is a good example of this approach to scriptural studies. Among both Jews and Christians, it was standard belief that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible – Genesis, Exodus,



**FIGURE 2.2** Baruch Spinoza. Anonymous/  
Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But Spinoza read the Bible carefully, along with several commentaries, especially that of Abraham ibn Ezra (d. 1164). Spinoza then put together several arguments that Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible. The simplest argument is about the book of Deuteronomy, which ends this way:

There in the land of Moab Moses the servant of the Lord died, as the Lord had said. He was buried in a valley in Moab opposite Beth-peor, but to this day no one knows his burial-place. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was not dimmed nor had his vigor failed. The Israelites wept for Moses in the lowlands of Moab for thirty days; then the time of mourning for Moses was ended .... There has never yet risen in Israel a prophet like Moses.

It seemed obvious to Spinoza that Moses could not have written about his own death and funeral.

Another argument Spinoza presented was that Deuteronomy 27 says that the whole book of Moses was written on the circumference of one altar. But the Pentateuch is well over 200 pages long. To fit on the surface of an altar, Spinoza said, what Moses wrote must have been much shorter. Many passages in the first five books of the Bible, too, are written about Moses in the third person, such as "Moses talked with God" and "Moses was the meekest of men." Why would Moses write about himself in the third person rather than saying, "I talked with God"?

Spinoza also looks at place names in the Pentateuch. Some names for places, such as "Dan" for a certain city, did not exist until long after Moses was dead. Spinoza concludes, "From what has been said, it is thus clearer than the sun at noonday that the

Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by someone who lived long after Moses” (de Spinoza and Elwes 1951, 124).

For his critical thinking about the Bible, and for his unorthodox philosophical ideas, Spinoza was expelled from the Jewish community in Amsterdam in 1656. But “source criticism” – the scientific study of the sources of scripture – remains a significant area of specialization within Religious Studies. Indeed, over the next two centuries, scholars continued to work on the sources of the Pentateuch. Today, biblical scholars generally accept what is known as the “documentary hypothesis,” developed by German theologian Julius Wellhausen (d. 1844), according to which the “Books of Moses” are an amalgam of four independently authored sources. Scholars have also developed subspecializations in examining the literary forms of scripture (“form criticism”) and the impact of scripture’s editors (“redaction criticism”).

## ***William Robertson Smith (d. 1894): Historical Criticism***

As more scholars pursued source criticism, the field broadened and came to be known as **higher criticism** (by contrast to “lower criticism” or “textual criticism,” which focuses on removing any human errors in the transcription or transmission of texts). Some scholars focused on the historical contexts in which scriptural reports developed, relying on sources outside scripture in order to better understand the meaning of the texts. This area of specialization in Biblical Studies is therefore often called “historical criticism.” William Robertson Smith is a major figure in the development of this field.

Robertson Smith offered descriptions of ancient Near Eastern life and religion in order to contextualize scripture. The people of Israel, he said, were far from unique in their religious ideas and practices. They were Semites, speakers of a Semitic language, a group which includes Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. So to understand the Bible, the Prophets, and Jesus, we must understand the Semitic culture they lived in.

One tradition that was already solidly in place when the Israelites appeared on the historical scene was the sacrificing of animals by priests. The writers of the Old Testament do not explain these rituals, as if they were a new idea, Robertson Smith writes, because everyone in the ancient Near East had long assumed “that sacrifice is an essential part of religion.”

When we look at other details of the religion of ancient Israel, we find other similarities with neighboring Semitic cultures. In fact, when we study Israel before the 6th century BCE, “nothing comes out more clearly than that the mass of the people found the greatest difficulty in keeping their national religion distinct from that of the surrounding nations” (Smith 1923, 5). As we shall see in Chapter 6, Solomon was famous for building the Temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem, but he also built shrines to the goddess Asherah (2 Kings 18:22). And over the next four centuries, the Temple itself came to have altars and shrines to Asherah, Baal, and other deities (2 Kings 23:4–13). Thus, he concludes, the early people of Israel were not monotheists, believers in only one god. Elijah’s contest with the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah in the First Book of Kings (18:19–40) demonstrates this. There could not be 950 prophets of other gods if Yahweh were the only god worshipped in Israel.

# The Rise of Modernity and Its Impact on the Study of Religion

Related to the development of the printing press was the Protestant Reformation, which led to another step in the development of Religious Studies. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the Protestant Reformation began when various reformers disputed some of the teachings of the Roman authorities. Since the Roman authorities based their teachings on their interpretations of the Bible, it was up to the Protestants to justify their views with different interpretations of the same scriptures. Although theologians in each camp were convinced of the accuracy of their own interpretations, some scholars got the idea that there was more than one plausible interpretation of scripture. It became another step in the development of Religious Studies.

Another less obvious but related phenomenon contributing to the development of Religious Studies was the breakdown of central authority and the rise of independent countries in Europe. In Europe's premodern era, political power was legitimated through religious authority. As we noted in Chapter 1, from the time Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne (800 CE), the Church had theoretically been the source of political legitimacy. That is, people had to obey the emperor and his representatives because the Church said so. If a group became disloyal, the emperor could send his armies to enforce allegiance. However, the economy was changing and the emperor did not have infinite resources to support either his loyal vassals or his troops. As various regions of Europe developed economic independence, they began to demand political autonomy as well. Since the emperor's power was legitimated based on the Roman Church's authority, it was up to those who wanted independence to either reject religion or defend their positions with new religious justifications.

Europe's various regional leaders chose the latter option, starting with Henry VIII in England. Instead of separating government from religion, he created the Church of England, independent of the Church of Rome. He had no disagreements with the pope concerning doctrine. And it is true that Henry wanted a divorce because his wife had produced no male heirs. But more importantly, Henry did not want the income from local churches going to Rome, while he had to pay the salaries of local clergy. So he made himself the head of the Church of England – a position still held by the British monarchs.

Other regions began to declare independence and express loyalty to new interpretations of Christianity – those of Luther or Calvin, for example. This process began the development of Europe's modern countries. But the birth of these states was not easy. ("States" are geopolitical entities with fixed borders, in contrast with "nations" or "empires" whose boundaries are subject to change.) There was a great deal of conflict over who got to lead them and how to establish the borders between them. For over a century, Europe's "Wars of Religion" raged. Various Protestant and Catholic factions battled for control across Europe, culminating in the horrendously bloody Thirty Years War. Finally, in 1648, the combatants agreed to stop fighting and recognize a formula that had been developed nearly a century before in a failed effort to bring peace. According to this "Westphalia formula" (named after the city where it was articulated in 1555), each ruler had the right to determine the religion of his own territory. So parts of what would become Germany (established in 1871) became officially Lutheran, Switzerland was Calvinist, and so on.

Political implications aside, what this period again highlighted to scholars was the human element in scriptural interpretation. The existence of multiple and conflicting interpretations of a single scripture prompted scholars to examine the very process of interpretation and, more specifically, how people reason. The need to demonstrate rules of careful reasoning became a serious responsibility. This examination of how people reason, in fact, became a preeminent concern of modern philosophers. They wanted to identify how reason worked and under what conditions it could be trusted.

Another major concern of modern philosophy was political theory. Under the premodern system, people's responsibility was to obey the *clerks* of the realm, who were often the *clergy* (the two terms are related). Obedience was owed because the leader was under divine sanction. In the modern age, by contrast, sovereignty ultimately resides in the people (the meaning of "democracy"). Everyone is endowed with dignity, freedom, and the wits to order their own lives under normal circumstances. Since their efforts are most effective when used cooperatively, modern philosophers developed the idea of a "social contract" whereby people agreed to give up some of their personal autonomy to a government that rules in accordance with the collective will of the people. Even so, it is considered "self-evident" – as the United States Declaration of Independence put it – that people have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." However, religious authorities had denied some of these rights and had legitimated governments that denied them. (In fact, the Roman Catholic Church was opposed to democracy until the 1920s.) So Europe's modern political thinkers based their revolutionary thoughts on what they believed was valid human reason – rather than on religious authority. This is the source of the separation of religious authority from political authority.

This heightened confidence in reason, in turn, contributed to the development of Religious Studies, particularly when combined with data flowing in from Europe's global explorations in the 15th and 16th centuries. Until then, most attention paid by European Christian scholars to religions other than their own had been in efforts to demonstrate the superiority of their own religions. The paradigm of this genre was Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*, written in the mid-13th century to refute "the errors of the infidels" – Jews and Muslims, in particular. In the modern era, philosophical analyses of religion included critiques based on nontheological criteria and the development of new approaches that made room for nonrational experience. Examples are given below.

## Philosophy and the Study of Religion

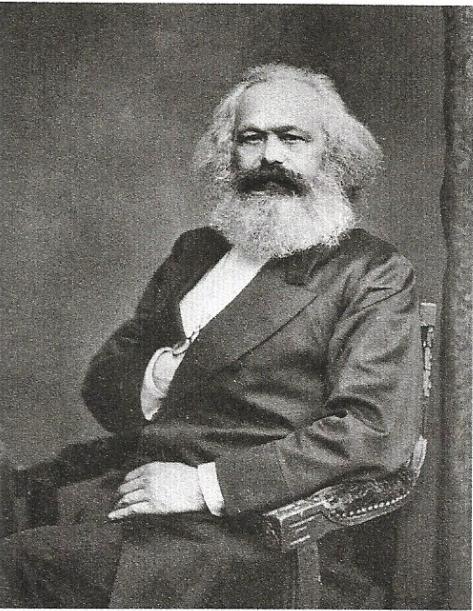
Modern philosophy reflected an abiding confidence in humans' ability to reason, provided the reasoning in question is carried out properly. Therefore, modern philosophers tried to identify just what constituted reliable reasoning. One of the key figures in this project was Immanuel Kant (d. 1804). Kant struggled with the conclusions drawn by another famous modern philosopher, David Hume (d. 1776), who stressed the importance of sense perceptions as the basis of knowledge (and wrote a great deal on religion, giving rational explanations for its existence and many religious beliefs). Hume was so committed to grounding knowledge in sense perception that he denied the objective reality of notions such as cause and effect. He said we cannot observe cause and effect; we can observe only that something routinely

happens after something else – such as a billiard ball moving after it is hit with another ball. We say that the movement is “caused” by hitting the ball, but we cannot see the transfer of anything. Kant rejected Hume’s radical skepticism. He argued instead that there are things that we know without having to observe them. For instance, we know that a square has four sides and that material things have dimensions. We know such things a priori, meaning that we know them without having to observe them. He included causality – the idea that all effects have causes – among our a priori concepts.

However, Kant continued, we must recognize that this kind of a priori reasoning resides in the reasoner, not in the thing being observed. The “thing being observed” is usually called the “thing in itself” (*Ding an sich*, in Kant’s German). In philosophical language, it is called the **noumenon** (pl. noumena). And Kant said we cannot expect to know it. All we can know, according to Kant, is the thing as it appears to us. He called this – the thing as it appears to us – the **phenomenon** (pl. phenomena). Our impressions consist of the things we observe as they are interpreted through our a priori categories of understanding – such as causality. We can then manipulate these impressions. We can analyze them – reduce them to their components. And we can synthesize them – put them together with other impressions. Either way, we must be very careful to follow rules of logic if we want our efforts to result in valid claims.

## Karl Marx (d. 1883)

The negative effects of the modern Industrial Revolution on working people dominated 19th-century German philosopher Karl Marx’s (Figure 2.3) analysis of religion. He condemned capitalism as the root cause of workers’ exploitation by the moneyed classes, and religion as the source of people’s passivity in the face of their own exploitation. Marx was not alone in his fierce criticism of religion – especially the Christianity dominant in industrial Europe. His slightly younger contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900) gained notoriety for postulating that “God is dead.” However, Nietzsche’s work was so idiosyncratic and unsystematic that it had little lasting impact on Religious Studies. The influence of Marx, on the other hand, is still strong in analyses of contemporary life and religion.

A black and white portrait of Karl Marx. He is an elderly man with a very full, bushy white beard and mustache. He has receding hair and is wearing a dark, high-collared coat over a white shirt. He is seated in a chair, looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression. His arms are crossed on the back of the chair.

To understand why Marx had such a negative view of Christianity, we need to understand what life was like in 19th-century Europe and North America. The Industrial Revolution was changing society in unprecedented ways. People were moving from rural areas, where they had done farming and craft work, into big cities, where they worked in factories and lived in cramped apartments or row houses. In 1800, 20% of Europe’s population lived in cities, but by 1851, that figure had nearly doubled.

The workweek was six days, and the workday 10–12 hours. There were no minimum wage laws and no government rules about safety. Accidents were common, and hundreds of workers died each year. Factory

**FIGURE 2.3** Karl Marx. John Jabez Edwin Mayall/Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

owners could run their factories as they pleased, to make maximum profits. Children as young as five worked in the textile mills: mines could legally employ ten-year-olds. Factory smokestacks belched tons of filthy smoke, without restrictions. For workers who were injured or laid off, there were no benefits to help them get by. And when a worker became too old to work, there were no pensions or social safety nets. In some industries such as mining, factory owners maximized profits by building “company towns,” where they owned all the houses and the stores where workers were forced to buy their food and clothing at high prices. Many workers were in constant debt, so no matter how miserable the job, they could not afford to quit. The lives of factory workers, in short, were little, if any, better than the lives of slaves. They had next to nothing – except their labor, which they sold each day to the factory owner.

Marx knew firsthand what this system was like, because his friend Frederick Engels was the son of a factory owner and together they visited many factories. In his book *Das Kapital* (*Capital*), Marx analyzed the society produced by the new industrial capitalism and compared it with earlier societies.

Capital is something a person owns to make a profit. In ancient and medieval times, before manufacturing, farming was the basic form of production. Food crops and livestock were the basic commodities, so land was the basic form of capital. Those who owned the land had the peasants working on it to produce a profit in the form of crops and livestock. Landowners could also rent out some of their land to make a profit. Most people who did not own land did not have any capital. Peasants had to make do with whatever food and shelter the landowners allowed them.

With this division between rich and poor, life in ancient and medieval societies was hard for the lower classes, Marx says. But medieval life looked almost pleasant compared with the lives of 19th-century factory workers. For one thing, most medieval workers lived in rural areas, where they were surrounded by fresh air and the natural world. In crowded 19th-century cities such as London and New York, people lived in filthy tenements, breathed polluted air, and drank polluted water.

Another difference was that in ancient and medieval times at least the landless poor had craft skills from which they derived satisfaction. Craftspeople such as seamstresses and blacksmiths worked hard, but they could take pride in what they produced. In contrast to the pride people took in craftwork, Marx says, people who work in industrial economies, trading their labor for wages, are “alienated” from their labor. Rather than the satisfaction they might have derived from the process of making a unique product from beginning to end, workers in the capitalist system receive only wages. One worker’s wages are distinguishable from others’ wages only in amount. So laborers cease to derive a sense of identity from their work and begin to identify with their wages and what they can acquire with them. They relinquish a sense of being someone who does something in particular and make do with an identity based on what they own. In Marx’s view, this “identity of having” is inherently unsatisfying, since the only way to distinguish oneself is by “having” more than someone else. This sets up a dynamic in which people are in constant competition to own more than their neighbors. Thus, the capitalist system has negative effects on social relations, as well as personal identity. People become, in effect, slaves of the economic system.

Marx believes that religion is an integral part of industrial capitalism’s ability to control societies. He says that religion keeps the oppressed workers cooperative and submissive, willing to spend six days a week at mind-numbing, physically exhausting

toil. Religion – and he meant specifically Christianity – does this by convincing people that we serve God by doing our daily work and obeying those in authority – the mayor, the bishop, and the foreman at the factory. Our work is hard, but our earthly lives will be over soon. If we have been submissive and obedient, we shall be rewarded in the afterlife, where all our needs will be fulfilled. “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him” (I Corinthians 2:9).

Without religion, Marx thinks, factory workers would confront the misery of their lives and do something to change it. They might well revolt against the oppressive factory owners. However, Marx says, religion dulls their sense of suffering as they focus on the life to come. In short, religion works like a strong painkilling drug. It is the “opiate of the masses.”

If we look back through history, Marx observes, religion has always taken the side of the rich owners of capital against the poor workers. Marx calls the owners of capital the *bourgeoisie* and the workers the *proletariat*. The Hebrew Bible not only permitted slavery but regulated it, as did Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But again, Christianity was his primary target. Christianity that taught, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ” (Ephesians 6:5–9) and “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves” (Romans 13:1–2). Marx concludes:

The social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of Antiquity, glorified the serfdom of the Middle Ages, and are capable ... of defending the oppression of the proletariat ... The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and oppressed class ... preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submission, and humility ....

The social principles of Christianity declare all the vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either a just punishment for original sin and other sins, or trials which the Lord, in his infinite wisdom, ordains for the redeemed.

Marx’s critique of religion was harsh indeed, but it certainly was taken seriously by the Russian revolutionaries who overthrew the Czar in 1917, and by the revolutionaries who took control of China in 1949. Both tried to eliminate religion from their new Communist states.

## **Edmund Husserl (d. 1938)**

A far different attitude toward religion arose among philosophers who called their work **phenomenology**. One of the most important developments in modern philosophy as it contributed to Religious Studies was one that built on Kant’s distinction between noumena (things as they are in themselves) and phenomena (things as they appear to us), emphasizing the latter.

Edmund Husserl (d. 1938) is usually regarded as the father of phenomenology. Rather than limit philosophy to things that are objectively verifiable, as many modern philosophers did, Husserl believed that philosophy should also concern itself with subjective

things – those things that are functions of human consciousness. Emotions and memory and intention are all considered subjective phenomena and worthy of study.

But how can subjective phenomena be studied systematically? Husserl proposed a new method: **bracketing**. When we study phenomena, he said, we pay careful attention to what appears to us or is described to us, but we should not ask whether it is real or true beyond our experience of it. We put such questions “in brackets,” ignoring them for the purposes of our study.

This method of carefully describing how things appear and not asking what is objectively true has become a dominant method in Religious Studies – so much so that phenomenology of religion has become a special branch of phenomenology.

## Rudolf Otto (d. 1937)

Early representatives of the phenomenology of religion focused on identifying phenomena associated with religious experience. Rudolf Otto went beyond describing to asserting that religious experience has a unique essence.

Otto was deeply influenced by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834). Schleiermacher described the source of religion as a powerful feeling of dependence people have on something infinitely greater than themselves. Worship is their response to this feeling. It is the acknowledgment that everything they are comes from the divine. In his groundbreaking 1917 work, *The Holy: On the Irrational in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, Otto describes the source of religion as an encounter with “the Holy.”

The Holy is something we feel rather than something we understand. Our experience of the Holy, he says, is a “non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self.” To analyze the experience of the Holy, he describes what it feels like. He invents a new term for the object of this experience. He calls it the **numinous**, and analyzes the numinous as something that, when experienced, evokes feelings of frightening and fascinating mystery. His Latin phrase is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

Religious experience, Otto says, is negative and positive at the same time. There is awe and fear in it, but also attraction and fascination. It is beyond the experience called sublime, the sense of awe and wonder that one might feel when viewing a huge waterfall or a stunning work of architecture. Experiencing the Holy makes one feel utterly insignificant in the face of the Infinite, as when Abraham addresses God with the words, “Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27).

Otto calls this sense of utter dependence “creature consciousness.” “It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (Otto 1958, 8–11). There are phenomenologists who do not concern themselves with whether or not the “religious experience” is caused by some transcendent reality, but Otto was convinced that religion is the human response to encounters with the ultimate reality, the Divine.

Note here the focus is not on one religious tradition, as in traditional theology, nor on religion in general, as in Marx’s analysis, but on the phenomenon of religious experience. Phenomenologists tend to use terms such as the Holy, the Sacred, Ultimate Reality, and the Divine rather than God. Otto says the Holy is not “the ‘philosophic’ God of mere rational speculation, who can be put into a definition.”

Rather the source of *mysterium tremendum* is a force “which is urgent, active, compelling, and alive” (Otto 1958, 24). It is common to all religious experience, around the world, and only to religious experience. This is why Otto is called an essentialist.

## Mircea Eliade (d. 1986)

Perhaps the most influential essentialist of the 20th century was Mircea Eliade (Figure 2.4). As founder of the journal *History of Religions* (1961), editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987), and a professor at the University of Chicago, he mentored dozens of scholars and his work remains seminal in the phenomenology of religion.

Eliade was hostile to **reductionism** – explanations of religion that treat it as reducible to, and so nothing more than, social, psychological, or economic phenomena. Instead, he insisted that religion is a distinct and unique phenomenon (*sui generis*). For him, religious experience reflects not merely the psychological and social dimensions of life, but another dimension – the sacred – to which he believed all people aspire. Any reductionist explanation of religion, Eliade said, “is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred” (Eliade 1963, xiii).

Eliade’s method was historical. His primary interest was in older, nature-based religions, the kind that is often called “archaic.” He thought that these ancient traditions show the essence of religion that lies deep within all traditions. Unlike the historically based traditions of Western monotheism, which identify manifestations of the sacred in specific times and places, archaic religions treat the sacred as in a special realm outside of history.

In *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957), Eliade says that the sacred and the profane are different planes of existence. The profane is our ordinary world of physical objects in space and time. The sacred lies outside of ordinary time and space; it is eternal and transcends the ordinary world described by history and science.

People think about the sacred mostly in their myths – which Eliade describes as stories of events occurring in a special time not recorded by clocks and calendars. The aboriginal peoples of Australia call it “Dream Time.” Renowned astrophysicist Carl Sagan (d. 1996), quoting 4th-century philosopher Sallust, calls myths “things which never happened but always are” (Sagan 1977, 8).



FIGURE 2.4 Mircea Eliade postage stamp. Post of Moldova/Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

Religious myths help people make sense of their lives and deal with life's problems. People connect themselves with myths by attending to *hierophanies* – manifestations of the sacred in our world – and they perform rituals to reenact sacred events. However, for Eliade, rituals do not just imitate sacred events; they are not merely symbolic of events that were important in the past. Rituals allow people to transcend the ordinary world to actually participate in these sacred events themselves over and over, according to Eliade.

As Eliade studied hundreds of myths in the world's religions, he identified a number of patterns. Fertility and growth are important to people around the world, for example, and many cultures tell of a great cosmic tree from which things grew. Some archaic religions venerate an actual tree as the great cosmic tree and say that it is the center of the universe.

Another myth found in many cultures is the story of how the human race started out in a paradise but then "fell" from that ideal state into the world we see today. A major motivation in religion, Eliade said, is to return to that original golden age, and so many religions have savior figures who rescue human beings from their fallen state and bring them to paradise. Again, in Eliade's view, these stories reflect awareness of the dual planes of existence, and the human urge to transcend the profane and live in the presence of the sacred. Even in the "historical" traditions, Eliade says, there is a sense of sacred time in rituals such as the Passover Seder, which reenacts the Hebrew people's escape from enslavement in Egypt; the Christian Eucharist, which recalls Jesus' death on the cross in payment for human sinfulness; and Eid al-Adha, the Islamic festival commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son when God told him to.

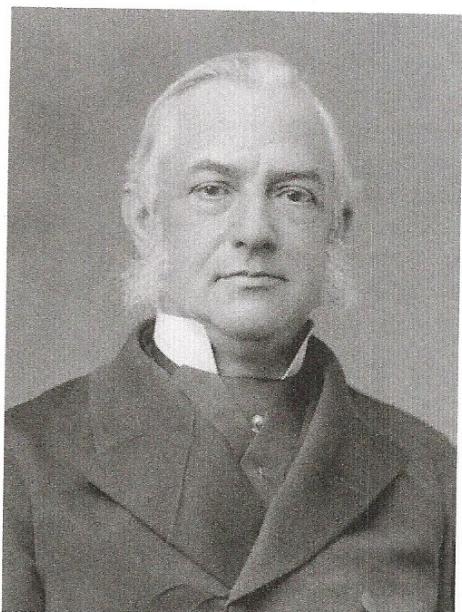
According to Eliade, religious myths and symbols reflect the deepest concerns of human beings, and so the sacred is the most important dimension of human life. If we adopt the ordinary attitudes of Western culture since the Enlightenment, we may think of science and history as telling us the way things "really are." But actually, Eliade says, the sacred is more real than everyday things and events. In order to appreciate the sacred, we have to go beyond our ordinary thinking, especially its linear sense of time and its commitment to logic. Religious thought works with symbols, metaphors, and imagination, not with rational assertions. It is more like aesthetic experience, the thinking in poetry, music, and painting, than the thinking in science or engineering.

People living with modern technology in big cities have largely lost a sense of the Sacred, Eliade thinks, even if they say they are religious. They are hungry for the deep meaningfulness that the sacred confers in life, especially the shared emotions with their fellows that religious rituals evoke. And almost as if he were prescribing a cure for the modern sense of alienation, he insists that people will never find satisfaction without it. This is because he believes that all people, by nature, seek the sacred. As he put it, humans are naturally "religious" – *homo religiosus*.

## Oriental Studies and Religion

### **Max Müller (d. 1900)**

Another traditional field impacted by modernity was Oriental Studies. Spurred largely by the desire to access scientific and mathematical knowledge, chairs had been established for the study of Arabic, Aramaic, Greek, and Hebrew at universities in Avignon, Paris, Bologna, and Oxford in the 14th century. These were the earliest



**FIGURE 2.5** Max Müller. Alexander Bassano/  
Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

university programs in “Oriental Studies.” However, the field expanded to include other languages and cultures, including religions, during the 17th and 18th centuries. Among the most significant of the early Orientalists to deal with religion was Max Müller (Figure 2.5), mentioned in Chapter 1. He is best known for identifying Religious Studies as a field of specialization on its own. He named it *Religionswissenschaft* – the Science of Religion.

A specialist in Sanskrit, a language of ancient Vedic (later called Hindu) scripture, Müller left his native Germany to work in England. Britain controlled India at the time, and its agents had collected hundreds of Sanskrit texts. Müller translated and published many of them as a 50-volume set he called *Sacred Books of the East*. At the University of Oxford, he became a Professor of Comparative Philology (the study of languages and literature), and then Oxford’s first Professor of Comparative Theology.

Müller wanted his observations of Indian traditions to be well informed and rational, as objective as any other scientific study. He wanted scholars to put aside whatever religious commitments they might have had,

and study other people’s traditions as well-informed, rational observers. This kind of objectivity is what Müller hoped to achieve in the “Science of Religion.”

In pursuing this ideal of a Science of Religion, Müller was inspired by the new science of language, Linguistics. Linguists study many languages, comparing and contrasting them, and looking for general patterns. This is how scholars should approach the world’s religions, according to Müller. Another promising similarity is that linguists treat all languages as valid and interesting. Müller thought scholars should take this same attitude toward the world’s religions. Just as any language gives a group of people a set of concepts with which they make sense of their lives, so too does any religion. “The Science of Language has taught us that there is order and wisdom in all languages,” Müller said, and he hoped that the Science of Religion would search for order and wisdom in all religions (Müller 1869, Vol. 1, 21).

The comparative method, which is essential to Linguistics, became essential to Müller’s study of religion, too. As we saw in Chapter 1, he insisted that with both languages and religions, “He who knows one know none.” The person who simply speaks a language or practices a religion does not have what is necessary to understand the general phenomenon of language or the general phenomenon of religion.

Müller’s own study of Sanskrit and Indian traditions was a model for the scientific approach he preached. Similarities between Sanskrit words and words in Latin, ancient Greek, and modern languages led him to conclude that there are similarities between various religions. The Sanskrit word for god, *deva*, is related to the English word *divine*. In the Rig Veda (one of the four “Vedas,” the oldest of India’s sacred texts), there is the father god Dyaus Pitar. His name is related to Zeus Pater, the father god in ancient Greece, and to Jupiter, the father god in ancient Rome. Müller spent decades studying the Vedas, in part to find the origin of the gods of Greece, Rome, and Europe, and the roots of religion in general.

While Müller's attempts at objectivity were noble first tries, it is not surprising that, as a pioneer of this approach, he did not have a perfect score. In several of his writings, the influence of his Christian upbringing is obvious. For instance, Müller defined religion as "a mental faculty ... which ... enables man to apprehend the Infinite." This works well for Müller's own Christianity, but not for Buddhism or for many other traditions. Müller's grounding in Christianity is also evident in his comment that

The Science of Religion will for the first time assign to Christianity its right place among the religions of the world; ... it will restore to the whole history of the world, in its unconscious progress toward Christianity, its true nature and sacred character.

A few pages later, Müller says, "Every religion, even the most imperfect and degraded, has something that ought to be sacred to us, for there is in all religions a secret yearning after the true, though unknown, God" (Müller 1869, Vol. 1, 30).

Whatever biases Max Müller may have had (and in view of such biases, the term "orientalism" took on a negative connotation), his contribution to Religious Studies was enormous, establishing the academic study of religion as a science separate from Theology, Philosophy, and Oriental Studies, and laying the groundwork for the comparative study of religion.

## Anthropology and Religion

Some of the same dynamics that gave rise to Religious Studies in the modern era also influenced the development of new academic disciplines. Within the traditional humanities (the disciplines studying humanity), anthropology emerged as a discipline focused specifically on new ethnological (the study of specific peoples) data. Among the common phenomena Europeans observed as they explored the "new worlds" (which, of course, were not new to the peoples who lived there) was what appeared to be religious activity. Many early contributions to Religious Studies came from this new field of study.

### Edward Burnett Tylor (d. 1917)

One of the first people to study religions scientifically was also one of the first anthropologists, Edward Tylor (Figure 2.6). Tylor held the first chair in anthropology at the University of Oxford. His best-known book is *Primitive Culture* (Tylor 2009). Today we do not call oral cultures "primitive," given its negative connotation. In Tylor's perspective, "primitive" meant "early" or "uncomplicated."

When Tylor's book came out in 1871, most European scholars saw Europeans as advanced far beyond the other cultures. This is how they justified their colonizing of Africa, Australia, Asia, and the Americas. Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had only recently been published and was becoming popular among intellectuals. Tylor applied its theory of evolution – the idea that more complex forms of life develop from simpler ones – to cultures. Tylor thought that cultures could be ranked, based on how far they had "evolved": Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian, and upwards toward his own culture.

Another evolutionary idea of Tylor was that, as cultures developed into more advanced forms, they sometimes preserved older tools, language, customs, and beliefs.



**FIGURE 2.6** Edward Burnett Tylor. Unknown author/Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

He called these old things that had been preserved in modern culture “survivals.” For example, when someone sneezes today, we say, “God bless you.” This is a “survival” from centuries ago, when people believed that the soul escapes the body when one sneezes. “God bless you” is a kind of prayer that God will put your soul back into your body quickly.

Today this belief is outdated and considered quaint, but some beliefs that have survived from early human cultures are still taken seriously, particularly in what Tylor called **animism**. For Tylor, animism was the first “general philosophy of man and nature,” and religions all over the world were based on it.

Animism is seeing everything that moves as having an *anima*, a soul or spirit that animates it. (The words *animate* and *animal* are built on *anima*.) Animals have *animae* (plural of *anima*), and so do trees, rivers, volcanoes, and anything else that moves. Some cultures even attribute *animae* to things such as tools.

Tylor had an evolutionary explanation for animism.

He said that it developed in stages. Early humans observed that the difference between a living person and a dead person is that a living person breathes. So our distant ancestors thought that it was breath that made people be alive, Tylor said. This is why in many languages the word for “soul” is the word for “air” or “breath.” The English word “spirit” is from the Greek *spiré*, which means “breath.” The biblical words for “soul” are the Hebrew *nefesh* and *ruah*, and the Greek *spiré* and *pneuma*; and the Qur’anic terms are the Arabic *nafs* and *ruh* – which are all words for “breath” or “air.” So for Tylor, the first stage of animism was to think of the anima, the soul or spirit, as something that makes a person be alive.

People who thought this way, Tylor said, naturally thought of death as the departure of the anima, the soul or spirit, from the body. But that was not the end of it. Once free of the body, our ancestors thought, the soul or spirit continued on its own. This is the second stage of animistic thinking: the soul is what leaves the body at death and goes on by itself.

The third stage of animism, according to Tylor, was to think of the anima, the soul or spirit, as what appears to us when we dream about a dead person, or have a vision of a dead person. After a loved one dies, we do not erase them from our memories, of course. It is common to dream about someone who has died or even sense the presence of that person while we are awake. An important public person such as a religious leader might even appear to many people at the same time in different places. If a person’s dying is their soul leaving their body, then it is natural to think that what appears to us in our dreams of dead people, and in their apparitions to us, is their soul, which has left their body. This soul, their anima, now free of the body, has become a phantom or a ghost – a person without its old physical body.

A dream or apparition is obviously not as solid or stable as the living person was, so the phantom is thought of as made of a very lightweight, translucent kind of matter, like a mist that can hold a shape. Tylor described it as “a thin, unsubstantial human image … a sort of vapour, film, or shadow.” Like a living person, it takes up space, has a shape, and moves, but it weighs almost nothing and it can pass through walls and doors, and travel across great distances in an instant.

Tylor says that the idea of the anima applied not only to people. If human beings have souls that make them be alive, primitive people thought, then animals have souls that make them be alive, too. Similarly, if having a soul means being alive, and being alive is characterized by the ability to move, then the movement of trees blowing in the wind, rivers, volcanoes, and anything else that moves may be attributed to their having souls. Indeed, Aristotle thought that even the stars were moved by souls.

The next stage was to think of souls that had never been in bodies. These "pure" souls are gods, angels, and demons (disembodied souls that have evil tendencies). Having the "spirit of God" move you is having an outside anima take control of your body. The same is true of being possessed by a demon, an idea found in a number of the world's religious traditions. Tylor said that the development of religious thought was largely the development of animism. In the beginning, each god, each disembodied anima, was local. It was associated with a particular thing or place – this river, or that village. But then people developed the idea of gods with wider domains. Ceres became the goddess of cereal grain – not just the grains in Rome, but all grains everywhere. Poseidon became the god of all the seas, not just the ones around Greece.

The anima, soul, or spirit is essential to ideas about life after death. In the monotheistic traditions, there are two main ways of looking at death. The older one is that death destroys people for a while, but at the end of the world people will be brought to life again; God will give them life (or breath) again. They will be "resurrected." After the notion that human beings are a material component animated by a spirit or soul (dualism) began to influence Christianity, Christians tended to identify themselves with their souls. Then they thought of death in a different way – that their souls survive death and wait somewhere until the Last Day. Some monotheists believe that their souls will be with God right after death and later will be rejoined with their bodies; for others, souls remain in the grave until the Last Day. Then they will be rejoined with their bodies, their lives will be judged, and they will be consigned either to happiness in heaven or punishment in hell.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, and in many traditions of Asia and Africa, a common belief about death is that the anima leaves the body and then animates a different body on earth. As we saw in Chapter 1, this is called reincarnation. Some believe that the souls of relatives must be revered lest they become troublesome ghosts.

According to Tylor, all these ideas of life after death are based on thinking of the soul as what makes a person be alive and as what survives death. Ideas of gods, angels, and demons are also based on that way of thinking, so believing in animae is the basis of all religions. This allows Tylor to present a simple theory of religion. Religion, he says, is "the belief in spiritual beings."

Tylor maintains that the most advanced religions are monotheistic, because they have just one God as the creator and controller of everything. Apparently uninfluenced by theories of evolution in this regard, he figured that the simplest religious structure, rather than the most complex, is the most advanced. On the other hand, he did think that religion was evolving. And since animism was "primitive" – an idea that began in the "childhood of the human race" – it should now be discarded. As science has developed, he thought, explanations involving souls, spirits, phantoms, and ghosts have all but disappeared in educated people's discussions.

It should be noted here that Tylor assumes that religion is a universal phenomenon. He was brought up in a culture that distinguished between religion and other aspects of life, and he assumed that all cultures make the same distinction. Further, since religion in his culture was associated with belief in God and the soul, he looks in other

cultures for belief in “spiritual beings” in order to understand what he assumes is their religion. We shall see other scholars who make similar assumptions, and also that these assumptions are questioned by contemporary scholars of religion.

## James Frazer (d. 1941)

The most famous student of Edward Tylor was James Frazer. In 1890 Frazer published what would become one of the first classics of Religious Studies, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Over the next 25 years, he expanded *The Golden Bough* to 12 volumes, in an exploration of the myths, cults, and rituals of many cultures.

Like Tylor and others, Frazer saw human cultures as evolving through stages. As we noted, in their view their own cultures were the most advanced and, by comparison, others were at earlier stages of development. For many such thinkers, it was Christianity that marked European culture as the most advanced. They saw monotheism – or at least Christianity – as the most highly developed stage of religious thinking. Communities with multiple gods were primitive, and their beliefs and rituals were based not on reason but only on superstitions. They represented an early stage of human development. They were examples of **magic**.

At the heart of magical thinking, Frazer says, is the belief that certain actions guarantee certain results. This idea is found not just in magic, of course, but in science and human thinking generally. What distinguishes magic is that its formulae for which actions will cause which results do not reflect empirically verifiable and readily duplicated patterns of cause and effect. Instead, they are based only on associations between ideas of A and B.

In magical thinking, if the idea of A is associated with the idea of B, then A and B are related in the real world. And so one can manipulate A to have an effect on B. One way that A and B might be associated is that A is a part of B. If someone wants to hurt you and has something that belongs to you or even looks like you, they might do something to that item as a way of doing something to you. Some scholars believe that prehistoric cave drawings served in this way. Perhaps people tried to influence the animals they hunted by appealing to the pictures of the animals. This kind of magic is often called “sympathetic magic.”

However, magic is not entirely predictable. It does not always work, and this became problematic for ancient peoples, says Frazer. In his view, it was the realization of the fallibility of magic that led to the development of a more advanced kind of thinking – religion.

For Frazer, religion involved appealing to supernatural powers to influence those things over which we have no direct control. As Daniel Pals explains,

Instead of magical laws of contact and imitation, religious people claim that the real powers behind the natural world are not principles at all; they are personalities – the supernatural beings we call the gods. Accordingly, when truly religious people want to control or change the course of nature, they do not normally use magical spells but rather prayers and pleadings addressed to their favorite god or goddess. Just as if they were dealing with another human person, they ask favors, plead for help, call down revenge, and make vows of love, loyalty, or obedience. (Pals 2006, 38)

Frazer’s analysis of Christianity provides a good example of the evolution from magic to religion. One of the many similarities he found between ancient magical rites and Christian practices concerned what he called the Corn King. He believed that some early agrarian cultures developed elaborate rituals to ensure that their grain

## Cargo Cults and Magic

Cargo cults are the classic example used by scholars of the associative kind of reasoning in magic. "Cargo cults" is the generic name for a phenomenon that developed in the South Pacific following the arrival of Japanese and then Allied forces in World War II. Both groups had introduced kinds of equipment and quantities of supplies previously unimaginable to the islanders. The local people witnessed the periodic arrival of food, medicines, weapons, and other supplies via ships and airplanes. It appeared that these shipments occurred following certain actions by the soldiers: speaking into an electronic device, writing numbers on sheets of paper, and marching with rifles on an airstrip, for example. After the war and the evacuation of the soldiers, the supplies no longer arrived. Some of the islanders reasoned that the deliveries had stopped because no one was doing the things the soldiers used to do. Some islanders attempted to restart the deliveries by imitating the actions of the soldiers. Researchers observed them fashioning models of radio communication devices and airplanes, shuffling papers on models of desks, and marching up and down runways with rifles just as the soldiers had done before supplies were delivered. It appeared to them that these actions had pleased the gods, who in response delivered the supplies from the sky or the sea. Surely, they would respond again provided the actions were performed properly.



**FIGURE 2.7** Cargo cult on Tanna Island in Vanuatu, South Pacific Ocean. The men carry long lengths of bamboo stained at the ends, to mimic rifles, and with "USA" painted in red on their chests and backs. Paul Raffaele/Shutterstock.

crops would come back each spring. He describes their choosing a man to personify the crop for one year. He calls this person the “Corn King” (“corn” here meaning any grain). The Corn King was identified with the crop, and so he was treated very well through the growing season. But in the fall, when it came time to break up the dried stalks and scatter the seeds, the Corn King was killed and his body was chopped up and scattered across the fields. This ritual was believed to insure that the seeds would sprout and come up in the spring.

Frazer found “survivals” (to use Tylor’s term) of the ancient beliefs in Christian teachings. In the Gospels Jesus uses the image of the grain dying and then bringing forth new life: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). And New Testament writer Paul uses the image of grain dying and coming back to life to explain how humans would be resurrected (I Corinthians 15). Frazer also suggests that the idea of Jesus being crucified for the good of the human race evolved from the ancient Corn King ritual.

Frazer’s general conclusion is that Christianity superseded ancient magical practices, replacing unpredictable magical thinking with religious belief in a God who controlled

## Frazer and the Evolution of Christian Beliefs

Frazer believed there were many similarities between ancient myths and Christianity. The ancient Greeks and Romans, for example, worshipped a vegetation god, Attis, and his mother, Cybelé, who, some accounts say, was a virgin. In Greece and Rome, Cybelé was called “Mother of the Gods.” Christianity taught that, since Mary was the mother of Jesus, and Jesus was God, Mary was the Mother of God. So it made sense that when Christians built a church on the site of the old temple of Cybelé, “Mother of the Gods,” they dedicated it to Mary, the “Mother of God.”

The death and resurrection of Attis were celebrated in early spring. Frazer describes a ritual in which worshippers of Attis mourn his death, but then

the sorrow of the worshippers was turned to joy. For suddenly a light shone in the darkness: the tomb was opened: the god had risen from the dead. ... The resurrection of the god was hailed by his disciples as a promise that they too would issue triumphant from the corruption of the grave.

To Frazer, this sounds like Easter. Frazer also sees similarities between Christmas and ancient rituals celebrating the Birth of the Sun around December 21, when after six months of the days getting shorter, they finally start to get longer.

Thus it appears that the Christian Church chose to celebrate the birthday of its Founder on the twenty-fifth of December in order to transfer the devotion of the heathen from the Sun to him who was called the Sun of Righteousness. (Frazer 2009, 370)

human destiny. However, rather than jettisoning all previous practices, Christians “compromised,” and transformed the earlier practices to fit the new thinking.

While Christianity and other religions were an improvement on magic, Frazer thought, the outcome of religious rituals is not always predictable either. When they pray to gods, religious people realize that their requests are not always granted. However, religious people have a number of explanations for these instances. Maybe they have not made the proper offering required by the god. Perhaps they displeased the god earlier and have not yet made amends. The list of possible reasons for not having your prayers answered is a long one, and so, Frazer says, the religious person does not expect automatic results.

Frazer said that religion was therefore an improvement over magic. When they do not get the results they seek, religious people can explain why, as believers in magic cannot. However, Frazer thought, religion has problems of its own because it presumes that God or the gods interfere in nature. That calls into question the idea that there are fixed patterns in nature such as the laws of physics and laws of chemistry. For example, someone afflicted with a terminal disease who believes they can be cured as a result of prayer must believe the laws of science are flexible.

According to Frazer, recognizing this problematic aspect of religion prompted some “acuter minds” to move on from religion to a still more advanced way of thinking – science. Like magic, science posits correlations between events, but through observation and experimentation, science arrives at correlations that are consistent and readily duplicated, while magic does not. Both magic and science are attempts to deal with the world, then, but science is more reliable.

The view of religion as a step in the evolution of human efforts to gain control over their environments is rejected by those who view religion as a central feature of human culture. Twentieth-century anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas are among them.

## **Clifford Geertz (d. 2006)**

First published in 1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is a classic of Religious Studies. Geertz compares a culture to a work of art. It means something to people, and scholars’ task is to interpret this meaning. We need to go beyond simply describing what people do in religious rituals, for example, to what he calls “thick description.” Geertz did not invent “thick description” (he borrowed it from philosopher Gilbert Ryle), but his application of it to anthropology and Religious Studies has established it as a dominant method in these disciplines. A thick description involves being as thorough and specific as possible in one’s descriptions, including not just what one observes but explanations from those being observed regarding their actions and motivations.

Geertz is also known for his insistence that religions are at the heart of culture. He defines culture as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973, 89). Cultures are systems of symbols by which people make sense of their lives. Other animals are born with instincts to do most of the things they will need to do in life, but humans are born utterly helpless, have only a few instincts, and must learn all the skills they will need to survive. This is what culture provides for people and, according to Geertz, religion is central to it.

Geertz describes religion as a system of symbols that provides a worldview, a picture of “a general order of existence.” Symbols are anything that stands for something else; they can be words, pictures, rituals, statues, songs, etc. The worldview created by religious symbols is both descriptive and prescriptive or normative. It describes both the way the world is, and the way the world should be.

Through their worldviews, religions produce “moods and motivations” in people, prompting them to think, feel, and act in certain ways. Many of these motivations are moral virtues, such as courage, compassion, and generosity. Geertz gives the example of the puberty rites of the Native Americans known as the Plains Indians. To become a man, a boy must go on a “vision quest” that requires “endurance, courage, independence, perseverance, and passionate willfulness” – exactly the traits that he will need to get through life. The vision quest is a mini-rehearsal for his life as a man.

Geertz presents detailed discussions of how religious rituals create worldviews that produce moods and motivations. One involves a ritual on the island of Bali, Indonesia. This ritual depicts a wild struggle between two mythical figures. The first is Rangda the witch (Figure 2.8), a vicious hag who snatches babies from their mothers and causes strife wherever she goes. Rangda represents all the evil that happens to the people of Bali. Geertz describes the person playing Rangda in the ritual:

Her eyes bulge from her forehead like swollen boils. Her teeth become tusks curving up over her cheeks and fangs protruding down over her chin. Her yellowed hair falls down around her in a matted tangle .... Her long red tongue is a stream of fire. And as she dances she splays her dead-white hands, from which protrude ten-inch claw-like fingernails, out in front of her and utters unnerving shrieks of metallic laughter. (Geertz 1973, 114)



**FIGURE 2.8** Rangda the Witch, mask, Bali. Yves Picq/Wikimedia Commons/Public domain/CC BY-SA 3.0.

Rangda's opponent is the Barong. He is a monster, too, but a friendly, comical one who helps people. The Barong is a four-legged figure who is played by two men in a horse-like costume and a wooden mask with chattering teeth. Geertz describes him as a "cross between a clumsy bear, a silly puppy, and a strutting Chinese dragon."

The ritual begins with Rangda threatening the village. Men with short swords come together to attack her, but she casts a spell over them. Then the Barong comes to the rescue, engaging Rangda in fierce combat. Sometimes he subdues her, sometimes she gets the better of him, but neither wins for very long.

The lesson in this ritual is that life is full of danger and struggle, and we have to cooperate if we are going to survive. However, life is not an epic struggle calling just for seriousness. As the ritual shows, there is considerable room for playfulness as well. Geertz says that the Barong embodies "the Balinese version of the comic spirit – a distinctive combination of playfulness, exhibitionism, and extravagant love of elegance, which, along with fear, is perhaps the dominant motive in their life."

Geertz benefited enormously from late 19th- and early 20th-century predecessors who developed methods of ethnography (description of peoples and cultures), particularly what is known as "participant observation" (gathering data while living within the communities under study). His emphasis on the centrality of religion to human culture, and the need for careful, multifaceted observation "in the field" are his lasting legacies. His assumption of the modern European approach to ritual and symbol as central to religion will be among those criticized by late 20th-century and early 21st-century scholars.

## Mary Douglas (d. 2007)

British anthropologist Mary Douglas produced another classic of Religious Studies, one dealing with a phenomenon found in many religions: identification of what is pure and what is not. In *Purity and Danger* (1970) she relates notions of purity and impurity to ideas of "clean" and "dirty." The basic idea of "dirty," she says, is that something is out of place.

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or ... clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs .... In short our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. (Douglas 1970, 48)

The opposite of "dirty" is "clean." Cleaning is putting things in order. This means putting things where they "belong." Where things belong can be rather arbitrary, but within any given system (or worldview), things belong in designated places determined by categories. In systems that consider rats to be dangerous vermin, one would not expect to find them in a religious building. However, there are worldviews in which rats are seen as receptacles of the souls of deceased nobles, or indeed as the nobles themselves, waiting to be reborn as humans. People who organize their lives according to such worldviews worship in temples that are sanctuaries for rats, such as Karni Mata in India (Figure 2.9).

Everyone needs to classify things into categories, Douglas points out, in order to know how to act toward them. If we cannot label something as belonging to a class we



**FIGURE 2.9** Rats at Karni Mata, “Rat Temple,” in Rajasthan, India.

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recognize, then we do not know what to do with it, if anything. “It is part of our human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts,” she says. When we experience things that do not fit into our categories, we are puzzled and uncomfortable. We tend to avoid them or even condemn them.

Religions play key roles in establishing people’s categories, says Douglas, to help us organize our world. The Hebrew Bible’s Book of Leviticus, Chapter 11, and Deuteronomy, Chapter 14, for example, list creatures that can be eaten and those to avoid because they are “unclean.” For example:

These are the living things which you may eat among all the beasts that are on the earth. Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals you may eat. Nevertheless among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these: The camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you .... And the swine, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you ....

These you may eat of all that are in the waters. Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers, you may eat. But anything in the seas or the rivers that has not fins and scales ... is an abomination to you ....

Every swarming thing that swarms upon the earth is an abomination: it shall not be eaten. Whatever goes on all fours, or whatever has many feet, all the swarming things that swarm upon the earth, you shall not eat; for they are an abomination.

We can make sense of this classification into clean and unclean animals, Douglas says, if we consider the categories of animals that the ancient Israelites had. The animals with which they were most familiar were the ones they raised – sheep, goats, and cattle. These shared two features: they had split hooves and they chewed the cud. The first passage from Leviticus above makes those two features requirements for

mammals that are to be eaten. If an animal is close enough to sheep, goats, and cattle, in having split hooves and chewing the cud, then we may eat it. But if it lacks either of these essential features, then we should avoid it. The pig, for example, has split hooves but does not chew the cud. It does not fit into our accepted classification system. It is therefore potentially dangerous; it is impure or “unclean.”

Many people today say that monotheistic scriptures forbid the eating of pigs because they can carry diseases such as trichinosis, but there is no hint of this explanation in the Hebrew Bible or the Qur'an (which also forbids the consumption of pork). The real reason, Douglas says, is that the pig is not similar enough to sheep, goats, and cattle, the animals that the nomadic peoples of scripture had always eaten. It was strange, out of place, and so unclean.

The second passage above is about things that live in the sea and in rivers. The paradigm of a water animal presented is a fish. The essential features of a fish are its fins and scales. So the passage above makes fins and scales requirements for water creatures that are to be eaten. A clam, for example, does not have fins or scales, it does not swim, and it does not even have eyes. Lobsters have eyes, but they are like land animals in having legs and walking. They cross categories, combining land animal features with water animal features. They do not fit neatly into either category and so they are rejected as “an abomination.”

The third passage above condemns animals that creep, crawl, or swarm. What is wrong with them, Douglas explains, is that they move in an indeterminate way that does not fit the Bible's description of land animals. A land animal is supposed to have four legs and move by hopping, jumping, or walking. But a snake or a worm has no legs at all and slithers. A centipede has way too many legs that move much too fast to see clearly. A reptile has the right number of legs but it does not walk on them. Instead, like a snake, it slides its body across the land.

Douglas' most influential theory, then, is that the basis of religions' purity rules is systems of categories. These are fundamental concepts, generally presented in religions' worldviews, with which people sort the things they experience, and so make sense of the world.

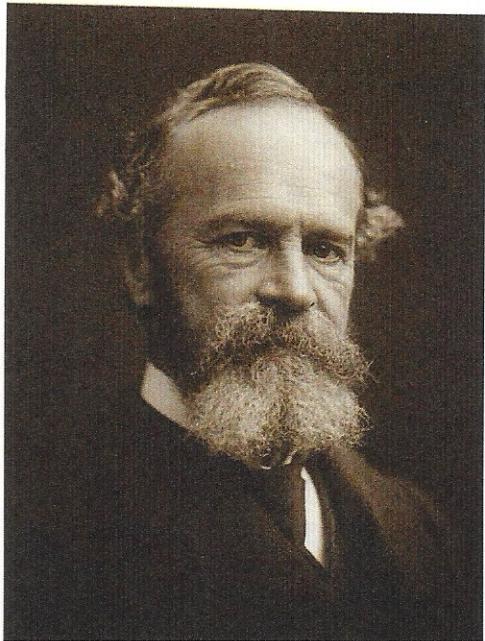
## Psychology of Religion

Anthropology was not the only new field examining religion in the late 1800s. So were psychology and sociology.

### William James (d. 1910)

As a founder of the modern study of psychology, William James (Figure 2.10) devoted much of his work to personal religious experience. Indeed, he defined religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude; so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine” (James 2008, 31).

James believed that scholars should study these intense kinds of religious experience, because they show us extreme forms of normal mental patterns. He even speculated about the experiences of ancient religious figures, those who influenced the development of the religion with which he was most familiar, Christianity.



**FIGURE 2.10** William James. Notman Studios/  
Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

What did the experience of religious revelation feel like to them? When Abraham first heard the call from Yahweh to leave his home and move to a new land, what form might that experience have taken? When Moses experienced God in the Burning Bush, or Job heard the voice of God in the whirlwind, what was that like? By thinking about “the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate,” James said, we can discover something about religion in general.

While he was not concerned with whether or not the divinities people described were real, James said, “If there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch us, the psychological condition of their doing so might be our possession of a subconscious region which alone should yield access to them.” In other words, if there really are higher powers such as God, then communicating with them – or “experiencing” them – might require special mental abilities or attitudes. Perhaps it is possible for people to cultivate those abilities or attitudes.

James was especially interested in **mystical experiences** – the kinds of intense mental or emotional experiences some people report and interpret as having resulted from the experience of the divine. To induce such experiences himself, he took drugs such as chloral hydrate, nitrous oxide, and peyote. He then developed a scientific description of mystical experiences. Mystical experiences, James said, have four features. First, they are “ineffable,” meaning they cannot be described to someone who has not experienced them. Second, they have a “noetic quality”; they are so intense that they make us feel that we are understanding a truth or learning something, perhaps for the first time. Third, mystical states are transient: they come and go rather quickly. Fourth, during a mystical experience, people feel passive: they feel that some external agent is acting upon them. They do not feel that they themselves are creating the experience.

As James explored many kinds of religious experience, he thought that some fostered mental health while others did not. His terms were “the religion of healthy-mindedness” and “the sick soul.” The healthy-minded religious person appreciates “the goodness of life” and is optimistic, while the sick soul is pessimistic. Even when the sick soul seems happy, “something bitter rises up: a touch of nausea, a falling dread of the delight, a whiff of melancholy” (James 2008, 106). (Scholars have observed that this description seems to reflect James’ personal experiences with depression and thoughts of suicide.)

Some sick souls, he said, are converted to healthy-mindedness – he calls such people the “twice-born.” Citing as examples Augustine of Hippo and Leo Tolstoy, James said that the twice-born person reaches a “state of assurance” with “the loss of all the worry, the sense that all is ultimately well, … the peace, the harmony, the *willingness to be*, even though the outer conditions should remain the same” (James 2008, 185).

As a philosopher and psychologist, James eventually developed a general assessment of mystical and other religious experiences. He said that on the whole they

are beneficial. Indeed, they are “amongst the most important biological functions of mankind.” In religious experiences, “the further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely ‘understandable’ world” (James 2008, 373–374).

## Sigmund Freud (d. 1939)

Another founding father of psychology was Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (Figure 2.11), who developed psychoanalysis, the basis for psychiatry. Freud revolutionized our understanding of the human mind, and when he applied his new ideas about the mind to religion, it came out looking far from beneficial. Before Freud, it was generally assumed that people could reliably report on their own beliefs, emotions, and motivations. However, from his studies of people with psychological problems, Freud concluded that the mind is a complex coping device. It is fairly reliable regarding things that do not cause anxiety, practical things like time of day and the weather, for example. Things like this are in what Freud termed the conscious part of the mind. But there are parts of the mind of which we are not conscious, where we store experiences and feelings that are too uncomfortable to confront directly. Feelings resulting from negative experiences with family members in childhood are prime examples for Freud. Because of the anxiety they can cause, they are often suppressed from the conscious mind. But they can remain active, resulting in emotional disturbances and difficulty in forming healthy relationships. Indeed, Freud says, virtually all our psychological problems stem from our early relationships with our parents.

The new techniques of psychotherapy that Freud developed were designed to bring thoughts and feelings out of the unconscious into the conscious mind, where they could be faced and dealt with. One of them was the analysis of patients’ dreams. In our dreams, Freud says, thoughts and feelings that are repressed in waking life are expressed.

This new understanding of psychological problems and of the mind as a coping device influenced Freud’s understanding of religion. He sees religion as arising not from the rational conscious mind but from the unconscious mind. Religious beliefs, he says, are not based on what we have found to be true. They are based on what we would like to be true. Religion is a way for us to cope with problems and get through life. As a coping device, religion works to a certain extent, but it causes major problems of its own, just as the child’s repression of negative feelings for a parent does. Freud’s overall assessment of religion is that it is a kind of neurosis, that is, a mild form of mental illness.

Freud wrote three books on various aspects of religions. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913) he speculates on how religion originated, and in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) Freud presents a new interpretation of the story of Moses in the Bible. His most paradigmatic book on

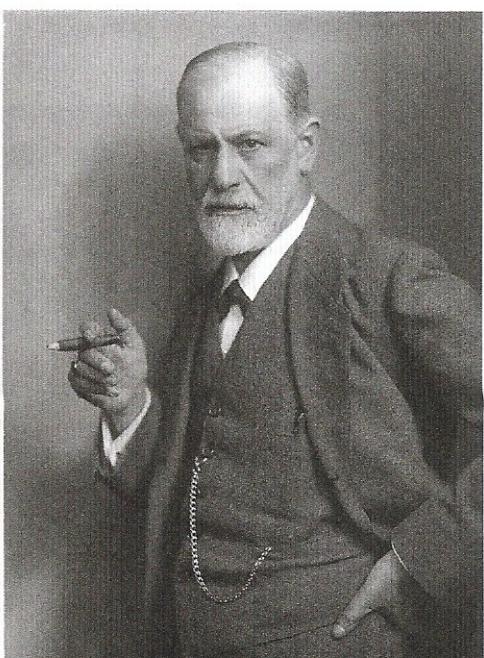


FIGURE 2.11 Sigmund Freud. Max Halberstadt/Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

religion is *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) in which he presents a general assessment of religion in culture.

The basic motive for religious belief and ritual, Freud says, is fear of the dangers in life and a desire to be reassured that everything will be all right. Early humans faced a dangerous and often confusing world every day. The two main sources of their anxiety were other human beings and nature. Early on, people learned to handle social problems by making agreements, setting up rules, and showing consideration for other people. When they wanted something from other people, for example, they would be polite and offer them something in return.

As early humans faced the natural world, Freud said, they carried over their ways of dealing with other human beings. They treated volcanoes, thunder, and rain, for instance, as if they were the actions of gods with whom they could make polite requests, negotiate, and do the other things that worked with people. If they needed rain for their crops, they could sacrifice something to make the rain god happy. If the volcano was rumbling, they could beg the volcano god to calm down. By believing in gods and praying to them, they made the natural world an extension of their social world, and this gave them a feeling of control over natural events.

According to Freud, the gods had three functions: to exorcise the terrors of nature, to reconcile people to the cruelty of fate, and to compensate them for what they endured and what they gave up by living in society. Clearly influenced by modernist theories of evolution, Freud believed that humans' early belief in many gods evolved into monotheism. Instead of having dozens of gods, each controlling a different area of life, they came to believe in a single all-powerful fatherly god who protected them. They showed him respect, prayed to him, offered him sacrifices, and followed his commands. All of this made life feel more secure and, at the same time, laid down the moral rules that made civilization possible.

Whatever benefits religion brought long ago, however, Freud says that we now have better ways than praying and sacrificing to deal with illness, crop failures, and other natural forces. They are based on science. In science we try to figure out patterns in nature and we check them with experiments. When we come up with a hypothesis, we test it against the data, and we accept the hypothesis only if it fits the data. In religion, on the other hand, we accept beliefs because they make us feel secure. We believe that a heavenly father is watching over us, for example, not because we have discovered this to be true, but because we want it to be true.

Freud called this wishful thinking an "illusion." Normally, that word implies that a belief is false, but Freud uses the term in a different way. His term for a simple false belief is "delusion." In ancient times, for example, people believed that the earth is flat. When this was shown to be false, most people switched to the belief that the earth is round. This kind of correctable false belief is a delusion. However, religious beliefs are not correctable, Freud says, because people do not check them against their experience. Rather, they accept those beliefs for the way they make them feel.

Freud's views on religion continue to be severely criticized. His claim that religion is based on a reassuring belief in a father figure, for example, applies only to some versions of monotheism, and not at all to many polytheistic traditions. Nor does it deal with the types of personal religious experience we have seen described by thinkers like Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Eliade's one-time collaborator Carl Jung.

## **Carl Gustav Jung (d. 1961)**

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung is another towering figure in psychology who took religion very seriously. Early in his career, Jung collaborated with Sigmund Freud, accepting Freud's basic ideas about the importance of experiences and perceptions of which we are not conscious (because they are stored in the "unconscious"), the role of dreams in revealing what is happening in the unconscious, and the origin of psychological problems in early childhood experiences. However, after five years, Jung and Freud parted ways. While Freud is considered the founder of psychoanalysis, Jung is the founder of a school of psychotherapy called "analytic psychology." Freud gave us terms such as the "ego" and the "unconscious." Jung gave us the term "complex" to name mental problems, as in "inferiority complex," and the concept of introverted and extroverted personalities.

After his split with Freud, Jung withdrew into his own private mental world. As a child, he had often had vivid dreams and fantasies, and now he gave free rein to the irrational, unconscious part of his mind. He took careful notes about his dreams and fantasies and developed theories about what they meant. All this became important in Jung's method of psychotherapy, a method he called "individuation." Its goal was to have patients strip away social conventions to discover their unique true selves.

In our dreams and fantasies, Jung said, there are personal elements that arise from our individual experiences, but there are also universal elements found in the "collective unconscious," a part of the mind that is shared by everyone, in all cultures and all historical periods. Jung called the ideas in the collective unconscious **archetypes**. They include "the father," "the mother," "the child," and a patriarchal figure Jung called the "god-archetype."

According to Jung, these archetypes in the unconscious mind are the source of the thinking that is at the root of all religion. Religious myths are expressions of these ideas found in everyone's mind. To understand the world's religions, Jung thought, we need to analyze their symbols and myths and trace them to the archetypes.

Jung studied many religious traditions, but was especially interested in Christianity and its role in shaping European culture. This culture had developed in three stages, he said – the religious, the scientific, and the psychological. In each stage, people handled the archetypes in the collective unconscious differently. In the Middle Ages, about 500–1500, the archetypes were expressed in religious images such as God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary. This is obvious in medieval art, architecture, and literature. In the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, roughly 1500–1900, the emphasis was on the conscious rational mind. So the unconscious with its archetypes was neglected and even repressed. Science was valorized as the highest form of thought, and religious thinking and anything else based on the unconscious were considered obsolete. The last stage of European culture, according to Jung, is the psychological era, starting around 1900, when scientists such as Freud discovered the unconscious mind. Now, at last, Jung said, we can acknowledge the importance of the unconscious mind and study it scientifically. Since religion is based on archetypes in the unconscious mind, we shall finally be able to understand religion across all cultures in an objective way, by studying the various expressions of the archetypes.

Jung influenced a number of important scholars of religion who focus on the meanings of myths. American literary scholar Joseph Campbell (d. 1987) is chief among them. Campbell, who was also influenced by James Frazer and Rudolf Otto

and in turn influenced George Lucas of *Star Wars* fame, developed an immensely popular documentary, aired in six parts in 1988, called “The Power of Myth.” In it he discussed “hero types” – his version of a Jungian archetype, using Jesus, the Buddha, and movie heroes as examples, and a massive array of other aspects of traditional and popular culture.

## Sociology of Religion

### Emile Durkheim (d. 1917)

Like psychology, sociology – the scientific investigation of how society operates – has representatives among classical Greek and medieval Islamic thinkers. However, as an independent field, based on supreme confidence in human reason, sociology is quintessentially modern European, and Emile Durkheim is generally regarded as its founder. He established the first department of sociology, at the University of Bordeaux in 1895.

Durkheim studied all aspects of human social organization, including religion. In fact, he believed that religion is essentially social. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he describes what he considers the earliest and simplest religion as totemism. A totem is an animal with which a tribe identifies. The Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest, for example, carve totem poles featuring bears, ravens, and whales. Sometimes they name themselves after the totem animal. Modern sports teams do something similar when they name themselves the Lions or the Dolphins, but totems have a deeper meaning to the group than the simple symbolism of a mascot. As we saw in Chapter 1, the totem often figures in the foundational stories held sacred by the group and is believed to have a metaphysical or spiritual relationship with the group.

The function of totemism, Durkheim says, is to meld people into a cooperative group. Focusing on group identity through rituals involving the totem, the community’s religion encourages them to override their selfish concerns for the good of the group. The function of these rituals is “to bring individuals together, to increase contacts between them, and to make those contacts more intimate” (Durkheim 1915, 348).

Durkheim thus defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden” (Durkheim 1915, 47). This distinction between “sacred” and “profane” things was readily accepted within the field of Religious Studies. “Sacred” meant “holy” or “special” and therefore to be treated with reverence; it is to be treated differently from everyday “profane” things. Whether it is a totem or other object, or a place, a person, or even a name or word, its specialness must be marked. In this sense, it is “forbidden” to the uninitiated. In Durkheim’s terminology, the sacred totems are *taboo* – something that should not be touched except under special conditions.

We shall see in Part II that diverse traditions identify a wide variety of what is considered sacred, and often it is because of a connection with the supernatural. But for Durkheim, the sacred is not something supernatural. The sacred is the realm of the social, where people are concerned with the common good.

Because the totem represents the group, what people are actually venerating in their religious rituals is their own social group. In Durkheim’s words, “The sacred

principle is nothing more nor less than the society transfigured and personified" (Durkheim 1915, 347). The term "profane," by contrast, covers people's everyday activities such as work, in which they are concerned only with themselves. So Durkheim concludes his definition of religion: It is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1915, 47).

This theory of Durkheim is called **functionalist** for the obvious reason that it defines religion in terms of its function. But whereas some functionalist analysts believe that the function could be fulfilled by things other than religion, Durkheim sees the role of religion in promoting group solidarity as irreplaceable. Without the solidarity engendered by religion, he fears that we would find ourselves in social chaos. In fact, in his studies of suicide, Durkheim suggests that one of its causes is the loss of social orientation provided by religion.

Durkheim was one of the key figures in the development of what is called "modernization theory," which predicted that all societies would inevitably develop industrialized economies just as Europe had. With industrialization, societies reorganize. They build cities (urbanize), and develop new institutions (bureaucracies) to organize their lives. Durkheim also observes that, as societies modernize, individuals develop increased autonomy and a correspondingly decreased sense of group identity. He worries that, without a strong sense of belonging to a group, individuals may lose the sense of well-being provided by group solidarity. The other great figure in the development of sociology, Max Weber, likewise theorized about the role of religion in social evolution, but attributed a different role to religion.

## Max Weber (d. 1920)

One of Max Weber's major contributions to Religious Studies is his naming of "ideal types" of leadership. In *The Sociology of Religion* (1922) he discussed three ideal types of religious leader. First is the "magician," which Weber describes as the shaman or healer, who has a charismatic style of leadership. The magician gets to be a leader by convincing people through sheer force of personality that they can offer practical benefits such as healing for their illnesses and rain for their crops. The second ideal type of leader is the "priest." While magicians gain authority based on personal charisma, priests' authority is a function of the official positions they hold. And while the magician is a one-person operation who does whatever seems appropriate to them, the priest is part of a bureaucracy that has extensive training, rules, and a system of pay and promotion. Weber's third ideal type of religious leader is the "prophet," from the Greek terms meaning to "speak" (*phao*) "for" (*pro*). The prophet speaks for a god. Even more than magicians, prophets' authority comes from their personal charisma. They are respected because they convince people that they are speaking for a god. If the audience does not hear the god's voice in the message of someone who claims to be a prophet, they will not be recognized as a prophet.

One of Weber's best-known analyses of religion is his claim that early Protestantism made modern capitalism possible. As he studied various European cultures of his own time, he noticed that the leaders of business and banking were overwhelmingly Protestants. Catholics tended to be workers and tradespeople or, if they were in the middle class, doctors, lawyers, or teachers. So Weber wondered about the connection

between modern business and Protestantism, and why capitalism as he defined it developed in Europe rather than elsewhere, and in the 1600s rather than earlier or later. His reflections on these questions became his most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904).

Weber's explanation is that the new beliefs and practices taught by Luther and Calvin (see Part II) fostered in people attitudes and habits that made them want to be successful in business. The "spirit of capitalism," Weber says, was for "the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life" (Weber and Parsons 1958, 53).

The Christian tradition of medieval Roman Catholicism did not valorize worldly success. Indeed, it warned of the dangers of being concerned with money. Jesus, after all, said that it is "easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven." In Catholicism, Weber observes, a religious life is oriented to the world to come, heaven, not to this world. And so the fully religious person is a priest, a monk, or a nun, not a banker or a factory-owner. Because worldly success was suspect, Catholic laypeople tended to be farmers, lower-level workers, doctors, lawyers, and teachers.

In Weber's analysis, the Protestant leader whose ideas did the most to foster capitalism was John Calvin. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), he wrote that, because of the "original sin" of Adam, all human beings are born in a morally corrupt state. We inherit an "innate depravity from our very birth." We are born so depraved, in fact, that we are incapable of doing anything good on our own. We have no free will. All we can do by ourselves is sin. In this dreadful condition, the whole human race deserves eternal damnation, Calvin said. Every baby is naturally headed for hell, and without God's intervention, all would end up there. However, fortunately for some, God has absolute freedom and chooses to save some people. They are called "the elect." They are no better than anyone else, but God predestines them for eternal happiness in heaven.

Understandably, those who accepted Calvin's teachings, such as the Puritans, were anxious about their eternal fate. Since everyone deserved damnation, death was frightening. Unlike Catholics, who believed in free will and in the value of "good works," Calvinists thought they were incapable of doing anything to help themselves reach heaven.

Weber explains that for Calvin the world exists for only one reason: to glorify God, its creator. The main way we do this is through our daily work. Our religious calling is not, as in Catholicism, to withdraw from worldly activities and pray. It is to be successful at our jobs. We are on earth to work. The harder we work and the more successful we are, the more we glorify God, and the more likely it is that God has predestined us for heaven rather than hell. Success in business does not *earn* people salvation; success simply *indicates* that they are already favored by God and predestined for salvation.

This new worldview produced what Weber calls the **Protestant Ethic**. It valorized hard work and career success and cast a doubtful eye on play and leisure. The virtues it praised were self-control, self-denial, the ability to delay gratification, thrift, and simple living. Weber calls this "inner-world asceticism." It made Protestants well suited to starting businesses, opening banks, engaging in trade, and building factories – all the things that helped promote modern capitalism in Europe and North America.

Weber's articulation of forms of religious leadership and his thesis that Protestantism made capitalism possible were two of his historic contributions to the analysis of religion. His most questionable thesis, as we will see in Part III, is the so-called the **secularization thesis**. Again, reflecting modernity's overarching confidence in reason, as well as the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution, Weber characterizes the modern world (and the "spirit of capitalism") as "calculating" or rational. Modernization is a process of "intellectualization" of life, and a reciprocal decline in reliance on "mystery" or the unpredictable promises of religion. He calls this process "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*) and "secularization." Secularization, and modernity in general, is thus characterized by the privatization of religion: diminishing appeals to the divine in public life, especially in political and economic matters. Communities in which religion retains a public profile were to be judged backward and in need of modernization.

## Peter L. Berger (d. 2017)

Peter Berger is best known for his work on the **social construction of reality**, which is the title of one of his most famous books (co-authored with Thomas Luckmann in 1966). The idea is that our concepts are influenced by our social contexts. Berger rejects the idea that our thinking can be utterly independent of that context. We learn through language, and the use of language involves countless connotations and associations. (Think, for example, of terms such as "liberal," "conservative," "Muslim," and "Jew," and how each of them would be described by people from different groups.) We learn attitudes and value judgments as we learn our languages within our communities, Berger observes. We learn about our environments through these inherited meanings, and we learn about ourselves in the same way. So even our self-perceptions are products of our social contexts.

However, meanings and the concepts based on them are not static. They develop over time. People create societies, which become their own realities complete with meaning-laden language to describe themselves and to ensure their survival. Berger calls this the "objectification" of society. These objectified societies then impact individuals within them. Societies transmit to their members the meanings and values of things, understandings of who they are as members of the group and what is expected of them, and what they can expect. (Compare, for example, the self-perceptions of someone who grows up being called "Your Highness" with someone who grows up being called a "foreigner.") The individuals then can reflect upon these experiences, and either repeat the meanings in future interactions or attempt to reinterpret the received meanings. Thus, the individual, although a product of society, can also impact society.

The vehicle through which meanings are conveyed, again, is language. Through language, people share communities of meaning. Berger uses the term "knowledge" for these collective meanings and therefore describes his work as sociology of knowledge. Knowledge in this sense is also involved in an interactive process: it is a product of society but can also be used to change society. According to Berger, people create their societies and are created by their societies through a process that plays out over generations. This is how we order our lives.

Religion plays a significant role in this process, particularly at the stage of "objectification" of society. Religions are the means by which societies "reify" society,

or “make it into something” of which individuals can feel a part and to which they can give their loyalty. Using terms such as “the Community of Saints” and “the People of God,” they “sacralize” or sanctify the social order.

In another of his famous works, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967), Berger explains that religions are social constructs serving specific functions. They establish contexts in which individuals can find meaning in their lives, and thus engender commitment to the “sacred community.” They are, in other words, not “real” in the sense that a tree or a cat is real; instead, like the societies they serve, they are constructs shared by groups in their “communities of meaning.”

The consciousness of being members of a sacred community shared by individuals is thus based on fiction – something that human beings have made. It is a useful fiction, however. It gives us a sense that the world is indeed in order. Life is not chaotic and our lives are not just random accidents. Again, we see the connection between what is good and what is orderly in religion. In Berger’s early career, he believed that sufficient reflection on this reality would allow societies to transcend the need for religion. He publicly embraced secularization theory and predicted the demise of religion in accordance with the spread of modernity and its all-powerful rationality. However, in his later career he admitted that history had proven him wrong. In *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (1999) he stated that “the whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken.” Berger predicted that the twenty-first and subsequent centuries would be just as religious as any other, perhaps more so, but not necessarily in the same ways. Indeed, he concludes, “Those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril” (Berger 1999, 18).

Berger’s admission of error about secularization does not detract from the significance of his contributions to sociology of religion. His theories regarding the relationship between individual and society and especially his focus on the role religions play in creating universes of meaning have been highly influential. His method of studying religions remains useful, especially its “methodological atheism,” something he proposed in *The Sacred Canopy*. Similar to our “willing suspension of belief,” methodological atheism in the study of religion does not entail rejection of one’s own religious positions and identity but, as Husserl would say, “bracketing” them in a conscious effort to view religious claims without preconceptions or prejudgment (prejudice).

## **Robert N. Bellah (d. 2013)**

Robert Bellah’s treatment of secularization is quite distinct from that of Berger. Rather than make predictions about the decline of religion, he expands the definition of religion to include contemporary developments.

Bellah is best known for his description of “American civil religion,” the title he gave in a 1967 article to what many citizens of the United States see as simply their way of life. For Bellah, this way of life involves holidays and rituals such as the Thanksgiving meal and the Fourth of July fireworks. These rituals reinforce a world-view complete with group loyalties, and motivations to behave in accordance with specific values. These values, such as courage in the face of tyranny, individualism, and selflessness, are supported by founding myths and heroes (think of George

Washington and the cherry tree). For Bellah, the lack of a supernatural element in American civil religion is irrelevant.

Civil religion does not replace traditional religions necessarily; it exists parallel to them. As Bellah put it, “While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith … few have realized that there actually exists alongside … the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America” (Bellah 1967, 1).

In describing civil religion, Bellah effectively turned the study of religion on its head. Traditionally, scholars looked at examples of phenomena that people identified as religious, and then tried to construct definitions broad enough to encompass all the phenomena involved. Bellah took a broad description of religion and then found examples of human activity that fit the description, even if they were not identified by the people involved as religious. This opened the way for analysis of numerous “varieties of civil religion,” as he elaborated in a 1982 book by that title.

Bellah believes that the development of civil religion is one aspect of secularization in the United States. Individualism is another. He views individualism as a corollary of secularization, which he described as “the emptying out of any religious content of culture.” America has always been individualistic, Bellah observes, but, without a public presence of religion in culture, individualism may become excessive.

Participating in a religious community can moderate excessive individualism, Bellah believes, but he also worries that identification with a religious community can itself become excessive. As he wrote in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America* (1987), despite secularization, religions in America remain focal points of communal and individual identity. He focuses in particular on antagonism between Christians and Jews, between Protestant and Catholic Christians, and between liberals and conservatives of all traditions. As with his treatment of individualism, Bellah here is concerned with both the positive and negative effects of religion.

## Conclusion

Weber’s secularization thesis is treated by many scholars as more than a description; it is treated as a prediction. As Rodney Stark, a leading critic of the theory, pointed out in 1999, Weber was not alone in his prediction. This line of thinking goes as far back as the 18th-century theologian Thomas Woolston, who predicted the end of Christianity by 1900, and Frederick the Great, who wrote in the 18th century that religion “is crumbling of itself.” In the same century, Voltaire gave religion 50 more years of life; Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1822 that every “young man now living in the United States” will abandon Christianity for Unitarianism. Stark summarizes: “For nearly three centuries, social scientists and assorted western intellectuals have been promising the end of religion. Each generation has been confident that within another few decades, or possibly a bit longer, humans will ‘outgrow’ belief in the supernatural” (Stark 1999).

However, the predictions about the demise of religion contained in the secularization thesis turned out to be false. As we shall see in Parts II and III, religion continues to thrive and is increasingly evident in public life, calling into question the very category “religion” as constructed by European modernists. The Introduction to Part II presents the views of contemporary theorists who raise such questions, and the

Introduction to Part III surveys thinkers who recognize the failures of secularization theory as well as those who continue to think that religion is obsolete.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some reasons that it took so long for educated Europeans to begin to study religion scientifically?
2. William Robertson Smith responded to opponents of modern studies of the Bible by saying, “A book that is really old and really valuable has nothing to fear from the critic, whose labors can only put its worth in a clearer light, and establish its authority on a surer basis” (Smith 1892, 17). Do you think that people opposed to scientific examinations of the Bible would have been reassured by this comment?
3. In 1900 the Catholic Church was opposed to source criticism and other modern methods of studying the Bible. The pope insisted, for example, that Moses had written the first five books of the Bible. However, by 1950 Pope Pius XII approved of modern methods of biblical criticism. What might this change of position say about how religious teachings develop?
4. Can the idea of anima or soul that Edward Tylor described still be found in religions today?
5. Can ideas that James Frazer called magical thinking still be found in religions today?
6. Can you think of examples of religious teaching today that back up Karl Marx’s critique of Christian churches during the Industrial Revolution?
7. Can you think of examples of religious behavior today that back up Sigmund Freud’s view of religion?
8. Does Emile Durkheim’s claim that the essential function of religion is to promote social solidarity match any contemporary religions?
9. What are some contemporary examples of religious leaders who fit into Max Weber’s three ideal types?

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