

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 New Academic Disciplines: Oriental Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, and Psychology

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 6, 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 rise of independent countries in Europe. In Europe’s pre-modern era, political power was legitimated through religious authority. As we noted in Chapter 2, 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, or 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" that do not necessarily have fixed boundaries.) 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 pre-modern system, people's responsibility was to obey the clerks of the realm, who were often the clergy (the two terms are related). As we saw in Chapter 2, 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, the only attention paid by European Christian scholars to religions other than their own had been 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 allegedly to refute Muslim teachings.

The explorers' mandate was not always explicitly religious, although spreading Christianity was a common motivation for their efforts. Their major task was to find

sources of wealth (and potential conquests) accessible to their European sponsors. In the process, however, they discovered cultures entirely new to them, and their reports spurred some scholars to examine them.

The academic fields of Classics, Oriental Studies, and anthropology developed in this context. Classics, the study of ancient Rome and Greece, had been a feature of Europe's young universities since the 16th century, as had Oriental Studies, with experts in such "oriental languages" as Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic. But the fields expanded to include other languages and cultures, including religions, during the 17th and 18th centuries. During the 19th century, the field of anthropology developed, with the goal of understanding human beings, their cultures, languages, and religions. As we shall see, early representatives of these disciplines struggled with ethnocentrism – a preference for their own group's ways, including its religion. Moreover, their research methods were primitive compared with those of later scholars. However, the goal of identifying and describing others' religious traditions as objectively as possible, in order to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon of religion as such, became central to Religious Studies.

### **Max Müller (d. 1900): Oriental Studies and Religion**

Among the most significant of the early Orientalists was Max Müller. 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, the language of ancient India, 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 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 simply 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.



**FIGURE 3.4** Max Müller. Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

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 the 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. (If you say these three names fast, you can hear the similarity.) 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 towards 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." (1869, Vol. 1, 30)

Whatever shortcomings Max Müller may have had, though, his contribution to Religious Studies was enormous. He set the bar high for everyone who followed, by saying that the academic study of religion should be a science.

## ***Edward Burnett Tylor (d. 1917): Anthropology and Religion***

Some of the same dynamics that gave rise to *Religionswissenschaft* also influenced the development of other new academic disciplines, among them anthropology – "the study of human beings." 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.

One of the first people to study religions scientifically was also one of the first anthropologists, Edward Tylor. Tylor held the first chair in anthropology at the University of Oxford. His best known book is *Primitive Culture*. Today we do not call oral cultures “primitive,” because it has a negative connotation. But in Tylor’s perspective, “primitive” simply 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. He called these old things that had been preserved in modern culture “survivals.” Archery is now a sport, for example, but it began as a technology for hunting and war. It is therefore a “survival” of earlier methods of hunting. 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. Indeed, 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

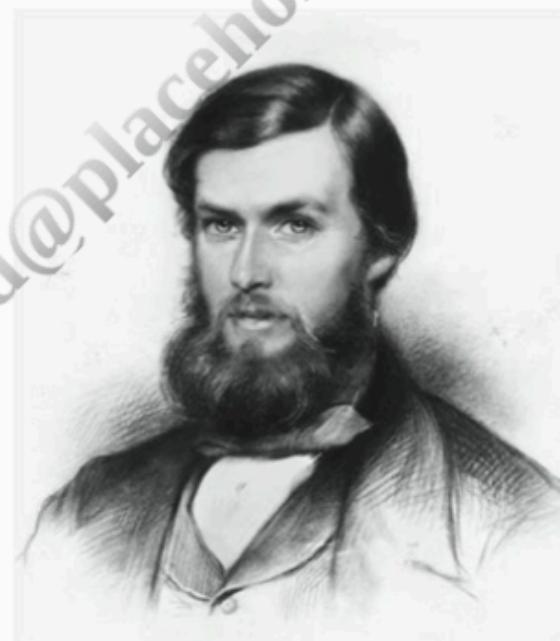


FIGURE 3.5 Edward Burnett Tylor. Granger Collection/  
Topfoto.

*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.

Early 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 see an apparition 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.

To summarize, then, the anima, soul, or spirit is

- what makes a person be alive
- what leaves the body at death
- what appears to us in dreams and apparitions of dead people.

Once early humans had this idea of the anima, Tylor says, they extended it beyond people. If human beings have souls that make them be alive, they 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 2, this is called reincarnation. Some believe that the souls of male 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. And all 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 is assuming 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 the same kinds of assumptions, and in later chapters we shall see that these assumptions are questioned by contemporary scholars of religion.

### ***James Frazer (d. 1941): Evolution and Religion***

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 twelve 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. Expressed as a formula,

Do A, and B will happen.

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 what action will cause what result 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 I want to hurt you, and I have some of your hair, I might do something to that hair as a way of doing something to you. Another kind of association is similarity. If I draw a picture of you and then burn the picture, this may hurt you. Some scholars believe that prehistoric cave drawings served in this way. Perhaps people tried to influence the animals 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 crops would come back each spring. He describes their choosing a man to personify the crop for one year. He calls this





## 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 in formation 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 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.

*Image not available in this digital edition.*

**FIGURE 3.6** Cargo cults. Paul Raffaele/Rex Features.

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)