

fulfilled by something else, such as nationalism. The essentialist approach – the idea that religions do something for people that nothing else can do – has its roots in a branch of modern philosophy called phenomenology.

Back to Philosophy

We mentioned in Chapter 3 that 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. Hume was so committed to grounding knowledge in sense perception that he denied the objective reality of things 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 we hit it. We say that the movement is “caused” by hitting the ball, but we cannot see the transfer of anything. Kant rejected this 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 constituent 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.

Some philosophers continued in this line of reasoning, with stress on the importance of validating claims (or “propositions,” as philosophers like to call them). Some thinkers concluded, in fact, that the entire goal of philosophy was to validate claims through careful reasoning. These thinkers developed what is known as analytic philosophy.

According to the basic standards of analytic philosophy, all claims should be subject to three questions, which may be called the “three Cs.” These questions, as we saw in Chapter 3, are: “Is the claim clear?” (Are the terms used to make the claim explained carefully, so that anyone who hears the claim can understand just what is being asserted?) “Is it coherent?” (Do the parts of the claim fit together in reasonable ways?) And “Is it credible?” (Does the claim follow accepted rules of reasoning so that we have good reasons to believe it?)

The three Cs seem very reasonable, of course, but when religious claims are subjected to them the results can be problematic, as we shall see in the work of analytic philosopher Antony Flew.

Analytic Philosophy: Antony Flew (d. 2010)

Antony Flew represents a movement within analytic philosophy known as **logical positivism**. Logical positivists try to clarify statements, identifying those that are meaningful and those that are not. Among the criteria they use are “verifiability” and “falsifiability.” In order for a statement to be considered meaningful, logical positivists hold that there must be a way to demonstrate its truth or falsehood. In the natural sciences, if someone claimed to have a hypothesis but nothing would count as evidence for or against it, then it would not really be a hypothesis. It would be meaningless as a claim. The logical positivists extended this criterion beyond science to claims in philosophy and religion.

Applying it to philosophy, they concluded that a number of traditional philosophical claims are meaningless. The position called Materialism – that everything is material – is one of these statements. And so is Idealism – that everything is made up of minds or ideas. No possible test could show that either of these positions was true or false, and so they are not really claiming anything.

Flew applied the falsifiability test to religious claims. In books such as *God and Philosophy* (1966/2005), *The Presumption of Atheism* (1976), and *Atheistic Humanism* (1993), he concludes that many religious statements that seem to say something about God are not meaningful claims at all, because no event could prove them to be either true or false.

Some religious statements are testable and so meaningful as assertions. “Jesus rose from the dead” is one of them. We can imagine verifying this statement, as by discovering historical documents proving that Jesus was resurrected. We can also imagine falsifying this statement, as by discovering historical documents proving that Jesus’ followers made up the story of the resurrection. However, other religious statements cannot be verified or falsified, and these are meaningless as assertions, according to Flew. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, for example, often say that God loves the human race. Indeed, Christians call God our loving Father. This sounds like a claim, much as you might say of your neighbor, “Clive is a loving father.” But suppose that when you said that Clive is a loving father, someone pointed out that when Clive’s children all came down with life-threatening swine flu he did nothing about it, even though he had the money and time to get them to a doctor. If you continue to insist that Clive is a loving father but you cannot explain his obvious dereliction of paternal duty, then your claim is not a meaningful assertion.

Flew applied the same argument to claims about God’s goodness. Throughout history millions of people have lived miserable lives plagued by disease and poverty that could have been prevented by an all-powerful being. According to UNESCO, 35,000 children starve to death each day. The person who continues to insist that “God is a loving father,” despite the clear evidence to the contrary, is describing a fiction she has chosen to believe, rather than making a meaningful assertion, Flew says. Meaningful assertions are revisable in light of evidence, so that if certain things happened, we would deny what we now assert. Flew’s question to religious believers is, “What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute

for you a disproof of the love of, or even the existence of, God?" (Flew 1955, 99) If the answer is, "Nothing," Flew says, then their statements about God are meaningless as assertions. At best, these statements simply express comforting ideas that religious believers choose to maintain for reasons unacceptable to analytic philosophers.

It should be noted that Flew's rejection of claims about the existence of a loving father God did not preclude his belief in God. Following the dictates of reason, he came in his later years to believe that there is sufficient scientific evidence to support claims for the existence of God as the purposeful creator of our magnificently complex cosmos.

Phenomenology and Religious Studies

Not all philosophers limited valid claims to those that can be verified and falsified. Some looked at the distinction between noumena (things as they are in themselves) and phenomena (things as they appear to us) and proposed a new kind of study that focuses on phenomena. They called this study **phenomenology**.

Edmund Husserl (d. 1938) is usually regarded as the father of phenomenology. Rather than limit philosophy to things that are objectively verifiable, as the logical positivists did, Husserl believed that philosophy should 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 kind of phenomenology.

Rudolf Otto (d. 1937)

Early representatives of 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 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.

It is interesting to note here the drift away from using terms specific to one religious tradition in identifying the source 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)

The universality of religious experience developed as a central feature of Religious Studies through the work of Mircea Eliade. Many people count him as the most influential scholar of religion in the 20th century. Eliade was editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, and as a professor at the University of Chicago he mentored dozens of young scholars who went on to become professors.

He was also an essentialist. Criticizing prevailing views in Religious Studies, he was especially hostile to *reductionism*, explanations of religious phenomena that present them as nothing more than social, psychological, or economic phenomena. Against such thinkers as Durkheim, Freud, and Marx, Eliade insisted that religion is a distinct and unique phenomenon (*sui generis*). It reflects not merely the psychological and social dimensions of life, but another dimension – the Sacred. So religion should be explained “on its own terms,” and

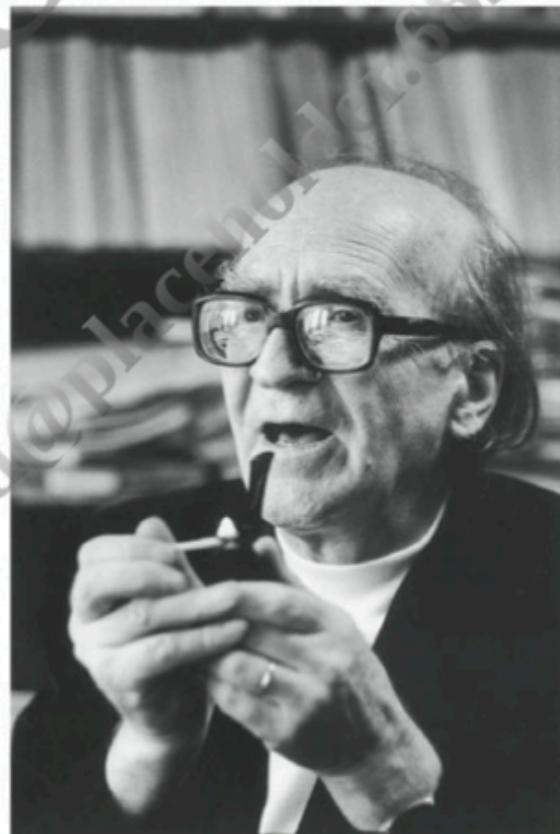


FIGURE 4.2 Mircea Eliade. Michael Mauney/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

not be “explained away” as some other kind of phenomenon. 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)

In applying a phenomenological approach, Eliade proceeded historically. Rather than simply describing the current phenomena, he traced various manifestations of the Sacred throughout history. For this reason, his methodology is known as History of Religions (or HR).

His primary interest was in older, nature-based religions, the kind that are 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 Sallustius, calls myths “things which never happened but always are.” (Sagan 1977, 8)

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, from Eliade’s viewpoint, 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 Sacrifice of the Mass, which reenacts 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 on 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*. Eliade’s views remain highly influential but, as we shall see in Chapter 10, his claims about *homo religiosus* have come under serious criticism.

Philosophy of Religion

Not all modern philosophers who are concerned with religion practice analytic philosophy or phenomenology. Some examine the credibility of religious claims. They practice the kind of philosophical theology traditionally known as philosophy of religion. Reflecting its Christian origins, philosophy of religion is practiced almost exclusively by Christian thinkers. John Hick and William Lane Craig are examples.

John Hick (b. 1922)

John Hick, an ordained Presbyterian minister with a Ph.D. in philosophy from Oxford, has spent decades analyzing Christian ideas philosophically. An example is his critique of the standard Christian teaching that Jesus died for our sins, in a book chapter titled “Atonement by the Blood of Jesus?” (Hick 1993) Like Thomas Aquinas, Hick starts with a question. He asks whether the traditional Christian doctrine of the Atonement makes sense today. According to this doctrine, Jesus’ death on the cross paid the penalty owed by the human race to God for Original Sin. In Hick’s words,

The basic notion is ... that salvation requires God’s forgiveness and that this in turn requires an adequate atonement to satisfy the divine righteousness and/or justice. This atoning act is a transaction analogous to making a payment to wipe out a debt or cancel an impending punishment.

Hick points out that the doctrine of the atonement originated around 1100 when Anselm of Canterbury wrote his book *Why Did God Become Man?* Before Anselm, Christians had other ways of explaining what the death of Jesus had accomplished. As we shall see in Chapter 6, according to a popular view, the human race became the property of Satan after