

# The Routledge Companion to Study of Religion



Edited by John Hinnells

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# The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion

## Second Edition

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*The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* is a major resource for courses in Religious Studies. It begins by explaining the most important methodological approaches to religion, including psychology, philosophy, anthropology and comparative study, before moving on to explore a wide variety of critical issues, such as gender, science, fundamentalism, ritual, and new religious movements. Written by renowned international specialists, this new edition:

- includes eight new chapters on post-structuralism, religion and economics, religion and the environment, religion and popular culture, and sacred space
- surveys the history of religious studies and the key disciplinary approaches
- explains why the study of religion is relevant in today's world
- highlights contemporary issues such as globalization, diaspora and politics
- includes annotated reading lists, a glossary and summaries of key points to assist student learning.

**John R. Hinnells** is Emeritus Professor at Liverpool Hope University and Honorary Research Professor at SOAS where he was founding head of the Department for the Study of Religion. He is also a Senior Member of Robinson College, Cambridge, and life member of Clare Hall, Cambridge. His main works on Zoroastrianism are *Zoroastrians in Britain* (OUP 1996); *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies* (2000) and *The Zoroastrian Diaspora* (2005). He edited the *New Penguin Dictionary of Religions* and the *New Penguin Handbook of Living Religions* (1997 and 1998). He is editor of the Routledge series *Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices*.

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# Contributors

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# Introduction

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Religions do not exist, nor are they studied, in a vacuum. While the first edition of this book was being prepared, major international events have rocked societies and their religions: the attack on the Twin Towers in New York and on the Pentagon on 9/11; the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, ever more brutal battles between Palestinians and Jews appear to have pitched Christianity, Islam and Judaism against each other. Bombs in Bali, Kenya and London, terrorist attacks in Mumbai, wars in Sudan and Somalia, crisis in Zimbabwe and the global credit crunch have turned societies upside down as fears of nuclear war grow with tensions rising and falling between India and Pakistan and with developments in North Korea and Iran, the world appears under threat. With the break up of the old Soviet Union, countries have been opened up to Christian missionaries and New Religious Movements, so religions have become more prominent on the world stage.

This book looks at the many perspectives from which religion may be viewed. The first edition (2005) was well received but this second edition is larger with eight new chapters as well as revisions and updating to the others. It starts by looking at different answers to the question 'Why study religion?' It is important to know how we got to where we are in the subject and how scholars have theorized about religion. The chapter by Eric Sharpe maps the historical picture of the growth of religious studies down to the 1960s and the chapter by Greg Alles covers the period since then. Contrary to popular opinion there are many approaches and disciplines involved in the study of religions; each is discussed here in a separate chapter. Robert Segal discusses theories of religion. The obvious routes into the subject are theology and religious studies, though there is much debate about the relationship between the two. In America there are signs of a growing difference whereas in Britain the two appear to be coming together as can be seen in the chapters by David Ford and Don Wiebe. The historical approach is clearly an important one in the study of religions and is discussed here by John Wolffe. Philosophy of religion is a well established route in many cultures, which is discussed by Chad Meister. A very different approach is the phenomenology of religion – where the term phenomenology is used differently from wider philosophy as discussed by Douglas Allen. There are various social and/or scientific ways of studying religion. The sociological study of religion is of growing importance and is discussed here by Martin Riesebrodt and Mary Ellen Konieczny. Authors were asked to look particularly at recent developments in their subjects; Rosalind Hackett exemplifies this in her chapter on anthropology by avoiding the all-too-common tour of nineteenth-century theorists. 'Psychology of religion' is an umbrella term for a number of approaches which are discussed by Dan Merkur. Many different approaches are used in the comparative study of religion as discussed by William Paden.



Whichever methodological approach one pursues there are a number of key issues addressed by scholars involved with religions. Gender is obviously an important subject and is addressed here by Darlene Juschka. An issue which is often discussed is the problems caused by insider and outsider perspectives as discussed by Kim Knott. Jeremy Carrette discusses some of the key developments in post structuralist theories of religion. 'Orientalism' has been a subject of recent debate and the issues related to religions are discussed by Richard King who also discusses issues concerning mysticism and spirituality. Theories of secularization and studies of New Religious Movements are discussed by Judith Fox. Contrary to what 'rationalist' approaches to society might have expected, fundamentalism (often a misused term) seems to have become more prominent in various cultures and countries (Henry Munson). Myths and rituals are interpenetrating and central to religions and cultures (Robert Segal). The question of authority is a major feature in most traditions, both in the sense of religious individuals and their charisma, and in the sense of authoritative texts (Paul Gifford). Of course texts are not static; the words may not change, but their interpretation does – an issue at the heart of hermeneutics (Garrett Green). Religions do not exist in a vacuum so there are chapters on how religions have been involved in, interacted with or been seen through the prism of politics (George Moyser), popular culture (Gordon Lynch), the financial world (Larry Iannaccone and William Bainbridge), advances in scientific discoveries and thought (Thomas Dixon) and environmental concerns (Roger Gottlieb). Increasingly scholars have become interested in the notion of sacred space (Kim Knott). The chapter on religion and cognition by Luther Martin looks at one of the most challenging forms of current approaches to religious studies. Back in the 1960s and 1970s international migration increased dramatically. It was assumed by many that migrants would, over a couple of generations, 'assimilate' and leave their religion behind. The reverse has happened, resulting in the growth of the study of diasporas (Sean McLoughlin). As religions have met and interacted – and sometimes experienced tensions – so religious pluralism has become an issue that many people have had to address (Michael Barnes).

There have been numerous debates about definitions and presuppositions in the study of religion. Many scholars have questioned whether there is any such 'thing' as religion, there are only the religions. But some have gone further and questioned the value of the terms 'religion' at all. In various languages, Sanskrit for example, there is no word for 'religion'. Is 'religion' a Western construct imposed on various cultures as a part of intellectual imperialism? It has been said that words mean what we want them to. My own opinion is that the word 'religions' is useful, but should be used with caution.

The ease of travel, large migrations to and from many countries and the growth of the internet and the media have resulted in the interaction of cultures at a global level. The 'other' is encountered more often, more closely and by more people than ever before. Whereas some religions were remote and exotic, now they are part of the local scenery for many.

Students on many courses become fretful when studying theory and method. However, the more complex the subject, the more important such issues are. When the subject is one as full of sensitivities, presuppositions and prejudices as the study of religions is, then it is essential, from the outset, the student is alerted to debates and doubts and that key issues, motives, aims and academic beliefs are fore-grounded – that is why my own assumptions and interests are articulated frankly and explicitly in the first chapter. I spent much time reflecting on the value of a section on the definition of such important terms as 'religion', but others, such as Mark Taylor, have done that, and for shorter articles students can consult my *New Penguin Dictionary of Religions*. I thought this book should be on theoretical approaches

and key issues at the heart of debates in the study of religions. There is no one 'right' way to study religions. One 'wrong' way is dogmatism – that does not appear in this volume. Not only are there different approaches, there are also different opinions and emphases and much enthusiasm for the subjects (the singular is best avoided!). The publishers suggested that I indicate how the book may be used by students on courses. Had it been available during the forty years in which I taught the subject at undergraduate level, I would have woven a seminar around each chapter; if it were at (post)graduate level I would have required students to have read the relevant chapter before a lecture or seminar. However it is used, I hope students find it useful.

In planning the book, authors were invited who are specialists and leaders in their field, on the basis that an introduction to a subject can be the most influential literature a student ever reads. It is often the person who has real command of the subject who is the person with the vision to give the best overview. Each author received the same author's brief on length, treatment of material and bibliography. Inevitably some kept 'closer' to the brief than others; equally inevitably some have different perceptions of what are the appropriate issues and levels for students in their first year of studying religions. Such are the facts of life for every editor. Nor is it necessarily a bad thing. The students using the book will be different and it is foolish to invite senior scholars to contribute and then to put them all into a straitjacket. Furthermore, some topics are better handled in one way rather than another. But all authors have been willing to discuss and amend their text.

The structure of the book follows broadly the structure of the introductory course I taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London University, some of the time with one of the contributors, Dr Judith Fox; she joined the course to the benefit and delight of both myself and the students. It has been amended in the light of discussions with Professors Rosalind Hackett and Don Wiebe in the early stages, and Professor Robert Segal has helped considerably on several occasions. I am indebted to all of them, although I take responsibility for any failing in the overall conception and execution of the book. I would like to dedicate my work in this book to Eric Sharpe, a long-standing close friend, who finished his chapter for this book only a few days before his death.

John R. Hinnells



# Why study religions?

*John R. Hinnells*

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### Introduction

Are the study of theology and religious studies only for religious people? If you are religious, should you not get on and practise your religion rather than study it? If you are studying religions, should you not get on with that – studying them – rather than discussing abstract theories and debates on methods? The answer to each of these questions is ‘no’. Obviously many people do wish to study religion if they are religious, because they want to know more about their own religion, or be able to see their religion in the context of others. Some people find studying religion helps to develop their own spiritual journey, be they Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Zoroastrian or whatever. Students in most fields object to starting a subject by lectures on theory and method. But it is necessary to be aware of the different disciplinary perspectives used, and to be alert to some of the key issues that affect basic presuppositions.

But why study religions if you are not religious and/or do not want to become religious? As a professor of the comparative study of religion, the first question I am commonly asked when meeting people is – ‘which religion do you belong to?’ Those who know me to be an atheist, often ask why I spend most of my life studying something I believe to be wrong? Indeed one might go further. I incline to the view that religions are dangerous because more people have been tortured and killed for religious reasons than for any other motive. Persecution, the torture and killing of heretics and people of other religions have been major themes running through much of world history. At a personal level a religion can be helpful, supportive and even joyous for many people. But equally many are tortured by feelings of guilt or shame because they cannot live according to the ideals of their religion, or cannot in conscience accept doctrines they are expected to hold.

Of course one does not have to agree with something in order to study it. Students of the Holocaust do not have to agree with Hitler and his followers. One can learn something about history, about oneself, from studying even evil forces. But why have whole departments of theology and religious studies? Why have such financial and human resources been invested in the subject if it is harmful or marginal, and for which one has no attachment? Increasingly sociology, psychology, history, philosophy departments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have moved religious studies towards the margins of their subject. One does not have to be ill to become a doctor but one does have to want to care for and aid the sick to be a doctor – why study religions if one does not wish to encourage people to be religious? Some universities have it in their constitution that they shall not teach or research religion – University College London and Liverpool are two examples in Britain.

Despite my own non-religious position, however, I want to argue that the study of religions is vital and not only for 'the Hitler principle' that one should never ignore forces for destruction (nor is it because religions have sometimes been forces for good), but because of the massive power that religions have wielded, something that no one can deny. I question whether one can understand any culture and history – political or social – without understanding the relevant religions. This is true not only of 'the Holy Roman Empire' or the Islamic conquest of Iran, i.e. in past history; it is true in the twenty-first century as well. Although the situation in Northern Ireland is complex it cannot be denied that there are strong religious motives involved in the conflict there; there is sectarian hatred. Christian Serbians were killing Muslims in the former Yugoslavia; Muslims in many countries believe that the West is anti-Muslim and many fear that if there is another World War it will be between Islam and the Christian world.

Originally my intention had been to write a standard survey of academic arguments for and against such studies. Obviously one only writes an Introduction to a book when all the material is in. Having read all the chapters it is clear that there are several scholarly and well-written articles in this book surveying the field. So I concluded that this should be a personal piece based on forty years of university teaching, also to make explicit my motive in producing the book and why it is structured with certain emphases. It means that most examples will be taken from my specialist field – the Parsis and their religion Zoroastrianism. There is no single argument for why and how one studies religions. Many readers will reject my arguments completely and that is perfectly reasonable; maybe where this book is used for a course an early seminar discussion on the subject may be 'why study religions?' The basic question to be addressed is: why should an atheist want to study religions? First, it is necessary at the start of a book of this nature to discuss what one means by the term 'religion'.

## Defining religion

There have been endless discussions of the definition of 'religion'. Indeed recently some scholars have argued for avoiding the word 'religion' as meaningless and have argued instead for the term 'culture'. This introduction is not a place for extensive debate, but rather as a place for explaining where I am 'coming from' as editor of this book, but it would be a mistake not to indicate my position on this primary issue of saying what is meant by the word 'religion'. In my opinion there is no such thing as 'religion', there are only the religions, i.e. those people who identify themselves as members of a religious group, Christians, Muslims, etc. An act or thought is religious when the person concerned thinks they are practising their 'religion'. Organizations are religious when the people involved think they are functioning religiously. In some societies in East Asia a person may have, say, a Christian initiation, a Buddhist wedding and a Chinese funeral; in my understanding, at the moment they are acting, say, in a Christian way, then at that moment they are a Christian. Of course the boundaries of those groups are fluid – so some people who claim to be, say, Muslims are not accepted by the majority of that religion as being 'true' Muslims. My general position in discussing religions is that people are what they believe they are. I am cautious about replacing 'religion' with 'culture' (Fitzgerald 2000, see also McCutcheon 2001) partly because that simply moves the debate on to the question of what is meant by 'culture'. But many others see culture as something that includes religion, but that also has much wider connotations. The Parsis, for example, have what they see as their culture in addition to their religion. The equivalent

term is *Parsi panu* (Parsi-ness), and it includes non-religious dress (e.g. the Parsi style of a sari in contrast to the religious garments, the sacred shirt and cord, *sudre* and *kusti*), drama (*nataks* – in Gujarati, rather bawdy but huge fun – and never on religious themes) and their own highly distinctive way of cooking *dhansak*. All these are Parsi favourites, common not only in the old country but also in the diaspora. They would interpret such items as parts of Parsi culture but not part of their Zoroastrian religion. Parsis who say they are not Zoroastrians (either because they are not religious or if they have converted to, say, Christianity) are still likely to enjoy *Parsi panu*. Some of my colleagues disagree with the use of the phrase ‘the religious dimension’ of a situation or event. I do not wish to imply that there is any ‘thing’ out there that is religious. But events, like people, are complex, and can have both religious and secular dimensions; having one does not exclude the other. An act is a religious act when the person involved believes it to be associated with their religion. A religious thought is a thought which the thinker thinks is Zoroastrian (Christian, etc.). Of course I recognize that the situation is far from clear-cut. What of ‘cultures’ that have no word for ‘religion’, as in Sanskrit, and where the term for a religion is anachronistic, for example the term ‘Hinduism’, which is a modern West-imposed label for a plethora of different groups, beliefs and practices across a large continent with some purely local phenomena. ‘Hinduism’ exists in the diaspora communities because of compliance with use of Western categories, e.g. to obtain charitable status. Ninian Smart’s use of the term ‘world views’ has some merits, but prioritizes the belief aspect of religion that is inappropriate elsewhere, e.g. Parsis for whom ‘religion’ is to do with individual identity; it is something in the blood or genes, to do with community boundaries and associated practices but with little or no reference to beliefs. In the case of Zoroastrianism, ‘religion’ is appropriate since there is a term (*den*) that it is reasonable to translate as ‘religion’. All ‘labels’ have limitations and these must be accepted, so ‘religion’ is a useful but potentially misleading term.

## Religions and politics

The former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, once argued strongly that religion was a private matter of belief (therefore bishops should not get involved in political debates as they were doing). But I believe that in this assertion she was completely wrong. Religions and religious leaders have rarely been outside politics, be they Jesus, Muhammad or Gandhi. Christianity was a driving force in Spanish, Portuguese and British empire-building. With the first two there was a powerful urge for converts as well as fortunes. The British came to stress ‘the white man’s burden’ of ‘civilizing the natives’ (though fortunes and converts were also welcome!).

Partition in South Asia in 1947 sought to create separate Muslim and Hindu nations. These countries have been to war, or on the brink of it, many times in the following decades (though, now that there are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan, the religious divisions no longer follow the original policy). The showing and sales of videos of the two Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* stoked (probably unwittingly) the fires of Indian nationalism, and the radical BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) party came to power. A touchstone was the Hindu claim to the site of the mosque at Ayodhya, which they claimed was built over an important Hindu temple (Van der Veer). Many looked on in horror at the Hindu attacks on Muslims, the mob violence and the torching of Muslim homes in Bombay and Gujarat by Hindu militants in the early 1990s. The sorry tale of religious violence extends over all continents.

In the contemporary world the various religions seem to be even more prominent: the Israeli conviction that the land of Israel is God's gift to them has led to attempts to eject or impose themselves over the Palestinians (who respond with suicide missions). The reason why it is thought American governments ignore Israel's breaking of UN resolutions is due to the powerful Jewish lobby in the US; rightly or wrongly many Muslims believe it be an anti-Islam stance. The Shah was overthrown in 1979 for various reasons, but a major factor was the popular uprising led by Ayatollah Khomeini on the grounds that American influence had become more important to the government than Islam. It is difficult to believe that the invasion of Iraq in 2003/4 is legitimately explained simply by the terrible massacre of thousands in the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11. It is not only that there is little evidence of Iraqi government involvement in al Qaeda activity; it is highly unlikely because Saddam Hussein was not a particular ally of a movement that opposed his secularizing tendencies. President Bush and Prime Minister Blair, both of whom have made public their Christian religious position, sought 'regime change' through invasion or 'a crusade' as Bush called it. For Muslims in many countries this was seen as a Christian assault on Islam and the consequences will almost certainly be with us for many years and may well have brought al Qaeda's ideology into Iraq and provoked more militant Muslims in many countries. Many fear it might bring nearer a war between the Christian 'West' and Islam. Terrorist activity in America, England, India and Spain, for example, has increased since 9/11 and increases the concern about such a war, and the invasion of Afghanistan raises wider concerns prompting some Muslims to see this as a further Christian–Western invasion of Muslim countries.

Some writers suggest such acts are not the outcome of 'real' or 'true' Christianity/Islam, etc., rather they suggest this is people using a religion to justify their violence; it is not, they say, that religion is the cause of the problems. Even the fighting in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants is often put down to other causes. Doubtless there are a variety of factors in most conflicts, but religions are often potent factors in the explosions of violence. Of course religions can also be at the forefront of movements for peace and justice; for example Gandhi's non-violent campaign; Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa; the Reverend Martin Luther King with his dream in America; and the bishops' stand taken against the corrupt dictators in South America with 'Liberation theology'. How can anyone doubt the importance of studying religions when they are such potent forces?

## Religion and culture

Is it possible to understand another culture without looking at the appropriate religion practised there, be that in ancient Egypt or modern America? (It should be noted that the term 'culture' is a contested one, see Masuzawa in Taylor 1998: 70–93.) It is often difficult to say which came first, the religion or the values and ideals – but basically it does not matter; they are now part of an intricate network. In pre-modern times most artwork was produced for use in the relevant religion. How can one study the art without understanding its use and context? Whether the student/teacher/writer is religious or not, one cannot – should not – fail to study the religion of the culture. A study of the history of Gothic churches or of artefacts from primal societies in North America or Africa or the Pacific without setting them in their religious context is inevitably going to fail to understand their importance and 'meaning'. The artist may or may not have been inspired by the religion of his region but it is important to know something of the culture in which the object was produced and used, and religions are commonly an important part of that culture.

In the contemporary world, interaction with other cultures is inevitable, with trade, in the news, when travelling or just watching television; meeting a different cultural tradition is inevitable for most people. To understand a religion, it is essential to have an awareness of the different sets of values and ideals, customs and ethical values. Even if the people one meets from the 'other' culture are not religious, nevertheless their principles, values and ideals will commonly have been formed by the religion of their culture. Although an atheist, I have no doubt that my value system has been formed by Christianity, specifically Anglican Christianity. My attitudes to gender relations, prioritizing one set of values over another, what I consider to be 'good and bad', have all been affected by my general background of which Christianity was a major part.

Racial and religious prejudices are major issues in the contemporary world. They are often interwoven so it is not clear whether someone is discriminated against for being, say, from Pakistan or because of prejudice against Islam, and either can be the excuse for violence. In the 1980s and 1990s I undertook a survey questionnaire among Zoroastrians in America, Australia, Britain, Canada, China, East Africa and Pakistan, and conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Zoroastrians in France and Germany. Many respondents believed that they had faced prejudice, especially in Canada, but there they said they had faced it mainly in obtaining a first job. Once you had shown that you were good at your work, they said, you were accepted. In America one-third of my respondents said that they had experienced discrimination, but what they feared even more was the threat of the 'melting pot' eroding their identity. Some scholars describe the 'melting pot' as a myth, and there have been different terms used, e.g. a 'salad bowl' of cultures. American respondents and informants thought that the 'melting pot' was a threatening reality. The countries in which most people said that they frequently faced discrimination were Germany and Britain – especially in schooling (Hinnells 2005). One major motive for me in pursuing the comparative study of religions (usually abbreviated, conveniently if unfortunately, to comparative religion) is to encourage knowledge and understanding between religions and cultures, based on the assumption that prejudice will be overcome if each knows more about the other. The media and many sections of society have stereotypical images of 'the other'. I hope that knowledge will result in understanding, and thereby better relations between peoples. Above all my 'quest' as a teacher is to enable students to 'see through the spectacles' of another culture. I do not believe that there is a block of knowledge that has to be conveyed. If someone can develop an empathetic understanding of one other culture, the result will be that they are more ready to empathize with other cultures as well. But am I wrong? Is it necessarily the case that the more you know about the other religion, the more you will think positively about people from that religion? Some might be alienated from it. Would people respect Hitler more if they knew more about him? Maybe my motives are 'woolly liberalism'. If I thought that, then I would feel I had wasted much of my academic life.

### Some common presuppositions

Writers have a tendency to think that 'real' Islam is found in the Middle East and in Arabic texts; or 'real' Hinduism is found in Sanskrit texts. R. C. Zaehner, for example, wrote his widely used book *Hinduism*, without ever having been to India (when he went there he did not like it!). What resources he thought he needed to write about Hinduism were his books in his study and in the Bodleian library in Oxford. His methodological assumptions were shared by many of his contemporaries. Of course textual studies are important, both



the 'sacred' texts but also their hermeneutical interpretation by later generations. One problem, however, is that these texts are commonly the domain of the intellectuals and the literary few – widespread literacy is a modern phenomenon, and still not present in many countries. Archaeology can yield important information, but by definition most of the artefacts unearthed tend to be those which were most durable, costly and therefore often came from the domain of the wealthy and powerful, not from the wider population. That is one reason why in this chapter I have stressed the importance of studying various art forms, both 'pop' and 'high' art. Meeting people from the religion studied (where possible) can be very important even if a student is studying ancient texts. It changes one's attitude when seeing how the religious literature is used. The study of religions needs to be 'polymethodic'.

There is a common tendency in religious studies to think of religions as monolithic wholes. It is now quite common to question if there is any such thing as Hinduism, but the same is less true of the study of other religions. For example, is there any such 'thing' as Christianity, or are there are many Christianities? Are Primitive Welsh Methodists a part of the same religion as the Russian Orthodox? Where does one draw the boundary of Christianity – does it include the Mormons or 'The Children of God' (now known as 'The Family'), a group which sought to express the love of God and Jesus through the practice of 'flirty fishing' following the Biblical injunction to become fishers of men (that practice has ceased but the movement remains active and somewhat 'unconventional' – see Van Zandt). Some American tele-evangelists seem to be from a very different religion from that practised in St Peter's in Rome – the Northern Ireland politician and preacher, the Reverend Ian Paisley, thinks so, judging by his tirades against the Pope. If a religious movement calls itself 'Christian' should it not be treated as part of Christianity – or one of the Christianities?

## The new growth in religion: some key questions

In the 1960s many of us forecast that religions would gradually decline, especially, but not only, in the West – we were wrong! In studying religions it is important to ask why things happen and to understand why change comes about.

- In many Western cities, especially in America and the Middle East, but also in the new Russia, in Korea, in Mumbai, religious groups have become more prominent. Why?
- As far as Christianity is concerned, growth is pre-eminently among evangelicals and charismatic groups. Why?
- Whereas secularization was the theme of the 1960s and 1970s, there has been an increase in the number of New Religious Movements (NRMs). It is impossible to estimate the number of people involved, because many of the movements are small, and dual membership also happens. But the number of movements has increased. Why?
- The broad pattern of recruits to NRMs are middle aged, middle class, generally well educated – and often people who had sought but not found religious fulfilment in established religious groups. Why?
- The aspect of various religions that have become more prominent is what is labelled as 'fundamentalism'. Why?

In the 1970s and 1980s sociologists wrote from an entirely secular perspective about migration and diaspora groups in the West. The religion of the migrants and subsequent generations was ignored; they were simply labelled as Hindus, Muslims, etc., but there was

rarely any discussion of patterns of religious change and continuity, nothing about how Hinduism/Islam, etc. have been shaped in the diaspora. Because the scholars were not themselves religious, they tended to look past the religion of the subjects they were writing about. The discussions were about prejudice, housing, working patterns – all, of course, issues of great importance, but writers ignored that which meant most for many migrants – religion.

There was another factor. Writing as someone involved in an aspect of government policy relating to migration in the 1960 and 1970s, frankly it was assumed that migrants' religions would fade over the years and generations as they assimilated. It was assumed that they had left their religion behind back in the old country. These ideas were completely wrong. Studies of transnational or diaspora communities at the turn of the millennium commonly found that migrants tend to be more religious after migration than they were before, because their religion gives them a stake of continuity in a sea of change. Further, recent studies are finding that what might be called the second generation's 'secular ethnicity' – their Pakistani/Indian/Bangladeshi, etc. culture is not as meaningful to the young, who prefer to see themselves as Muslims/Hindus/Zoroastrians, etc. (see for example Williams 2000; Hinnells 2005). Religion is becoming the marker that many young people are taking up. Further, there was an assumption that migrants and their youngsters would be more liberal than the orthodox people back in the old country. This is not necessarily so. The religions of people in South Asia move on (I am less familiar with the literature on South East and East Asians in America); their religions are dynamic and change or 'evolve'. There the changes are often greater than among people in the diaspora, for, in the latter, continuity matters in individual or group identity. An example of this would be the militancy among Sikhs in Britain, and especially in Canada, which was stronger than it was in India following the attack on the Golden Temple. The diaspora impacts on the old country. Since the 1970s the biggest source of income for Pakistan was money sent 'home' by families working overseas.

One common question in many religions is that of authority. To use a Parsi example again: in 1906 in a test case in the Bombay High Court it was decided that the offspring of a Parsi male married out of the community could be initiated, but not the offspring of an intermarried woman because Parsi society was a patrilineal one (there were also some caste-like debates). That judgement continues to be followed by most Parsis in post-colonial, independent India – and by many Parsis in the diaspora. Technically the authority of the High Priests (*Dasturs*) in India is within the walls of their temples (*Atash Bahrams*). But among the traditional/orthodox members in the diaspora their judgements carry considerable weight. These issues came to a head in the 1980s over an initiation in New York of a person neither of whose parents were Zoroastrians. When the furore erupted, opinions in America were evenly divided over whether the authority of a 1906 Bombay High Court judgment in the days of the British Raj, and of the priests 'back' in India, was binding over groups in the West in the third millennium. Lines of authority become complex as religious people adapt to new social, legal and cultural settings.

There is another vitally important factor in the study of religions in their diasporas, namely the implications of religious beliefs and practices of transnational groups for public policy in their new Western homes. Some obvious examples are the implications for healthcare. Since attitudes to pain and suffering are different in different religions or cultures, it can be essential that doctors and nurses are sensitive to, and are therefore knowledgeable about, values, and the priorities of their patients (Hinnells and Porter 1999; Helman 1994). The problems are even more acute in the case of psychiatric illness because what might seem 'abnormal' behaviour in one society may not in another (Rack 1982; Bhugra 1996; Littlewood and Lipsedge 1997; Honwana 1999 on the damage which 'Western' psychological practice can

inflict on – in this case – African peoples who had experienced the trauma of the massacres in Mozambique). Perhaps the instance where informed sensitivity relating to religious/cultural values is of greatest need surrounds death and bereavement. Having ‘a good death’, the ‘proper’ treatment of the body and support for the bereaved all matter hugely to people of any culture. ‘Doing the right thing’ is emotionally vital and that commonly involves religious beliefs and practices even for those who do not consider themselves religious. (Spiro *et al.* 1996; Howarth and Jupp 1996; Irish *et al.* 1993, the last of these is particularly good on a wide range of minority groups in America, e.g. Native Americans.)

The presence of a huge range of religious groups, be that in Australia, Britain, Canada or the USA and elsewhere, has serious implications for social policy and national laws, problems both for the minorities and for governments because many religious traditions evolved outside a Western legal orbit (and others which have not, e.g. the Mormons and polygamy). The obvious example is concerning gender issues where some traditions are in conflict with Western concepts of human rights (Nesbitt 2001; Hawley 1994; Sahgal and Yuval Davis 1992; Gustafson and Juviler 1999). Policymakers concerned with schools and educational policy, crime and punishment all have a need to pay serious attention to the religions in their midst, the values, priorities and principles (see Haddad and Lummis 1987) especially at times such as the start of the twenty-first century, when Muslim feelings run high and where governments all too readily stigmatize minorities; when there is violence, invasion and wars; when there is a breakdown in aspects of human rights, for example the rights of prisoners. Ignoring religious issues and feelings can be exceedingly dangerous.

## Change in the new world

Not only do religions change, so too do the countries to which people migrate. Perhaps the country which has changed the most is the USA. Prior to the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 migration was only from Northern Europe and was mostly of English speakers. Gradually South and East Europeans were allowed in, but from the 1970s Asians were admitted, providing they fitted the criteria of US interests, admitting in particular the highly educated, especially scientists and people in the medical profession. There have long been migrants, many illegal, from Mexico to undertake menial tasks, but with the arrival of educated Asians, perceptions of ‘the other’ began to change. Black settlers from the days of slavery became accepted in a way hardly imaginable in the early 1960s; so that ‘People of Color’ can occupy places of high office, including Obama becoming President of the USA. Attitudes to Asian cultures had changed briefly in the 1890s with the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago and in particular the teaching ‘missions’ of Swami Vivekananda. But it was mainly from the 1960s that interest in Asian religions began, with Rajneesh, the Maharishi, Reverend Moon and the work of the Krishna Consciousness movement. Many American cities have their China towns. In California there are ‘villages’ of nationalities, for example the Iranians settled near Los Angeles (in an area popularly known as ‘Iranglees’). Refugees are not always the poor; many Iranians, for example, after the fall of the Shah brought their substantial wealth with them (see Naficy 1991). In the 1990s interest in ‘Native’ American religions grew. Hindu temples were built following the designs and bearing the images crafted by skilled traditional artists from India. The religious landscape of the US changed dramatically in some forty years (Eck 2000, 2002; Haddad 1991, 2000; Williams 1988, 2000; Warner and Wittner 1998). It, and the landscapes in Australia, Britain and Canada have all changed further in the third millennium (see Hinnells 2010).

In countries where there is substantial religious pluralism, inter-faith activity has been important. What has yet to be adequately studied is the impact of these activities. There are of course many benefits in developing active communications between groups, but I fear there may be problems not yet identified. On the Christian side it tends to be the Protestant churches who are involved, less so the Catholics who are numerically the biggest Christian denomination in the world. From the minority groups' side it tends to involve not necessarily the typical Hindu, Muslim, Zoroastrian, etc., rather those leaders whose linguistic and social skills enable them to interact with the 'outside world'. These 'gatekeepers' of the communities often emphasize the aspects of their religion that will find the most ready acceptance in the outside world, so with Zoroastrians they will emphasize the ancient (indeed the prophet Zoroaster's) emphasis on 'Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds' rather than, say, the purity laws. In time this sanitized version of the religion may impact back into the community. I read in one book of minutes from a Canadian Zoroastrian Group where the managing committee made a conscious decision to change the translation of an Avestan (roughly 'scriptural') text so that it would not offend Muslim guests. This is an issue which merits further study.

## What of theology?

So far this chapter has focused on religious studies and comparative religion because this book is likely to be used mostly in the study of religions. For a member of any religion, its theology is important – the word is usually applied just to Christian thought, but there is comparable activity in most religions, certainly in Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism for example. (The late Ninian Smart often referred to Buddhology – and that may not be inappropriate.) 'Theologizing' is particularly important in many mystical groups, not least in Islam in the West (see Hinnells and Malik 2006). The Mullahs in Iraq and Iran have been prominent in recent times, exercising considerable influence over national politics with their teachings. For the billions of active religious people in the world, working out the implications of their crucial religious teachings for their daily life is of vital importance. Geography is far more important in the study of religions than is generally appreciated. Religious beliefs and ideas, symbols and practice, are naturally affected by social and geographical conditions in which the theology is elaborated. Religion in central New York is bound to have different symbols or images to cater for the different needs from those in a remote village in northern Scotland, which is in turn different in the deserts of Saudi Arabia or in India and Korea. I am fascinated by the differences between urban and rural patterns of religion. It is inevitable that if a theology is to be meaningful to a person, if it is 'to speak to that person', as many Christians would say, then it has to be different from that in a different environment. Such issues have probably been pursued more in the study of Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam than they have with Christianity (a notable exception is Ford 1997).

Can an atheist see the point in studying theology? Its value is that it addresses the big questions which many people want to ask – Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why do the innocent suffer? What non-theologians often overlook with theology is the wide range of subjects involved – textual studies and languages, archaeology, philosophy, ethical issues, history and through applied theology there is an engagement with local communities. If theology was restricted to theological colleges and madressas, etc., the consequence would almost certainly be an increase in sectarian prejudice. But of course many people are religious, though they do not belong to a formal church yet they believe in a God.

A lot of people outside the churches, the mosques, temples, etc. yearn for a 'spiritual' life and to them the study of theology and religious studies can be fulfilling. Secularism may be strong in Britain, but in many other countries religion is alive and well, not least in America.

## The comparative study of religions

I am convinced by Max Müller's dictum: 'He who knows one knows none', that is if you only study one religion, you are not studying religion, but just, say, Christianity (or Zoroastrianism, or Islam, etc.). It is only through some element of comparison that we appreciate just what is, and is not, characteristic of religions generally and what is specific to that religion. The term 'comparative study of religion' is widely suspected, because it was used by particular Western academics, mainly in the nineteenth century, who were trying to prove that Christianity was superior to other religions. Some huge theories about 'religion' were constructed by writers who ranged widely across different religions – from the comfort of their armchairs and without the necessary first-hand knowledge of texts in the original language or without knowing people from that religion. The term 'comparative religion' has also been associated with superficiality because you cannot 'really' know much about a range of religions. But if comparative linguistics and comparative law, etc. are valid subjects then so, surely, 'the comparative study of religion' can be too. Of course I reject any idea of trying to compare to show the superiority of any one religion. When one is comparing it is essential to compare what is comparable, so should we compare the whole of one religion with the whole of another? In my study of the Parsi diaspora, it was helpful to compare the Parsi experience with that of Jews, or Hindus or Sikhs, etc. in that same context, which usually, but not necessarily, means in the same city or region. It has also been helpful to compare Parsis in different countries, e.g. Britain, Canada and the US, or their experience in different cities in the US (e.g. Houston and Chicago). My theoretical question was 'how different is it being a religious Parsi, say, in Los Angeles or in London, or in Sydney or Hong Kong?' (Hinnells 2005). It is regrettable that there are not more comparative studies of diaspora religions in different countries so that we might discover what is, or are, *the American* (British/Australian/Canadian) experience(s). It can also be helpful to compare the theology of different religions, e.g. on issues of attitudes to the body partly for doctors and nurses, or for the understanding of social groups (Law).

Obviously the comparative study of religion should not be concerned only with the modern world. Earlier in my career I was passionately interested in the Roman cult of Mithras (first to fourth centuries CE). In order to understand what was significant about Mithraism it was important to learn about contemporary religious beliefs and practices in the Roman Empire. There was such a rich diversity of religious cults; Mithraism shared features with some (e.g. early Christianity) and not with others. In fact the key breakthrough in the study of Mithraism came when Gordon and Beck began to look at the contemporary Roman ideas on astrology (Beck). By taking a blinkered look at just one cult, it would have been impossible to interpret the archaeological finds of temples and statues (especially difficult because there are virtually no Mithraic texts, only inscriptions and the comments of outsiders). One of the things which disturbs me about some work in New Testament studies and in research on Christianity's early developments is that so much of the evidence is looked at only through the lens of the Judaeo-Christian traditions. Can one really understand the development of the liturgy of the Mass/Eucharist/Lord's Supper without looking at the role of sacred meals in the contemporary Roman religions? Nothing exists in a vacuum. It seems odd that so many books and courses on the philosophy of religion look at key figures such as Hume and Kant

without looking at their contemporary world; or studying the Biblical work of Bultmann without looking at the anti-Semitic culture in which he lived and worked and which many would say coloured his account of Judaism. Taking the context seriously, comparing other related phenomena, is crucial.

## Bias

What of the theme of insider/outside? Can a person outside the religion really understand what it is like to be a Zoroastrian – or whatever? Even after thirty-five years of living with and studying Zoroastrians I think it is impossible for me to understand them and their religion fully. I may get close to it, but as an outsider my instincts, my basic thoughts and aspirations, etc. are, for better or worse, English. Ultimately we cannot change our basic conditioning; we cannot step outside our identity. We may – should – seek to go as far as possible in empathy and with understanding but we are all products of our own history.

It is vital that students and scholars should be conscious of their own motivations or biases – because we all have them. It is the ones we are not aware of that are the most dangerous: to illustrate the point with a story against myself. I am currently writing a book about the Parsis of Bombay in the days of the Raj. The book's structure seemed clear: defining key periods, important individual and social groupings; having worked on the history of temples, doctrinal changes, visited India many times over thirty years, and having worked with a high priest and each of us having the other as a house guest, I felt close to the community. Then a book came out which collected the oral histories of a broad spectrum of Parsis; some highly educated some not, some famous others not, about their personal private religious feelings (Kreyenbroek with Munshi 2001). It made me realize that with my atheistic attitude, despite my contacts with many Parsis, I had completely failed to look at the widespread belief in the miraculous powers of prayer; the importance of mantras to preserve people from misfortune and to bless and aid them in a project, i.e. the reality of miracles for many people. I had failed to look for what I don't believe in.

There is, of course, the alternative danger of being biased in favour of your subject. One can normally tell the denomination of a Church historian, or a theologian, from his/her writings. Authors rarely draw conclusions at variance with the teaching in their denomination. The same can be true of internal accounts of other religions, for example Orthodox and Liberal accounts of Judaism. There is often an honourable desire when making a university teaching appointment to look for someone who knows the tradition from the inside, be (s)he Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Hindu, etc. Of course they can have a depth of insight that is beyond the outsider. But, as with Christianity, in principle the appointment should be solely on academic grounds. Many of those grounds, e.g. linguistic facility, may well make an insider the right appointment. But in recent years there have been difficult cases where such an appointee has been summoned to their religious council of elders and reprimanded for not teaching a particular perspective. There have been cases where an insider from one section of a religion has denied the others were true believers, but were heretics. This has happened in Christianity also when in recent years some theologians had papal support withdrawn and were not allowed to teach in a Catholic institution because they had 'deviated' from authorized Church teaching. There can be difficulties with insiders, as well as with outsiders.

Some time ago a publisher asked me to write a book on Zoroastrianism and the Parsis for English schools. It began to be used by Parsis in their Sunday schools and in some adult education classes. When the English edition lapsed, the Parsis in Bombay reprinted it and



still sell it there and in some other centres around the world. At first it seemed to be the greatest possible compliment. Gradually however I began to worry. When I visited some communities my own words were coming back at me. With plant photography one must take great care never to break or destroy anything that is being photographed. How much greater care should one take with a living religion (especially one that is declining numerically at a great rate)? Should you affect the people you study? Can you get too close to your 'field'? Is it fanciful to think that you can avoid having an impact? What is the impact of a group of students going to a mosque or temple? Does it change an act of worship if there is an 'audience' of outsiders watching?

## Using the right words

There are numerous debates about the meaning of key terms such as 'religion', 'culture', 'race', etc. This section is not about these important terms (a useful book for that is Taylor 1998), but rather it is concerned with terms that raise religious issues.

The first is to do with translations for key religious concepts. An obvious one is: should one write 'Allah', or 'God'? My vocabulary changes according to the audience. With Zoroastrians and students I use 'Ahura Mazda' (Pahlavi: Ohrmazd) rather than 'God'. The danger is of unconsciously importing Christian notions into the concept of the ultimate. However, if talking to the general public or perhaps in a lecture that is not essentially about theology the word 'God' may be appropriate, otherwise there are so many technical words that the listener (or reader) will switch off. But there are some technical words that it is essential to use because their obvious equivalent Western term would give a misleading impression. For example the terms 'spirit and flesh' are inappropriate for the Zoroastrian concepts of *menog* and *getig*. The *menog* is the invisible, intangible, the realm of the soul, *getig* is the visible and tangible world, but the *getig* world is not a subordinate or 'lower' world; it is almost the fulfilment of the *menog* – it is its manifestation. There is nothing of the Hellenistic 'spirit and flesh' dualism. A Zoroastrian could never make the connection 'the world, the flesh and the devil' for the *getig* world is the Good Creation of Ohrmazd. Misery, disease and death are the assault of the evil force, Ahriman, on the Good Creation; human duty is to fight evil and protect the Good Creation so that at the renovation *menog* and *getig* will come together to form the best of all possible worlds. Zoroastrians do not use the term 'the end of the world' for that would be Ohrmazd's defeat; instead they refer to the 'renovation', the time when all will be restored or refreshed and again becomes perfect as it was before the assault of evil. 'Spirit and flesh' therefore involve a different cosmology from *menog* and *getig*.

Sometimes scholars use Christian terms for concepts or practices in order to help the reader but it can lead to misrepresentation. For example, Zaehner uses the word 'sacrament' to describe one of the higher Zoroastrian ceremonies, the *Yasna* in which the *haoma* (*soma* in Hinduism) plant is pounded with pestle and mortar. The ceremony is led by two priests and can be performed at a time of death or for blessings. Laity may attend but rarely do so for the priests offer it on their behalf. This is Zaehner's description of the rite:

The Haoma ... is not only a plant ... it is also a god, and the son of Ahura Mazdah. In the ritual the plant-god is ceremonially pounded in a mortar; the god, that is to say is sacrificed and offered up to his heavenly Father. Ideally Haoma is both priest and victim – the Son of God, then offering himself up to his heavenly Father. After the offering

priest and faithful partake of the heavenly drink, and by partaking of it they are made to share in the immortality of the god. The sacrament is the earnest of everlasting life which all men will inherit in soul and body in the last days. The conception is strikingly similar to that of the Catholic Mass.

(Zaehner 1959: 213)

Of course the Catholic convert, Zaehner, intended this as a very respectful account of the rite. But it bears no resemblance whatever to the Zoroastrian understanding of the ritual. There is a huge danger in failing to see the religion through the insider's spectacles.

An earlier writer, J. H. Moulton, is another good example of well-intentioned scholarly misrepresentation of another religion. Moulton was a Professor of New Testament Studies but took a keen interest in Zoroastrianism. He was also a Methodist Minister. In his Hibbert Lectures in 1912, he applied contemporary Protestant methods of Biblical scholarship to the study of Zoroastrianism. He applied the contemporary assumption that religions are divided between the priestly or prophetic forms; the former being associated with superstition and the latter with visionary, personal religious experience. He argued that since Zoroaster was clearly a prophet he could not have been a priest, so when Zoroaster refers to himself as a priest (which he explicitly did) then Moulton concluded he must have been speaking metaphorically. He concluded:

That Zarathushtra is teacher and prophet is written large over every page of the Gathas [the poetic passages deriving from Zoroaster himself]. He is perpetually striving to persuade men of the truth of a great message, obedience to which will bring them everlasting life ... He has a revelation ... There is no room for sacerdotal functions as a really integral part of such a man's gospel; and of ritual or spells we hear as little as we expect to hear ...

(p. 118)

A traditional Zoroastrian (or a Catholic Christian for that matter) would not make such a distinction between priestly and prophetic religion. These are but two examples of a widespread trend to impose Western ways of thinking, or methods of analysis, on non-Western phenomena. Misrepresentation does not arise only from prejudice against a religion, but can come equally from the well-intentioned scholar. Many scholars find it helpful to draw a typology of religions and these can be useful in classifying data, but they can also result in trying to fit data into a false dichotomy; it has to be 'either this, or that or that', etc. It rarely allows for 'this and that' – in Moulton's case either a prophet or a priest, but Zoroaster could be described as 'both ... and'.

Some of the most common words used in writing about religion are inappropriate or at least demand substantial clarification. 'Praying' and 'prayers' are words used in many religions, for example, in Christianity and Zoroastrianism. But the activities they refer to are somewhat different. In Western Christianity, prayers are in the vernacular and it is thought important to know what the words mean. Be the prayers intercessions or thanksgiving, there is an element of conversation with God. Prayers in Zoroastrianism are rather different. They should be in the ancient 'scriptural' Avestan language in which it is believed Zoroaster prayed to Ohrmazd. It does not matter if the worshipper does not understand them, indeed orthodox Parsi priests in India argue that it is unhelpful to understand the words, for if you do then you think about what they mean and thereby limit yourself to mere human conceptual thought. By praying in



Avestan one seeks to share something of the visionary experience of the prophet, the purpose of prayer is to achieve direct experience of Ohrmazd in a trance-like state.

There are numerous terms in common usage which have presuppositions that merit questioning. The term 'faith community' implies that 'faith', i.e. a set of beliefs, is what defines a community and that is a Christian and intellectual understanding of the 'other'. For Jews and Parsis religion is to do with identity, a question of community boundaries, it is to do with who or what you are, something that is in the blood, the genes. For Parsis in particular, identity, far more than any set of beliefs, is what matters. For Muslims also it is a questionable term, since 'just' believing is inadequate, Islam is a way of life.

Another term in common usage which can cause religious offence is 'Old Testament'. Orthodox Jews object to it for it implies old, redundant, replaced. Most say that they have become accustomed to this Christian abuse of their scripture. Their preferred term though is 'Hebrew Bible'. The usual Christian reaction is to point out that a part (but only a very small part) is in Aramaic. But should students of religion use terms and phrases that can cause religious offence? The question becomes sharper when the word is used in the naming of university departments, of academic societies and books.

## Conclusion

Whether one is religious or not, the study of religions is a key to understanding other cultures; religions have been powerful forces throughout history in any country, sometimes working for good and sometimes working to destroy. They have inspired some of the greatest and most noble of acts; equally they have inspired some of the most ruthless brutality. They have been the patrons – and the destroyers – of arts and cultures. But they are central to much social and political history. Scholars who have left religions out of their pictures when writing about various societies, be they Hindus in Britain or Muslims in America, are excluding a key element from their study. It is essential to know the values, ideals and priorities of those from another culture or religion with whom one comes into contact. Globalization makes such contact with 'the other' common. Religions might be compared to diamonds; they have many facets; they can be seen from many angles, but the pictures are too complex for any one writer to see the whole. This book looks at a range of approaches to these diamonds.

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# The study of religion in historical perspective

Eric J. Sharpe

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### Motive, material, method

The academic study of anything requires that those involved should consider at least three questions: why, what and how? The first demands that we examine our *motive*; the second makes us consider our *material* – what do we accept as admissible evidence? The third, and most difficult, level of inquiry is concerned with *method*: how do we deal with the material we have at hand? How do we organize it, and with what end in view ('motive' again)? A century ago, it was not uncommon to speak in this connection of 'the science of religion' (German: *Religionswissenschaft*) – a form of words no longer current in English. What has been identified as the foundation document carried the title *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (Friedrich Max Müller 1873). According to Müller, such a science of religion was to be 'based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important religions of mankind' (1873: 34). It was, then, to be impartial and scientific by the standards of the age and based on the best material available at the time.

The history of the study of religion since the Enlightenment can never be told in full. There is simply too much of it, and it is subdivided in too many ways: by period, by geographical and cultural area and by the 'disciplines' cherished by most academics. The one history can be described as being made up of many smaller histories – for instance the history of the study of everything from Animism and Anabaptism to Zoroastrianism and Zen Buddhism. The field may be divided by subject matter; along national lines; depending on where in the world the tradition of study has been pursued; in relation to events in world and local history; and so on, virtually ad infinitum. No one can cover the whole of the area.

The words 'the study of religion' obviously convey different meanings to different people. For most of human history and in most cultures, they would have conveyed no meaning at all. To 'study' in the sense of standing back to take a coolly uncommitted view of anything, was not unknown in the ancient world, but it was uncommon, being cultivated by 'philosophers' – lovers of wisdom – but hardly elsewhere. Similarly, where what we call 'religion' is concerned: gods, goddesses, spirits, demons, ghosts and the rest, people knew and generally respected them (along with what it was hoped was the right way to please, or at least not to offend them); 'religion' they did not.

These supernatural beings – who were they? In the ancient world, they were envisaged in human terms: a hierarchy reaching all the way from a royal family down through nobles and artisans to mischief-makers: imps and demons of the sort who spread disease and curdle milk. There were the ghosts of the departed, still in many ways close at hand and with their

remains buried nearby. (The unburied tended to turn into peculiarly nasty ghosts.) Sun, moon and stars watched; storms rampaged; forests and mountains brooded; powerful animals marked out their territories. 'Power' was perhaps the key to the world as archaic man saw it – power of heat over cold, light over darkness, life over death – and those who knew how to control that power became themselves powerful.

The process must have begun at some point in time, somewhere in the world, but we have no way of knowing when or where that point might have been (absolute origins of anything are always out of reach). When our records, such as they are, begin – numerical dates are worse than useless in such matters – we are already able to sense the presence of something or someone like a proto-shaman: at one and the same time a ruler and a servant of the spirits, a controller of rituals and an interpreter of laws and customs. From what we know of later shamanism, it would seem that such persons were servants of their respective societies by virtue of their knowledge of the spirit-world and their ability to establish and maintain contact with it. Shamanism 'proper' belongs in the context of hunter-gatherer societies, and as the structure of human societies changed, so too did the function of mediation between the tangible, everyday world and the unseen forces that were believed to control it.

The shaman was chosen and prepared for his (or in some cases, her) work, by aptitude, discipline and application, and by initiation – a pattern that survived most tenaciously in the trade guilds and those of the learned professions, which (untypically in the modern West) treasured their own past. In more complex societies – that of the agriculturalists and fisherfolk in their settled environments, that of the city-dwellers within their walls, and so on down to our own day and its bizarre preoccupation with economics – the functions of the shaman (serving the people by mediating between one order of being and another) have multiplied and diversified in an intriguing way.

This is not to say that the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury, or for that matter the Chief Rabbi or the Dalai Lama, or the Shankaracharya of Puri, are crypto-shamans: merely that their training on the one hand and their functions on the other, are of a kind one recognizes. (How well or how indifferently individuals may fill high offices has no bearing on the question.) Each has a position in an ongoing tradition, and is responsible for its continuation. Here we have the first, and the dominant, sense in which what we call 'the study of religion' functions. It is appropriate to call this a *discipline* in the strictest sense, an apprenticeship in which a pupil (*discipulus*) is taught by a master (*magister*) inside the bounds of a system, within the frontiers of which both knew precisely what was to be taught to whom, and why. Since the wellbeing of individuals and societies depended in large measure on the maintenance of what it is perfectly proper to call 'law and order', much of what had to be learned was concerned with these concepts and their ramifications.

In many cultures, 'law' (in Sanskrit, *dharma*, in Hebrew, *torah* and in Latin, *religio*, even the much misunderstood Australian Aboriginal word 'dreaming') and 'religion' are almost synonymous. What one supposes began as habit hardened first into custom and eventually into law, on the basis of which boundaries could be set up and wars fought. In the ancient world, no one expected laws, or religions, to be all of one kind. The 'when in Rome ...' principle was, and often still is, no more than common sense: deities, like humans and animals, were to some extent territorial, and to pay one's respects to a *genius loci* was no more than courtesy. Customs differed in much the same way as languages differed, and normally even the learned would know very little of what went on outside the family. 'Study' was for the most part concerned only with the family's (tribe's, nation's) traditions, history, sacred

places and the rituals associated with them. In time, as more of this material was committed to writing, the study of those writings assumed a central place in the student's apprenticeship: often through memorization and constant repetition and chanting, in a setting in which the student's submissive obedience was simply taken for granted. This pattern of education is still operative today, though unevenly; generally speaking, Judaism, Islam, the ancient traditions of the East – varieties of Hinduism and Buddhism – have held fast to the method where instruction in the secular West has not.

What did the student make of other peoples' traditions, their deities, their rituals and their laws? In the ancient world, there were, roughly speaking, three alternatives: to ignore them altogether (the majority view), to observe them as curiosities, without taking them too seriously, and to condemn them as evil. Let us consider the second and third of these.

Greek and Roman 'philosophers' and historians were in many cases intrigued by the customs of the various peoples they met around the Mediterranean and as far afield as northern Europe. Perhaps they did not take their own national myths and rituals too seriously. At all events, the Greek and Roman historiographers, beginning with Herodotus (died approx. 420 BCE) showed a certain amount of interest in other people's behaviour where gods and the like were concerned. Berosus and Manetho (both third century BCE) wrote about ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Herodotus having previously written about the Persians. In the second century BCE Pausanias compiled an extensive and invaluable account of rituals and places of worship in his native Greece. The Romans for their part made fewer contributions, though special mention may be made of the accounts of the customs of the Celtic and Germanic tribes contained in 'war reports' like Caesar's *De bello Gallico* and Tacitus' *Germania*. Such writings as these (and there were many more) were compiled as information and entertainment, and to some extent propaganda: not as systematic accounts of anything. Tacitus 'studied' Celtic and Germanic tribes because they were troublesome to the Roman legions, and that was all.

The Hebraic attitude to such things could not have been more different. Israel knew all about 'the nations' and their deities, and trusted none of them. To the extent that other people's religion appears in the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament, it does so under a black cloud. Egypt and Mesopotamia – oppression. Canaan – apostasy. Persia – a brief glimpse of light. Rome – more oppression, this time apparently terminal, as the Temple was laid waste and the people scattered. Understanding? What was there to understand, except that the gods of the nations were impostors, small-time crooks, perhaps not without local influence, but entirely incapable of any act of creation. Least of all could they create a world, as Yahweh had done. They were mere 'idols', man-made and powerless. It is all summed up in two verses, 'For all the gods of the peoples are idols; but the Lord made the heavens' (Ps. 96:5); and 'The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens' (Jer. 10:11).

There was the additional frightening possibility that 'idols' were nests of 'evil spirits' – unseen vermin whose existence was never properly explained, but whose malevolence no one in the ancient world seriously have doubted.

We find a partial relaxation of this uncompromising attitude in respect of the worship of natural phenomena – sun, moon and stars. These were at least God's creations, and not man-made objects, and may therefore be admired for the sake of their Creator, to whom ideally they ought to point the way. Human beings, however, are incorrigibly obtuse, and go off in pursuit of 'idols' even so. A classical statement of this attitude is to be found in Paul's Letter to the Romans (1:20–23):

Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made ... [but to no avail] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles ...

All of this carried over into early Christianity, later Judaism and later still, Islam. There is one God, who has created, and will ultimately judge, the world; he has made his will known to humanity through his servants the Prophets, though his power may be recognized in what he has created. To 'study' in this connection was to know and obey the will of God, as set forth in successive writings – historical records, prophecies, hymns, statutes and apocalyptic, visionary writings. We have no need to enter into further details, except to point out that in Judaism the heart of the matter is the Law (Torah) itself, in Christianity the person and work of Jesus Christ, and in Islam again the Law, as revealed afresh to Muhammad; in all three traditions, the dividing line between truth and falsehood was sharply marked (in some modern versions of Judaism and especially Christianity, it has grown less so, modernism and Islam meanwhile remaining largely irreconcilable).

All this stands out in sharp contrast to the spirit of detached inquiry we find in Greek philosophy. Where the Classical cultures had philosophers, the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim tradition had prophets and their disciples, whose business was less to inquire than to obey. The tension between them has been felt repeatedly in Western religious and intellectual history, and it is well that we recognize where it all began. On the one side there are the conservatives, who love and respect tradition and continuity; on the other there are the inquirers, the radicals, the freethinkers (or however else fashion may label them). The terminology is constantly changing, but today's alternatives would seem to be 'fundamentalist' (meaning conservative) and 'pluralist' (which may mean anything, but is obviously anti-fundamentalist).

What of the Orient in all this? Here we must be brief, but in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, to 'study religion' has always meant to place oneself under spiritual guidance, either by private arrangement with a guru, or as a member of a community of monks or nuns. In either case, the disciple's relationship to a guru has always been paramount: to be accepted as a disciple, or a novice, is to be prepared to show unquestioning obedience to the guru in everything, however trivial or apparently unreasonable. Not until you have made your submission in faith (Sanskrit: *shraddha*) to a teacher, can you begin to be taught. *What* is to be taught, it is entirely up to the guru to decide. The process of teaching and learning is strictly one-way, from the guru to the disciple, whose role is generally limited to the asking of respectful questions and absorbing the teacher's answers, either in writing or (more often) by memorization – a method still common enough in our own day, despite repeated attempts to discourage it.

We who live in the age of information, with every conceivable fact instantly available to anyone capable of pressing the right computer keys in the right order, find it hard to imagine a time when very little was known about our world and its inhabitants, and what little was known, had to be fitted into existing paradigms. At the end of the first millennium, the West divided religion into four categories, and only four: Christendom, Jewry, Islam and 'paganism' – an *omnium gatherum* for everything that did not sort under the first three. As to the study of religion, one studied within the framework of one's own tradition. To be sure, there was a certain curiosity value in other people's customs: travellers' tales have never lacked an audience, and although the genre invited exaggeration and a concentration on



the previously unknown and the bizarre, world literature between the fifth and the fifteenth centuries (the 'dark ages' of Western culture) was full of fresh information concerning people's beliefs and customs, myths and rituals.

In his fascinating book *The Discoverers* (1983) Daniel Boorstin wrote that:

The world we now view from the literate West – the vistas of time, the land and the seas, the heavenly bodies and our own bodies, the plants and animals, history and human societies past and present – had to be opened for us by countless Columbuses ...  
(p. xv)

Discoveries are not inventions. One discovers what is already there to be discovered; one invents what is *not* already there. Discovery is in a sense the archaeology of ideas, the finding afresh of what, somewhere and at some time, was once common knowledge but which the world has since forgotten. But having discovered, one has to find some way of incorporating the new information into one's existing frames of reference. In the Christian West, that meant in practice sorting each new wave of information into the categories set forth in the Bible, with occasional footnotes supplied by 'the ancients'. There were true and false gods and goddesses; there was the sin of idolatry; there were sacrifices offered to 'demons' and various related abominations. This was the only viable principle of measurement: by reference to the (so far) unquestioned and unquestionable data of revelation, as stated in Holy Writ and interpreted by the Holy Church. Not until the advent of evolutionary theory toward the end of the nineteenth century did the would-be student of religion have an alternative method to fall back upon.

'Discoveries' came thick and fast, once navigation had become a tolerably exact business, and exploration by sea (as distinct from the overland treks of antiquity) developed. Judaism and Islam were already known, though little understood – in Islam's case, against a background of fear fuelled by the Crusades. The Enlightenment (German, *Aufklärung*) was more interested in China and its (apparently) rational approach to religion than in alternative monotheism or pagan superstitions. Most of the Enlightenment's information about China came directly from the reports of Jesuit missionaries, among whom the first was Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who idealized Chinese 'religion' as a system without 'priestcraft' (the bugbear of the Age of Reason), but in possession of high moral virtues. At much the same time other Jesuits were writing about the indigenous peoples of north America in similar terms; the phrase 'the noble savage' seems to have been coined by John Dryden (1631–1700) in his *Conquest of Granada* (1670), the point being that virtue can and does flourish beyond the boundaries of Western urban civilization. The 'noble savage' was (or seemed to be) the antithesis of modern urban man – an image which has since proved remarkably resilient.

What manner of religion might 'the noble savage' have known and observed? On this point, the unorthodox Western intelligentsia in the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century were of one mind. Ruling out supernatural revelation and its (supposed) manifestations as a matter of principle, but retaining a core of belief in a divine moral order, there was proposed a system of basic religion, resting on five 'common notions': that there is a God, a supreme power; that this power is to be worshipped; that the good order or disposition of the human faculties is the best part of divine worship; that vices and crimes must be eliminated through sorrow and repentance; and that there is a future life, in which virtue will be rewarded and vice punished. This was 'natural religion', later known as 'deism'. First formulated in the early seventeenth century by Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648) in his



*De Veritate* (1624), and restated with variations ever since, 'natural religion' of this kind was passionately anti-ecclesiastical and contemptuous of rites and rituals, doctrines and dogmas, which it dismissed as 'priestcraft'. Its adherents long found access to faculties of theology/divinity practically impossible, but they were able to exercise an indirect influence on the study of religion from elsewhere in the academy.

## The nineteenth century

Between 1801 and 1901 the Western world passed through a time of unprecedented intellectual change. At the dawn of the century, Napoleon, having failed to conquer Egypt, was on the point of trying to impose his will on Europe; the formality of what Tom Paine called 'The Age of Reason' had begun to lose ground to those who valued the spontaneous more than the coolly calculated, and the natural more than the artificial. The Romantic movement (as it came to be called) left its mark on literature, music (where Beethoven and Berlioz were the greatest romantics of all) – and on both the practice and the study of religion. It did not begin in 1801. Romanticism had been years in the preparation among those for whom the dry categories of order for order's sake had no appeal.

Where the practice of religion in the West was concerned, little in 1801 differed greatly from what it had been a century earlier, except perhaps the new factor of Protestant revivalism which had begun with the Wesleys in England in the 1730s, and which in the nineteenth century was to lead to the Protestant missionary movement, and indirectly to the making available of vast quantities of material (of unequal value, naturally) for scholars to work on. Otherwise there were Protestants, Catholics and freethinkers; outside, there were Jews, Muslims and assorted pagans, about whom little was known other than by rumour and hearsay. A massive work like William Hurd's *New Universal History of the Religious Rites, Ceremonies and Customs of the Whole World* (1788) is instructive in this regard, representing as it does what the educated but non-specialist reader might find of religious interest in the foundation year of the New South Wales penal colony. It was not the only compilation of its kind: the putting together of encyclopaedias was common enough in the eighteenth century. But it is instructive in its concentration on 'rites, ceremonies and customs', on the externals of religion in the non-Christian world. Often it was wildly inaccurate, sometimes to the modern reader (of whom I suspect I may be the only one) reminiscent of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. In those days the heathen were expected to perform bizarre rituals and carry out abominable sacrifices in the name of their idols – the Bible said so! What else there might be behind the rituals, very few in the West knew.

The tide was about to turn, however. China, the West knew after a fashion. Before, almost until the end of the eighteenth century, India was a mystery within an enigma within a locked box. The Muslim north was known in part. Its official language was Persian before it was English; and it was through the medium of Persian that the West first gained a limited access to, first, Hindu laws (Halhed, *A Code of Gentoo Laws*, 1776, collected in Sanskrit, translated into Persian, then retranslated into English), and later, a number of *Upanishads*, this time from Sanskrit to Persian to Latin. Then in 1785 there appeared Charles Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavadgita*, followed four years later by William Jones' translation of Kalidasa's play *Sakuntala* (1789), both this time directly from Sanskrit to English. No 'temple of doom' here. Instead, an India heavy with the scent of jasmine and sandalwood and a home, not of grotesque ceremonies but of timeless wisdom.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, while the fearsome figure of Napoleon was rampaging around Europe, India was coming to serve Europe and America as a landscape of the mind, and an antidote to the crass materialism that had emerged in the wake of the industrial revolution. This was not the 'real' India at all, but it served its purpose. And when it transpired that there was more to Indian thought than caste, cow-worship and suttee, India grasped and held the romantic imagination. One thing, however, was lacking: knowledge of Hindum's most ancient scriptures, known collectively as the Veda (meaning knowledge), of which the oldest part, a collection of over a thousand ritual texts, was the *Rigveda*. Long kept secret from outsiders, its Sanskrit text was finally published, at the East India Company's expense, between 1849 and 1862, under the editorship of a German scholar working in Oxford, Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900).

Müller was a pivotal figure in the study of religion in the West during the second half of the nineteenth century. He belonged firmly within the orbit of German Romanticism (his father wrote the poems set to music by Schubert as *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Winterreise*); he was a good friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and is said to have been a fine pianist. In religious terms he was (for want of a better word) a broad-church liberal Christian. One thing he was not: he was not a Darwinian.

Between 1801 and 1860 the raw material on which the study of religion is based multiplied at an extraordinary rate. What most of all captured the attention of a broader public was that involving the 'truth' of the Bible, and especially its chronology. We have no need to go into detail, though we may need to remind ourselves that in these years (before 1860), the study of religion sorted into two separate compartments: that which related to the world of the Bible (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, Iran, Greece and Rome); and that which did not (the rest), with Islam somewhere in between.

## The Victorian anthropologists

Those who persist in believing 'the Victorian Age' to have been a time of smug self-satisfaction in matters of religion, delude themselves. For one thing, it was a very long period of time, and little of what was taken for granted in the 1830s still held good in 1900. No doubt there were smug and self-satisfied individuals, then as always, human nature being what it is. But with regard to religion, the second half of the nineteenth century saw practically everything called into question, somewhere, by someone. Then, as later, the chief focus of controversy was the word of the Bible: was it, or was it not, 'true' and therefore infallible, or at least authoritative? And if not, what leg has faith left to stand on?

On the negative side, some controversialists quite clearly said and wrote what they did chiefly to challenge the authority of the Church. The world could not have been created as described in Genesis, in 4004 BC. There had never been an Adam and Eve, a flood, a parting of the Red Sea. Further on, there had been no Virgin Birth, no Resurrection – the existence of Jesus himself was at least doubtful, and so on.

There was nothing new about this, battles having been fought over precisely this territory since the days of Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the deists in the early seventeenth century. But a blanket condemnation of 'miracles' and the supernatural was one thing; proposing a plausible alternative was another matter entirely. Before the middle years of the nineteenth century, though there was no shortage of fresh material, there was no comprehensive method with which to treat it, once one had abandoned the hard-and-fast 'truth-versus-falsehood' categories of Christian tradition. *Evolution* filled that gap from the 1880s on.

Say 'evolution' and one thinks at once of Charles Darwin and his epoch-making book *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwin had very little to say directly about religion, either for or against (Ellegård 1958). Some of his contemporaries were however less cautious. The most widely read of those writing in English was the popular philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1904), who took Darwin's biological theory and made it into a universal explanation of life on earth and its social institutions – government, language, literature, science, art and of course religion. All these things began with simple forms: *homo sapiens* had evolved out of something prior to and simpler than man (exactly what, no one knew, though the hunt for 'fossil man' was pursued with diligence); religion had therefore evolved out of something cruder than *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. What that 'something' might be, no one could possibly know (Trompf 1990). Conjecture was inevitable. Of the various theories put forward in the late nineteenth century, that labelled 'animism' has stood the test of time better than most. The term was launched by the Oxford anthropologist E. B. Tylor, in his important book *Primitive Culture* (1871), who declared that religion began with 'a belief in Spiritual Beings', prompted by reflection on the phenomena of dream and death. Suppose that I dream about my father, who died in 1957 (I do, as it happens): is that evidence that he is still alive in some other order of being? If majorities count, most of the world's population has always believed so. There is then at least some reason to inscribe 'animism' on religion's birth certificate, as indeed those wanting religion without revelation urged.

But might there perhaps be some even earlier stage, less explicit than animism? Tylor's successor at Oxford, R. R. Marett, thought there was, and called it 'pre-animism', without dreams and reflections on the mystery of death, but with a sense of the uncanny and of supernatural power (Polynesian/Melanesian *mana*). Marett's book *The Threshold of Religion* (1909) set out the arguments.

A quite different attack on the animistic theory came from the Scottish man of letters Andrew Lang (1844–1912), who had begun as a classicist and specialist on Homer, was for a time a disciple of Tylor, but in the end struck out on his own. From his Tylorian years comes his first anthropological book, *Custom and Myth* (1884). *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887) marks a transition, and his mature position was stated in *The Making of Religion* (1898). Lang's final argument was that there was no way in which animism was capable of evolving into ethical monotheism. Again and again the anthropological evidence had recorded belief in 'high gods' – conceptions of a Supreme Being, divine rulers and creators – which the evolutionists had simply chosen to ignore or dismiss as proof of 'the missionaries' tampering with the evidence. Lang tried to let the evidence speak for itself. He never claimed to have cracked the code, merely that '... alongside of their magic, ghosts, worshipful stones ... most of the very most backward races have a very much better God than many races a good deal higher in civilization ...' (Sharpe 1986: 63).

Lang was a public figure only in what he wrote. Having resigned his Oxford fellowship on his marriage, he held no farther academic position, living entirely by his pen. His versatility was extraordinary – historian, novelist, minor poet, psychic researcher, biographer, translator of Homer: he was sometimes ironical and often inaccurate, but never dull. His anthropological investigations were undertaken almost in his spare time, though he once confessed that given the opportunity, he might have devoted more time to anthropology. As it was, his hints and suggestions proved extremely fruitful. When he died in 1912, the Austrian ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt had just published the first volume of his massive work *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (in the end twelve volumes in all), in which Lang's 'high gods' were taken very seriously indeed.

Another celebrated Scottish anthropologist to leave his mark on the study of religion was James George Frazer (1854–1951), still remembered as the tireless and unworldly author of *The Golden Bough* (1922), a compendium of practically everything sorting under what was then called ‘primitive’ religion, including folklore (domestic anthropology). For many years now, Frazer has been branded the archetypal ‘armchair anthropologist’, all of whose material was second-hand, having been raked together by casual observers whose motives were variable and whose accuracy was open to question. The criticism was justified up to a point, but Frazer did what he could to verify his sources, and was well aware of the risks he was running. In any case, the task of pulling together the growing bodies of evidence concerning archaic and vernacular religions needed to be undertaken by someone.

Frazer might well have become the first professor of comparative religion in the UK. In 1904 he was approached with a view to taking up such a post at the University of Manchester, but in the end declined, on the grounds that he was not a fit and proper person to instruct young men preparing for the Christian ministry. One wonders what might have become of the study of religion at Manchester, had Frazer’s scruples been overcome!

## The history of religion school

Between about 1890 and the outbreak of the First world War in 1914, a prominent position in Protestant religious scholarship was occupied by a group of fairly young biblical scholars, most of them Germans, known collectively as *die Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (the history of religion (not ‘religions’) school). Their leaders were Wilhelm Bousset on the New Testament and Hermann Gunkel on the Old Testament side, and their chief theorist was Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), who, almost alone of the group, is still read today, thanks largely to his book *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (1902, belated Eng. tr. *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, 1971). The principles of the movement were threefold: first, to focus on religion rather than on theology; second, to concentrate on popular expressions of religion rather than on high-level statements *about* religion; and thirdly, to examine closely the environment of the Old and New Testaments, rather than merely treating them as the free-floating (and divinely inspired) texts of orthodox tradition. The productivity of the young men making up the movement was remarkable, though relatively little of their work found its way into English. The trouble was that, like the Deists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were generally political radicals, socialists and populists at a time and in a country where socialism was held to be only one step removed from treason.

To the members of the school, the world of scholarship nevertheless owes a great deal, for liberating the study of the Bible from its dogmatic straitjacket, for opening up the worlds of ‘later Judaism’ and the Hellenistic mystery religions, and for demonstrating that conspicuous piety is no substitute for sound scholarship where the study of religion is concerned. Special mention may be made of their work on the religious traditions of ancient Iran, Egypt and Mesopotamia. Iran was important mainly because of the towering figure of the prophet Zoroaster/Zarathustra (perhaps c.1200 BCE), whose teachings seemed to anticipate those of the Judaeo-Christian tradition at a number of points, in particular eschatology (death, judgement and the future life). Also, there were myriad points of contact between Iran and India. There emerged a new label, ‘Indo-European’, as an alternative to ‘Aryan’ as a blanket term for everything from the languages of north India to those of northern Europe. (The sinister overtones of ‘Aryan’ as the equivalent of ‘non-Jewish’ came later.)

Other advances that were registered toward the end of the nineteenth century in the academic study of religion concerned Egypt and Mesopotamia, thanks in both cases to the decipherment of what had previously been unreadable scripts, hieroglyphic and cuneiform respectively. We cannot go into details, but in both cases sober history and wild surmise combined. In Egypt's case, speculation went all the way from the bizarre theories of the Mormons (invented before the hieroglyphs had been deciphered) to the Egyptian origins of monotheism, which Sigmund Freud wrote about and may even have believed in, and the universal diffusionism of the Australian Grafton Elliot Smith, which claimed Egypt as the cradle of the whole of western civilization. A controversial expression of what came to be called 'pan-Babylonism' was a series of lectures on 'Babylon and the Bible' (*Babel und Bibel*), delivered in Berlin by Friedrich Delitzsch in 1902–5, which claimed that everything of value in the Old Testament was copied from Babylonian sources – the creation and flood narratives, the Sabbath, the notion of sin and much more.

The 'father' of the history of religion school (as distinct from its propagandists) had been the great historian Adolf (von) Harnack (1851–1930). In 1901 Harnack, also lecturing in Berlin, had argued *against* the widening of the theological curriculum to include non-biblical religions, chiefly on the grounds that the result would be dilettantism and superficiality. If comparative religion were to be taught at the universities, it should be in faculties of arts/humanities, and not under the aegis of theology. (Eventually, this was more or less what happened.) A somewhat different point of view was that of the Swedish scholar Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), who argued in his Uppsala inaugural lecture of 1901 that there should be no artificial barrier between biblical religion and the rest, and that comparative religion (*religionshistoria*) should be an essential part of the theological curriculum. Three years later comparative religion in fact became an integral though subordinate part of the theological programme of the University of Manchester.

The trouble, though, was that often, the advocates of *Religionsgeschichte* (comparative religion) were at best indifferent and at worst hostile to theology as the churches understood it and the faculties taught it. And of course vice versa. Hence in most universities the study of 'other religions' came to be scattered around departments of history, anthropology, classics, Semitic studies and the like, and kept separate from theology. So it remained until the onset of 'the religious studies movement' in the 1960s.

## Psychology and the mystics

The years around the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century saw the emergence of many new 'sciences', among them 'the science of religion'. Within that science there were soon sub-sciences, of which the psychology of religion and the sociology of religion were the most significant. If two books were to be picked out as foundation documents of these sub-sciences, they might well be William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1890) on the psychological side, and Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) on the sociological, though neither marks an absolute beginning. The difference between them is easily stated. Whereas the psychology of religion was, to begin with, concerned only with the individual's mental processes as they relate to religion, the sociology of religion saw (and still sees) religion as a collective, social phenomenon.

In both cases the formative years were the 1890s. This has nothing to do with the character of religion itself, which has always involved individuals and societies in equal measure. In psychology's case, the initial question concerned the mechanism by which the individual

comes to experience sensations and feelings that he or she identifies as supernatural, and the consequences to which this may lead. The old alternatives had been divine inspiration on the one hand, and demonic deception on the other (speaking here in Judaeo-Christian terms). But suppose there were nothing supernatural involved. What then?

Interestingly enough, a number of the first psychologists of religion were Americans. Religious individualism was endemic in nineteenth-century America, especially among the heirs of the Enlightenment, such as Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists. 'Individualism ... was common enough in the Europe of the nineteenth century; in America, it was part of the very air men breathed' (Nisbet 1965: 4). This was due in part to the importance of the individual 'conversion experience' as the major criterion by which the genuineness of religion was judged. Sectarian extremism was also common, some parts of America even coming to resemble a menagerie of frequently warring sects. Add to this the impact of phenomena as diverse as exploration, industrialization, migration, half-understood Darwinism and not least the Civil War, and it is not hard to grasp the fascinated energy with which intellectuals tackled religious questions. Here an important book was Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1955). White, the first President of Cornell University, was writing too early to incorporate psychology into his account; he was not irreligious, but was passionately opposed to the imposition of 'theological' limits on free enquiry.

The first psychologists of religion in America are all but forgotten today – Granville Stanley Hall, James H. Leuba and Edwin D. Starbuck among them. Starbuck is worth a special mention as the first to work with questionnaires as a means of gathering material. How do you find out what people experience as 'religion'? Simple: ask them! The results of his enquiries took shape in his book *The Psychology of Religion* (1899). Starbuck also taught a course in the psychology of religion at Harvard in 1894–5. The major emphasis of his questionnaires was on 'religious experience' in general, and the experience of conversion in particular. The method as such was deeply flawed, but won approval as a means of breaking away from the crude choice between divine inspiration and demonic deception as explanations of 'the conversion experience'.

Starbuck's material was used (and duly acknowledged) by his Harvard teacher William James in preparation for the lectures delivered in Scotland and published in 1977 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* – one of the few religious classics of the twentieth century. William James, (1842–1910), the elder brother of the novelist Henry James, came of Swedenborgian stock, though his personal religion was an undogmatic theism. He trained as a doctor, but never practised medicine. Then he became fascinated by the infant science of psychology, and for years worked on his one and only book, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) – all his later publications were tidied-up lectures, *Varieties* being his unquestioned masterpiece.

James was writing (or rather, speaking) as what he called a 'radical empiricist', a pragmatist who was convinced that where religion was concerned, judgement is possible only on a basis of the results to which it leads – religion is what religion does, not what it claims to be able to do. He drew a famous distinction between two religious temperaments: that of the 'healthy-minded' – positive, optimistic, relatively unconcerned with the problem of evil – and that of 'the sick soul' – obsessed with the sense of its own unworthiness, inadequacy and (in Christian terms) sin. 'Let sanguine healthymindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet' (James 1977: 140).



James also anticipated in *Varieties* what in the 1960s was to become one of the bugbears of the study of religion, by introducing the subject of artificially induced 'religious' experience through drugs, even going so far as to experiment himself with nitrous oxide ('laughing gas') and to suggest that if there should be supernatural revelation, the 'neurotic' temperament might be better able to receive it than the well-adjusted.

There were major flaws in James' approach to his subject, and this may be the time to mention them briefly. One was entirely deliberate, namely, his exclusion of religion's social dimension from his inquiry: 'religion' he limited to '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 the divine' (James 1977: 31). How far individuals feel, act and experience because of the environment in which they live, with all its precedents, images, taboos, expectations and the rest, he does not discuss. More important was the assumption, shared by all those who have ever used questionnaire material, that the individual actually *knows*, fully consciously, what he or she believes and why – and this is not always safe, as Freud and Jung were shortly to show.

Lectures XVI and XVII in *Varieties*, James devoted to the subject of 'Mysticism', which we might perhaps characterize as religious experience at its most intensive. Wisely, he did not attempt to define this notoriously slippery word, but identified 'ineffability', 'noetic quality' (the quality of self-authenticating knowledge), 'transiency' and 'passivity' as a 'mystical group' of states of consciousness (James 1977: 380–2). Whether mysticism is therefore to be welcomed or avoided had long been disputed territory. *Mystik* had long been regarded by theologians (especially those of the Catholic tradition) as something entirely positive, a mark of divine favour; *Mysticismus* was the word used by German-speaking rationalists to denote irrationality and delusion in religion, in practically the same sense as 'enthusiasm'. The English language was in the unfortunate position of having only one word to cover both senses. Either way, 'mysticism' came in the years around the turn of the century to serve as a catch-all term for all that sorted under the categories of visions, voices, trances and what today we call 'altered states of consciousness'; but also to label religious intensity. At the back of all this was what was the mystic's desire to achieve oneness with the Ultimate Reality – or alternatively, a mental disorder of some kind, depending on one's presuppositions.

One cannot 'study' mystics, except to the extent that they are prepared to write or speak about their experiences. There was however no lack of such material, and beginning in the years around the turn of the century there appeared a number of significant works on the subject. The first of these was W. R. Inge's *Christian Mysticism* (1899), followed by, among others, James' *Varieties*, Nathan Söderblom's *Uppenbarelsereligion* (*The Religion of Revelation*, 1903, which drew the important distinction between theistic and non-theistic expressions of religious faith), Friedrich von Hügel's massive *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908), Rufus Jones' *Studies in Mystical Religion* (1909) and Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (1940). At the end of this line we may perhaps place J. B. Pratt's *The Religious Consciousness* (1920). It is perhaps worth noting that the last four authors mentioned were Roman Catholic, Quaker, uneasy Anglican and Unitarian respectively: clearly religious experience bore no particular relation to Christian denominationalism. Pratt's horizon was however wider: he had a lively interest in India, writing with regard to Buddhism that he had '... tried to enable the reader to understand a little *how it feels to be a Buddhist*' (Sharpe 1986: 115f. emphasis in original).

It was slightly ironic that Pratt's book should have been called *The Religious Consciousness*, since by the time it appeared, Freud, Jung and their respective bands of followers had most effectively called in question the very idea of consciousness as a decisive factor in human

conduct. The new psychologists, wrote Sir John Adams in 1929, '... know exactly what they want and are quite clear about the way they propose to attain it. There is a lion in their path; they want that lion killed and decently buried. This lion is Consciousness ...' (Sharpe 1986: 197). The Freudians, the Jungians and the rest of the psychoanalytical establishment did not pretend to scholarship in the area of religion, and some of their ventures into the field were quite bizarre; their profession was medicine, after all. But whereas Freud and his followers treated religion as part of the problem where mental health was concerned, the Jungians took a more positive view of religious mythology and symbolism. The psychoanalytical cause became fashionable in the years following the insanity of the First World War, not least in America, and cast a long shadow.

As an example, we may quote the case of the American anthropologist Margaret Mead (1902–1978), author of the celebrated *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), which proved, entirely to its author's satisfaction, that adolescence can be practically pain-free, once the sexual restraints imposed by society have been relaxed. Mead was a protégée of Franz Boas, a determined Freudian. Margaret Mead was no more than 23 when she did the field-work on which her book was based, and many years later one of her chief Samoan informants confessed that the girls who had supplied her with material had been pulling her leg (Freeman 1983). It did not matter. Her teacher Franz Boas wrote that: 'The results of her painstaking investigation confirm the suspicion long held by anthropologists, that much of what we ascribe to human nature is no more than a reaction to the restraints put upon us by civilisation' (Mead 1928: viii). 'Field-work' was of the essence, no matter how poorly equipped the investigator – an attitude which passed in the course of time to the study of religion.

Psychoanalysis aside, other issues divided students of religion in the early years of the twentieth century. Another relatively new science was the science of sociology – collective, rather than individual human behaviour. A key concept in this connection was 'holiness/sacredness' (the adjectives 'sacred' and 'holy' are generally interchangeable; 'the sacred' and 'the holy' are on the other hand abstractions).

There were two alternatives: on the psychological (and often the theological) side, what was up for investigation was 'what the individual does with his/her own solitariness'; on the sociological side, what communities do under the heading of 'religion'. At the time when William James was most influential, there was a strong current of thought flowing in precisely the opposite direction: toward the assessment of religion's social functions, past and present. Out of the second of these there emerged *the sociology of religion*, which over the years was to assume a more and more dominant role as an academic sub-discipline.

One can do sociology in two different but connected ways. First, as an evolutionary science. Although Darwin was first and foremost a biologist, it was not long before his admirers applied the evolutionary model to (among much else) the development of human societies. Here the prophetic voice was that of the popular philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1904), whose *First Principles* (1862) argued that 'the law of organic evolution is the law of all evolution' in every field of human activity, and not just in biology: 'this same advance from the simple to the complex, through successive differentiations, holds uniformly' (Spencer 1862: 148). Spencer held that the simplest, and therefore the earliest, form of religion had been the worship (or at least fear) of the dead, especially those who had been powerful during their lifetimes: 'The rudimentary form of all religion is the propitiation of dead ancestors ...' (Spencer 1901). This 'ghost theory' (as it came to be called) has the merit of sometimes being at least partly true. Examples are not hard to come by. But it leaves out too much to serve as a general theory of the origin of religion.



Shortly before Spencer's death, there had been published a centenary edition of an influential book by the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799; Eng. tr. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 1893). It was important on two counts: first, because it argued that the only way to study religion adequately is not in terms of the bloodless intellectual abstractions of 'natural religion' (which is in actual fact neither natural nor religion), but in and through the religious beliefs and practices of actual living human beings – a point made many years earlier by Charles de Brosses, but taken insufficiently seriously since. And second, because to Schleiermacher, the heart of religion was to be found, not in rules and regulations, hierarchies, hassocks and hymnbooks, but in the individual's experience of (or sense of) and dependence upon a power infinitely greater than his own. The reissue of Schleiermacher's *Über die Religion* in 1899 could not have come at a more opportune moment. Darwinism was all very well; the rule of law was an efficient sergeant-major in an unruly world, but left little room for creative individuality. It was however Schleiermacher's editor who made the greater long-term impression.

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) was a philosopher and theologian by training and temperament, with Indology as another area of interest and expertise. Today however he tends to be remembered for only one book, *Das Heilige* (1917; Eng. tr. *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923), which argued that what is essential in religion is the individual's experience of 'the holy', even at one point requesting that the reader who has had no such experience to read no further! But experience of what, precisely? Trying to explain, Otto coined the word 'numinous' (*das Numinose*), a sense of the presence of a *numen* (deity, supernatural being). This in its turn gives rise to a perception, or apprehension, of a *mysterium* which is both *tremendum* (scary) and *fascinans* (intriguing).

The words 'holy' and 'sacred' are adjectives, which need to be related to someone or something if they are to make sense, and are not easily turned into nouns ('holy scripture', 'holy mountain', 'holy day', 'sacred cow', 'sacred site' make sense as the abstract nouns 'the holy' and 'the sacred' do not).

A few years before the appearance of Otto's book there appeared in France Émile Durkheim's *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse* (1912; Eng. tr. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1915). Here we have the opposite argument: that (put crudely) religion is a social phenomenon, resting not on the individual's feeling-states but on the needs of the community. Families, tribes and nations set up symbols of their own collective identity – from totem poles to national flags – which are 'sacred' through their associations.

On this view, every human community invents its own sacred symbols. The supernatural does not enter into it, the closest approximation being 'power' (the Melanesian/Polynesian *mana* and similar power-words, which Durkheim mistakenly believed to be impersonal, but which always turn out to be associated with spiritual beings who possess them). It is therefore the community which decrees what is, and what is not, 'sacred' in its own cultural terms.

## The phenomenology of religion

Between the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and the end of the second in 1945, the study of religion in the West became fragmented. The old idealism had been shattered in the trenches of the battlefield, and in 1920, religion itself, let alone the study of religion, seemed to have no future worth speaking of. On the Christian theological front, the tradition of scholarship was maintained by a very few idealists in the face of growing opposition from the

disciples of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and the other 'dialectical' theologians, in whose eyes 'religion' was as dust and ashes compared to the Gospel, and who declined to study it further. The conservatives were what they had always been: intent on doing battle with 'the world' on as many fronts as possible. Meanwhile, the anthropologists, Orientalists, philologists and the rest cultivated their respective gardens.

Comparative religion had been trying to compare religions as totalities, as systems, as competing solutions of the world's problems. This was unsound. Religions are totalities only in the pages of textbooks, and what believers actually believe, and how they believe, may bear little resemblance to what they are supposed to believe and do. The student, intent on examining religions and writing their histories, was faced with an impossible task. One alternative was to divide the field functionally, by themes and characteristics, and to attempt on that basis limited comparisons: prayer with prayer, sacrifice with sacrifice, images of deity with images of deity. In all this it was important to examine, not what the textbooks say, but what is actually there to be observed, the *phenomena* involved in the business of religion. The point had been made by Charles de Brosses in the 1760s and by Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1799: that the student of religion must concentrate, not on what people might do, ought to do or what the textbooks say they are supposed to do, but on what they actually do, and the ways in which they actually behave. But people do, and have done, so many things. How can anyone grasp the field as a whole?

It was with an eye to resolving this difficulty that the term 'the phenomenology of religion' was pressed into service. As we have said, limited comparisons were still possible, provided that they were based on either reliable information or careful observation. However, in the early years of the twentieth century, 'phenomenology' acquired another set of meanings, having to do less with the material than the mind-set of the observer. The name of the philosopher Edmund Husserl is often mentioned in this connection, though his contribution to the study of religion was at best indirect. 'Philosophical' phenomenology aimed at the elimination of subjectivity (and hence dogmatic bias) from the inquirer's process of thought. As such, the ideal was and is unattainable, and it was unfortunate that for a time in the 1970s, a few phenomenological catch-words (*epoché*, the suspension of judgment, and *eidetic vision*, the gift of seeing things as wholes, as well as 'phenomenology' itself) found their way into the vocabulary of the study of religion. In the inter-war years, the trend was best represented by the Dutch scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), author of *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933; Eng. tr. *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 1938).

Practically all the first phenomenologists of religion were Protestant Christian theologians – Chantepie de la Saussaye, Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, Edvard Lehmann, William Brede Kristensen ('... there exists no other religious reality than the faith of the believers ...') and C. Jouco Bleeker. An exception was the enigmatic German scholar Friedrich Heiler, whose chaotic book *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion* (1961) rounded off the series. In all these cases, phenomenology was a religious as much as a scholarly exercise. Those making up the between-the-wars generation of scholars we now call phenomenologists were deeply committed to the principle that the causes of sound learning and sound religion were not two causes, but one. The enemies of sound learning were all too often captive to *unsound* religion – unsound because (among other things) unhistorical and therefore almost inevitably authoritarian. Faced with such a configuration, one may distance oneself altogether from religious praxis; or one may try to bring the religious community (that is, the faculties of theology) round to one's way of thinking. Most opted for the first of these alternatives; the very few who chose the latter, though they won a few battles, ultimately lost the war – not

because of the innate superiority of theological thinking, but due to the corrosive influence of secularization on religious thought in general.

## Tools of the trade

Over the past century or so, the study of religion has gradually acquired an extensive body of reference material for the use of students. The idea that it might be possible to bring together all the world's knowledge and publish it in encyclopaedia form belongs to the Enlightenment. Today we are more modest, but the genre has survived. As far as religion is concerned, an important landmark was James Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1908–26); in German, there was *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1909–13), a fourth edition is currently in preparation. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* (16 vols, edited by Mircea Eliade) appeared in the US in 1987. Given the new situation created by the Internet, it is unlikely that there will be any more.

Compact dictionaries and handbooks are by now legion, as are 'world religions' textbooks for student use. Special mention may be made of *The New Penguin Dictionary of Religions* (1997) and *The New Handbook of Living Religions* (1998), both edited by John R. Hinnells. On the textbook front, Ninian Smart's *The World's Religions* (1989, an updated version of a book first published in 1969 as *The Religious Experience of Mankind*) has proved an excellent *gradus ad parnassum* for generations of religious studies students.

Concerning scholarly journals, we must be brief. They have never been other than variable in quality, and though these days every effort is made to guard professional standards, the level of readability is often depressingly low. There is the additional factor that the fragmentation of the study of religion in recent years has resulted in more and more specialist journals, which can only be read with profit by fellow specialists. Among the best 'general' journals in English are *Religion* (UK/US), *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (US), *Journal of Religion* (US) and *Numen* (international).

## Congresses, conferences, consultations

In 1993 there was celebrated the centenary of the Chicago 'World's Parliament of Religions', though this time relabelled 'Parliament of World Religions' – a shift in meaning no one bothered to examine at all closely. Both were propaganda exercises, but for different causes: 1893 for religious oneness (monism), 1993 for religious diversity (pluralism). There would be little point in listing even a selection of the myriad conferences, congresses and consultations that have punctuated the years between, increasingly frequently since the advent of air travel in the 1960s. Opinions differ as to their importance, though it is probably true to say that the best are the smallest (the most satisfying conference I have ever attended numbered no more than thirty-five or so participants). It would however be churlish to deny their social function or the opportunity they provide for younger voices to make themselves heard among their peers.

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# **The study of religions: the last 50 years**

*Gregory Alles*

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In one sense, the study of religions is as old as religion itself, or at least as the first human beings who looked at their neighbours or themselves and wondered what they were doing when they did what we have come to call religion. In another sense, in most parts of the world the study of religions in a narrower, more technical sense, as the non-theological study of religion in the context of higher education, did not begin in earnest until after the Second World War. In the same period, the academic study of religions expanded greatly in Europe, which already had firm if small traditions of such study. In those parts of the world that had traditions of teaching theology, such as North America and colonial Africa, the development of the study of religions was largely a shift in emphasis from examining the world through a lens shaped by religious conviction to examining it through one shaped by perspectival pluralism, religious uncertainty, or anti-religious naturalism, usually an uneven mixture of all three. The shift rarely satisfied everyone. In other parts of the world, such as East Asia, it involved building an academic enterprise around an imported foreign category, 'religion'.

Although the expansion and internationalization of the study of religions began in earnest after the Second World War, an exact starting point is impossible to determine. As the preceding chapter demonstrates, the academic study of religions had a long prehistory and history in Europe, and the global move to study religions academically had neither a single founder nor a founding moment. Nevertheless, it is clear that as Europe and Japan rebuilt, as Europe gradually divested itself of its colonies, as much of the rest of the world tried its hand at self-government, and as the Cold War divided up the world between two and later three great powers vying for influence, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, universities and colleges in many parts of the world instituted programmes for the study of religions.

From the point of view of history, it is just becoming possible to assess the earliest of these events. Their lasting significance – the significance that makes people in later periods want to remember them and transmit them to succeeding generations as history – will not be apparent until those later periods come into being. At the same time, one should not ignore them, even if it is tempting for older generations to dismiss some developments as retrograde. They are the movements that shape the study of religions today.

### **The study of religion in context**

There were probably many reasons for the expansion and internationalization of religious studies after the Second World War. Some of them were truly global in scope.

One reason was the vast expansion of both the world's population and of tertiary education. In 1900 the world's population was 1.65 billion (10<sup>9</sup>). In 1950 it was 2.5 billion; by 1999 it was almost 6 billion. With all other factors constant, the number of scholars studying religions worldwide should have increased four-fold during the course of the twentieth century, most of the growth taking place after the Second World War. Other factors did not, however, remain constant. After the Second World War, countries in Europe and the European diaspora generally shifted from elite to mass universities, giving a much higher percentage of their populations access to higher education and employment within it. Furthermore, in both the de-colonizing world and in nations attempting to demonstrate the viability of an alternative political ideology, such as the People's Republic of China, the establishment and promotion of tertiary educational institutions allowed governments to stake claims to quality. A government that fostered a system of universities and colleges deserved loyalty and respect. Under such conditions even a field of study that loses a moderate amount of market share will actually expand (cf. Frank and Gabler 2006).

Such statistics alone do not, however, explain the expansion and internationalization of the study of religions after the Second World War. Significant global technological and cultural developments probably played a role, too. Among them one might mention infrastructural factors such as the introduction in the late 1950s of commercial jet aircraft – the de Havilland Comet 4 and the more successful Boeing 707 in October 1958, the Douglas DC-8 in September 1959; and the launch of communication satellites – Sputnik 1 in October 1957, Project SCORE in December 1958, Telstar in July 1962. Commercial jet air transportation gave increasing numbers of people, including scholars, ready access to more distant parts of the world. Satellites enabled the transmission of higher volumes of auditory and visual communication throughout much of the world. Both had the effect of stimulating curiosity about places elsewhere, creating demand for knowledge about religions, among other topics, and providing affordable means to meet that demand. At least in some people, they also had the effect of undercutting older, locally defined loyalties, including assertions of exclusive claims to religious Truth associated with traditional approaches to theology.<sup>1</sup> For the pluralists, the space programmes of the 1960s and early 1970s, especially images of the earth from space, such as the earth rising over the moon shot from Apollo 8 in 1968 and the whole-earth view shot from Apollo 17 in 1972, provided visual icons. There is also some evidence that the events of the Holocaust and the Second World War themselves made parochial definitions of Truth seem more untenable within an academic context (Frank and Gabler 2006: 67).

In addition to global factors, local factors probably also contributed to an expansion in the volume of the study of religions as well as to a shift in its emphases in various parts of the world. For example, in the 1950s, during the Cold War against godless Communism, religiosity and, in some circles, religious plurality became markers of identity for the United States. (Significantly, the study of religions had very different trajectories in nations under the influence of the Soviet Union.) In 1963 the US Supreme Court noted in a ruling that although government institutions could not teach students to be religious, they could and probably should teach students about religions (*School District of Abington v. Schempp* 374 US 225 [1963]). As the Vietnam War and public opposition to it intensified, interest in Asian religions grew, because the experience of the war and its aftermath provided more intimate contact with what often seemed strange religions; consider the impact of Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation on June 11, 1963. That interest also grew because religions like Buddhism and Hinduism could be promoted as alternatives to a seemingly stifling and



bellicose Christianity. In 1965, the United States also changed its immigration laws, allowing limited numbers of Asians, previously barred, to enter the country, eventually creating a new religious demographic.

## Expansion and internationalization<sup>2</sup>

These factors and others as well combined in the decades following the Second World War to create a general shift toward a more pluralistic conception of religious studies as well as the establishment of new academic units and positions. Until the 1960s many state universities in the United States had largely avoided the study of religions. In the 1960s state universities began to found academic units for it. The most significant of these was the department of religious studies at the University of California–Santa Barbara, established in 1964. Although Friedrich Max Müller (1867) had announced the birth of the science of religion while working at Oxford, the United Kingdom had lacked academic units devoted to its study. That changed, too, as Great Britain began to institute such programmes, especially in its new universities. The way was led by Ninian Smart, who founded the first British department of religious studies in Lancaster University in 1967. Earlier, in 1960, the fifth section (*Sciences religieuses*) of the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris expanded to include 29 chairs. It has since grown to roughly twice that size and is the largest single unit devoted to the study of religions in Europe. In orientation its work has tended to be more exactly historical and philological than is often the case in religious studies departments in other countries.

At the other end of the Eurasian land mass, the People's Republic of China founded the Institute for World Religions in Beijing in 1964, although the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) severely disrupted its work. In Korea and Japan the study of religions was promoted through academic appointments and the establishment of new academic units, such as the chair of religious studies at the University of Tsukuba, founded in 1973. In New Zealand (Aotearoa), the University of Otago established a chair in the phenomenology of religion in 1966; Victoria University, Wellington, established a chair in religious studies in 1971. The Universities of Queensland and Sydney, Australia, established Departments of Studies in Religion in 1974 and 1977, respectively. Meanwhile, in Africa, especially those parts of Africa formerly under British rule, programmes in religious studies were founded as newly independent African nations established national universities. Nigeria was and remains particularly active in the study of religions, beginning with the founding of the department of religious studies at the University of Ibadan in 1949. In addition to local African professors, African programmes in religious studies have benefited from the services of many leading scholars of European and, less frequently, North American origin, such as Geoffrey Parrinder, J. G. Platvoet, James Cox, Rosalind Hackett, and David Chidester.

Scholarship involves more than academic units in universities. It also involves professional associations and other structures that facilitate scholarly communication and research. These structures, too, map the growth of religious studies during the last fifty years. Among the new professional associations founded after the Second World War were the International Association for the History of Religion (established 1950), followed (or in some cases preceded) by the founding of national associations in many European countries, the American Academy of Religion (the new name given to the National Association of Bible Instructors in 1963), the Korea Association for Studies of Religion (1970), later revived as the Korean Association for the History of Religions; the Society for the Sociology of Religion (a Japanese association founded in 1975; the Japanese Association for Religious Studies has



been founded in 1930); the Australian Association for the Study of Religion (1975); the New Zealand Association for the Study of Religion (1978); the [mainland] Chinese Association of Religious Studies (1979), and the African Association for the Study of Religion (1992). Similarly, a host of new journals came into being, including, to name only a few: *Numen* (journal of the IAHHR, 1954), *Przegląd Religioznawczy* (Poland, 1957), *History of Religions* (US, 1961), *Temenos* (Finland, 1965), *Journal of Religion in Africa*, *Religion en Afrique* (Africa, 1967), *Religion* (UK and North America, 1971), *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (Japan, 1974), *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* (China, 1979), *Jongkyo Yeongu* (Korea, 1986), *Journal for the Study of Religion* (Southern Africa, 1988), *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (North America, 1989), *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* (Germany, 1993), *Religio. Revue pro Religionistiku* (Czech Republic, 1993), *Archaeus: Studies in the History of Religions* (Romania, 1997), and *Bandue* (Spain, 2007). Space does not permit mentioning the many book series and text books, reference works, and anthologies that appeared, but one might note the publication of two editions of two major encyclopaedias in this period: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1957–1965, 1998–2005) and *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987, 2005).

It would be misleading to suggest that after the Second World War religious studies emerged equally in every part of the world. In the Soviet sphere of influence, the study of religions was under severe political pressure, and some scholars, such as Kurt Rudolph, an expert in Gnosticism and Mandaeism at the University of Leipzig, left for the West. Since the fall of European Communism, vigorous programmes in religious studies have arisen in places such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, with recent promising beginnings in Russia itself. Aside from Israel, universities in the Middle East still tend to teach ‘theology’, or rather, Islamic law, although a non-theological study of religions has begun to emerge in some countries, such as Turkey. In South America, other academic units, such as history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, generally study local religions. In South Asia there are very few programmes in religious studies, but sociology, introduced into Indian universities in the 1960s, has produced very fine scholarly work on religions, such as the work of T. N. Madan (1976, 2004, 2006).

## Theoretical beginnings

Despite the wide geographical expanse of the study of religion, theoretical work in the field has tended to be done in Europe or countries associated with the European diaspora. That hardly means, however, that only people of western European ancestry have been theoretically influential. A dominant influence in the first part of the period under review was the ‘Chicago school’, associated above all with the names of three professors at the University of Chicago, none of whom was western European in the common usage of the term: Joseph M. Kitagawa, Charles H. Long, and Mircea Eliade.

In many ways the Romanian-born scholar, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), defined the study of religions throughout much of the period under consideration. That is true both for his admirers and for his many critics, who reacted by deliberately contrasting their work with his. Although Eliade is closely associated with the name ‘history of religions’, the designation was in some sense a relic of Romanian and French terminology as well as of earlier terminology at the University of Chicago. Rather than history, Eliade’s thinking represented perhaps the last grand flourishing of the phenomenology of religion. Rejecting approaches that sought to explain religion in terms of something that was not religious, such as society or the human psyche, he attempted to develop what he called a morphology of the sacred. That is, he

wanted to identify the basic forms through which the sacred manifested itself in human consciousness. He was particularly interested in cosmogonies (myths of origin) and their ritual re-enactment, which he interpreted as an attempt to return to the time or origins and live in close proximity to the sacred. He developed these ideas in full form in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949b; Eng. trans. 1958) and *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1949a; Eng. trans. 1954), then repeated them tirelessly in a series of more popular books. He was also particularly known for his studies of yoga (1954; Eng. trans. 1958) and shamanism (1951; Eng. trans. 1964).

Ninian Smart (1927–2001) had a different background and a different approach to the study of religions. He also occupied a different sphere of influence. A Scotsman, he read philosophy and classics at Oxford. As noted above, he founded the department of religious studies at Lancaster University in 1967. Eventually he also took a position in the United States at the University of California–Santa Barbara. While Eliade's notion that the sacred manifests itself as a structure of human consciousness can be read in a religiously committed sense, Smart (1973) insisted that scholars of religions needed to adopt a methodological agnosticism: as scholars they should be non-committal in the matter of religious truth. Instead of developing a grand theory of religious content, as Eliade did, Smart identified six, later seven, dimensions constitutive of religion: doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, institutional, and material. He also famously noted the similarity between Marxism, for example, and more traditional religions and suggested that the study of religions is properly the study of worldviews (Smart 1983). Like Eliade, he, too, was a popularizer, but in a broader range of media. A notable example was his series 'The Long Search' on BBC television (Smart 1977).

One final figure anticipated much work in the study of religions that was to follow, the Canadian Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2001), a professor at Harvard, among other universities. An Islamicist who taught in Lahore prior to Pakistani independence, Smith (1963) critically interrogated the central category on which religious studies is based, 'religion' itself. The term, he contended, was a modern invention that did not correspond to what was found empirically throughout most of human history. He recommended replacing it with the terms 'faith' and 'cumulative tradition'. In addition, he objected to an objectivizing, 'us' and 'them' mentality, which he saw underlying religious studies. He envisioned a time when the peoples of the world would come together to talk with each other about themselves (Smith 1959: 34). If Smart advocated a methodological agnosticism and Eliade provided a grand statement of the content allegedly underlying all religions, Smith took a different approach and eventually moved *Towards a World Theology* (1981).

These three thinkers were not the only leading figures in the study of religions at the beginning of the period under consideration. There were many other important scholars as well. Arguably those who did careful historical and philological work contributed just as much if not more substance to the study of religion than these three figures did. Among such scholars one might name, to include only a few, Hideo Kishimoto (1903–1964) and Ichiro Hori (1910–1974) in Japan, P. V. Kane (1880–1972) in India, Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959) in Italy, Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) in Germany, Henri-Charles Puech (1902–1986) and Marcel Simon (1907–1986) in France, S. G. F. Brandon (1907–1971) in the United Kingdom, and Okot p'Bitek (1931–1982) in Uganda, generally known for his contributions to literature but also important for his contributions to the study of African traditional religions. Nevertheless, the prominence of the institutions with which Eliade (Paris, Chicago), Smart (Lancaster, Santa Barbara), and Smith (Harvard, Dalhousie) were

associated gave them unparalleled importance for scholars of religions who aspired to be more than philologists or historians in the strictest sense of the words. They served to define three major sub-communities within the study of religions.

## Second thoughts

Figures like Eliade, Smart, and Smith provided starting points for the study of religions during the last fifty years. It is striking, however, how little of the work that has been done has directly developed their ideas. Most theoretical directions in the study of religion have been set from the outside as scholars reacted to the writings of Eliade, Smart, and Smith, especially Eliade. Although some have wanted to see the study of religion as a discipline, defined by a particular method, in practice it has been an undisciplined, polymethodic field largely planted with seeds from elsewhere. Many heirloom cultivars – ideas of earlier scholars such as Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber – have continued to produce rich crops. Among the most important sources of new seeds have been anthropology, literary studies, cultural studies, and in recent days, the social sciences.

## An anthropological turn

A central claim in Eliade's theory of religion was that 'archaic' peoples were the prime representatives of *homo religiosus*, religious humanity. It should not come entirely as a surprise, then, that in the last fifty years scholars of religions have turned to the field that once took such 'archaic' peoples as its object of study, anthropology. Initially they used anthropology as a means to assess and critique Eliade's claims. Then they returned to it repeatedly as a well from which to draw the freshest methodological waters. This is not the place to recite the history of anthropology over the last fifty years, but some names are unavoidable.

While Eliade had sought to identify the content of religious thought, the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss took a different approach, articulated in several books from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s (1955, 1958, 1962a, 1962b; Eng. trans. beginning 1961). Under the inspiration of structural linguistics, he tried to describe the logical patterns according to which the mind worked, along with their implications. The resulting structuralism, which made heavy use of binary oppositions to identify the language underlying religious 'utterances' rather than the meaning of the utterances themselves, became a major movement within the study of religions. Lévi-Strauss himself applied the method at length to the elucidation of myth. Wendy Doniger, who studies Hindu mythology, applied it to good effect in her early work on the god Śiva (1973). Hans Penner (1989, 1998) has continued to be a vigorous spokesperson for the possibilities of structuralism.

Other anthropologists also exercised profound influence on the study of religions beginning in the 1960s. The American, Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) sought to effect a paradigm shift in anthropology away from a structural-functionalist anthropology that sought causal explanations toward a hermeneutical anthropology that sought to understand the meaning of symbols. Among his most influential contributions to the study of religions are his programmes of 'thick description', identifying local knowledge, and 'reading' culture as a text, as well as his account of 'religion as a cultural system' (Geertz 1973, 1983). Another important anthropologist from the same period, Victor W. Turner (1920–1983), adapted Arnold van Gennep's analysis of rites of passage to many other cultural areas, exploring the anti-structural phase of 'liminality' in activities such as pilgrimage (Turner 1967, 1969,

1974). Mary Douglas (1921–2007) rose to prominence because of her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), which, inspired by structuralism, argued that dirt and pollution were not the result of natural experiences but rather reflected an inability to fit certain items into established categories. Each of these anthropologists was extremely influential on work in the study of religions. For example, Victor Turner is in some ways a founding figure for the later field of ritual studies.

The names Geertz, Turner, and Douglas hardly exhaust the anthropologists from the 1960s who had an impact on the study of religion. Among his many writings, the structuralist Edmund Leach (1966) published a harsh critique of Eliade. One might also mention Melford Spiro (1970) and Stanley Tambiah (1970, 1981), who worked on Burmese and Thai Buddhism, respectively. Spiro has been particularly important for a definition of religion that he published at the same time that Geertz published ‘religion as a cultural system’: religion is ‘an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings’ (Spiro 1966: 96).

Eventually this new generation of anthropologists came in for harsh criticism. Their successors found them vulnerable on a number of grounds, including an overly systematic view of culture, an inattention to the political dimensions of cultural activity, and a propensity to over-interpret the data. For scholars of religions, however, they had the effect of calling important paradigms into question, especially those associated with Eliade. Specifically, a grand synthesis of religious content such as Eliade and the other phenomenologists had attempted to provide seemed untenable and irresponsible to the complexities of cultural data.

Within the study of religions itself this kind of critique is probably best represented and furthered by a younger colleague of Eliade’s at Chicago, Jonathan Z. Smith (1978, 1982, 2004). A specialist in Greco-Roman religions who has been more a writer of essays than of monographs, Smith has been particularly interested in issues of definition, classification (taxonomy), difference, and relation. A careful reader and relentless critic, Smith anticipated much future criticism by seeing Eliade’s views as reflecting an overly conservative political orientation, emphasizing locative, normative aspects of religion while ignoring utopian, radical dimensions. Among Smith’s other distinctive ideas is the claim that definitions should not be rooted in essential features, as in Spiro’s definition mentioned above, but ‘polythetic’, loose bundles of features any one of which might not be present in a specific instance of religion. He has also insisted that the study of religion consists in translating the unknown into the known and of redescribing the original in terms of other categories. His favourite example of such translation is Émile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which translates the religious into the social.

Inspired in part by Smith as well as the anthropological turn, scholars of religion have largely abandoned the older phenomenological enterprise and turned instead to detailed studies informed by theoretical issues but carefully delimited in terms of geographical, temporal, cultural, and linguistic extent. They have also felt less comfortable than a scholar such as Eliade did about discussing religions of communities whose languages, history, and culture they do not themselves have a good working knowledge of. Such reluctance led Eliade and others with similar sentiments to lament the loss of the *grande oeuvre* and the fragmentation of the field into a great variety of subspecialties. From the other side, such limitations seemed a prerequisite for responsible scholarship.

## **Critical modes**

Smith's work intersects with anthropological theory, but it intersects with more work as well. It also addresses issues of interest to various modes of critique that became common in the 1970s and 1980s. These modes – postmodern, post-structural, post-colonial, feminist – are most closely associated with literary and cultural studies. A number of French thinkers from the late 1960s were influential in their development, among whom the most famous are Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Michel Foucault (1926–1984). In some quarters these approaches are quite controversial.

### ***The postmodern***

Derrida's work is notoriously difficult, but perhaps one may say that it explores the limits of human speech and, implicitly, human conceptualization. For Derrida, human attempts to make definite utterances always ultimately fail; indeterminacy is implicit within them. If the goal of one kind of academic discourse is to construct meaningful accounts – or in Smith's terms, to translate the unknown into the known – the goal of an alternative kind of discourse is to deconstruct such accounts, to show that, ultimately and irredeemably, they miss out. This can often be done through creative rhetorical means that call into question the pretensions of the discourse at hand, for example, by responding to earnest attempts at precise definition by deliberately playing with words, blurring their boundaries and obscuring their meanings. Although Derrida's brilliance at such deconstruction is readily acknowledged, it is not clear that some of his epigones have not devolved into silliness.

The major impact of postmodernism has been not so much on the study of religion in the narrow sense as on theology. This makes sense, both because postmodernism rejects the 'modernist' project that an 'objective' study of religions would seem to presume, and because contemporary naturalist discourse often seems entirely at odds with theological claims. (Recently theologians and scientists have begun to explore a possible merger of the two.) In vulgar terms, if God can no longer be found in rational accounts, as in the days when philosophers of religion claimed to be able to prove God's existence by reason alone, perhaps intimations of God can be found in the inevitable limitations of naturalist discourse. Leading post-modern theologians include John D. Caputo, John Milbank, and Mark C. Taylor. Within the study of religions more narrowly, perhaps the best representative of this approach is Tomoko Masuzawa (1993, 2005), who has reread the history of the study of religion from a postmodern perspective.

### ***Post-structural, post-colonial, and feminist currents***

Many postmodern thinkers have tended to concentrate on language. For some of them, language in fact creates the world, and there is no world outside language. Such an orientation does not necessarily preclude social and ethical reflection, but other critical modes, post-structural, post-colonial, and feminist, arose with a more distinct orientation toward social criticism. Perhaps the leading thinker for this line of thought was Michel Foucault.

Among other concerns, Foucault examined the manner in which knowledge and power are mutually implicated. Powerful institutions and persons create knowledge in such a way that it perpetuates and extends their power. At the same time, those who possess knowledge also possess power. Power-knowledge exercises its governance through defining the marginal

and controlling it in a number of ways. Foucault pursues the theme through the examination of institutions such as psychiatric treatment, hospitals, and prisons, as well as by looking at how what counts as knowledge, the various conditions for knowledge, have changed over the centuries. Although Foucault himself did little with religion *per se*, it should be fairly apparent that these ideas provide a rich set of possible themes for the study of religions to explore. Parallel currents of thought particularly important for the study of religion were post-colonialism and feminism.

Derrida and Foucault largely thought within the horizons of Europe. In her well-known article, 'Can the Sub-Altern Speak?', the Indian thinker and translator of Derrida, Gayatri Spivak (1988), famously re-directed his line of thinking in a post-colonial direction to talk about the marginalization of colonized people, especially women. Even larger was the impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which in some ways extended Foucault's project beyond the European frontier. The book examines the various ways in which Orientalism as a discourse, including the academic field known by that name, has imagined the people of the Middle East. According to Said, these imaginations are not accurate representations so much as the creation of images of an 'other' to the European self that serves the European self's own ideological purposes. Simultaneously, many women, who had largely been excluded from higher education prior to the twentieth century, began to examine the many ways in which academic discourse, including academic discourse about religions, had been narrowly centred on men. Once identified, such discourse easily appears as an instrument of control. Linking all of these approaches together is a perspective on human activity that emphasizes the social construction of reality and identity, political dominance and cultural hegemony, and society as a location for suppression, appropriation, and exploitation.

Post-structural, postcolonial, and feminist thought each had enormous impact upon the study of religion. It is fairly obvious that religion has served to subordinate and exclude women. For examples, one need only consider the hiring practices of almost all churches prior to the feminist critique or of the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox synagogues still today. Many early feminist thinkers addressed issues of religion directly. Many of them also worked within Christian institutions or in explicit rejection of those institutions, and they were often theologians as much as scholars of religions. Among other names one may note Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983, 1992), Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983), and, on the more radical side, Mary Daly (1973, 1978). Feminism has not, however, been limited to Christianity, and in many religious communities important women thinkers, such as Rita Gross (1993) in Buddhism and Judith Plaskow (1990) in Judaism, have emerged to criticize androcentrism and patriarchal authority, to re-read inherited traditions, and to reformulate their communities' teachings and practices. Their work has also had a salutary impact on the study of religions. If at the beginning of the period under consideration it was acceptable to equate men's religious activity with the religious activity of the entire community, it is no longer so today. A large number of publications have appeared devoted to women's religious lives. In addition, steps have been taken to encourage women's full participation in the academic community. One example is the Women Scholars Network of the International Association for the History of Religions, organized by Rosalind Hackett and Morny Joy.

Like feminism, post-colonial thought has had a major impact upon the study of religion. Said's *Orientalism* unleashed a reconsideration and critique of traditional representations not only of Arabs, Islam, and the Ancient Near East but also of people in Asia more generally. Similar dynamics can be found in writing about religions throughout the world. Writing on Islam and Christianity, Talal Asad (1993) famously critiqued Clifford Geertz's notion of



religion as a cultural system as being too rooted in a particular historical context to be useful cross-culturally. Others have examined the ways in which colonial administrators in South Asia allied with certain elements of the Indian population to construct a religion known as Hinduism. Donald Lopez (1998), as well as others, has talked about the ideological needs which the Western imagination of Buddhism fulfils. Bernard Faure (1991, 1993) has made much use of Foucault in the study of East Asian Buddhism. The American scholar Sam Gill (1987) suggested that the notion that Native Americans worshipped Mother Earth was largely an academic creation.

In one way or another, all of these moves represent the introduction of the realm of the political into the study of religions. The Chicago scholar Bruce Lincoln (1989, 1994, 2007), influenced as much by Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci as by post-structural, post-colonial, and feminist thinkers, has produced a body of work interrogating, among other topics, authority, power, politics, and ideology in both religion and the study of religion, including the work of Mircea Eliade. Beginning with Ivan Strenski in 1987, it has become common to criticize Eliade on political as much as on theoretical grounds. A host of scholars, among them Adriana Berger, Steven Wasserstrom, Daniel Dubuisson (1993; Eng. trans. 2006; 2005), and Russell McCutcheon (1997) have not only criticized the political implications of Eliade's theory but have attempted to link that criticism to Eliade's activities on behalf of the fascist Iron Guard in 1930s Romania. Furthermore, in something of a continuation of the claims of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the very category of 'religion' itself has also come in for intense scrutiny, and some, including Timothy Fitzgerald (2000, 2007), Daniel Dubuisson (1998; Eng. trans. 2003), and Russell McCutcheon, have advocated abandoning the category altogether. Others, including Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln, have maintained that it continues to have limited utility. Although scholars in other parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia and China, have weighed in on these issues, their voices have not yet been incorporated into discussions by European and North American theorists. The major exception has been S. N. Balagangadhara, but he teaches at the University of Ghent, Belgium.

## New fields of study

In a review of the work of Bruce Lincoln, Brian Pennington (2005: 1) has written, 'The declining hegemony of phenomenology and theology in the study of religion and the rise of critical methodologies in the wake of post-structuralism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism have contributed to a discipline that is far more attuned to the production of knowledge and the authorization of power'. True enough. These movements have also had at least two other major effects on the study of religions: the opening of new fields of study and of new methods of representation.

The present chapter is probably not the best place to discuss new fields of study. These are represented by the rest of the chapters in this book. Nevertheless, it is important to note that as a result of various modes of criticism that became common during the 1970s, the study of religions has changed tremendously. Some important shifts have already been noted, such as the move to include women's experiences and voices within the study of religions. Another shift concerned sources and methods. As it had developed in Europe, the study of religions was heavily oriented to the examination of texts, especially texts that somehow counted as 'classic', and their historical contexts. Today scholars of religions are as likely, if not more likely, to give significant attention to many other data sources, including many contemporary media of communication, such as radio, television, the internet, and even comic books.