

How people experience religion

Perspectives in the study of religious consciousness and perception

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Phenomenology is an obscure term, related to a modern philosophical movement led by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) in which human consciousness is studied through the subjective experience of its interaction with phenomena. Phenomena, in turn, are the objects of a person's perceptions or items of reality as they are perceived by a person's senses or mind. Before exploring the significance of phenomenological approaches to the study of religion in greater detail, this introductory section examines why these approaches have been grouped with psychological approaches and how both relate to the sociological and anthropological approaches surveyed in the previous section.

First, it is worth noting that the phenomenological and psychological approaches examined in this chapter were developed in conjunction with the sociological and anthropological approaches. That is to say that the timelines of major thinkers and influential works in each of these four approaches significantly overlap with one another, each approach describes its methods as scientific rather than theological, and all four approaches continue today. Moreover, these approaches have interacted

with each other and have continually refined their assumptions and methods over time. For example, phenomenologists of religion might use for their own theories data collected by anthropologists; however, in their use and interpretation of this data they may strive to correct what they perceive to be overly reductionistic anthropological, psychological, or sociological interpretations. Reductionism is a term that connotes the intellectual tendency to explain the complexities of a phenomenon being examined through an account that simplifies its causes or nature. That is, the reductionist anthropological, psychological, or sociological account of religion would assert that religion originates and functions for cultural, psychological, or social reasons respectively. The phenomenologist might object that her social scientist colleagues' explanations addressed only parts of the complex whole and missed or misrepresented the essential *religious* quality of a religion, ritual, or myth.

With such tensions and different interpretations in mind, as well as the basic distinction between the emphasis on description in phenomenology and explanation in psychology, the pairing of phenomenology with psychology might seem surprising. However, they share a number of things in common, including a focus on religious consciousness in general and religious experiences and perceptions in particular. Both also differ from sociological explanations, although in different ways. Psychologists are likely to critique sociological theories as inadequate to the individual's experience, needs, and thought processes, whereas phenomenologists argue for greater attention to the religious dimension itself—of both groups and individuals—rather than understanding religion primarily according to its social function. One criticism invokes the practitioner's interior life and the other acknowledges, as essential and irreducible, the religious phenomena—the rituals, myths, concepts of sacred space, and expressions of the divine. However, even here there is important overlap between categories because, like psychologists, phenomenologists often emphasize the experience and perception of these religious phenomena.

The pairing of phenomenology with psychology of religion can also highlight juxtapositions in terms of irreducibility, bracketing of truth claims, and sympathetic descriptions. While "sympathetic descriptions" could mean merely reproducing insiders' descriptions of their religious traditions, without any critical analysis, such descriptions would add nothing to scholarship beyond the reporting of data. More typically, sympathetic description refers to a sensitivity that tries to understand and take seriously the insiders' perspective without limiting interpretation to insiders' views or categories. "Bracketing" suggests a suspension of judgment (taking certain questions and evaluations out of play). "Irreducibility" refers to a reluctance or inability to simplify something out of concern for losing an essential quality, or distorting it beyond meaningful recognition in order to fit a model. Thus, phenomenologists would resist "explaining away" religion only in terms of psychological conditions as strongly as they would reject reductionistic sociological explanations. However, phenomenologists are quite willing to acknowledge psychological dimensions to religious practice and belief—as well as sociological, political, and

other influences—as long as there remains something distinctly religious that is not subsumed by or reduced to these non-religious explanations. Although the phenomenologist seeks to preserve and emphasize this distinctly religious dimension, the “sacred” in Eliade’s writings and the “numinous” or “holy” for Otto (to name two major theorists and their concepts, which we will explore below), this approach is best known for “bracketing” claims of truth rather than affirming or rejecting the theological claims made by religious insiders. Phenomenologists are often sympathetic to the religions they study in terms of trying to understand the ideas, language, myth, rituals, beliefs, and practices of insiders, but they are not compelled to affirm, reject, or limit themselves to the insiders’ interpretations. Psychological approaches are not bound to this bracketing or sympathy. Although some psychologists of religion do bracket the reality of an external sacred power, others confidently assert that religion is simply an illusion, a mental affliction, or a projected human construct derived from psychological needs, wish fulfillments, and stunted development.

Psychological approaches can also focus on individuals’ perceptions, experiences, or even brain activity while engaged in religious practice, without denying or dismissing the possibility of an external religious reality or the positive potential that religion can play for practitioners’ mental health. However, even such positive evaluations of religion seek a psychological explanation beyond practitioners’ interpretations or explanations of religious experience. The scholar of either phenomenological or psychological approaches analyzes various dimensions of religion to better understand individual people, their experiences, beliefs, and traditions as well as religious patterns, origins, and functions. Moreover, these approaches share origins and ambitions that justify grouping them together. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Hegel defined phenomenology in terms of knowledge as perceived by consciousness. His *Phenomenology of Spirit* asserted that close study of diverse phenomena reveals an essential spirit that unifies and directs the various manifestations. Many of the seminal figures in the development of religious studies described their studies in terms of the “science of religion” (*Religionswissenschaft*) and used phenomenological approaches. By the end of the nineteenth century, the phenomenologist Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye had even linked the approaches together by asserting that psychological and phenomenological approaches complement each other in the pursuit of a science of religion.

Psychology of religion, like the discipline of psychology as a whole, is rooted in nineteenth-century expansions of scientific modes of study which aimed at a better understanding of human beings and their culture and society as well as the natural world. In *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, Carl Jung asserts that in his study of religion, he restricts himself to “the observation of phenomena” without engaging in “metaphysical or philosophical considerations.” He further invokes phenomenological approaches in this work by insisting that he is an empiricist and that his scientific approach to psychology represents a “phenomenological” standpoint “concerned with occurrences, events, experiences—in a word, with facts” rather than

judgments. Some of the notions of science and technologies used to test hypotheses and establish “facts” have changed between the time of Jung and his predecessors and today. Contemporary studies of religion through cognitive science and even “neurotheological” analysis are more recent movements that examine religious consciousness in terms of cognitive processes and brain activity. These approaches employ cutting-edge scientific techniques, language, sensibilities, and machinery; however, the resulting explanations and interpretations about religion and religious consciousness have not rendered all earlier approaches and methods obsolete. We will explore several of these recent movements alongside phenomenological and psychological approaches in this survey of perspectives in the scientific study of religion that focus on religious consciousness, perception, and experience.

Phenomenological approaches

The introductory paragraphs above described phenomenological approaches and some of their telling characteristics. These included bracketing truth claims and acknowledging that other approaches might offer partial explanations or descriptions while asserting that there is something irreducibly *religious* about religious phenomena. That is to say that religion is *sui generis*: it is of its own kind. Because phenomenologists typically maintain that religion is its own unique category, they argue that something would be lost if religion were only studied as one focus among many in departments such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and history. Each of those departments, and each approach to the study of religion, adds important insight about religion, but for the phenomenologist, religion cannot completely be explained by or reduced to its socio-economic, psychological, or cultural dimensions. Phenomenologists of religion argue that to attempt such reduction misses the most essential *religious* aspect. Scholars who employ this approach are also among the most passionate advocates for departments of religious studies rather than leaving the study of religion to the theoretical perspectives, methods, and perhaps the margins of departments of psychology, anthropology, sociology, and history. For example, these departments might ignore religion or study it restrictively: psychological perspectives would likely be restricted to explanations of religion in terms of psychological causes and functions; religious accounts in anthropology might be restricted to participant-observer ethnographic methods; and religion could become marginal in sociology if the department did not include a sociologist of religion, or could become marginal in other ways in history if an historian only incidentally made reference to religion as a relatively minor factor among many others that shape historical context, dynamics, and events. A religious studies department, it is argued, will be more fully and comprehensively focused on the study of religion, with the resources and institutional standing to avoid haphazard study or a slide to the margins. Phenomenologists go one step further in arguing that uniquely *religious* dimensions should not be neglected within religious studies itself, much less within the university as a whole.

Although phenomenological approaches have been quite influential for religious studies scholarship and teaching, the term phenomenology baffles students, and its meaning is far from clear to many religious studies scholars. This lack of clarity stems both from the obscurity of the term, and the imprecise and shifting meaning that it has when applied to the study of religion. Phenomenon, of which phenomena is the plural, refers to a thing as it is experienced or perceived by our senses. Such a thing can be observed or apprehended by the senses, though this perception of the object is not the same as the object itself. That is, our perception is shaped by our senses, experiences, tastes, preferences, history, culture, mind, cognitive functions, etc. The intrinsic essence of the thing in itself is mediated through these lenses. Therefore, phenomenology is a study of phenomena, not of things as they actually are without regard to how we perceive them. By acknowledging that descriptions of consciousness and experience are mediated by perception, phenomenological investigations in philosophy and religion typically bracket the question of whether or not the phenomena that are experienced are ultimately real in some objective sense.

Blurred boundaries: irreducible religious essence

That said, some phenomenologists of religion seek to grasp and describe a religious essence, which they perceive in the traditions they study and from patterns that they detect in wide-ranging religious data from myths, rituals, texts, temples, dances, practices, beliefs, and ideas of gods and sacred space. A good number of seminal thinkers in the history of religious studies fit this category. Many are sympathetic to religion and to the priorities, language, categories, and explanations of religious adherents. They do not restrict themselves to the interpretations of insiders, but they are more likely to consider and value insiders' perspectives and perceptions relative to other approaches in the academic study of religion. Scholars inside or outside a religious tradition can conduct phenomenological observation, analysis, and interpretation of patterns in religious practice and belief. Those outside the tradition may need to pay closer attention to insiders' sensibilities, but those inside the tradition may need to guard against confessional perspectives where normative statements about their religion transgress the boundaries of academic analysis in a secular setting. In light of the statements above concerning sympathetic disposition toward religion and religious insiders as well as assertions regarding an irreducible religious essence, it is not surprising that this boundary between secular and theological approaches has been blurred by a number of influential phenomenologists.

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) is a classic example of a scholar who blurs this distinction. Whereas some phenomenologists approach the study of religion from a background in philosophy or with a careful adherence to the objective ideals of the scientific study of religion, Otto is one of the early religious studies scholars who first trained as a theologian. This theological disposition, in combination with his focus on experience, asserts itself in his famous work, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923), in which

he invited the reader “to direct his mind to a moment of deeply-felt religious experience, as little as possible qualified by other forms of consciousness. Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther. . . .” Otto privileges the insider’s access to experiences of this religious essence and elsewhere argues against the capacity of scientific study objectively and comprehensively to grasp, understand, and explain religious experience from the outside. His contention may strike many as reasonable or intuitive. His dismissal of those who have not had such a religious experience can further be understood as a rejection of secular theories and theorists, such as Sigmund Freud. Freud acknowledged that he had never had an “oceanic” experience, and his psychological theories marginalized powerful and mystical religious experiences. Nevertheless, Otto’s restriction is exclusivist and normative in ways that conflict with the standards of the secular scholarship of religion and with social scientific ideals of open, impartial, repeatable, and verifiable analysis.

Reason and rational elements factor into Otto’s analysis, but as a complement to, rather than a dispeller of, supernatural and non-rational elements of religious meaning and experience. Whereas aspects of religion, of the holy, are accessible to reason, he used the term “numinous” to designate the religious dimensions, or “overplus of meaning” beyond reason’s reach and rational articulation. In some ways, he may seem more at home in the section on theological approaches; however, his methods and description of an irreducible essence of religion, the “numinous,” were quite influential to the development of the phenomenological approach. Moreover, he focused on how individuals perceived and experienced religion. For example, he analyzed how people experienced this numinous reality not through rational comprehension but instead in terms of “mysterium” and “tremendum,” characterized by overpowering feelings of awe, terror, fascination, and urgency when confronting the “wholly other” mystery. Otto’s descriptions of awe, fear, and trembling in the face of divine power rely on Christianity but are intended to address experiences and perceptions of the divine from various traditions. That is, his language and insights, such as linking feelings of awe with the awe-full majesty of the unapproachable creator god, are refracted through Christianity, but attempt to speak to a unified religious dimension beyond his own tradition. He did travel widely and promoted the comparative study of religion with a sympathetic and relatively open disposition, which is characteristic of phenomenologists. He noted differences but also stressed larger patterns and similarities across traditions. Nonetheless, he compromises any sense of even-handed comparison by explicitly claiming Christianity as a uniquely superior religion. His terms and descriptions of religious experience and his insistence upon a separate essence of religion remain influential, while his discussions of the origins, development and fulfillment of religion have exerted much less influence in religious studies.

Other major early phenomenologists, such as the Dutch scholars P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874) and Cornelius Petrus Tiele (1830–1902), studied theology and served as ministers before advocating phenomenological approaches that extended beyond Christianity to categorize and compare religious phenomena.

They directed their studies toward understanding religion as a whole rather than toward promoting one tradition at the expense of another. They promoted the scientific study of religion though they did not claim that such study could fully explain religion or grasp its essence. Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950) also spent time as a minister. His dissertation and later books, including *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*, contributed to this phenomenological approach in the academic study of religion. He carefully examined religion as an object of study, as well as the subject who experiences religion, with an emphasis on the power of the sacred. He studied religious practitioners' traditions along with their feelings of fear and attraction while setting aside, or bracketing, specific truth claims made by a particular religion or about the sacred in general. Such bracketing is especially characteristic of phenomenology, and arises from the effort to understand religion without necessarily trying to explain it, much less refute or promote it. That said, van der Leeuw's writings reveal Christian theological assumptions that help to organize and interpret the vast data he collected from various religious traditions.

Pioneers in the history and comparison of religions

Whereas van der Leeuw was the pre-eminent phenomenologist in the first half of the twentieth century, F. Max Müller (1823–1900) and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) were dominant figures in the history and comparison of religions in the latter halves of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Their influence exceeds the boundaries of phenomenology, but exhibits crucial phenomenological characteristics of description and the gathering of vast amounts of diverse data from which to ascertain patterns, connections and essences of religion as a whole. Müller was the founding father of the scientific study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) separate from traditional perspectives of theological and philosophical approaches. He spent most of his life and career at Oxford, but also demonstrated his German academic training with close analysis of religious texts from around the world. This comparative dimension was central to his study. He adapted Goethe's famous phrase about language, "he who knows one knows none," to the study of religion. Study within one tradition is not truly to study or know religion. It is only through comparison that one comes to understand one religious tradition, other traditions, or the category of religion as a whole. His tireless efforts on behalf of the scientific study of religion yielded many influential books and essays, including the massive *Sacred Books of the East* series of primary texts in translation. This series, which began in 1879 and eventually reached fifty volumes, provided Westerners with access to Asian traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism, which were little known in the late nineteenth century.

Mircea Eliade interpreted, connected, and categorized myriad myths and symbols from religious traditions throughout the world. He sought out phenomena that manifested a sense of the sacred as distinct from the profane. For Eliade, religion

concerns experience of the transcendent, sacred mode beyond the everyday, profane mode of existence, which is ordinary, relative, and bound by history. Rituals, practices and myths provide access to sacred experience, sacred place, and sacred time. Eliade was at least as prolific as Müller. He edited the highly acclaimed sixteen-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion* and numerous influential books, from classics such as *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, to massive works that demonstrated the scope of his scholarship, such as *From Primitives to Zen* (now known as *Essential Sacred Writings from Around the World*). His work on shamanism, yoga, myths, and other sacred writings brought attention to sources and traditions that were often new to religious studies. However, his contributions went beyond the vast data that he gathered and described, to the theories and methods he employed in connecting this diverse data into a framework for understanding the meanings and logic of symbols that represent how the sacred manifests itself throughout the history of the various religious traditions. Unlike historical explorations that emphasize a particular historical context, Eliade asserted that many concepts, types, patterns, and manifestations of the sacred are the same across time and space.

Although very much a comparativist, Eliade preferred “history of religion” for a title to describe the discipline of religious studies. Eliade combined analysis of the history of various traditions with the language, experience, and insights taken from religious participants and their symbols and myths. He insisted on the autonomy of religion as irreducible and on the need to understand religion through its symbols, categories, and interpretations. In other words, he did not believe that religion could be reduced to a psychological or sociological theory, or that it could be most fully understood through the tools of those other disciplines. According to Eliade, the other disciplines can capture economic, linguistic, artistic, and other aspects of religion, but they miss the essential element of the sacred. This remains a point of contention in religious studies between phenomenologists in the mode of an Eliade, Otto, or van der Leeuw, and social scientific scholars who cringe at the idea of a privileged, sacred essence beyond the grasp of an outsider’s secular analysis.

Eliade’s influence extends even further beyond his writings to the students of religion whom he trained at the University of Chicago. Eliade helped to build an especially strong program in Chicago, which produced many of the scholars who filled the rapidly growing number of positions in this relatively new discipline. However, Eliade’s extensive influence has waned in recent decades with greater specialization, area studies, postmodernism, and critiques that his methods were anti-historical and uncritically selective. These critiques have reduced the influence of research in comparative studies and phenomenology of religion more generally. In fact, criticism of this approach has come from distinctly opposing directions. On the one hand, there are those who think that attempts like Eliade’s to reveal universal structures have been inadequate to the diversity and specific context of each tradition. On the other hand, critics from social scientific approaches assert that there is inadequate reduction and rigor in what appears to them to be a subjective selection of data and interpretation without sound scientific method.

Influential phenomenologists of religion

P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874) and **Cornelius Petrus Tiele** (1830–1902): Dutch scholars who shifted from theological ministries to early advocacy of phenomenological approaches that categorized and compared religious phenomena beyond Christianity.

F. Max Müller (1823–1900): German scholar at Oxford and founding father of the scientific study of religion (*Religionswissenschaft*); compared and analyzed religious texts from around the world; the multi-volume *Sacred Books of the East* exemplifies his vast contributions.

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937): German scholar; theological training and phenomenological perspectives; used “numinous” to designate religious dimensions—including feelings of awe and terror—beyond the grasp of reason and scientific explanation; wrote *The Idea of the Holy* (1923).

Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950): Dutch scholar, theologian, and author of *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology*; studied many religious traditions while setting aside, or bracketing, specific truth claims of a particular religion or about the sacred.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986): Romanian scholar of the “history of religion” at the University of Chicago; interpreted, connected, and categorized myriad myths and symbols from religious traditions throughout the world; focused on phenomena that manifested a sense of the sacred as distinct from the profane, including rituals, experiences, and ideas of sacred space or time.

Ninian Smart (1927–2001): Scottish scholar of religion; encouraged an imaginative empathy with adherents to better understand them and their religious experiences; rather than seeking a single essence, he explored multiple dimensions of religious perspectives, rituals, beliefs, myths, ethics, institutions and experiences.

Recent influences

Nonetheless, these comparative and phenomenological modes continue to exert great influence, both at the popular level through documentaries and books, such as *The Power of Myth*, a book and PBS television series based on Bill Moyer’s interview with Joseph Campbell, and in the way religious studies is taught in the university. Ninian Smart (1927–2001) is a pre-eminent example of this enduring influence at university level, as well as an exponent of a nuanced phenomenological approach that avoids the attempt to isolate a religious essence, for which many earlier scholars in this approach have been criticized. He avoids the critique of pursuing an overtly

religious agenda in the study of religion, but by bracketing the possibility of supernatural elements in religion, he does not avoid all criticism from religious studies scholars who seek to bolster the scientific rigor of their discipline by treating religion exclusively as a natural, human phenomenon.

Smart exerted considerable influence through his books, including textbooks such as *The Religious Experience of Mankind* and *The World's Religions*, as well as through the many students and graduate students whom he trained and who have since become major scholars and teachers in the field. Smart encouraged students and scholars to “walk in the moccasins” of the religious insider, to better understand his or her perspectives, rituals, beliefs, myths, ethics, institutions and experiences. He argued for an imaginative empathy with adherents of all traditions to better understand them, including their religious experiences and intentions. This required the phenomenological bracketing, known as *epoché*, where suspension of one's own beliefs and an openness that neither confirms nor denies truth claims assists one in empathetically engaging with another's worldview. In this way he was able to avoid some of the biases of his predecessors, including the bias of interpreting other religions through a Christian lens and the undue emphasis on religious belief in particular at the expense of other dimensions of religion. He is admired for promoting a popular mode of religious studies that values diversity in keeping with liberal ideals of religious pluralism. However, Smart was also a critical scholar and teacher who did not advocate simply repeating the insiders' explanations. Instead, he discussed religious traditions as complex organic entities with interrelated dimensions of doctrine, experience, mythology, art, ritual, ethics, and social institutions. Rather than one central essence of religion, each religious tradition exhibits these dimensions with some aspects emphasized more than others from one tradition to the next. Religion is not a static unified whole, nor are the various religions identical to one another. Instead, religions are related to each other according to Wittgenstein's idea of “family resemblance.” For this relationship there does not need to be a single defining trait shared by all members, but instead various members can be recognized as part of the same family, because they resemble each other by sharing some characteristics with one family member and others with another. Smart's cross-cultural comparisons aim to indicate these resemblances while also acknowledging the specific context and worldview of each tradition.

Psychological approaches

Psychological approaches to the study of religion are fairly diverse in their claims, but largely unified in attempting better to explain or understand religion by focusing on the mind, perception, experience, and consciousness of the religious individual. Some approaches can be described as reducing religion to its psychological dimension, such as “explaining away” religion as illusory wish fulfillment projected onto reality and mistakenly believed to be real. Others, such as studies that illustrate how existing beliefs influence the way in which religion is experienced, demonstrate

how psychology shapes religion without necessarily claiming that all of religion can be reduced to a psychological origin or explanation. This chapter will first explore some of the classical theories and theorists in the psychology of religion and then explore topics and recent methods that are related to this approach. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Carl Jung (1875–1961) are seminal to the formation of psychology as a discipline as well as psychological approaches to the study of religion. In addition to these two, we will survey the thought of their older contemporary, William James (1842–1910), and briefly mention subsequent scholars whose approach was influenced by these pioneers.

Early seminal theorists

Sigmund Freud: religion as illusory wish fulfillment

Freud developed the theory, therapy, and emerging field of psychoanalysis, led an influential group of psychologists centered in Vienna, and remains the most widely recognized name in psychology even today. His fame encompasses a fair bit of notoriety from knowledgeable critics and from lay people with limited and at times distorted understanding of some of his seminal theories—especially those, such as the Oedipus complex, involving sexual urges, infantile dependencies, and frustrated instincts. His views on religion are less well known, but were closely related and important both for his own life work and for religious studies.

Freud was very bright and ambitious. Even before developing psychoanalysis and writing numerous influential books, he was a doctor and a clinical neurologist who specialized in psychopathology. Freud continued with his clinical practice and interest in various neuroses, but he simultaneously directed his formidable intelligence, education, insights, and theories toward addressing larger questions of human civilization and religion. These topics were interrelated for Freud and he believed that his psychoanalytic insights were as usefully applicable to understanding religion as they were to resolving patients' neuroses. In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), he speaks of religion as illusory wish fulfillment that transforms forces of nature into anthropomorphic gods who are powerful and potentially destructive, but can also be approached and appeased. Freud indicates that monotheism, with god as a father figure, is especially conducive for developing a sense of a special relationship between god as parent and chosen people as children. The creation of gods and religion, according to Freud, also provides convenient solace and incentives that soften life's hardships, and protection and recompense for present and past suffering as well as future rewards for good behavior. In a sense, religion assists society's civilizing project by promoting moral precepts that guard against some of the baser instinctual desires of the individual and by attempting to domesticate some of the wilder forces of nature. Religion imbues civilization and individuals' lives with a sense of higher purpose, a divine hand guiding the helm, and an authoritative source of moral precepts beyond human society itself.

Despite Freud's praise for civilization and the link he establishes between its formation and that of religion, he remains critical of religion precisely because he thinks that it is illusory. That is, he asserts that it cannot be authenticated. Religious claims and beliefs are not necessarily false, but according to Freud they are quite improbable, and the inability to authenticate or refute religious claims leaves them in the category of illusion and well short of his preferred rationalist and scientific standards. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud appears to make the same bracketing move as phenomenologists who refrain from judging the truth claims of religion; however, his initial distinction between illusion and delusion falls away, as they are seen as ultimately the same in failing to measure up to objective, scientific knowledge. In this same work, Freud asserts that "scientific work is the only road which can lead us to a knowledge of reality outside ourselves." This rationalist ideal and the pre-eminence of science was increasingly common in Freud's age, but he speculates that there have always been doubts about the authenticity of religion and the gods, and that these doubts have been suppressed by individuals and societies. Freud explains that religious beliefs have been insulated from doubts and critiques because the related issues of meaning and purpose are so important even while the evidence is so tenuous and the logic in support of religious claims is often circular.

Freud: science displaces religion as civilizations mature

For Freud, the power of these urgent and ultimate wishes and the collective hold of the related illusion have propped up religion and led to suppression of these doubts. They have also led to the elevation of particular experiences and claims of faith over reason. Unlike the theological perspectives that privilege faith above reason or maintain that reason is ultimately supportive of faith claims, Freud distinguishes reason as separate from and superior to faith. Moreover, he finds individuals' inner experiences inadequate evidence for religious claims. For Freud, another's personal religious experience has no particular significance for those people, including Freud, who have not had such an experience. This disposition toward the insider and his or her experience is a departure from Otto and some other phenomenologists and theologians, who privilege insiders' experiential access to the most important religious essence, which is inaccessible to external observation and scientific analysis. Freud retorts at the end of *The Future of an Illusion* "an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere."

As Freud studies the past, present, and future of civilization, he theorizes about the past and future role of religion. Its future, for Freud, is quite limited. People, and civilization as a whole, will no longer find religion's illusion adequate and will benefit from a more penetrating and objective understanding of what is "really" happening. For Freud, both civilizations and human beings mature. In fact, he theorizes certain parallel developments where the illusions and neuroses of a child, including the ambivalent fear and reverence with which a boy might relate to his father, are recapitulated in early civilization's primitive religion and subsequent developments

of a father-figure god who inspires similar ambivalence. Just as Freud, as a full grown and self-aware adult, can dispel the illusions of childhood and penetrate the artifice of religion, so he thinks that civilization as a whole can reach a similar maturation at the expense of religious belief. For Freud, we as a society have outgrown religion. In the terms Freud developed in his practice, to remain “fixated” on religion or to “regress” back to earlier stages, where religious belief may have been an inevitable, child-like developmental stage, would indicate a neurosis best overcome through therapy.

His theories of religion, articulated in books such as *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) as well as *The Future of an Illusion*, contain this type of argument, where insights produced or reinforced by his wide reading and psychiatric practice are applied to diagnosing not just individuals, but psychological dimensions used to explain the origins and progressive development of religion and of civilization as a whole. In *Totem and Taboo*, the instinctual urge to displace the father described by Freud in the Oedipus complex is used to explain totemic religion with its related concept of powerful taboos. In parallel with killing the father and marrying the mother, Freud speculates that in prehistoric times frustrated younger males killed the dominant male of their “primal horde” in order to satisfy their sexual desires with the females under his control. This early clan or tribal model of extended families ruled by one dominant male stemmed as much from observations of apes and other animals as from ethnographic evidence of human groups. Consistent with other influential anthropologists and scientists of his age, Freud not only accepted Darwin’s explanation of the evolution of species, but assumed social evolutionary principles where less developed social arrangements progressively gave way to more advanced societies. The Oedipal uprising in *Totem and Taboo* provides the catalyst for abandoning a relatively primitive and animal-like interaction for a more civilized social arrangement. That is, Freud claims that the guilt of the young males (following killing and consuming their own father) eventually led them to reinstate the father as a totem animal to be worshipped, and to create taboos against incest and killing or eating the totem animal. This more advanced social arrangement arises from the recognition that the brief ecstasy the young males may have enjoyed by impulsively indulging their frustrated desires was unsustainable. The protection and security of the “primal horde” is sacrificed if members kill each other to fulfill sexual or other urges. The illusory wish fulfillments of religion allowed a restoration of security by restoring the dominant male and his authority (as a totem or a god) where allegiance to this authority in turn required precepts against killing, cannibalism, and incest. Through this Oedipal analogy, Freud explains the origins of religious totems, taboos, and even of “more advanced” societies characterized by better regulated violence and marriage outside the clan or tribe.

Similarly, in *Moses and Monotheism* Freud recounts developments in Judaism and Christianity as seen through his psychoanalytic lens. He departs from historians, theologians, and other biblical scholars by speculating that Moses may not have been a Hebrew devoted to Yahweh. Instead Freud postulates Moses as an Egyptian prince and monotheist devoted to the god Aten, who leads the Hebrews out of oppression

only to be betrayed. Here we move from Freud as maverick historian to his still controversial but more recognizably psychoanalytic claim that frustrated followers murdered Moses and displaced his god with Yahweh, whom they served with more primitive rituals. Freud credits later prophets with recovering the earlier monotheism, which he explains according to psychological notions of neuroses, guilt, repression, latency, and the inevitability of repressions resurfacing.

Criticism of Freud

Freud's explanations of Jewish and Christian developments in this book reveal some of the key limitations to his approach. Despite his early work on totemic religion, his insights are directed to the monotheism of Judaism and Christianity in particular rather than to diverse expressions of religion as a whole. Not only does he rely on a monotheistic father-figure god, but he also presumes that observations of individuals in psychoanalysis provide an unproblematic analogy to entire groups of people across vast spans of space and time. His analogies connect his insights about individuals' neuroses with his speculation about the religious and societal development of humankind. However, critics question both side of the analogy—his psychoanalytic conclusions about individual development and his grand theories about religion or civilization—as well as what they perceive to be a woefully inadequate logical or scientific basis for these interpretations, much less for the leap from individual case studies to society as a whole.

Despite this ongoing criticism of his work, Freud's influence can be best understood not so much by the specific content of his theories on the origins of religion, which have been widely rejected, as by his psychoanalytic method, rhetorical style, and confidence in "explaining away" religion. For Freud, not only was religion produced by humans rather than a divine, external authority, it was a defective product of an early stage of development. Moreover, Freud's approach is reductive in the sense that his questions and psychoanalytic methods reveal the psychological basis and motive for religion as well as the therapy to overcome it. Despite occasional references to the benefits of religion or distinctions between illusion and delusion, Freud ultimately seeks to dispel religion as an intellectually dishonest illusion, comparable even to an obsessive neurosis.

Religion as a sort of collective neurosis, according to Freud, should be overcome in the interest of knowledge vanquishing ignorance, even if religion has provided some services, such as consolation, motive for morality, "taming of the asocial instincts," and other relatively positive side effects. Freud acknowledges these benefits, but argues that religion has not done enough and that the usefulness of its function has been outgrown. He asserts that it has failed ultimately to provide happiness, morality, or other benchmarks of satisfaction and that there is greater risk than reward in maintaining the illusions of religion. Freud understands human and social development to occur in stages. Whereas such a "neurosis" may be inevitable in the ignorant infancy of a person or a society, Freud deems it unfit for adults or

mature civilizations. Problems arise if healthy progress is stalled by fixation or even reversed by regression, sliding back to an earlier stage of development. In either case, Freud asserts that his psychoanalytic insights and therapy can help both the individual and the larger society. Thus, he sees his role in dispelling the illusion of religion as ultimately healing and constructive. He further reinforces a modern, rational assault on religion by adding a “psychological foundation to the criticism of my great predecessors” in order to advance the scientific spirit and move civilization forward.

Freud’s theories were always controversial, but their influence has diminished over time and critics have also taken to task the claims of Freud and his followers concerning the scientific credentials of their method. Subsequent psychoanalytic approaches to religion have pursued similar questions about the nature of religion and the motives and mental health of religious belief, but they have generally been more nuanced while emending or ignoring many of Freud’s most controversial claims. Moreover, Freud’s theories represent just one of an expanding multitude of psychological approaches. Many of the more recent developments in psychology as a discipline, including psychological approaches to the study of religion, can be characterized as considerably more quantitative with “hard science” credentials, such as hypotheses that can be tested empirically. Psychologists of this stripe differ most radically from Freud’s methods and conclusions. However, even among more qualitative approaches during the peak of Freud’s influence, there were high-profile departures from Freud’s views. The Swiss psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung, exemplifies such a famous departure with implications for the interpretation of religion.

Carl Jung: religion as imperfect therapy

Jung and Freud shared a general commitment to advancing self-understanding and its broader applications as well as more specific interests and views, such as the importance of dream analysis. Moreover, each inspired schools of psychologists to form around his insights and methods. Thus, the schools of psychoanalysis pioneered by Freud and Jung’s analytic psychology continue to outlive their founders and are added to and revised by subsequent generations of psychologists. Each forms a psychodynamic system that purports to help the individual achieve healthy development, integrity, and self-understanding. It can be argued that religion includes similar objectives, and part of these psychologists’ interest in religion stems from this sense that they had devised a therapy to exceed or supplement the limitations of religion. Despite these similarities, there were important differences as well, such as the broad, deep, rich, complementary, and positive sense of the “unconscious” for Jung relative to Freud’s emphasis on the “subconscious” as a repository of suppressed desires and base instincts at war with mature, civilized, social behavior. Jung broke from Freud, but like his elder colleague, he applied his insights to religion and society as well as to himself and to his patients. The two great psychologists held quite different interpretations and theories of religion. Both

located the origins of religion in the unconscious, but Jung took the reality of religion more seriously and positively than did Freud.

Not only did Jung have a greater respect for religious ideas, symbols, and experiences, but he also found commonalities in individuals' experiences and the symbols of disparate traditions in various times, which reinforced his theory of universal archetypes that emerge from a collective unconscious, which was more broad and deep than the individual's personal unconscious. These unconscious depths combined with the conscious ego to form the self. Many might mistake the conscious ego for the self, as the former includes personality and identity including sensations, feelings, and memory, whereas the more complete "self" operates under the radar of consciousness. Even the conscious ego remains hidden to others as they experience the persona presented to them, which is shaped by various factors, such as social convention, politics, religion, class, nationality, gender, and occupation. The persona too had a complementary hidden dark side.

This sense of complementariness and totality is evident throughout Jung's writings. For Jung, the objective of "individuation" resonates with religion and religious ideas. Individuation refers to a coming together of the complementary conscious and unconscious aspects of the self. Becoming more conscious of the self, including the deep riches of the unconscious dimension, can be described as a process of self-realization. The relationships and connections are always there, and the goal—to borrow a key term in Buddhism—is to "awaken" to this more full and accurate understanding of the self and reality. The unconscious communicates through symbols, according to Jung. Dreaming is an especially useful intermediate state for this communication. Symbolic mental images from dreams can be interpreted according to the individual's context and perspective in order to illuminate the collective and personal unconscious while advancing the process of individuation. Religion, too, is an instructive repository of symbols that can be read as expressions of archetypes—including the idea of the completeness of God as a model of the whole self. Jung indicates that this idea of wholeness and perfection can also be symbolically represented by heroes, magical animals, and objects, or even a *mandala*—the geometrical cosmic maps of Tantric Buddhism and Hinduism. Religion also provides a realm for experiences, ideas and states of consciousness beyond the conventional limits of the ego consciousness. Jung recalls the phenomenologist Rudolf Otto by identifying religion as the attitude of a consciousness that has experienced a sense of an external, sacred, *numinosum*.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, Jung wrote half a dozen books directly relevant to his psychological approach to understanding religion. In addition to works such as *Psychology of Religion* (1938), *Answer to Job* (1956), and *Psychology and Religion: West and East* (1958), Jung also contributed the opening chapter of *Man and His Symbols*, a book written by Jungians and directed to a more general audience. Where an ardent atheist might find satisfying Freud's dismissal of religion as an illusion to be outgrown in healthy development, religious believers and practitioners are more likely to take comfort in Jung's insights and interpretations, which suggest that religion can be therapeutic. Where Freud's gaze was directed to Jewish and Christian

monotheism in particular, Jung's focus on a universal unconscious has won admirers from Eastern and Western traditions including those with mystical inclinations. Freud recommends therapy to overcome the neurosis of religion. Jung, on the other hand, asserts that religion functions as a therapy to overcome imbalance and realize a healthier and complete sense of self. In the modern age, its therapeutic potential has been eclipsed by therapies such as Jung's own analytic psychology, but religion is not the neurosis for Jung that it is for Freud.

In fact, for Jung, any manifestation of archetypes serves the compensatory purpose of the unconscious correcting an imbalance in consciousness. For example, manifestations, often particular to the individual, of the *anima* (the feminine part of a man's personality) or *animus* (the masculine part of a woman's personality) archetypes may appear in dreams to restore balance. The three primary archetypes are these two, along with the shadow, which represents negative qualities that are hidden, rejected, or projected onto others. These archetypes shape perception, but they cannot be perceived directly. Dreams, imagination, myths, and religious experience provide access to archetypal images, such as the sun, mother, father, sage, trickster, child, an animal, birth, and other important rites of passage. Archetypal images appear directly in dreams. Dreams, however, are irrational and require the therapeutic process of individuation to understand the unique significance of these images for one's self. This process involves self-realization—including awareness of the links and communication between one's consciousness and unconscious—and establishing a critical distance from the images to allow interpretation. According to Jung, religious experience also offers immediate access to these archetypal images. This direct access can be intense, confused, and can appear as a form of psychosis. However, when organized religion is mediated through ritual and doctrine, the archetypal images are no longer directly communicated. This form is less revealing but also less dangerous than immediate religious experience. It is, in a sense, an incomplete move in the direction of distance and understanding of the manifestations of archetypes that can be pursued more fully and successfully through Jung's therapy of individuation. Jung's psychotherapy is not only sympathetic to religion—the two overlap. The overlap, however, is not complete. Jung is ultimately urging his modern audience, many of whom have abandoned religion in their embrace of science, to pursue therapy rather than to return to religion in order to reconnect with their unconscious.

William James: importance of religious experience

Jung was by no means the first major psychologist to view religion and religious experience positively. William James, an American psychologist and philosopher at Harvard, was a pioneer of scientific psychology in the late nineteenth century. His nationality is notable in the sense that most seminal figures in the early developments of religious studies were European; however, Americans have been at the forefront of some of the experimental and "hard science" approaches to understanding

religion. After he published *The Principles of Psychology* in 1891, James examined religious experience from a psychological perspective. This focus on experience arose, in part, out of interest in conversion and differentiating religion from irreligion. His conclusions emphasized the potential value, importance, and benefits of religious experience. He disseminated his findings in the prestigious Gifford Lectures, which he delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1901–2. His most famous work for the academic study of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), emerged from these lectures.

Some of his observations and insights relied on personal introspection and clinical case studies, though much of this work responded to a wide array of readings from psychological materials, biographical accounts of religious leaders, translations of sacred texts, and other sources that informed his assessment of the psychological dimensions of religion. James focused on “immediate personal experience” of religion rather than doctrine, origins, texts, or ritual. He declared these other aspects to be secondary developments, and he asserted that the religious experiences, feelings, urges, and propensities form a compelling subject for psychological study. Moreover, he chose to focus on religious “geniuses” and their original, “pattern-setting” experiences, which display these religious propensities in their most extreme and fully developed forms. He acknowledges that such figures may be eccentric and unstable in some senses, but for his purposes, it is important only that they are sufficiently articulate to communicate their religious experiences.

While the “healthy-minded” religious adherent encountered neither spiritual crisis nor conversion, the conversion, awakening, or rebirth of the relatively tormented “sick soul” could lead to a dramatic and positive spiritual strength. James indicates Buddhism and Christianity as the religions that have most fully developed the relatively pessimistic aspects associated with the “sick soul” or “twice-born.” This latter term speaks to the possibility of transformative “deliverance: the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life.” For James, the direct, and especially intense, experiences and ideas of extraordinary mystics and religious founders carry particular authority and power. James acknowledged that mystical experience includes a “noetic quality”—perhaps better described as “metanoetic” (beyond the intellect)—of deep insight into truth and reality beyond the reach of rational, discursive thought. Such experiences are also characterized by ineffability—being beyond words or description. This term refers to the inexpressibility of such an experience. Merely describing it in words cannot communicate the feeling, the experience, to someone who has not shared it. James acknowledges that some have had this experience and others have not. As with his discussion of “healthy minded” and “sick souls,” he resists setting one group above the other in any absolute sense. However, he validates the claims of religious experience, taking a stance quite different from Freud’s, by asserting that there is no philosophical justification for determining that a “mystical world” is unreal just because not all have experienced it or because it cannot be easily communicated or revealed to the discursive mind. Moreover, James indicated that the power and authority from the unmediated insights and experiences of mystics and religious founders is primary, and that it then

deteriorates through the mediation of later religious organizations and interpretations. In the concluding lecture, which formed the final chapter of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James characterized the religious life as maintaining “that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance” and that “union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end.” He added that religion facilitates this goal and contributes “a new zest” to life, enchantment, earnestness, heroism, peacefulness, and love.

Like Jung, James understood his psychological approach to religion to be an empirical form of study. Both men also shared a positive view of religion as potentially transformative in helping to create a more complete self larger than, but unified with, the more limited conscious self. Both were also more open than Freud to applying their insights to religious traditions beyond Judaism and Christianity. Admittedly, James’s case studies and personal introspection often emphasize a Protestant perspective, as suggested by his definition of religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” He prefaces this definition with a discussion of the impossibility of fully or adequately defining the term and acknowledges that his own is rather arbitrary and responsive to his present study. Not only are women subsumed in the use of “men” to stand for all humans, which was common at the time, but the emphasis on solitude in James’ definition privileges Protestant ideas of direct access to God and the Bible free from mediating priests, rituals, or communal ceremonies and institutions. The latter part of the definition, however, suggests his openness to “whatever they may consider divine.” His text bears this out as he acknowledges that religion and religious experience do not require the actual existence or even the idea of a god or gods. He notes that Buddhism is officially atheistic even if the Buddha performs a similar role in popular devotion. James uses the transcendental idealism of Emerson as another example of religion where god is an abstract divine quality of the natural universe.

These references are typical of his work as James invokes a wide range of religious and philosophical systems with impressive command of diverse traditions for his era. For example, his analysis of mystical union explicitly states that this especially exalted religious experience is not restricted to any particular theology or philosophy. He illustrated how Hindus and Buddhists as well as Christians and Muslims have cultivated mystic consciousness. Over the next several pages of his book, James elaborates and offers sources that range from Indian yoga and the nuanced difference between the Hindu use of *samadhi* and the Buddhist *dhyana* for higher states of meditative absorption to a long extract in translation from Al-Ghazali’s writings on Sufism. In short, his studies of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* truly sought diverse source material for his conclusions. In self-deprecating introductory and closing remarks, he admits to being “ignorant of Buddhism” and does not claim to be a theologian, anthropologist, or a “scholar learned in the history of religions.” Nonetheless, his contribution to religious studies from a psychological approach was impressive and discerning. Moreover, this work has stood the test of time better than most early classics in the academic study of religion in the sense that it remains more

relevant and influential than most late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works that have addressed the human religious response.

Comparing approaches

Scholars of psychological approaches to religion often differ in the types of religious experience, practice, or belief that they focus upon, as well as in their explanation of religion's origins, function, future, and positive or negative effects on individuals and society. Some think that religion can be reduced completely to its psychological aspect. For others, psychology explains much but does not exhaust the scope or understanding of religion. Some focus on the academic study of religion; for others, religion is but one of many fields that they attempt to map in their psychological explorations. Freud's conviction that God and religion are concepts created by humans due to their own needs, projected out and then naïvely accepted as originating from a higher authority, fits with other interpreters of religion from the nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach to the twentieth-century sociologist Peter Berger. Similarly, he shares with earlier anthropologists, such as Tylor and Frazer, the dismissal of religion as illusory superstition lacking the reality, source, or authority with which believers imbue it. Although Freud devotes greater attention to questions of motive and psychological processes involved with religious beliefs, he labels them as illusory, ultimately unhealthy, and destined to be replaced by more rational explanations of reality.

In contrast, Jung and James are less dismissive of religion, even though they too explore and explain religious beliefs and experiences from a psychological perspective. While Jung agrees with Freud that gods arise from within the human psyche and are projected out, he does not agree that religion is a dangerous illusion to be dispelled by reason. In fact, in his chapter "Approaching the Unconscious" in *Man and His Symbols*, Jung directly contradicts Freud by declaring "Our present lives are dominated by the goddess Reason, who is our greatest and most tragic illusion." Jung turns Freud's conclusion on its head and suggests that not only is reason the dangerous illusion, but its devotees venerate it like a projected goddess.

Academic and popular studies of religion, such as those by the famous comparativist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), are indebted to Jung's concepts of archetypes and his positive evaluation of religion and myths as important experiential and cultural modes that communicate universal, symbolically rich meaning necessary for self-realization. Campbell has reached a wide audience, well beyond the boundaries of the academy, through books such as *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), *The Masks of God* (4 volumes, 1959–68), and *Myths to Live By* (1972) as well as the book and PBS television series, *The Power of Myth* (1988). Campbell also edited *The Portable Jung* (1971), in which the publisher describes him as "the most famous of Jung's American followers" although the label "Jungian" is a poor fit for Campbell. William James's exploration of immediate religious experience and the deep insights but inexpressibility of unmediated mystical awareness has been

extended to studies of Asian religious traditions, such as Zen Buddhism. D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) is the most famous of the scholars, practitioners, and popularizers who emphasized the religious experience of unmediated perception of reality and a non-dualistic whole encompassing nature, one's self, and others. Through his numerous lectures and books, including *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Suzuki greatly influenced the introduction of both this Buddhist tradition and its Japanese artistic and cultural context into North America and Europe. Of course, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* influenced many Western scholars of religion as well, though James's subsequent publications focused on philosophy rather than religion or psychology in particular.

Later twentieth-century contributions

While Freud's assertions about Jewish and Christian developments in *Moses and Monotheism* were soundly rejected, his application of psychotherapy to religion continues to influence religious studies. Erik Erikson (1902–1994) was an influential psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist with an interest in understanding key religious figures according to a psychoanalytic model of stages of development. Erikson's *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (1958) and *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (1969) offered his contribution to the academic study of religion during the rapid rise of religious studies in the 1960s and 1970s. In Erikson's model of eight stages of a human's life cycle, healthy development required adapting to each stage with its corresponding virtues while overcoming obstacles. Religion can help foster such healthy development of the ego into an increasingly meaningful and stable sense of self-identity. It can also influence an individual's development. His work on Luther demonstrated both directions of influence between religious and non-religious spheres in relation to crises in an individual's development. According to Erikson, Luther's troubled relationship with his father was linked to a nervous breakdown, which pushed him to a religious life and subsequent crises of self and purpose, before being resolved in a self-awareness that connected with God, free from the obstacles of his ego and thereby also resolving non-religious problems with his father.

Psychoanalytic interpretations of religion include other forays into psychobiography. For example, Jeffrey Kripal (b. 1962) published a controversial work in this genre, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (1995). This work asserts that a psychoanalytic reading of the Bengali mystic and saint, Ramakrishna, reveals homoerotic aspects of his tantric approaches, visions, teachings, life, and interaction with disciples. The book has received strong praise and passionate criticism from the time it was published through to the present, where much of the back and forth plays out on the internet. In addition to offering an example of psychobiography, the scholarship and reception of this book also raise issues of insiders and outsiders in the academic study of religion. Kripal is a religious studies scholar and many of his detractors are followers of Ramakrishna. Some detractors claim their issue is with the adequacy of the scholarship itself—that Kripal

is an outsider with insufficient access to or command of the language, context, and meaning of Ramakrishna's life and teachings to interpret it adequately. Other critics seem more personally involved in what they interpret as an outsider's attack on, and distortion of, the record of their saint. In either case, there is an insider vs. outsider dynamic not uncommon for religious studies. While not always as passionate, it is common for religious insiders to be uncomfortable with the questions asked and assertions made from the "outside" by scholars of religion.

Others could certainly be mentioned here, such as the influential work in psychoanalysis and anthropology of Gananath Obeyesekere. In *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (1981), Obeyesekere offers insight into the religious practices of Sri Lanka as well as theoretical breakthroughs for understanding symbolism. He employs methods of both anthropology and cultural applications of psychoanalysis, but he uses his ethnographic case study as evidence to revise the theories of symbolism offered by both approaches. René Girard (b. 1923) is another prominent theorist in the academic study of religion whose groundbreaking book, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), has significantly revised earlier psychoanalytic ideas. Girard argued that violence and the sacred are inseparable and operate in the same way. Moreover, the origins of each can be located by his psychoanalytic understanding of mimetic desire—the motive force that concerns desiring that which others desire—and the power and function of sacrificing a scapegoat to unite the group and stave off uncontrolled violence, which could otherwise spread like an epidemic and tear society apart.

Girard describes violence as a dangerous contagion that is powerful, awe-inspiring, and inescapable. Controlling this violence enough to ward off crisis involves sacrificial substitution that redirects this violence in ways that are most effective if they are not fully understood. Religion allows for this through rituals that are not completely transparent or rational, but can be effective and necessary if they are able to restore social order. This solution uses ritualized violence to quell internal violence in a manner that brings society together without inviting further retaliatory violence. Although judicial systems have taken on this role of curing escalating violence, Girard maintains that a religious quality continues to pervade this system in order to achieve its same purpose. That is, there remains a carefully scheduled, sanctioned, ritualized violence deployed to end chaotic, contagious violence. Girard disagreed with Freud's explanation of religious origins by means of the Oedipus complex. However, he shared Freud's method of looking to myths and primal psychological motivations, including desire and the violence that can arise out of desire, to understand how religion arose and functions.

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) was a key contributor to the humanistic psychology that became increasingly popular in the latter half of the twentieth century. Maslow is particularly well known for his theory of a motivation responding to a hierarchy of needs and values. His focus on human, rather than animal, subjects included a particular interest in especially well-adjusted, happy, and healthy individuals. Maslow posited that human beings' basic needs must first be met before motivation and opportunity for higher values can be realized. In this pyramid, the most basic needs

are physiological—food, water, sleep, a hospitable environment, and even sex—followed by needs related to safety and security, love and belonging, and esteem. Although progressively higher than the basic needs, these latter ones are all “deficit needs” in Maslow’s theory. Whereas a deficit in any of these areas, such as belonging or esteem, prompts the need, the yet higher level of “being needs” are motivated by growth rather than deficit.

These higher values include wholeness, truth, beauty, and self-sufficiency. Whereas lower needs are necessary for basic health, progressing through these higher needs is part of “self-actualization.” In this regard, “peak experiences” are especially valuable, and mystical religious experiences represent the “peak experience” *par excellence*. Maslow’s research concluded that not all “self-actualizers” have peak experiences and not all who experience these peaks are self-actualizers, but the ideal includes both having such experiences and continuously improving and self-actualizing. This emphasis on the value of peak experiences moved Maslow in the direction of transpersonal psychology, which looks to religious examples for transformation beyond normal states of consciousness. His book *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (1964) is most explicit in connecting his theories with religion. In the Preface to the 1970 edition, he indicates dangers of extremes in organized religions—“the ‘mystical’ and individual on the one hand, and the legalistic and organizational on the other.” Maslow repeats warnings against the excesses of organized religion where convention, dogma, habit, bureaucracy, and the churches “may become the major enemies of the religious experience” and the peak experienter. However, he also warns against the mystic becoming selfish or mean in pursuit of peak experience, or like a desperate junkie needing successively stronger stimuli to achieve this peak fix, or actually turning to drugs as a shortcut to such an experience, rejecting all guidance in a distorted way, or seeking the exotic in other places and traditions without recognizing that the “sacred is *in* the ordinary.” These comments appealing for a holistic integration rather than faddish excess speak directly to the times in America. In addition to a rise in academic religious studies, the late 1960s were characterized by experimentation in Asian and other alternative religions, drugs, and sex without always differentiating among these practices and experiences.

Influential psychologists of religion

William James (1842–1910): American psychologist and philosopher at Harvard; studies emphasized the value, importance, and benefits of religious experience with particular focus on “immediate personal experience” of religion rather than doctrine, origins, texts, or ritual.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939): Psychologist and influential intellectual based in Vienna; founding father of psychoanalysis; asserted that psychoanalytic insights fostered understanding of religion; indicated that religion provided several

benefits to civilization but ultimately is illusory, akin to a childhood neurosis, and inadequate for scientific standards.

Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961): Swiss founder of analytic (also called Jungian) psychology; evaluated religion more positively than Freud; propounded the notion of universal archetypes that emerge from a collective unconscious and the importance of individuation—a process where one comes to self-realization linking the individual conscious with the collective unconscious.

Erik Erikson (1902–1994): German psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist; in his model of eight stages of a human's life cycle, religion could assist in adapting to each stage; applied psychoanalytic model to key religious figures, such as Luther and Gandhi.

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970): American humanistic psychologist; considered that human beings' basic needs must first be met before motivation and opportunity for higher values can be realized; progressing through higher needs is part of "self-actualization"; mystical religious experiences represent the ultimate "peak experiences."

René Girard (b. 1923): French scholar; asserted that violence and the sacred are inseparable: their origins can be located in mimetic desire and the power and function of sacrificing a scapegoat to unite the group and stave off uncontrolled violence, which could otherwise tear society apart.

Buddhism and psychology

Before turning our attention to some of the latest intersections between science, religion, and psychological approaches in the West, it might be instructive briefly to survey close links between Buddhism and approaches focused on the mind, awareness, consciousness, and cognitive processes. Psychologists engaged in transpersonal psychotherapy and related practices with clear spiritual aims of self-realization beyond the confines of conscious awareness have found resonance between other forms of religion and their theories, practices, and goals. While some have highlighted supportive similarities in such mystical practices as Sufism or Kabbalah, links between Buddhism and psychology have been described as especially strong and have been pursued most extensively. In fact, Buddhism has appealed to a wide range of psychologists and psychological approaches, interests, experiments, and therapies. This has not simply been a recent preoccupation of Western psychologists read back onto the Asian tradition. Analysis of psychological and cognitive processes has been central to Buddhist thought from the time of the Buddha, approximately 2,500 years ago in India, through to the present, including this most recent appropriation in the West.

Many high-profile Buddhist teachers in the West also trained as psychologists. This is most evident with *vipassana* (insight meditation) teachers. Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg all trained under Asian Theravada Buddhist masters, but their Insight Meditation Society, with its retreat centers, forms of practice, and vast numbers of popular books, focuses on *vipassana* meditation. In the West, this practice's psychological emphasis on awareness and insight has been promoted often with little reference to its larger Theravada Buddhist context. Still further from its traditional religious setting, some other practicing psychologists who are not Buddhist teachers or authors nevertheless incorporate Buddhist meditation and insights into their clinical practices. In this context, meditation is often lauded for its therapeutic capacity to relieve stress and allow individuals to step back from the anxieties of their busy schedule, personal problems, or illness. With both groups in mind, one can argue for a sort of psychological approach to, or appropriation of, Buddhism. However, the relationship that is rooted more deeply in history could better be described as a Buddhist approach to key psychological concerns, such as states of mind, consciousness, awareness, and identity.

The story of the Buddha and his early teachings is often portrayed through an analogy where the Buddha is a physician diagnosing human beings' afflictions, and identifying the cause, cure, and prescriptive course of treatment. These core Buddhist teachings speak to a sense of dis-ease or suffering, which characterizes existence, and is caused by desire. Desire, including craving or attachment, results from ignorance of the impermanence and radical interdependence of all things. Buddhists speak of a mistaken idea, arising from this same ignorance about the nature of reality, of a separate, enduring self that desires, loves, hates, craves permanence, and suffers. Both cause and cure can be understood psychologically, and the constant encouragement to be aware of and awake to the often hidden workings of consciousness, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, attachments, and ideas about oneself and others fosters a sophisticated understanding of mental processes and their connections to beliefs, actions, and identity. The therapeutic treatment at the core of these Buddhist teachings prescribes an ongoing and interrelated eight-fold path where living ethically, practicing meditative contemplation, and working to better understand the teachings and corresponding insights into the nature of reality can reinforce each other and facilitate an awakening or enlightenment. This highest realization, which some psychologists might describe as self-realization or actualization, is actually a realization of "no-self" in the Buddhist context. In this early formulation of Buddhism, neither gods nor external powers are religiously—or therapeutically—important. Part of the appeal and link between Buddhism and many of the psychological theories already discussed includes an inward focus and emphasis on mental states, relationships, insights, and perspectives broader than the conventional concepts of the discursive mind and the limitations of ordinary consciousness.

Of course, to exaggerate the relationship or conflate Buddhism with Western psychology and related forms of psychotherapy would require distorting and oversimplifying both. Many psychologists would understand their discipline as capable of

explaining Buddhism and many Buddhists would see psychology as just one aspect of their tradition. After all, Buddhism is a religion, or a group of related religions, that developed various strands and characteristics in multiple cultures over the course of more than two millennia. However, in the West, certain aspects of Buddhism have often been seized upon and emphasized while ignoring or distorting other cultural and religious aspects. Humanistic, rational, and psychological dimensions have been especially popular. The fascination with Zen in the West has included its psychological appeal as evident by the involvement of high-profile psychologists, such as Jung, who wrote the foreword to D. T. Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen* (1949), or Erick Fromm's book, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (1960), which he co-authored with D. T. Suzuki and Richard De Martino. The authors suggest that Zen and psychoanalysis are mutually supportive in important ways though not fully equivalent; after all, Suzuki suggests that Zen is considerably more expansive and can provide insights and benefits beyond the psychoanalytic healing suggested by Fromm. Franz Aubrey Metcalf's article, "The Encounter of Buddhism and Psychology," in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (2002), notes that this dialogue between Buddhism and psychology has been continued by the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan tradition. Tibetan Buddhist monks have been involved with neurological experiments in American universities as a lab component of this dialogue, which has included the "harder-science field of neurology and the more philosophical field of cognitive psychology." These areas are addressed in the next section.

Cognitive and related "hard science" approaches

Whereas most of the attention devoted to religion by psychologists, including those surveyed above, could be categorized as qualitative social scientific studies, the quantitative "hard science" approach has also applied its theories and experiments to religion, influenced more by the natural sciences. There is, in fact, a surge of recent attention and experiments devoted to cognitive processes of the mind and measuring physiologically observable brain activity during religious prayer or meditation. Recent researchers in this "hard" scientific approach depart significantly from Freud and Jung, but they represent a vibrant current direction of research in the psychology of religion. They often strive for more repeatable and verifiable experiments guided by the scientific method.

Cognitive approaches have been increasingly influential for studies of religion rooted in psychology. Cognitive studies can be difficult to categorize as they often draw on expertise beyond one discipline. For example, Daniel Dennett's book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), explains the origins, functions and evolution of religion with reference to cognitive studies, including the roles of psychology and biology, as well as history and appeals to reasoned analysis from his own principal discipline, philosophy. Because this wide-ranging and lively work was written in a style intended to be inviting to a broader audience of

non-specialists, we could address it in the later section of this book, which examines the popularity of recent publications that are largely critical of religion. However, it may be more fruitful to keep it here, as Dennett's work draws upon cognitive studies—including the evolutionary interplay among biological, social, and cultural components that shape and perpetuate the mind's processes—along with references to a wide range of psychological, anthropological, and other approaches in the academic study of religion. Moreover, the first two chapters of Dennett's book discuss what religion is and why science can and should study it. This position, that religion should not be set apart as taboo to rigorous investigation, is central to all approaches in the academic study of religion however much they might diverge in their methods and conclusions. In summarizing these first chapters, Dennett acknowledges “obstacles” and “misgivings” about the scientific study of religion, but he insists that we should pursue these studies precisely because religions “are among the most powerful natural phenomena on the planet,” and that a better understanding of “how and why religions inspire such devotion” is necessary to determine how to “deal with them” more rationally. In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett adds his voice to the chorus of calls for the scientific investigation of religion, which in turn is understood as a “natural phenomenon” rather than supernatural or of divine origin.

Pascal Boyer is one of the scientists and anthropologists referenced most frequently by Dennett in his cognitive studies approach to an overview of the origins, developments, and implications of religion. Relative to Dennett, Pascal Boyer's cognitive studies of religion are more firmly rooted in psychology and more neutral in asserting religion's harm or benefit, but he too straddles disciplinary boundaries with classes taught in both anthropology and psychology departments. For his research in cognitive psychology, he conducts experiments designed to better understand the mind's neuro-cognitive systems. Ongoing work in cognitive studies and evolutionary biology has informed his theories about the relationship between mind-brain and religion. He has published his findings and theories in books such as *Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (1994) and *Religion Explained* (2001). The term “mind-brain” refers to the multiple neuro-cognitive systems responsible for how we understand reality, and act in various settings and situations. It is understood to be considerably more complex than simple notions that view the brain as an organ, catalog of information, or blank slate gradually being filled by information and experiences in this lifetime. Instead, evolutionary biology is used to explain the development, over many generations, of properties that serve as constraints upon what is perceived and how it is processed and acted upon.

Boyer's cognitive theory of religion in *Naturalness of Religious Ideas* accounts for the development, spread, and perpetuation of similar religious representations across diverse cultures and traditions by examining the role and constraints of the mind-brain in acquiring and transmitting some representations rather than others. Thus even though a wide assortment of people may possess religious conceptions of unusual, supernatural entities such as spirits and ghosts, their shared “mind-brain” constraints still have these seemingly counter-intuitive creations possessing certain human characteristics, such as beliefs and desires, which are derived from intuitions

about the natural world. *Religion Explained* extends this theory by analyzing how increasingly advanced understanding of the mind-brain allows for similarly greater insight into why religious representations arise and the function that they serve. In fact, Boyer points out that cognitive architecture constructed without particular reference to religion can account for religious concepts. Whereas questions about religion have been more central to some psychological studies, here explanations of religion can be seen as useful by-products of larger projects. Religion is not considered especially unique, or *sui generis* in the terms of many phenomenologists, but can be understood as a collection of natural instincts and cognitive processes. It is argued that the development of religion, or something similar, was essentially inevitable because it is so well suited to—or, more negatively, it so effectively exploits—these natural cognitive processes related to memory, moral-intuition, storytelling, etc. Moreover, Boyer argues that religion defies explanation without an understanding of these cognitive processes. Like earlier psychological approaches to religion, Boyer insists that the processes responsible for religious beliefs and experiences are primarily internal, but beyond the limitations of the conscious mind. The results of his experiments take issue with earlier theories that religion arises in response to a need, as well as with the contemporary physiological emphasis surveyed below, where religious activity is located in a specific part of the brain.

“Neurotheological” approaches

This latter physiological approach to understanding the interaction between religion and the mind-brain is dramatically apparent in Andrew Newberg’s neuroimaging studies on Tibetan Buddhist monks and Catholic nuns to determine the correlation between brain activity and intense prayer, meditation, or visualization. These studies—he uses the term “neurotheology” to designate this seemingly unlikely pairing of brain science and theology—combine his expertise and interest in nuclear medicine, neurology, psychiatry, and the health benefits of spirituality. These wide-ranging but interrelated areas can be simultaneously and collaboratively pursued at the University of Pennsylvania, where he holds positions in each of the relevant departments and directs the Center for Spirituality and the Mind.

His research, with its provocative combination of “hard” science and typically less quantifiable spirituality, has attracted wide attention from the media. His co-authored books, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience* (1999), *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (2001), and *Why We Believe What We Believe* (2006), introduced this neurological research along with accompanying “neurotheological” analysis and speculation. The last title responds to a question central to psychological approaches to religion. All of the theorists, at some level, are looking to the mind, conscious, unconscious, cognitive processes, experiences, and perceptions to understand what religion is, where it comes from, how it functions, and “why we believe what we believe.” Newberg looks to both biological determinism and a variety of equally influential societal factors to answer

these questions. This study goes beyond exploring the source of religious beliefs to assess how these beliefs shape us, and how they can lead to various benefits or harm.

Newberg's core questions restate the dominant themes found throughout psychological approaches to religion; however, the methods he uses to observe and map the physiology of the brain are novel in their capacity to link observations and explanations from the "hard" physical sciences with religious behaviors, activities, and experiences that have been studied more often by "softer" social scientific techniques. For instance, Newberg's studies demonstrate similar brain activity for Catholic nuns in prayer and Tibetan Buddhists in meditation. That is, the same areas of the participants' brains showed both significantly higher than baseline neurological activity in some parts and lower activity in others. These results have now been extended to include other nuns, atheists, and evangelicals while in the activity of speaking in tongues. The initial study graphically illustrates that elevated brain activity in the frontal lobes, as measured by blood flow and represented by SPECT imaging (single photon emission computed tomography), occurs during concentrated religious activity by trained adepts from these two different traditions, cultures, and genders. The images and accompanying interpretations explain that the increased activity in the frontal lobes is related to "focusing attention and concentration" whereas the parietal lobes, which show decreased activity during meditation and prayer, are involved in our sense of "orientation in space and time." In short, the functions associated with the areas of the brain that revealed significant increased or decreased activity during prayer or meditation fit with religious adherents' descriptions of the focused awareness and relative dropping away of time and space in intense or even mystical states of prayer or meditation.

Although the experiments, repeatability, predictability, and high-tech medicine and machinery demonstrate the scientific credentials of these studies, the interpretation of what they means enters murkier waters. It is the nature of science to keep pushing back the limits of knowledge, and cognitive science and neurological research promise to continue improving our understanding of the mind-brain. However, the analysis of what this means for understanding religion continues to leave ample room for speculation—theological or otherwise. To some, the studies suggest that human beings are "hard wired" for religion: that is, there is a capacity built right into the brain and a rather universal religious impulse is part of our genetic heritage, physiological architecture, and cognitive capacity. While it is exciting to be able to see and measure this activity more scientifically, the full extent of the conclusions that can be drawn from the experiments is less clear. Some might be persuaded that these studies objectively demonstrate that religion is "real" as an external force that is registered by the brain during prayer and meditation. However, such an interpretation jumps to conclusions that are possible but not necessary interpretations of the data. Jung and James also asserted that religious activity and experiences are important and that they can "really do something" transformative for the individual. However, Freud and Jung understood these experiences to arise from the human psyche, in connection with the vast collective unconscious for Jung. William James contended that a sacred power need only be larger than the conscious

mind, whether located in one's own psyche or out in the universe. These more recent studies have not yet resolved this enduring question, as they locate processes and activity in the mind, which can respond to internal or external stimuli, "real" or "imagined"—distinctions that may or may not ultimately be resolved by these approaches.

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