

mind, grounded in a kind of sexual energy called the libido, ascribed to a god-figure attitude which originated in the child's relationship with his human father.

### Projection

This introduces a major concept in religious studies: that of 'projection', a term which embraces not only the psychological approach of Freud but also the earlier philosophical argument of Feuerbach (1804–72), who claimed that statements about God were really to be understood as statements about man. Man had tended to construct ideas of God and then to look at them as though they had a reality of their own. For a proper understanding of theology one should reverse this process and interpret religious doctrine in human terms. Feuerbach influenced Marx and Engels, and thereby the rise of communist society and its view of religion as an outmoded way of interpreting life.

Freud also decided that religious positions were no longer useful to man, as his book *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) clearly showed: here projection is seen as illusion, the human mind leading man away from truth and reality, and therefore to be deplored.

The psychologist William James adopted a rather more positive attitude to the role of religion. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he gave a full description of religious experiences possessed by various people, comparing and contrasting what he called 'the religion of healthy-mindedness' with that of 'the sick soul'.

For James, religion was of value in helping man to live a positive and courageous life. It was seen as ultimately about the fact that there is something wrong with us, and with ways of saving us from that wrongness. In other words, religion helps man to accept himself and his life-condition rather than falling prey to the infirmities of his life. All this is of positive advantage to man, so that James did not see religion as an illusion with no real future as Freud thought it to be.

## The sociologists

The discipline of sociology also developed rapidly in the early twentieth century. Here too the idea of projection was of great significance, particularly for Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). His famous study of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* owed much to the same lectures by Robertson Smith which had also influenced Freud. It presupposed an evolutionary approach to religion, but did not accept the view that religious ideas were simply misleading products of the human mind. Here Durkheim as a sociologist parted company both with the psychology of Freud and the speculative anthropology of Frazer. Durkheim was convinced that there was something real in religion, and that man was not deceiving himself. In identifying the reality underlying religious behaviour he also parted company with theological explanations, for the reality influencing religion, he came to believe, is society itself.

Durkheim was as preoccupied with the idea of society as Freud was with the unconscious mind: he believed that there was a different sort of reality at work in social groups from that in individual lives. Society could be studied much as botanists studied plants. Religion was the human activity which spoke about social reality while using words about gods.

In one sense Durkheim was adopting a similar outlook to Feuerbach—that man merely seems to believe in and to speak about God, while really talking about his own social group without realizing it. But for Durkheim, who did not believe in a God who exists in his own right and independently of man, society is such an important thing that it can completely fill the place of God. Society is there before I am born and exists after my death. It gives me ideas and language to think and speak with. It protects me and makes me feel worthy of life. So, despite the fact that man projects all these ideas onto a god-figure, the ideas themselves are true, and what is more, they are necessary if society is to be held together as a moral community.

## Six Major Figures in Religious Studies

Eric Sharpe

### FRIEDRICH MAX MÜLLER (1823–1900)

Often called 'the father of comparative religion', Friedrich Max Müller was the son of a German Romantic poet. He studied in Leipzig and in Paris, where he began his first major work, a monumental edition of the Sanskrit text of the *Rig Veda*, published in four volumes between 1849 and 1862. He settled in England in 1846, and spent most of the remainder of his life in Oxford, becoming Professor of Comparative Philology in 1868. A prolific writer, his later books included *Comparative Mythology* (1856), *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), *India, What can it teach us?* (1883), and many other works, including three series of Gifford Lectures and two volumes of personal reminiscences. He was also responsible for editing the fifty-volume series of *Sacred Books of the East*—still an invaluable source for the study of religion.

Max Müller brought the religions of the world for the first time to the notice of the English-speaking public, interpreted to the West the ancient and modern religions of India, in a vital, if sometimes idiosyncratic, way. His theories that religion arose through the personification of natural phenomena have, on the other hand, been wholly superseded.

### EDWARD BURNETT TYLOR (1832–1917)

In its early years, the study of comparative religion was much concerned with the origin and evolution of religion as a universal human phenomenon. E. B. Tylor, who in 1896 became Britain's first professor of anthropology, in the 1860s coined the term 'animism' to describe what he believed to be the earliest stage in this evolutionary process, a simple 'belief in spiritual beings'. Tylor studied in Mexico; this visit resulted in his first book, *Anahuac* (1861). He subsequently published *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865), and his most important work, *Primitive Culture* (1871), in which the 'animism' theory is clearly stated. Briefly, it is that early man's experiences of dream and trance led him first to a belief in a separate 'soul' (*anima*) in himself, and later to postulate the existence of surviving souls (ghosts), and of many such 'souls' in animals, plants, the atmosphere, etc. Out of this belief in souls or spirits, there eventually developed belief in gods.

As an evolutionary theory, this is of very little value, but it does represent accurately the way in which primal (and other) peoples look on the unseen world. Tylor's example, as well as providing for the first time a way of understanding religion at a basic level, served to point anthropology along a path which it still to some extent follows.

### WILLIAM JAMES (1842–1910)

William James, the brother of the celebrated American novelist Henry James, was chiefly responsible, in the years around the turn of the century, for popularizing the new subject of the psychology of religion. His book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) is a classic, and still widely read today. Trained in medicine, he taught both physiology and psychology at Harvard as early as the 1870s, and in 1890 published a celebrated textbook, *The Principles of Psychology*. Most of his other books, including *The Will to Believe* (1896), *Pragmatism* (1907) and *Human Immortality* (1908), were originally courses of lectures.

In his *Varieties* he drew many valuable distinctions between types of religious experience, the best-known being that between the optimistic 'religion of healthy-mindedness' (typified by Christian Science) and the pessimistic 'religion of the sick soul' (traditional Calvinism). He also had much to say on mysticism, and discussed 'altered states of consciousness' many years before the subject became fashionable. He came from a Swedenborgian background, and his own religion was an indistinct theism, far removed from orthodox Christianity. Although he is still worth reading, his approach was too individualistic, and he had little to say about the corporate aspects of religion. His methods, too, were seriously called in question by the depth-psychologists (Freud, Jung and their followers), and are hardly applicable today.

### WILLIAM ROBERTSON SMITH (1846–94)

Robertson Smith, best known for his magisterial book *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), was a minister of the Free Church of Scotland. In 1870 he became Professor of Old Testament Studies at the Free Church College in Aberdeen. In the early 1880s he was dismissed from his chair for 'unscriptural' teaching, and in 1883 was elected Professor of Arabic at Cambridge. A liberal evangelical, he was responsible for bringing together traditional philological study of the Bible and the new insights of anthropology.

He first visited North Africa in 1879, and was impressed by the existence of 'totemism' among the Sinai Bedouin: this resulted in his first major work, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885). In his later *Lectures*, he concentrated on the concept of sacrifice, which he saw less as a legal transaction than as a practical means of establishing communion with deity. He also recognized that in religion, custom and ritual are often more significant than systems of belief, and that it is vitally important that the student be an accurate and sympathetic observer of the practical side of religion. His influence was widespread: he inspired J. G. Frazer to study totemism, and was a forerunner of the sociological study of religion—for which reason he, almost alone among his contemporaries, is still respected among sociologists and anthropologists. Despite his brush with

ecclesiastical authority, he remained warmly evangelical in his personal beliefs.

### **NATHAN SÖDERBLOM (1866–1931)**

The link between comparative religion and Christian theology was firmly established in the early part of the twentieth century by a group of scholars of whom Nathan Söderblom was perhaps the most outstanding. Born the son of a Lutheran country minister in Sweden, from 1894 to 1901 he was Swedish legation pastor in Paris; in 1901 he became Professor of Comparative Religion in Uppsala, and remained in this post until his elevation to the archbishopric of Uppsala in 1914, a post he occupied until his death in 1931. His scholarly work spanned many fields, among them Iranian studies, Luther studies, mysticism, Catholic modernism and general comparative religion.

Though few of his many books were translated into English, his Gifford Lectures *The Living God* (published posthumously in 1931) were widely read in their day. He endeavoured to locate historical Protestantism within Christianity, and Christianity within the religions of the world. He drew valuable distinctions between 'mystical' and 'revealed' forms of religion, and later between two forms of mysticism, 'mysticism of personality' (Paul, Luther) and 'mysticism of the infinite' (Indian religion). As well as this academic work, Söderblom made an invaluable contribution to twentieth-century Christianity as one of the

fathers of the ecumenical movement.

### **RUDOLF OTTO (1869–1937)**

Educated at Erlangen and Göttingen, most of Otto's career was spent in teaching posts at Göttingen, Breslau and Marburg. After early work in Luther studies, he turned his attention to the philosophy and psychology of religion, and after 1911 to the study of Indian religions. His best-known and most important work, *The Idea of the Holy*, first appeared in German in 1917, and in

English in 1923. In it, he attempted to show that religion begins with 'the sense of the numinous', that is, of a mysteriously 'other' deity both fearsome and fascinating (*numen* = deity). This book became a religious classic.

His later Indian studies included *Mysticism East and West* (1932) and *India's Religion of Grace* (1930), and a critical edition of the *Bhagavad Gita* (*The Original Gita*, 1939). In 1921, convinced of the importance of living, inter-religious dialogue, he inaugurated

the Inter-Religious League, which was not a success. In his last years his internationalism caused him to fall foul of the Nazi government in Germany, and he died in 1937.

Otto's most lasting contribution to the study of religion lay in his insistence on the importance of immediate, non-rational experience to any estimate of the nature of religion. Although *The Idea of the Holy* was not always well understood, it spoke directly to the mind of the twentieth century, and helped lay the foundations for much later work in the area of personal religious experience and of mysticism.



*The nineteenth-century interest in anthropology was aroused by expeditions such as Charles Darwin's world voyage on board HMS Beagle.*

The positive function of religion was something taken up by the sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) who sought to show how religious ideas influenced the active social life of a group. His famous study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* sought to show how the Calvinist idea of predestination led believers to adopt an earnest and rational life in which they endeavoured to fulfil their calling as good stewards of God's grace. This led to the situation in which commerce and industry could develop rapidly, with maximum investment of capital and minimum loss of energy by those responsible for production of goods. Religious ideas thus motivate man's action in the world, rather than—as Marx claimed—providing an anaesthetic for worldly life.

## **Religion as phenomenon**

'Phenomenology' differs from the previous approaches by concerning itself neither with the historical origin of religion nor with the function of a religion in contemporary situations. It sets out to classify the phenomena that are associated with religious traditions: objects, rituals, doctrines, or feelings. Each phenomenologist identifies what he thinks is the essence of these phenomena, and sets about describing their influence upon man.

Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950) was among the most distinguished of phenomenologists of religion. For him, power is the source and underlying essence of all religion; it is manifested in many ways, from the idea of man in Melanesian religion to the awe and wonder experienced in the world religions. His phenomenology is a description of the many ways in which 'man conducts himself in his relation to power'. Salvation comes about when the source of power is possessed or attained.

A person's religious experience cannot, of course, be observed by someone else. The phenomenologist can only see the consequences of people's experience. So phenomenol-

ogy cannot deal with questions of truth. It can only describe what can be seen by an outside observer.

## **The historical approach**

Mircea Eliade was born in Bucharest in 1907, and has worked and taught in many parts of the world. He is the best-known and most influential representative of the study of the history of religions. It is difficult to distinguish clearly between historians and phenomenologists of religion because their perspectives are similar. So while Eliade seeks to discover how religions have developed through their historical phases, his major concern is with the idea of the 'holy'.

*A Buddhist believer kneels before images of the Buddha in a shrine in Kampuchea.*

