

The Study of Religion

Douglas Davies

What is religion? There have been many definitions. Some have simply described it as 'belief in spiritual beings'. Others have attempted more comprehensive definitions in terms of beliefs or a description of practices.

Some of the different approaches to religion are as follows:

● **Anthropologists** describe religious beliefs and practices as they find them in living communities. Religion helps to unite people in a shared experience and explanation of life. It provides a pattern of human behaviour, often in response to the hazards of life.

● **Sociologists** stress the social dimension of religious ideas. Religion provides an agreed way of looking at the world. It gives the individual a sense of purpose and meaning.

● **Historians** describe religion in terms of events resulting from beliefs; **theologians** are concerned with the beliefs themselves, the question of whether they are true or false, and with people's response to them.

The different approaches are valid in different ways and within their own limitations. The basic difference is that of standpoint: there is the way of the believer and the way of the scholar.

The believer

Theology is the term usually given to the study of one's own religion. It is concerned with the meaning of the doctrines which have developed over the years, with the way doctrine is derived from *scriptures*, and the interpretation of the scriptures. This often leads to the formation of different schools of tradition and to sectarian divisions within major religions.

It also leads to the application of this knowledge to ordinary behaviour—*ethics*—and to special acts of worship—*liturgy*.

These are the names used of Christian theology, but similar strands can be found in other world religions.

Theology, then, is the study of a religion from the inside. It assumes that the faith is true. Then it seeks to explore it more fully, and often attempts to relate that faith to changing world situations. Theology is always grounded in a religious tradition.

The scholar

The 'scholarly approach' to religion means a neutral, non-committed form of study. It looks at the form of a religion: it does not ask whether it is true.

The phrase 'scholarly approach' is deceptive if it means that religious people cannot adopt an intellectual approach to religious things. Very often they can and do. But the scholarly, objective or scientific perspective is one which emphasizes the

outward and visible aspects of a religion, even when this means describing the nature of people's religious experiences, rather than pinpointing the great issues of truth and awareness of God as felt by the believer himself. It is possible for the religious person to speak in one context as a believer about the intimate things of his religion, and in another as a scholar about the way his fellow-believers see things.

What, then, are the different methods scholars have adopted in studying the whole subject of religion? And what are the key ideas that will help us understand the 'scholarly approach'?

Reductionism

The different approaches are not, of course, mutually exclusive. In fact each method of study can add to our total picture.

This is in contrast to the 'reductionism' of some approaches which try to explain everything in terms of one theory. Religion is 'nothing but' economic, sexual or evolutionary drives.

For instance, Marx explained religion in economic terms. Freud explained it in sexual terms. Some nineteenth-century anthropologists explained it simply in terms of evolution.

The anthropologists

Anthropology is the study of human behaviour: religion as a pattern of behaviour can be observed like any other human activity.

As a discipline it has added enormously to what we know of peoples throughout the world, particularly the more primitive tribes. Anthropologists from the last century on have been particularly keen to study such tribes because they were interested to relate the new science to the theory of evolution.

Evolution

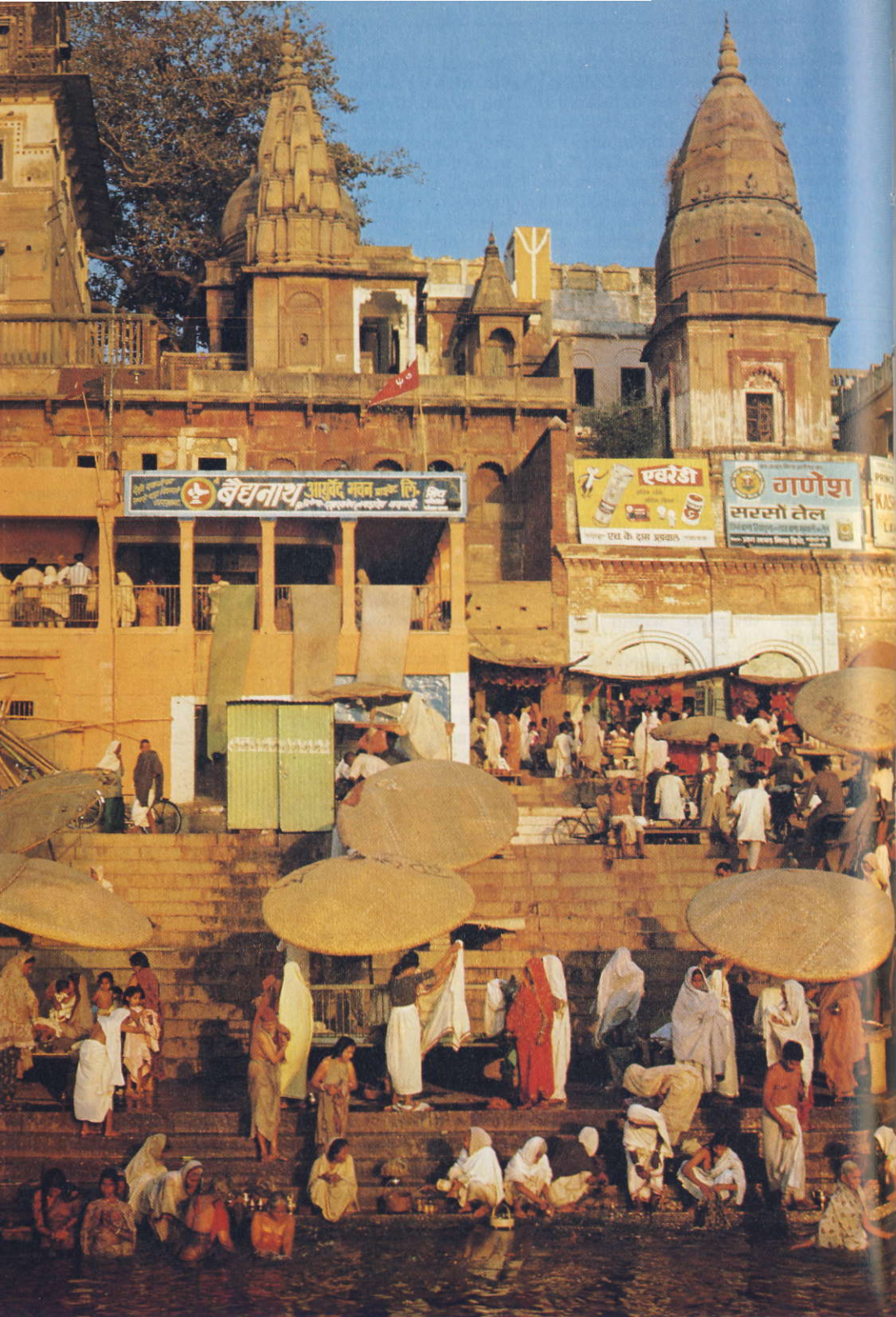
The work of Charles Darwin provided scholars with the kind of theoretical explanation of religion which had not been present in the eighteenth-century arguments of philos-

'No-one can understand mankind without understanding the faiths of humanity. Sometimes naive, sometimes penetratingly noble, sometimes crude, sometimes subtle, sometimes cruel, sometimes suffused by an overpowering gentleness and love, sometimes world-affirming, sometimes negating the world, sometimes inward-looking, sometimes universalistic and missionary minded, sometimes shallow and often profound—religion has permeated human life since early and obscure times.'

Ninian Smart, *Religious Experience*

Every adult male Muslim is required to make the pilgrimage to Mecca once in his lifetime. These pilgrims are setting out from Aswan.





ophers such as G.W.F. Hegel and J.G. Herder.

Instead of abstract ideas of progress and development, scholars such as E.B. Tylor, J.G. Frazer and W. Robertson Smith, whose works spanned the period between 1870 and 1920, sought to identify specific periods through which man had passed, by characterizing the beliefs held during these successive eras. They named these stages of religious life according to their own, largely speculative, theory of the dominant concern present in each one.

Often religion was said to cease to be significant once science replaced it as a stage in human thought. This was a characteristic argument of Sir J.G. Frazer, whose book *The Golden Bough* is still in print even though it is more a work of speculation than of fact.

Functionalism

The twentieth century saw a marked difference of approach to the study of religion, and in particular the question of the development of religion changed its form. Instead of asking the evolutionary question of how religion first originated, anthropologists chose to ask what function was served by religion in each particular society where it occurred. The anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard expressed this neatly, saying that 'religion is what religion does'. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) abandoned the historical dimension, preferring to study intensively the role played by religion in the Trobriand Island community where, as an Austrian citizen, he was interned during World War I.

Malinowski believed that there were scientific laws of culture and that they could also be applied to religion. The individual biological needs of food, shelter, sex and security could also be viewed as social needs which people provide for corporately through economic, political, kinship and religious institutions. Magic was useful because it brought one man into a leadership position during times of crisis in society. It made some sort of positive action possible and thereby pre-

vented chaotic behaviour. Religion along with magic provided the basic integrating force in society, for it was the response to the human desire for survival. Magic, performed in the face of natural calamity, provided a psychological support for people's fear. Much of this theory resulted from Malinowski's observation of primitive society, but as his private diaries show—published long after his death—his own fears of loneliness, the dark, and of death probably guided the way he constructed his theory of religion.

Structuralism

After the 1950s, anthropologists turned their attention more to the role of religion as an expression of the structure of the ideas, values and beliefs of a society. They drew a picture of the relationships which existed between doctrines. They asked how people argued, how they organized their beliefs, and what was the inner logical pattern of a religion.

For example, village Buddhists escape painful experiences by means of exorcists: how do they square this with the Buddhist ideal which denies the validity of such exorcism? Or how do Christian groups relate their beliefs about everyday life to the concept of the Trinity? This structuralist approach draws attention to the organization of human thought, and to the way man brings an ordered pattern to his complex world. For instance, the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss has studied the question of how this works out in the case of myths.

The psychologists

Whereas in the nineteenth century scholars were happy to combine anthropological ideas with those concerning the human mind, in the twentieth century the mind has been singled out for special attention by the psychologists. Sigmund Freud drew heavily from evolutionary anthropology, especially from William Robertson Smith's famous *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), but his wish was to show how the underlying power of the human

Hindus bathe in the sacred rivers such as the Ganges, to wash away pollution, both physical and spiritual.

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 of *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.



The enormous Hindu Wat at Angkor, Kampuchea, is almost a mile square. Surrounded by a vast cloister and moat, the central shrine represents the hub of the universe.

What are the various ways in which mankind becomes aware of the holy? His task leads him to discuss 'hierophanies'—the ways in which the sacred is manifested—including sacred places and persons.

For instance, Jesus Christ was said to be the supreme hierophany because in him the sacred, which normally belongs to a realm totally different from our own, is manifested in something belonging entirely to our world, his human nature. Eliade believes that the Western world has allowed its ability to perceive the sacred to wither, and that the task of the history of religions is to help it to regain this sense of the holy within its materialistic life.

Eliade resembles Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) whose famous book *The Idea of the Holy* asserted that the central reality of true religion lies in a sense of the magnetic and awe-inspiring nature of the source of religious experience. Some critics argue that this approach, which does not question the existence of a divinity but rather seems to presuppose the existence of a supernatural realm, has sought to foster religion rather than to be a dispassionate study. Historians and phenomenologists may reply that they seek only to avoid reductionism and to treat the evidence with the seriousness it deserves and in a method appropriate to it.

Comparative linguistics

In 1888, the same year that Smith gave the Burnett Lectures on *The Religion of the Semites*, Friedrich Max Müller delivered the Gifford Lectures entitled *Natural Religion*. Müller told how he became entranced as a young man with the idea of translating the sacred texts of India, how his early work in the 'science of language' led him to a study of mythology and finally to 'the science of religion'. Religion is that mental state which 'enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names', and the science of religion is the attempt to retrace the

development of the names given to the gods.

Müller's study of religion is thus a study of language. For instance, the Latin *deus*, the Sanskrit *deva*, and the Greek *theos* are related and refer to the idea of brightness. He is usually remembered for his notion of the 'disease of language': the description given to something actually becomes its name, and then is imbued with a nature all of its own. It is as though man forgets that he has given a name to something, and comes to believe that it has a reality and power in itself, as in the case of the bright sun becoming a deity in its own right. Müller's work has been largely forgotten in the West, but he is still recalled in India as the man who opened up the study of Eastern texts and stimulated an entire generation of later scholars of comparative religion. He laid the solid foundation of attempting to classify and order the vast amount of material in a systematic way.

Theory of meaning

In place of the evolutionary approach to religion inherited from the nineteenth century, there is now emerging another idea which may well provide an integrating theory for the study of religion. This approach stresses man's drive to establish a meaningful world of thought and life. It avoids all simple cause-and-effect arguments, and encourages us to look at the complex inter-relationships which exist between man and his environment.

We might call this approach the 'theory of meaning'. It is much more concerned with what religion does for people now, than with how religion might have originated in the past. It sees each man as one partner involved in an extensive series of communications with others, receiving feedback from them and changing his own outlook in the process. This model of meaning further emphasizes the dynamic nature of religion and of religious experience.

