

THE SCIENCE OF RELIGIONS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE



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IN THE Hebrew Bible, we meet a people who believe that God has made a unique Covenant with them. Is this just another form of the nationalistic or sectarian arrogance that has wrought such havoc in human history? We can no longer read ancient tales of genocide in the name of God (e.g. Num 31; Josh 7-8; 1 Sam 15) without shuddering. We can no longer sanitize them into allegories of a battle of good against evil. But we can attend all the more to the other side of the biblical picture, in which Israel is not concerned with its own victories but with all the peoples of the earth. Israel is a people who look beyond themselves to all other peoples, for its Lord has given it a world mission of justice and peace. 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Is 49:6; also 42:6). Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, begins with the words: 'Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.'

That is why the biblical writers often refer to the other nations, and cast their minds back to primeval times, long before Abraham was ever heard of. In the time of Adam's son Seth, we are told, 'people began to invoke the name of the Lord' (Gen 4:26). While the Bible often rages against idolatrous cults, such verses as these reveal that true worship is not an exclusive privilege of Israel, and that the people of God are ready to recognize it wherever it is found. The Bible is its own interpreter, *sui ipsius interpres*, as Luther remarks in *De servo arbitrio*. We may add that it is its own critic and corrector as well. Today we may read the Bible in light of the history

of religion, stretching back not only to the religions of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, and Greece, which have left so deep a mark on biblical understandings of God, humanity, and the cosmos, but also to Indian and Chinese creeds unknown to the scriptural authors, and still further, to the pre-historic religions of humanity, as we have joyfully rediscovered them over the last two centuries.

The Hour of Dialogue

The most revolutionary innovation of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was its turn toward dialogue with the world, and with the religions of the world. The Council's tones of deep respect for modern culture, and for Judaism and Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, had no equivalent in previous utterances of Councils or of the papal Magisterium. Indeed they are diametrically opposed to the fulminations of the Council of Florence and to the strictures of Pius ix.

Paul vi kept the nations, the cultures and religions of humanity, in his mind and heart. The theme of his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam* (6 August 1964), is dialogue with humanity, and it begins with the words 'The Church was founded by Jesus Christ to be the loving mother of the whole human family and minister to its salvation.' He continues: 'The aim of this encyclical will be to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that the two should meet together, and get to know and love one another.' A point Paul vi liked to make is that the Church exists not for itself but for the world. He read widely in history of religions and would have known the writings on the religions of Jean Daniélou, SJ (1905–1974) whom he chose as *peritus* at the Council and created Cardinal in 1969. I remember seeing him on a televised Mass (probably for the Epiphany in 1976) when he declared ardently: 'I see the religions of the world gathered around the crib, and as I say this my voice trembles, not with uncertainty, but with joy, *la mia voce trema, non d'incertezza, ma di gioia*.'

It has been said that Greece and Persia were the two eyes of the ancient world, and Persia is represented at the crib by the Magi (from whom comes the word 'magic'), a very striking presence. Paul vi himself performed an equally striking act in his address to the members of the non-Christian religions during his visit to India, on 3 December 1964, feast of St Francis Xavier, where he recited lines from the *Upanishads*: 'Rarely has this longing for God been expressed with words so full of the spirit of Advent as in the words written in your sacred books many centuries before Christ: "From the unreal lead me to the real; from darkness lead me to light; from death lead me to immortality" (*Br.* 1, 3, 28).' In another address on the same day he quoted Tagore: 'Day after day, O Lord of my life, shall I stand before thee, face to face?/ With folded hands, O Lord of all worlds, shall I stand before thee, face to face?/ Under thy great sky, in solitude and silence, with humble heart, shall I stand before thee, face

to face?/ In this laborious world of thine, tumultuous with toil and with struggle, among hurrying crowds, shall I stand before thee, face to face?' He also quoted the *Mundaka Upanishad*: 'Truth alone triumphs, not falsehood. The divine path to liberation has been laid with truth, which the seers who have overcome desire tread, and wherein also is that supreme treasure to be gained by truth.'

In *Ecclesiam suam*, Paul VI talks of concentric circles of dialogue: first dialogue with the human race, then dialogue with worshippers of the one God, and finally with fellow-Christians. This stance forbids the tones of scorn and contempt in which very many Catholics would speak of Jews and Muslims and of Protestants in the time before Vatican II (and with much less excuse today). Here is what Paul VI says about the second circle: 'We would mention first the Jewish people, who still retain the religion of the Old Testament, and who are indeed worthy of our respect and love. Then we have those worshippers who adhere to other monotheistic systems of religion, especially the Moslem religion. We do well to admire these people for all that is good and true in their worship of God. And finally we have the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions.' Here is the basis on which *Nostra Aetate*, the 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions' (28 October 1965), would be erected a year later, in the last days of the Council. It is also the basis of Pope Francis's declaration in Singapore that 'all religions are paths to God.' Paul VI hastens to add: 'honesty compels us to declare openly our conviction that the Christian religion is the one and only true religion, and it is our hope that it will be acknowledged as such by all who look for God and worship Him.' This is the standard 'inclusivist' Catholic attitude to the religions, which the future Benedict XVI tightened by declaring (CDF document, *Dominus Iesus*, 2000) that the multiplicity of religions was *de facto* but not *de iure*, and which Pope Francis loosened somewhat by seeing all religions as on the same path together to the Kingdom, on terms of equal respect.

The hour of dialogue had struck in 1964 and it was in the bliss of that dawn that the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture was founded in 1975. 'Dialogue' was still a word to conjure with into the late 1980s; Nanzan held a conference on 'Partners for Dialogue' in 1985, when the Institute was the Mecca of dialogue, drawing churchmen and theologians from everywhere; Fr. William Johnston kept referring to 'the dialogue' and Leonard Swidler proclaimed 'Dialogue, the Way Forward'¹ when the word had already become a little old-fashioned. The most prominent exercise in interreligious dialogue was the series of conferences around Masao Abe, which did not do much to open paths of understanding into Buddhism; the whole venture stalled.² The strangely titled book *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious*

1. Leonard J. Swidler, *Dialogue: The Way Forward* (Orbis, 1990).

2. John D. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives, ed., *The Emptying God: A Buddhist Jewish Christian Conversation*

Dialogue by Catherine Cornille perhaps sounded the knell of one style and the rise to prominence of another, namely, that of comparative theology, represented by her own symposia and her series, 'Christian Commentaries on Non-Religious Texts,' and also by the work of Francis Clooney and Perry Schmidt-Leukel (though the latter keeps up the aim of a 'theology of religions,' something that has been rather out of favor).³ Meanwhile, Western interaction with Buddhism is thriving in philosophical circles (unfortunately dominated by Anglo-American rationalism, thanks largely to the surrender of European Buddhologists to English monolingualism) much more than in the theological world.

Notice that in referring to 'the great Afro-Asiatic religions' Paul VI opens a window onto a religious world extending in space and time far beyond the frontiers of the major world religions. The Church's amazing turn to all the religions of the earth owes much to a small number of missionary pioneers, such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), João Rodriguez (1562–1634), Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), Ippolito Desiderio (1684–1733), all Jesuits. Another batch of prophetic figures, on whom I focus here, were the scholars of primitive religion, who drafted various theories of the origins and evolution of religion in the long millennia preceding biblical times, such as Max Müller (1823–1900), Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), Andrew Lang (1844–1912), William Robertson Smith (1846–1894), Jane Harrison (1850–1928), James G. Frazer (1854–1941), and Wilhelm Schmidt, SVD (1868–1954). The incredible industry and mental breadth of these legendary figures lies in the background of Vatican II's vision of the religions as sharing the light of the divine Word, which 'enlightens every one coming into the world' (Jn 1:9).⁴

Friedrich Max Müller

Max Müller was born at the heart of German Romanticism. Wilhelm Müller, the Byronic poet of Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Die Winterreise*, was his father; Carl Maria von Weber was his mother's godfather and his name Max comes from *Der Freischütz*; he was a friend of Felix Mendelssohn. He authored an English translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. An heir of the Oriental Renaissance represented by August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), and Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852), he spent the last fifty years of his life in Oxford, where he was not always fully

(Orbis, 1990); Christopher Ives, ed., *Divine Emptiness and Historical Fullness: A Buddhist Jewish Christian Conversation with Masao Abe* (Trinity Press International, 1995).

3. Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (Crossroad, 2008).

4. See Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay, *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860–1915* (University of Virginia Press, 2010).

appreciated, and where he launched the fifty-volume *Sacred Books of the East*.⁵ When he spoke to his patron the Prussian diplomat and philologist Baron Christian von Bunsen about 'the great revelations of the world,' Bunsen warned: 'Don't say that at Oxford!'⁶ Recalling his years in Oxford, Müller deplored the narrowness of the debates pursued there in the wake of the Tractarian Movement and in which he could see no genuine religion. He deplored the tortured nature of Newman's apologetic handling of historical argument, and his damaging effect on individuals and their families; he was close to Charles Kingsley and James Anthony Froude, critics of Newman.⁷

Müller, in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), which Eric Sharpe calls 'the foundation document of comparative religion,'⁸ claimed that belief in a divine being was universal, and that however childish or primitive a religion might appear, it still served to place the human soul in the presence of God. Müller predicted that the truths present in all religions would one day give rise to 'a new form of religion, which might still be called Christianity, that would preserve the best of each revelation of the divine.'⁹ He found the conviction of God, immortality, and a future reward firmly lodged in primitive religion. Followers of Newman attacked him, but he could riposte with a quote from Newman: 'the unaided reason, when correctly exercised, leads to a belief in God, in the immortality of the soul, and in a future retribution.'¹⁰ (This would be contested by Wilhelm Schmidt who ascribed the belief in God in primitive religions not to natural unaided reason but to an originary divine Revelation.) Müller mischievously quoted Bishop Frederick Temple's Bampton Lectures of 1884: 'It is quite possible that our Lord's resurrection may be found hereafter to be no miracle at all in the scientific sense,' such a discovery 'would not affect the place which our Lord's Resurrection holds in the record of revelation. It is not the purpose of revelation to interfere with the course of nature.'¹¹ Temple is talking of an eschatological perspective, not saying that the physical resurrection we currently perceive as miraculous never occurred.

5. N. J. Girardot, 'Max Müller's *Sacred Books* and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions,' *History of Religions* 41.3 (February 2002): 213–50.

6. F. Max Müller, *My Autobiography: A Fragment* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 277–8.

7. Müller, *My Autobiography*, 279–96.

8. Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (Duckworth, 1975), 35.

9. Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion* (Blackwell, 2000), 22. While missionaries in Japan used comparative religion to uphold the superiority of Christianity, it is wrong to saddle Müller with responsibility for this, as Notto R. Thelle seems to do, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854–1899* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 215–16.

10. Max Müller, *Anthropological Religion* (1892, repr. Routledge, 1997), vi. The quotation, from the last chapter of the *Apologia* (1864) indicates some acquaintance on Newman's part with Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. See John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua and Six Sermons*, ed. Frank M. Turner (Yale University Press, 2008).

11. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 11.

Buddhism emerged for Müller (as later for Eliade) on the wider landscape of the general history of religion. Intensive religious thought characterized Indian culture. ‘India is swarming with innumerable sects, and has always been a very hotbed of religious ideas,’ and it is deplorable that Western philosophers write ‘as if Kapila and Kanâda had never existed’ and that theologians write ‘as if the Vedas, the Pitakas, the Angas, the Purânas, and Tantras had never existed.’¹² He finds three strata in the Veda: ‘the most transparent natural polytheism,’ ‘the most minute and unmeaning ritualism,’ and ‘the most subtle theosophy’ (in the Upanishads).¹³ Buddhism was ‘originally a Brâhmanic sect.’¹⁴ Müller saw these religions as models of tolerance and the cure for what we would call fundamentalism. ‘When one sees the struggles through which mankind has to pass in order to establish the few fundamental principles of religion, and to gain recognition for the simplest rules of morality, one learns to be very grateful to the founders of every religion for what they have achieved.’ Ashoka found that all the sects of India exemplify ‘the fundamentals or the sap of religion—control of the senses, purity of mind, gratitude, and loyalty’; ‘in these essentials all religions are really one’; despite ‘great differences’ ‘there is a unity which ought to comprehend them all—the unity of toleration, the unity of love.’¹⁵ Pope Francis struck a similar note, as of course does the Dalai Lama: ‘I maintain that every major religion of the world... has similar ideas of love, the same goal of benefiting through spiritual practice.... Differences of dogma may be ascribed to differences of time and circumstance as well as cultural influences.’¹⁶

In his Gifford Lectures held in Westminster Abbey in 1878, Müller expounded Indian religious thought luminously and with contemporary relevance. Buddhism is ‘the frontier between ancient and modern literature in India’ and is ‘only intelligible as a development of, and a reaction against, Brahmanism.’¹⁷ Müller’s friendship with Nanjō Bun’yū is a link with living East Asian Buddhism beyond the range of his Sanskrit studies. Müller was an ardent admirer of the British Empire so his comparative religion project comes in for postcolonial critique. However the words ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ did not then sound as derogatory as now.¹⁸ The broad

12. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 36.

13. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 36.

14. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 35.

15. Müller, *Anthropological Religion*, 59–60.

16. Quoted, John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (The Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 34.

17. Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religions of India* (1898, repr. Routledge, 1997), 138, 140.

18. See David Chidester, “‘Classify and Conquer’: Friedrich Max Müller, indigenous religious traditions, and imperial comparative religion,” in: Jacob. K. Olupona, ed., *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous religious traditions and modernity* (Routledge, 2004), 71–88.

vision of the religions that was built up in the nineteenth century owes much to the structures of empire.

James George Frazer

James Frazer was an extraordinary man of letters, the editor of Ovid's *Fasti* and of Pausanias, in six volumes each, and an excellent prose stylist. In Cambridge his collection of books was so huge that it caused the floor to collapse. He was one of the very few historians of religion who carried their discipline across the threshold of mainstream literary culture, with impact on poets such as Yeats and T. S. Eliot (notably in *The Waste Land*, 1922). He has been disparaged as 'unscientific,' dismissed for his 'scissors and paste method.'¹⁹ Fortunately the new discipline of digital humanities opens the possibility of sorting, sifting, cross-referencing, and fact-checking the materials he accumulated.

Though thoroughly steeped in the skepticism of Hume and the irony of Gibbon, his tone in recording the chronicle of human superstitions is often sympathetic, for instance when he describes the magical or religious practices surrounding the killing of a bear among the Ainu.²⁰ Like so many global accounts of the evolution of religion, Frazer's version of the process has three stages, like Auguste Comte's *loi des trois états* (theological, mythical, positive). The ingenuity of human wishful thinking begins with fruitless recourse to magic, then to projection of religious presences, only finally to find a secure refuge in science. Frazer supplied Christianity with its wider mythological background – the dying gods, Adonis, Attis, Osiris, Herakles, Dionysus for the paschal mystery, Isis for devotion to the Blessed Virgin, Mithra for the birth of Christ – which could be interpreted negatively or positively. The material and his literary treatment of it often touches readers in ways he did not envisage. The pervasive influence of *The Golden Bough* helped Christianity to place itself in a new way in the history of religion, and in this sense built a resource for Vatican II's dialogal turn.

Another major work of Frazer's, *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*,²¹ is probably underused, since it summons biblical scholars out of their comfort zone into the great spaces of comparative study. The New Testament would offer a similar range of comparative parallels, for instance in tales of miracles. Even an apparently

19. In the entry on him in James Bowker, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. The entire paragraph on Frazer is dripping with derision. A brilliant essay by Jonathan Z. Smith (1938–2017), 'When the Bough Break,' in his *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), dismantled the impressive story which gives Frazer's masterpiece its frame and its title and showed it to be a poetic fantasy making unscrupulous use of its classical sources.

20. James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A new abridgement*, ed. Robert Fraser (Oxford University Press, 1994), 524–32.

21. *Studies in Comparative Religion Legend and Law* (Macmillan, 1919).

insignificant topic, such as the ‘custom of boring the ear of a purchased slave who refused to go free after serving his master for six years’²² (Deut 15:12-17), wakes a host of parallels. Here Frazer’s purpose is not to deflate religion, but simply to look at the anthropological information stored up in the biblical text. The higher its cultural density, the more credible its religious vibrations. The parallels are rather remote, however, in this case: a mother may have her child’s ear bored to keep it from being carried off by evil spirits; to deceive the spirits a child may be given an unflattering name or made to look ugly or subjected to a mock sale. Via the cutting of ears of animals in sacrifice, and various other kinds of mutilation, and severed hair or nails for use as fetishes to prevent a prisoner or slave escaping, the conclusion is reached that the Hebrew custom was ‘perhaps intended to give the master complete magical control over his servant by means of the blood on the doorpost.’²³

Wilhelm Schmidt

Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt, SVD, was another astonishing figure, as the entry on him in the encyclopedia *Religion Past & Present* shows:

Schmidt considered himself a scientist, a pastor, and a politically committed individual. During World War I, as an army chaplain he introduced field hospitals.... During World War II, he maintained many relationships with refugees and emigrants.... Like almost no one else, he winnowed the ethnographic material while also looking for synthesis.... Inspired by Andrew Lang, in 1906 he began his monumental *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (cf. E. Brandewie, *Wilhelm Schmidt and the Origin of the Idea of God*, 1983) in which he presented his views on primeval religion and primitive monotheism (vol. XII, published posthumously, 1955). As a linguist and ethnologist, he made central contributions to the discussion of what it means to be human. (Vol. XI [2012], 498)

In the first volume of his magnum opus *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*²⁴ Schmidt discusses at great length the views of Andrew Lang, man of letters and storyteller, who ‘made no major contribution to the development of knowledge,’²⁵ but whose lectures on *The Making of Religion* had a great impact (enhanced by Schmidt’s reception of them). Both Lang and Schmidt aimed to overcome the secularizing

22. 3.165. The topic is discussed for 105 pages.

23. 3.264.

24. *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee: Eine historisch-kritische und positive Studie*, 12 vols (Aschendorff, 1912–1955).

25. Benjamin C. Ray, art, ‘Lang, Andrew,’ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed.

approach of Tylor, 'often considered the founding father of anthropology,' who wrote as a 'militant atheist.'²⁶ Lang pointed out that 'the idea of a creative god who is moral, fatherly, omnipotent, and omniscient' is found among primitive peoples.²⁷

Schmidt sought to elucidate 'the development and origin of religion. This problem has now been abandoned by scholars, because it is not possible to provide an adequate scientific response.'²⁸ However, speculative constructions based on biblical dogma or on philosophical insight are not forbidden. Schmidt felt compelled by his faith to find the God of the Bible more clearly present in the earliest known religions than could be convincingly demonstrated. Yet no ancient society lacked a religion. All have known the sense of human limits that raise the question of religion, all have known the sense of gracious and numinous presences and forces which leads to adoration, and many cultures have erected powerful and beautiful religions which awe us even when they are considered dead.²⁹ It is an understatement to say that many enigmas remain, but let us hope that the Church (as well as the scholarly world) resumes its enthusiasm for these great questions, so as to let the light of the Epiphany shine out anew on believers and the world at large.

Also a broadly humanistic and literary approach to the history of religions may construct visions of religious origins by extrapolating from what we know about human nature. Panikkar says: 'It seems fair to say that the most universal, primordial human experience is neither monotheistic, nor atheistic, nor polytheistic but rather a deep-rooted belief in a divine world, a world populated by different kinds of superhuman beings or forces.... These beliefs express a human experience that says that man is not alone in the universe and that the sensible world is not all there is to reality.'³⁰ If Schmidt were right about the origin of monotheism this might devalue 'the research conducted by historians who have sought to reconstruct accurately the course and historical contexts (Mesopotamia, Egypt, ancient Israel) in which... the monotheism that characterizes modern Western civilization emerged.'³¹ Benedict XVI takes up this assertion of a monotheistic revolution in recent millennia. But can monotheistic revelation be confined to such explicit

26. Rane Willerslev, 'Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps not too Seriously?,' in *Indigenous Religions*, ed. Graham Harvey and Amy Whitehead (Routledge, 2019), 20–41; 22, 23.

27. Willerslev, 'Taking Animism Seriously, but Perhaps not too Seriously?,' 22, 23.

28. Joseph Henninger and Alessandra Ciattini, art., 'Schmidt, Wilhelm,' in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., 8168. See Sylwester Pajak, *Urrigion und Uroffenbarung bei P. W. Schmidt* (Steyler, 1978).

29. See James W. Heisig, 'The Icon as a Movable Bridge: With Reference to Jaspers and Tanabe,' in: Piergiacomo Severini, ed., *Jaspers in Dialogue: Views from Europe and Japan* (Chisokudo, 2025), 63–88.

30. Art., 'Deity,' *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed.

31. Art., 'Deity,' 8170, referring to Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris, 1985), *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1999). This book enjoyed undue influence, especially in France, in its schematic and rather old-fashioned recital of the history of religions as an ineluctable process of secularization, Christianity starring as 'the religion of the exit from religion,' leading to the present era of 'the death of God.'

movements if there is indeed a single God presiding over evolution and human history? Can monotheistic intuitions be kept from emerging in less articulate forms at all points in human development?

Noting that Henri de Lubac was skeptical that the religion of primitive humanity could be scientifically explored, Georg Siegmund (1903–1989) notes the temporal chasm: 99% of dark prehistory for 1% of history. The scholars have given us ‘a row of hypotheses,’ often presented as definitive results. He comes close to Schmidt in his conclusion: ‘the fact of a primordial belief in a heavenly father-god, who is symbolized by the sun.’³² In connecting our often too rigid images of monotheism with the flux of a wider history (including recognition of the religious dignity of the Greco-Roman world), we can unseal blocked sources of religious and anthropological insight. The origins may elude ‘scientific’ exploration, but they may be accessed by the power of rational speculation, even from ‘armchair ethnographers.’ Considering that Immanuel Kant was able to construct the history of the entire cosmos while sitting in his armchair, with success in generating fruitful hypotheses,³³ why must we be condemned to defeatism where the phenomenon of religion is concerned?

Mircea Eliade

The history of religions has been recounted comprehensively by Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), but no longer with the firm purpose of tracing the origins of religion and its evolutionary backbone, supposing it to have such. He aimed simply to apprehend the phenomenon of religion in its full weight and depth, thus becoming, as Lawrence Sullivan says, ‘the single most important individual in introducing the world to what religion means.’³⁴ The exiguity of information about pre-history and the great variety of interpretations the data give rise to, not to mention the impossibility of imposing a theological schema, can make the study of religion a discouraging pursuit. Eliade believed that religion was an autonomous entity, developing independently of sociological factors. But since Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), the tendency has been to study religions as social institutions. As an instance of this social reduction, one may cite: ‘The totemic principle can... be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem.’³⁵ Stretching

32. Georg Siegmund, *Der Glaube des Urmenschen* (Francke, 1962), 9, 10, 101.

33. Immanuel Kant, ‘Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels,’ in *Vorkritische Schriften bis 1768*, 1 (Suhrkamp, 1968), 219–396. See Hartmut Böhme and Gernot Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft: Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants* (Suhrkamp, 1983), 83–99.

34. Quoted, Douglas Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade* (Garland, 1998), xi.

35. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1976 [1912]), 206, cited Willerslev, 27.

the anthropological imagination to embrace alien perspectives, sometimes with decolonial purpose, may have become more central to the study of religions than any concern with God. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) set the tone in 1922: ‘To grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world.’³⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009)’s structuralist analysis of primitive cultures created a complex language for dealing with religious and social elements that seems to have little theological resonance. He showed that totemism is ‘simply one aspect of a universal human activity, that of classification.’³⁷ Illuminating, but rather deflationary for those seeking religion or theology. ‘This structuralist formalization,’ it is alleged, ‘brackets off the entire ethnographic substance by focusing on the form.’³⁸

Religion for Eliade is what the *homo religiosus* lives and experiences and it can only be grasped from within,³⁹ just as, say, literature is what the literary person experiences and grasps from within. The emic perspective must prevail over the etic. To reverse this priority would be to give religion the status of an illusion or a mental illness to be handled objectively by experts. There is a sense in which religion, like literature, is *sui generis*,⁴⁰ and the affinities between the two allow their mutual support against the great bugbear of Eliade: reductionism. Of any literature and of any religion one may ask is it really literature or religion and even when accepted as such there will be ongoing debate about the quality and authenticity of a given example of the literary or the religious. The Aum Shinrikyo incident of March 1995 ‘caused immense damage to the standing of scholars of religion in Japan,’⁴¹ where the pullulation of new religions had not been subjected to adequate critical scrutiny. It is a mistake to think that a phenomenological approach to religion demands an *epoché* that suspends all judgment, even moral judgment. Indeed, a study that refused to differentiate good from bad, or living from dead, religion would be as blind to the phenomena as a study that refused to discriminate between good and bad literature would miss the essence of literature.

Cultures of death in Latin American religions were explored by Lawrence Sullivan in *Icanu’s Drum*, who unveiled a vast forest of cultures that honors the brilliance of the human imagination, with little to say about God.⁴² ‘Questions about

36. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Kegan Paul, 1922), 25, cited Willerslev, 21.

37. Willerslev, 28.

38. Willerslev, 29.

39. See John A. Saliba, ‘*Homo Religiosus*’ in *Mircea Eliade: An Anthropological Evaluation* (Brill, 1976).

40. For a glimpse of the debate here, see Ilkka Pyysiäinen, ‘Religion—*Sui Generis*—But in What Sense,?’ In: Christoph Kleine, et al., eds., *Unterwegs: New Paths in the Study of Religions*, Festschrift for Michael Pye (Biblion, 2004), 97–108.

41. Ian Reader, ‘Coping with Aum: Violence and the Study of Religion,’ in Kleine, et al., 329–38; 331.

42. Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Icanu’s Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religions* (Macmillan, 1990).

the origins of religion and the evolutionary framework have long ceased to interest mainstream social anthropology,⁴³ and it may be that departments of Religious Studies are now persuaded that ‘the proper study of mankind is man’ and not the transcendent or even the numinous. Founded to shake of the shackles of Theology in the study of religious cultures, they may end up shaking off religion itself in whatever form.

Shunning the rigorous methodological bracketing of theological stances that marked the origin of the discipline of Religious Studies, and deploring the positivistic scientism that prevails in it, Eliade embraces a capacious idea of *Wissenschaft* inspired by Goethe, combining history and a morphological phenomenology and giving both a broad and warm humanistic sweep. The history is a genetic account of what *homo religiosus* has lived and created across the millennia, the phenomenology apprehends and interprets the living forms religion has displayed, and it brings to them a hermeneutics, which is not the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ of the powerful critics of religion, such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, but rather a warmly sympathetic readiness to bring out the meaning of religious phenomena, with a central focus on the Sacred.

Eliade upholds the autonomy and irreducibility of the religious. This has a suspicious resemblance to the status that Revelation had in much twentieth-century theology. Indeed, Karl Barth scanned the entirety of Scripture and its church reception as a phenomenon of Revelation, holding at bay historical and skeptical criticism. Critics of Eliade can sound just like critics of Barth: ‘The conception of religion as *sui generis*, i.e. as a primary datum, which can be understood in its own terms, has generally been accompanied in theological circles by its natural corollary: reductionistic explanations of religion are entirely incorrect.’⁴⁴ Empathy can be blocked not only by secularist reductionism, but also by one’s own religious sensibility which may be quite alien to that of the religion studied.

Hominization is closely connected with the hunting culture, in which ‘to kill the hunted beast, or, later, the domestic animal is equivalent to a “sacrifice” in which the victims are interchangeable.’⁴⁵ Lascaux throbs with an artistic-religious vision of existence in that culture. ‘The theory of the nonreligiosity of the Paleanthropians was conceived and generally accepted during the heyday of evolutionism.... But if today there is agreement on the fact that the Paleanthropians had a religion, in practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what its content was.’⁴⁶ For

43. Willerslev, 24.

44. John Y. Fenton, ‘Reductionism in the Study of Religions,’ *Soundings* 53 (1970): 61–76; 62, cited, Allen, *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*, 28.

45. Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas: 1. From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 1.5.

46. Eliade, *A History*, 1.5.

the theologian, the change of view is a reassuring indication that the march of science is not always in the direction of secularism or materialism. '*Homo faber* was at the same time *Homo ludens*, *sapiens*, and *religiosus*.'⁴⁷ 'Belief in a survival after death seems to be demonstrated, from the earliest times, by the use of red ocher as a ritual substitute for blood, hence as a symbol of life.'⁴⁸ 'The apparent import of the images seems not to have varied from 30,000 B.C. to 9000 B.C. and remains the same in Asturias and on the Don.'⁴⁹ The recent discovery in Indonesia of wall paintings dating back 40–50,000 years (in 2108, 2019, and 2021) contradicts the previous perception of a 'comparatively restricted territory, between the Urals and the Atlantic.'⁵⁰ But the testimony of the caves still reaches back only a little way into the two million years (Eliade) or 300,000 years (current estimate for *homo sapiens*) in which humanity lived by hunting, fishing, and gathering. The caves are 'a sort of sanctuary.'⁵¹ Claiming that it is 'impossible to imagine a period in which man did not have dreams and waking reveries and did not enter into "trance,"' Eliade concludes that 'the ecstatic experience as such, as an original phenomenon, is a constitutive element of the human condition.'⁵²

The philosophical science which is most serviceable for a deeper grasp of art, literature, and religion is phenomenology, which in some of its fundamental moves shows a homology with religion. Phenomenology steps back to a transcendental awareness, that is, it moves from our knowledge and experience to a self-conscious grasp of the conditions and deep structure of our knowledge and experience. Kant calls '*transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*.'⁵³ Husserl tracked structures of awareness, such as 'intentionality,' whereby consciousness is directed to its object. Heidegger stepped back from experience of beings to awareness of being as such. The historical texture of religious formations such as myths seems to disqualify any general statements about the religious mode of knowledge. But faced with any given religious phenomenon, one can at least attempt to apprehend what gives it its religious character, and to 'reduce' it to its 'essence,' to the *Sache selbst*. The lore accumulated by historians of religion should be subjected to sedulous phenomenological interrogation in order to save it from insignificance. This is a bulwark against sociological, psychoanalytical,

47. Eliade, *A History*, 8.

48. Eliade, *A History*, 9.

49. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Les religions de la préhistoire (Paléolithique)* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), 83; cited, Eliade, *A History*, 1.16.

50. Eliade, *A History*, 1.16.

51. Eliade, *A History*, 17.

52. Eliade, *A History*, 19.

53. *Critique of Pure Reason* A 12, quoted in Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary* (Blackwell, 1995), 399.

or Feuerbachian reductionism. Eliade himself needs to be retrieved in a more critical hermeneutics that will lend stability to his insights.

Karl Rahner

With the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984) I come back to the point of departure in the inclusivist theology of Vatican II. As my cousin Martin J. Murphy reminds me:

In *Foundations of Christian Faith*, Rahner establishes that human experience of the transcendent God is not something extraordinary, but the hidden ‘undertow’ or background horizon of every daily act, choice, and question about meaning.⁵⁴ In essays such as ‘Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace’⁵⁵ and ‘Reflections on the Experience of Grace,’⁵⁶ Rahner specifically discusses how grace is omnipresent and shapes the consciousness of every person. In these works he often notes that human beings possess an ‘anonymous, unthematic, perhaps repressed, basic experience of being oriented to God.’⁵⁷

Rahner tends to be missing in discussions of the religions and even of interreligious dialogue (except for jaded references to the Anonymous Christian, not based on much reading of him and not going much beyond what was already established in the Vatican II years). Rahner revisited the topic of anonymous Christianity many times, but never with sustained concrete study of another religion. The universality he claims for a constitutive orientation of the human being to God and for the experience of Grace chimes with what Panikkar and Eliade say about the universality of *homo religiosus*, and with Pope Francis on all religions as paths to God. But his metaphysical picture of the human being is too abstract to lend itself to development and tends to get bogged down instead in squabbles in post-Kantian philosophical anthropology, further laming its capacity to impose itself as a governing framework in the world of the religions).⁵⁸ Rahner himself realized the gap between his universal anthropological structure and the historical pluralism (and prehistorical obscurity) of concrete religious phenomena. The problem

54. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*

55. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVI (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 35–51.

56. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. III (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 86–90.

57. Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons, and Meditations*, ed. Albert Raffelt and Harvey D. Egan (Crossroad, 1995), 362.

58. Stephen J. Duffy, ‘Experience of grace,’ in Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 43–62; J. S. O’Leary, ‘Rahner and Metaphysics,’ in Pádraic Conway and Fáinche Ryan, eds., *Karl Rahner: Theologian for the Twenty-first Century* (Peter Lang, 2010), 23–38.

was that an explanation of religion was proposed before the labor of interpretation was completed or even begun. A disciple of Martin Heidegger, who praised his insight, he filled out the picture of religion with boilerplate existential attitudes, summed up in a list by Klaus Riesenhuber, sj: 'the experience of infinite nostalgia, of unquenchable dissatisfaction; the torment arising from the insufficiency of all tangible things; the deeply felt protest against death; the experience of encountering an absolute love even when it appears in utter incomprehensibility and seems to shroud itself in silence; the sense of a radical guilt paired, nevertheless, with a firm hope, and so on.'⁵⁹

Conclusion

This inspection of the founding figures of Religious Studies leads me to a number of very tentative suggestions about how Religious Studies should proceed.

1. **From scientism to humane understanding.** Religious Studies needs to step back from a certain scientism in its obsession with methodology, and try to appreciate instead the warm, humanistic approach of the figures examined above. Philosophically, it should re-engage with phenomenology as opposed to a positivistic and reductive empiricism. The affinities between religion and art should be explored further, to resist the reductive sociological emphasis. It might even draw inspiration from literary criticism, in the sense of a critical response to literature that itself remains literary rather than succumbing to some imposed academic trend.
2. **Speculative daring in searching for the meaning of the history of religions.** The abandonment of speculation on the origins and evolution of religion is a form of defeatism, and different hypotheses about the coherence of religious history can be rehearsed in light of the fuller mastery of the data that Digital Humanities render possible. Astronomers observe only the visible universe, leaving vast reaches permanently unknowable; nevertheless they acquire insight into the texture of the observable universe, and form stimulating hypotheses about the ultimate structure of the whole. Likewise, historians of religions will never advance far into 'the dark backward and abysm of time,' but they can grasp ever more penetratingly the texture of religious life, and they can test what is promising and what is defunct in various speculative accounts of religion such as those of Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer.

59. Afterword in Anita Röper, *The Anonymous Christian* (Sheed and Ward, 1966), 163–4; quoted in J. S. O'Leary, 'Rahner and Religions,' *Japan Mission Journal* 64 (2010): 60–5; pp. 60–1.

3. Openness to the possibility of raising study of religion to a theological level. The theological vision of religions as reflecting the light of the divine Logos can add a deeper layer of speculation, as can similar fundamental visions in other sources, such as Vedanta. Each religion is pressed to give an account of its stance toward the other religions and its conception of the interreligious space in which the religions meet and interact. This is a rich account provided not by philosophy or anthropology but by concrete theological traditions. Historians of religion may wish to ignore this style of thought, and to exorcize it when it appears to intrude on their turf, as in Eliade's remarks on *homo religiosus*, but it might be salutary for historians of religion to reflect that ultimately it is theology—not philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology— that is the science best equipped to understand the religious.

4. Dialogal hermeneutic governing all study of religion. Conducting all research into religions in the spirit of dialogue, in a hermeneutic which allows the religions to challenge those who study them, calling on us to overcome a summary and unimaginative attitude, is the way forward. Such a practice of communicative sharing should characterize all humanistic disciplines, but they often fight against it out of a misplaced subscription to limited ideals of objectivity and verifiability.

5. Rational and moral critique as a way of taking religions seriously. Religions should not be immune to criticism, moral and intellectual, not only to fight against their oppressive legacy (and to avoid dangerous collusion with cultic distortions), but also to treat them with due seriousness as honorable products of human culture, but also as reflecting something of the divine light of the Logos. In the social media one observes bitter feuds between religious fundamentalism and enlightened skepticism, but perhaps we are seeing the emergence of a middle path in which religions are more accepting of stark criticism while the critics are more appreciative of the irreducible power and illumination that religions convey. If so, a sterile stand-off will yield to a new dialogical culture, encouraging subtler and more contemplative thought.