

Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion

Modern Fascinations

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley · Los Angeles · London

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Modern Dilemmas in Writing on Religion

Notoriously diverse in the truths they profess and the methods they use to arrive at them, most religion scholars nevertheless seem to share a fascination with the human depth of the material they study. This makes the aesthetics of writing on religion more central to the institutional coherence of their field than many of them realize. For a number of the most influential writers on religion have consistently managed to express something of the depth that they see in the data of religious life to others inside and outside the academy. And if part of what many writers on religion do is to communicate their visions of human truths, then they have something in common with artists. The success of artful writers on religion, moreover, suggests the importance of art itself in real-life scholarly endeavor.

This book pursues a line of thought about the aesthetics of writing on religion, engaging some questions raised by its apparent centrality in the field of religious studies. Has a peculiarly expressive genre of writing on religion emerged from a particular historical moment? If so, what does this emergence suggest about the cultural significance of religiohistorical practice? Perhaps of greater interest to active practitioners is just what aesthetic moves humanistic writers on religion tend to make, in general and in specific. Inevitably, too, the art of religiohistorical writing comes up against the science of religion, an idea still alive in religious studies—at least in the German sense of *religionswissenschaft*, an organized body of knowledge about religious traditions. So how do questions of truth

come into the aesthetic picture? How, further, might a body of knowledge that draws on the aesthetic vision of scholars with very diverse worldviews build on itself and grow? This book attempts to rethink religious studies in a way that takes seriously the aesthetic dimensions of an influential strand of humanistic writing on religious life.

INTERPRETIVE WRITING IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

I have called this strand interpretive writing. It is practiced in many of the subfields of religious studies that have developed in the Western academy since the mid-twentieth century. While the study of religion is often housed in departments that were once devoted exclusively to biblical studies and theology (and were titled accordingly), it has expanded to include non-Western traditions. Although these were at first sometimes taken as part of a missiological curriculum, their study has in fact transformed scholarly ways of thinking about religion. For with more than one tradition on the horizon, not only are comparisons possible but also analytical projects on the ways in which religious traditions work: the cultural and psychological dynamics of myth and ritual; the structures of religious narratives; the sociology and politics of tradition and change. Interpretive writing looks at what is suggested by specific materials of religious life for these larger problems of religious traditions.

In analyzing the dynamics of religious traditions, interpretive writers readily borrow from established disciplines, humanistic and social-scientific alike. Subfields in religious studies have emerged with the refinement of various disciplinary approaches for studying religion. All too often, these subfields are denoted by affixing the term *religion* to a broad academic specialization; “religion and psychological studies,” for example, examines both the special psychological turns of religious life and the religious possibilities of normal human development.¹ Gaining some distance from tradition through analytic approaches, scholars in these subfields often work with familiar Western traditions. The distance characteristic of analysis, however, is paradigmatically found in work on the traditions of *others*, whose unfamiliar religious ways may also seem particularly compelling. When understood to contribute to the study of religious traditions generally, scholarship on others’ traditions forms part of the “history of religions”—probably the most current English equivalent of *religionswissenschaft*—and it is on interpretive writing in that field that this book will focus.

Not surprisingly, the two interpretive writers on others’ religions who

have been arguably the most influential in the recent past have also been among the most artful: Mircea Eliade and Clifford Geertz. Although both these writers once had ambitions in the literary world, there their similarity ends. Differing in both their presence in religious studies and their approach to religious materials, they present a radical complementarity. Eliade seems to have almost single-handedly revitalized history of religions in the 1950s and 1960s with large-scale comparative treatises that pointed effectively to felt human truths. Geertz, an anthropologist who has written frequently on religion, has stood at the field's institutional margins, offering considered descriptions of cultural and historical specifics that could reveal the everyday religious dramas of real human beings. Eliade saw religious meaning primarily in a broad vision of humankind in the universe; Geertz has understood acutely how it stemmed from specific human situations. In most interpretive writing on religion, both these types of perception come into play.

Eliade was a precocious intellectual in his native Romania, where he is remembered primarily as a writer of fiction. At the impressionable age of twenty, he went to India, staying for three years. Returning to Bucharest in 1931, he wrote (in addition to a dissertation on yoga) a successful semiautobiographical novel about a European's unsuccessful love affair with an Indian woman.² Eliade's academic career in Romania was disrupted by World War II, after which he remained an émigré—first in Paris and then, beginning in 1956, at the University of Chicago, where he was appointed professor of History of Religions. There he developed what he called a “total hermeneutic” that would interpret traditional religions for contemporary humanity.³ From the late 1950s through the early 1970s both academic and lay audiences were dazzled by Eliade's large synthetic vision, which could reveal profundities in diverse traditions as well as in ordinary life. Although his books were frequently promiscuous in their mixing of religions and cultures, the enduring patterns he identified seemed to ring true. In the years after his death in 1986, Eliade's personal reputation has become clouded by revelations of his sympathies for Romanian fascism and of his ready cooperation with the Bucharest regime—although not (yet) of any specific unforgivable acts. But Eliade's academic influence had already begun to wane during his later years, as his writing seemed increasingly repetitive and his vision stale and etheric. Increasingly, students were undertaking fieldwork and writing in concrete ways that drew inspiration from Geertz.

Returning from World War II with aspirations to be a successful novelist, Geertz found that he could go to college (Antioch) on the G. I. Bill,

went on to graduate school at Harvard, and has pursued a successful academic career ever since, for many years at the Center for Advanced Studies at Princeton. Geertz did fieldwork in Indonesia and then in Morocco, writing some long books that are still widely read and many oft-cited articles. He has a talent for telling an engaging story that both reveals cultural nuances and says something about larger cultural (very often religiocultural) questions. This is a crafted writing, which Geertz has compared to a fiction, in the sense of “something made”; it is fundamental to what he has called *The Interpretation of Cultures*—the title of his 1973 prizewinning collection of essays.⁴

With clear echoes of Geertz, the phrase “interpretive writing” carries some pointed associations with the recent scholarly past, so it was only with hesitation that I adopted it as a term for the central subject of my analysis. I stuck with it because the particular sense in which I use the term here does have some real continuities with Geertz’s crafted ethnological “fictions,” as well as with Eliade’s total interpretive hermeneutics. Still, although usually crafted in Geertz’s sense and hermeneutic in Eliade’s, the interpretive writing I discuss in this book might best be characterized by its strategic use of perspective.

Even if it does not always do so self-consciously, interpretive writing very evidently presents something of an author’s individual view. It is thus distinguished from a number of different genres in religious studies in which the author’s personal voice may be strategically mute: phenomenological description, naturalist explanation, accounts written to give voice to a received theological doctrine. Interpretive writers, by contrast, try both to represent their subject more or less accurately and to sharpen their perspectives on it. Their perspectives, importantly, give their picture depth in two senses: depth of knowledge and depth of vision.

The two senses of depth produced by an interpretive perspective point to two sorts of truths. Depth of knowledge can offer truths of enlightened science. At its best it offers a profound rational understanding of a subject, perhaps even a degree of scientific truth. Depth of vision, by contrast, offers truths of romantic art. It presents an individual perspective on a scene that reveals insights into it not otherwise easily known. When one talks about interpretation in religious studies these days, it is this romantic depth of vision that comes first to mind, especially when *interpretation* is contrasted to scientific *explanation*. The two terms have come to signal a contrast between a relatively softhearted humanistic stance toward religious traditions and one that is more hard-minded and critical. This is another reason why I stuck with the term “interpretive

writing.” For even though I hope to show that the characteristic religio-historical aesthetic has a necessary rational edge, if forced to choose I take the position here as closer to the softhearted side.

THE ARGUMENT

Interpretive writers, I argue in part 1, tend to suffer from an uncomfortable modern dilemma. They *like* religion—in the sense that they see it as revealing vital human truths—but they *believe* in science, that is, in some version of post-Enlightenment positivism. Their ambivalent feelings draw them toward the stuff of religious life but keep them twice removed from it: not only are they fascinated by the religions of *others*, but they assimilate these through their aesthetic (as opposed to religious) sensibilities. In coming to this conclusion, I begin by working backward, outlining the origins of contemporary religious studies from an interpretive point of view. Inevitably, I suggest in chapter 1, even old stalwarts of hard-minded Enlightenment-style and softhearted romantic-style scholarship on religion harbor ambivalent feelings toward the materials of their study. Chapter 2 then examines more closely some ways these ambivalences play out in the lives of two confessedly conflicted scholars from the first half of the twentieth century: Jane Harrison and Erwin Goodenough, both of whom wrote memoirs. Coming from different sides of the religious spectrum, they each moved toward the middle: Harrison, the self-avowed secularist with a growing passion for Greek ritual; Goodenough, cherishing warm memories of boyhood Methodist enthusiasms even after losing faith in them. In neither case were their feelings toward their subject at all simple.

Part 2, “The Art of Writing on Religion,” is the central section of the book. It begins, in chapter 3, by reflecting further on the relationships between perspective and depth alluded to above, bringing in a third term: *imagination*. If scholars of religion are like artists creating art objects, what are some of the imaginative processes entailed in the construction of *religiocultural* objects—that is, of crafted pieces of writing that reveal the realities of religious subjects through the subjective visions of their authors? To examine the ways in which different types of religious materials suggest characteristic aesthetic strategies, I turn in chapter 4 to works by four important writers on religion in the last half of the twentieth century: Eliade, Geertz, Georges Dumézil, and Wendy Doniger. These examples, along with some work of Jonathan Z. Smith, provide a basis for exploring in chapter 5 what seems to me the charac-

teristic aesthetic dynamic of interpretive writing on religion, which draws on the ambivalences explored in part 1. Interpretive writers are fascinated by the stuff of religious life, which appeals to their imaginations, but their scientific sides also make them prone to rational analysis. Since the play between imagination and reason was explored at length by Kant, this leads us to his aesthetic theory, and the characteristic aesthetic of interpretive writing elaborated here turns out to be a version of Kant's sublime.

Because the sublime demands imagination *and* reason, interpretive writing must give scientific reason something it can take as true. So part 3 examines the scientific truths of interpretive writing in light of its aesthetic ones, exploring relationships between the two truths. Chapter 6 argues that interpretive writing is limited in the degree of scientific truth it can attain and that its most appropriate range is a middle ground between isolated statements about particulars and grand generalities. Within that range, however, its statements can be as valid as those in any humanistic field. The argument is amplified in chapter 7 by examining the relevance of some of our aesthetic concepts to scientific ones: In what ways can the religiohistorical objects created by interpretive writers seem objective in a scientific sense? What parallels can be drawn between depth of religiohistorical vision and depth of scientific explanation? Because questions of truth in religious studies have been the subject of a number of recent monographs, I have restricted my discussions in part 3 to what aesthetic issues of interpretive writing bring to the debate. I make up for the brevity of part 3, however, in part 4, which explores some historical territory thus far largely uncharted.

Part 4 examines problems in the collective science of religion. How is writing that emerges in good part from individual vision woven into a fabric of public religiohistorical knowledge? The short answer is obvious: very loosely. Nevertheless, examining ways in which people have (and have not) worked together does reveal interesting patterns in that fabric's loose weave. Just how these patterns may take shape is suggested by the extended historical examples of chapters 8 through 10—taken, respectively, from Dutch phenomenology, British and German diffusionism, and classical studies in Edwardian Cambridge. These examples suggest as well the ways in which the theoretical principles of the earlier chapters may work out in ordinary religiohistorical practice. If our historical forays give some grounded complexity to our idealized formulations, they together also emphasize the limited conditions under which religionists have in fact undertaken extended close collaborations. But if

instances of collective work are few, ideals of public knowledge, we see in chapter 11, are many, driven by different understandings of the significantly true and the academically possible. An afterword sketches some turns these different understandings have been taking as they encounter critical approaches at the beginning of the twenty-first century and suggests what those newly critical religiohistorical turns might mean for the future of interpretive writing.

THE FASCINATED WRITERS

This book deals with the work of many writers. The more obscure ones are treated in historical contexts in parts 1 and 4 and are introduced briefly when they appear. The five writers whose work forms the basis for the central theoretical discussions of parts 2 and 3, however, have been important figures of the present and recent past—if not well known to all readers then familiar to many. All readers nevertheless deserve to know why these writers have been singled out for special attention.

Little more needs to be said now, I think, on the centrality of Eliade and Geertz for the work on which I focus. However we value the effect of Eliade's towering role in twentieth-century history of religions, his legacy remains evident. And whatever Geertz's primary disciplinary affiliation may be, he is a master of interpretive writing on religion in culture and has reflected articulately and influentially on his practice. Eliade wields the great, universal vision; Geertz tells the small, perceptive story. Of the three other writers treated at length, two—Doniger and Dumézil—find a place in the discussion because their work, in whole or in part, combines elements of broad vision and telling specifics in ways that complement the work of Eliade, Geertz, and each other.

Wendy Doniger is a specialist in Hindu mythology, the first occupant of the Mircea Eliade chair in History of Religions at the University of Chicago. Like Eliade, she looks for larger significances in myth and is not shy of broad comparisons. Like Geertz, however, she is a teller of stories and revels in vivid, specific detail. A witty and prolific writer, she is also a bold personality, unafraid to change her name in midcareer (she made her reputation as Wendy O'Flaherty). Her widely read books, focusing largely on Indian myth, have dealt engagingly with broad issues of illusion, gender, and sexual ambivalence, thus opening her arcane material to a broad readership in religious studies and beyond. In this sense, Doniger is an interpretive writer par excellence. I focus on her first book, *Śiva, the Erotic Ascetic*, where she presents in detail all the stories sur-

rounding a specific Hindu divinity in a way that suggests implications of truly universal import.

Georges Dumézil, who died in 1986, was an Indo-Europeanist whose reconstructions of ancient Indo-European mythologies I will consider as a whole. Thoroughly familiar with the French sociological tradition of Durkheim and Mauss, Dumézil was by training and inclination a philologist—a master of all the Indo-European languages, living and dead, and several more languages besides. A prolific writer, Dumézil spent most of his career in Paris: first in the Section des Sciences Religieuses of the École des Hautes Études at the Sorbonne, and from 1948 to 1968 as professor at the Collège de France. In 1979 he was honored by election to the Académie Française. Like Eliade, Dumézil painted on a large canvas, and comparison was crucial to his arguments. But the conclusions he drew were, like those of Geertz, often limited to a single—if in his case very large—cultural frame. In its attempt to establish a picture of ancient Indo-European society from fragments of language and myth, his work could resemble a feat of intellectual engineering. His aesthetic was correspondingly often bare and architectonic, depending less on suggestion (like that of Geertz and Doniger) than on coherent form. Questions have been raised about the significance Dumézil's broad scheme may hold for European fascists, who might have read (and may still read) *Indo-European* as *Indo-Aryan*, with nefarious implications. But whatever Dumézil's political sympathies during World War II, his academic legacy has, like Eliade's, survived the suspicions, as scholars in Europe and North America continue to follow his lead in exploring the ways in which the specifics of particular myths fit into the general Indo-European picture.

In parts 2 and 3, where discussions revolve around strategies for bringing the specific and general together in aesthetically and intellectually powerful ways, Eliade, Geertz, Doniger, and Dumézil present points on an analytic compass. Standing counter to them all is our fifth scholar, Jonathan Z. Smith, whose work is met with at points throughout these two parts and the rest of the book, too. Displaying the human depth of his material to make a larger point, Smith's writing is eminently interpretive in our sense, yet it tends to be more tightly reasoned than that of the others, presented through pithy argument in individual articles, not extended monographs. Smith is a master of the short essay, and his longer works have taken shape largely as collections of articles and as published lecture series. His analyses—which treat materials ranging from his early studies of late antiquity through the South Seas, Siberia, and Jonestown—have reg-

ularly juxtaposed traditions in original ways. In doing so, they have frequently been critical, questioning previous scholarship and inviting us to look at religious phenomena from newer, perhaps deeper, perspectives. Having taught at Dartmouth and UC Santa Barbara, Smith has long been based at the University of Chicago but has had an uneasy institutional relationship with the history of religions program there. His work, however, has had a strong impact on historians of religion there and elsewhere, consistently bringing clear rational thought to an empathy with religious subjects in a way that appeals to hard-minded and softhearted alike.

Many of the writings I discuss are from the 1960s and 1970s, a formative period in the contemporary study of religion, and reflect some of the more romantic resolutions of modern dilemmas characteristic of those decades. Despite the impact of more recent critical theory, those resolutions—which privilege depth of meaning over surface play, unified argument even amidst scattered foundations—continue, I think, to be relevant, outliving some theoretical excesses of the years since. Nevertheless, the very pervasiveness of the past decades' diverse critical currents (which can be exciting as well as excessive) has made this book possible. For when I first started thinking about religionists' fascinations, the notion of a science of religion could still look naively naturalistic, and ideas about the aesthetic nature of academic writing seemed almost too daring to enunciate. Since then, the wave of critical thinking that peaked in the 1980s has both definitively weakened our sense of natural foundations and brought to the surface the role of the aesthetic in intellectual life. Still, as with many enveloped in the study of visionary worlds, the specific theoretical currents of that wave at its peak never pulled me too far in any particular direction. And by the time I was ready to give my thinking some historical and theoretical shape, the wave had already begun to break and the tide to ebb. I experienced some effects of its surge but never really rode with it.

In the interpretive study of religions, late-twentieth-century theoretical currents have left in their wake some critical concepts that can sharpen our thought,⁵ but with them also a hypercritical attitude that offers our thinking little room to develop as a discourse of its own. Indeed, some have gone so far as to see the field of religious studies itself shattering under the recently breaking wave, an event then celebrated as the disintegration of a discipline with no real object.⁶ That celebration is not one I have joined. A vital field is indeed necessarily diffuse, I argue, because it must incorporate the visions of diverse scholars, but it can still

cohere in its own way around the fascinating material at its core. So here I am writing about truth and beauty in the study of religion. Mine may be seen as a retrograde attitude, perhaps, but I prefer to think of it as humane: appreciative but not all-embracingly theological, analytic but not mordantly critical or numbingly scientific. I think there remains a need to articulate a practical attitude that modulates the extremes. For the dilemmas that have given rise to interpretive writing on religion have not yet gone away, and the genre, I suspect, will be here for a good while longer.

Fascinated Scientists and Empathizing Theologians

The different ambivalences toward their subject found in present-day writers on religion derive in part from their field's imperfect fusion of two historically distinct intellectual traditions. One of these is dominant in the social-scientific end of the field. It looks back to Enlightenment rationalism and maintains a spirit of scientific discovery triumphant in the late nineteenth century.¹ The other, more consciously humanistic, carries a spark from early-nineteenth-century romanticism that has enlivened historical studies and encouraged sympathetic directions in phenomenological work. In twentieth-century religious studies, these historical and phenomenological streams came together in a hermeneutical enterprise often carried on by self-aware Christians who could locate their studies within broader, usually liberal, theological frames. Convinced voices from both the Enlightenment and romantic camps have been sounded resolutely through the beginning of the twenty-first century. But less-settled voices have also been heard, often quieter and more reflective—voices replete with the hesitancies of thoughtful scholars finding their different ways toward engaged analyses. To provide some measure for understanding the ambivalent middle grounds in the history of religions, I will survey the field's historically extreme stances toward religious traditions. Yet the extremes, I will argue, are not without their hesitancies either. For whatever scholars' conscious ideals, neither a path of scientific detachment nor one of religious empathy can readily be trodden to its end. As writers move toward the logical conclusions of extreme

ideals, they inevitably step back—to heave a sigh of wonder, dismay, or resignation.

SCIENTISTS FIND RELIGION PUZZLING

When scholars want to cite the most strident critic of religious traditions from the radical Enlightenment they often turn to David Hume.² Hume did in fact have sharp words for religious traditions, but he also found them finally perplexing and enigmatic. Writers before Hume had, for the most part, seen pagan forms of religion as degradations of a primitive monotheism—a vision that admits of a common biblical Eden and sees the possibility of a noble soul in the simple savage.³ The worldview presented by Hume in his *Natural History of Religion* is, however, as the work's title suggests, eminently *naturalist*, locating the origin of religion in diverse human fears that produced a manifold, unconnected polytheism.⁴ This psychological account of the origin of religion has little room for anything positive in the religious traditions of common people, which are contrasted to the divine truths that philosophers can comprehend. The latter present “the good, the great, the sublime, the ravishing”; the former consist of “the base, the absurd, the mean, the terrifying” (93). For Hume, “the religious principles that have prevailed in the world” are nothing “other than sick men’s dreams” (94).

But these famous words of Hume, characteristically caustic about “prevailing” common religious traditions, do not tell the whole story. The contrast between the base traditions he finds about him and the sublime forms of theism he also recognizes is itself a source of wonder for him. Hume concludes that “[t]he whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny” (95). This uneasy doubt is not a comfortable feeling for a clear-minded philosopher, and it struck Hume deeply. Hume obviously didn’t *like* religion, but it remained a source of wonder for him—mysterious, perplexing, in its very contradictions itself strangely numinous.

Standing in contrast to Hume’s pondering philosophical deliberations, the scientific investigations of religion that began in the latter half of the nineteenth century gave serious attention to the data at hand. For the most part, eighteenth-century philosophers and savants concerned with religion tried to present coherent rational narratives based on the piecemeal data available to them.⁵ Although Hume’s psychological “natural” history marked a break from Deist devolutionary and Euhemerist ac-

counts, in all of them the larger picture was central. If authors had no use for particular traditions they knew about, as was often the case, they could, like Hume, simply dismiss them as “absurd, mean, and terrifying.” Although nineteenth-century scientists also had their theories, both the temper of the scientists and the intent of the theories demanded more detailed elaboration of proofs. Even unsavory religious traditions needed to be considered carefully, not merely dismissed. All the unruly data of religion needed to be *explained*—or at least labeled and fit into a system. With the scientific spirit glorying in the *facts*, the mystery of religious diversity that Hume saw in the polarized whole now became reflected in the particulars, presaging the lasting fascination with the stuff of religion that remains vital in religious studies today.

The late-nineteenth-century concern with particulars of tradition, however, might seem alien to a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century exegete concerned with the psychological, cultural, or critical implications of a favored individual myth. There was at that time still too much unsorted data to be able to look comfortably at particulars in isolation; these called, instead, for order among themselves. Faced with the astounding bulk of details accumulated over centuries by explorers, missionaries, and orientalists, the new scientists of religion attempted to make sense of its diversity. What were sought were keys that could unlock the secrets of how the particulars fit together. Many were suggested: Max Müller’s solar mythology; several diffusion theories;⁶ but the most exciting key, the most widespread—the most *scientific*—was evolution, of which the most successful anthropological proponent was E. B. Tylor.

Tylor begins *Primitive Culture*, in which he gives his most substantial treatment of religion, with a chapter on the “science of culture.”⁷ Two axioms underlie this science. First, there is a pervasive uniformity in culture resulting from the “uniform action of uniform causes” (1:1). A corollary of this is the existence of a basic consistency in the “character and habit of mankind”: Tylor finds truth in Dr. Johnson’s remark that “one set of savages is like another” (1:6). Second, “various grades of culture” should be regarded as “stages of evolution” (1:1). In applying these axioms to the study of civilization, an important first step in his scientific method is then to “dissect” culture “into details, and to classify these in their proper groups” (1:7). The result is a detailed array of human customs linked by type, not individual culture, that reveals the fundamentally uniform cultural evolution of humankind.

The detailed array of religious traditions found in the second half of

Primitive Culture presents exotic beliefs and customs in straightforward prose. “What causes volcanos?” The Australians say that demons “threw up red-hot stones”; people from Kamchatka say that mountain spirits heat up their houses and throw the brands out the chimneys; Nicaraguans seem to offer human sacrifice to a spirit of the mountain, “for one reads of chiefs going to the crater, whence a hideous old naked woman came out and gave them counsel and oracle” (2:293). All over the world, humankind in a similar state of evolution has faced similar intellectual problems in ways that may diverge but are broadly similar in type. Scientists should look at these bizarre traditions dispassionately and see them in their proper place.

Nevertheless, as vestiges of an early stage of a *common* humanity, exotic religious traditions are part of our collective heritage as human beings. They fascinate us in part because in them we may see intimations of what we once were; even as we have moved beyond them, they are with us. Somewhere, humans much like us still visit the “hideous old naked woman”—and although her image, of course, should no longer instill any foreboding in civilized human beings, it sometimes, inexplicably, still does.

A similar stance toward exotic traditions is taken by James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, which brings the ordered catalogue of data into the twentieth century, poeticizing it and broadening the scope of its audience. Whereas Tylor sought a scientific, evolutionist key for understanding the diverse data of religious traditions, Frazer found an ordering principle in a central myth. His monumental work begins with the story of the priest at the temple to Diana at Aricia. Consort of the goddess, the priest was known as King of the Wood; eventually, he would be challenged and killed by his successor, who first had to steal the golden bough that he guarded.⁸ For Frazer to unravel the mystery of the King of the Wood meant to examine sacred marriage and dying (and rising) divinities, as well as the ideas of magic, spirits, and taboo that give these concepts meaning. Sharing some of Tylor’s presuppositions about the uniformity of humankind, Frazer explored these concepts very widely beyond the Roman context of his story. More than Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*, Frazer’s *Golden Bough* became, by its third edition, a veritable encyclopedia of exotic religious lore.

Frazer’s classical frame-story, together with his literary style, helped popularize the study of religion among a much wider educated public and presaged the deeper study of myth that would take place later in the century. But Frazer himself was no depth psychologist, and by the

twelfth volume of *The Golden Bough* his central mythic thread appears as little more than a wispy leitmotif that links highly diverse data. Its role in the work is to provide a perplexing story that lets Frazer ask questions. Religious customs, for Frazer, were curiosities.

Like Tylor, Frazer saw the religions he studied as outmoded, something *historically* interesting. Even if what each of these scholars studied intrigued him because it revealed a collective human past with which he could identify, it was of no immediate personal use. The relics of the past Tylor and Frazer found in religious tradition, rather, might reveal important secrets about humankind in general. This stance toward religious materials—a fascination with the important human truths they suggest, together with a strict personal distance—is an attitude that continues to mark one end of the spectrum of religious studies.

BELIEVERS BROADEN THEIR HORIZONS

The other end of the spectrum is marked by a generous personal engagement with religious traditions, often on the basis of a considered theology. Many of the most forceful advocates of some attitude of engagement had theological training, and several were also known as creative theologians—usually liberal, most often Protestant. The history of religions, they intimated, might help us discern some ways of the divine in the world. An attempt to penetrate the diverse religious experiences of humankind, moreover, could prove a valuable experience for one's own self-development.

Foregrounding any such stance is thus an appreciation of religious experience, but in the background lurks the acknowledgment that our understanding of another's experience can never be complete. Here, then, lies the echo on the religious side of the rational scientists' fascination with religion in the face of their personal distance from it. Those scientists, although remaining personally aloof, had still demonstrated a wonder at religious tradition—either in the contradictory whole, like Hume, or in the intriguing particulars, like Tylor and Frazer. Scholars who, on the other hand, would grow personally close to the religions they studied recognized the inevitability of some personal distance, whether they liked it or not.

A theology of experience first comes to the fore in the Protestant world with Friedrich Schleiermacher. As a young man, Schleiermacher was close to Friedrich Schlegel and his circle of romantic cultural revolutionaries, but by the time of his death he was professor of theology at

Berlin and “the most distinguished theologian of Protestant Germany.”⁹ History of religions looks primarily to the *young* Schleiermacher, the radical romantic who at the age of twenty-nine wrote *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. Published in 1799 as a rejoinder to secular contemporaries—die-hard classical rationalists and burgeoning romantic poets alike—this work dramatically introduces two propositions that find a place in the theological agenda of most historians of religion who consciously have one. First, enunciating a view of religion in tune with romantic sensibilities, Schleiermacher claims that religion is, preeminently, feelings: these are “what is autonomous” (47) in religion. Second, arguing against Enlightenment attempts to find a single Deistic religion that all rational people could believe, he affirms religious plurality in its historical richness: “each religion was one of the particular forms [the one] eternal and infinite religion necessarily had to assume among finite and limited beings” (99). Adding an appreciation for diversity to an elevation of experience, the young Schleiermacher still speaks to many who find studying other religious traditions personally enriching.

Once the science of religion was taken up in earnest in the twentieth century, Schleiermacher’s exuberant proclamations were given new substance by Rudolf Otto, who wrote an introduction to *Speeches*.¹⁰ A professor of systematic theology at Marburg who produced philosophical and comparative studies, as well as translations from Sanskrit, Otto is best remembered in religious studies as the author of *Das Heilige*, translated into English as *The Idea of the Holy*.¹¹ There, like Schleiermacher in the *Speeches*, he presents the essence of religion first of all as a kind of feeling, but he also takes this experience of the “numinous” to be grounded in a sense of “the holy”—a specific a priori category construed within the neo-Kantianism of Jakob Fries.¹² As a category of its own, the holy becomes intrinsic to the experience of humankind and the well-spring of all religious phenomena. On this basis Otto can offer a short catalogue of the ways in which the numinous has manifested itself throughout the world. Although his examples are mostly from Western traditions, they also include some from the Indian sources with which he was familiar. In *Das Heilige* the holy becomes an object of study, theoretically grounded and historically revealed.¹³

A highly influential book when it was published in 1917, *Das Heilige* has continued to excite scholars personally open to the religious traditions they study. Not all of these scholars, however, have followed Otto to his theoretical conclusions. Professor William Brede Kristensen of Leiden, a contemporary of Otto’s who remained professionally active well

into the 1940s, saw no need for Otto's philosophically grounded idea of the holy: "We must put the questions differently than Otto does. We should not take the concept 'holiness' as our starting point, asking, for example, how the numinous is revealed in natural phenomena. On the contrary, we should ask how the believer conceives the phenomena he calls 'holy.'" ¹⁴ The scholar must then "form an accurate conception" of the believer's religious reality and "understand it from within" (23). More than any reification of the holy, it is this insistence on sympathetic understanding, on the attempt to experience something of another religious reality in a way that can be personally broadening, that will be emphasized as the defining characteristic of this side of our religious-studies spectrum. By studying religion, the student "grows himself religiously."¹⁵

Some important implications of what growing oneself religiously by studying religion can entail are emphatically articulated in the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Smith has focused on world religions, which can provide "a living encounter . . . between people of diverse faith."¹⁶ Unlike Kristensen, who abandoned theological training for long philological studies and then took up ancient religions, Smith's early training in theology and Islamics led him to go with the Canadian Overseas Mission Council to Lahore, Punjab, where he became acculturated to South Asian Muslim life.¹⁷ Attached to educational institutions, he gained an acute understanding of the society in which he lived¹⁸ and, more important for the turn of his later work, evidently valued his interactions with Muslims. In a famous essay published in 1959, Smith underscored that "the study of religion is the study of persons. . . . Faith is a quality of men's lives."¹⁹ Studying religion, from this perspective, focuses attention on people's self-conscious beliefs, on their feelings and attitudes—not only of those studied but of the scholar as well. In this deliberate personalization of the study of religion, key words are *encounter*, *communication*, and, especially, *dialogue*—which may ideally become a mutual, all-encompassing, global discourse: "The culmination of this progress," writes Smith, "is when 'we all' are talking *with* each other about 'us.'" ²⁰

But as Smith realized in 1959, our circle of understanding is not yet so broad, collaborative, or harmonious and perhaps never will be. In all of these personally engaged writers, together with the hope for broadening understanding, there is an awareness of limits. Kristensen, formulating a primal distinction between "ancient" and "modern" religions, perceived a gap between a contemporary Western post-Enlightenment outlook and *all* other traditions—a gap that could only be partially fathomed. For Otto, his translations and comparative work notwithstand-

ing, the experience of the holy was perceived as one of the “wholly other”; it was something daunting to encounter in one’s own tradition, not to mention in another culture.

Thus, despite their desire somehow to comprehend other religious worlds deeply, these religiously committed scholars all recognized the boundaries of their own cultural horizons, the limits of their individual efforts, as well, perhaps, as the rootedness of their own personal faiths. Representing one extreme of the spectrum of stances in religious studies, their enthusiastic, but admittedly limited, inward engagement mirrors the cool but fascinated detachment of the uninvolved scientist at the other. Neither all-embracing engagement of others’ religions nor absolute aloofness from them seems practically tenable in scholarly work.

Finding Middle Grounds

In balancing analysis with engagement and detachment with empathy, interpretive writers have found distinct stances within the middle grounds of religious studies—that expansive scholarly space where head and heart come to terms with one another about the subject of religion. Scholars' own, not always positive, personal experiences of religion (in more and less conventional varieties) have coalesced uneasily with their alternative ideas of what it means to be scientific. From the beginnings of the modern study of religion at the turn of the twentieth century, anthropologists, classicists, and biblical scholars, among others, have had intellectual encounters with obscure but compelling traditions that led them to question comfortable realities. From our twenty-first-century standpoint, some of these encounters can seem surprising indeed.

SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND HUMAN MEANINGS THROUGH THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

Particularly surprising were some vocal participants in extended turn-of-the-twentieth-century anthropological debates. Although these debates were conducted in the spirit of rational British science, they included some Britons who clearly recognized the importance of human capacities other than reason itself. Perhaps the most interesting of these scholars was Andrew Lang. A talented man of letters with diverse interests, Lang produced prose about religion in the same staid tone as his more

exclusively anthropological contemporaries, but he recognized dimensions to his subject that many others did not.¹ Religionists today most frequently remember Lang as the first forceful advocate of the existence of “primitive high gods,” a claim that early humanity, too, knew some sort of abstract, supreme divinity—often seen as a god of the sky.² This claim developed from Lang’s enthusiastic championing of the anthropological study of myth, which led him to continued public diatribes with the philologist Max Müller.³ Lang’s contemporaries, however, knew him best not as an academic but as a literary man fascinated with folklore—a prolific and engaging author who penned, among other works, popular fairy tales for children.⁴

Concurrent with his literary, anthropological, and folkloric endeavors, however, Lang was a founder-member (and sometime president)⁵ of the Society for Psychical Research, organized “for the purpose of inquiring into a mass of obscure phenomena which lie at present on the outskirts of our organised knowledge.”⁶ The society was a haven for upper-class aficionados of all varieties of then-fashionable theories that looked beyond a philistine Victorian materialism; the ideas of Freud and Jung were considered, as well as examples of “dowsing rods, poltergeists, and automatic writing.”⁷ Lang’s interests seemed to be less in the narrowly psychological than in the broadly supernatural, and he integrated these with his folkloric work through the study of ghost stories, of which he collected many.⁸

This otherworldly dimension of Lang’s folkloric work raised the eyebrows of his more sober-minded colleagues. In a response to criticism by Edward Clodd in the latter’s presidential address to the Folk-Lore Society in 1895, Lang chided the narrow empiricism advocated by Clodd: “I am in disgrace with the Folk-Lore Society,” he complained, “for maintaining . . . that some people *do* see hallucinatory pictures in glass balls, in carafes of water, in ink.”⁹ His own claims here were limited and pertained to human—not superhuman—phenomena. Not affirming that psychic phenomena were objectively real, he merely suggested that some might be subjectively so in a genuine way, that not all psychics were frauds, as Clodd had implied. In an article called “Protest of a Psycho-Folklorist,” however, Lang admits more openness to the possible objective reality of supernatural events, in which “honorable men” may believe: “What I cannot understand is this: as long as . . . belief rests only on tradition it interests the folklorist. As soon as contemporary evidence of honorable men avers that the belief reposes on a fact, Folklore drops the subject.”¹⁰ Scholarly interest in uncanny phenomena, he intimates,

should not be daunted by the possibility of their reality. Although the superhuman realities that catch his attention—ghosts and psychic phenomena—made him less religiously reverent than were theologically oriented scholars like Rudolf Otto or Wilfred Smith, Lang insisted along with them that scientists of religion should (at least) be allowed to be open to the intangible dimensions of what they study.

More ensconced than Lang in the anthropological establishment was R. R. Marett, who held the chair of social anthropology at Oxford from 1910 to 1936. Preceded in that position by E. B. Tylor, his mentor, and succeeded by the functionalist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Marett stands in a rather hard-nosed empiricist lineage. He himself, however, is remembered as seeing the origin of religion in *mana*, a Melanesian word that describes a sense of awe in the face of unexplained powers. Like Otto, who appreciated his work,¹¹ Marett is then led to understand that “man’s religious sense is a constant and universal feature of his mental life.”¹² And in identifying *mana* as what is crucial in religion, Marett—like Otto with “the numinous”—gives priority to feelings over speculation. “The religious sense” is to be sought “in that steadfast groundwork of specific emotion whereby man is able to feel the supernatural precisely at the point at which his thought breaks down.”¹³

Although Marett did take a trip to Australia, he was trained as a philosopher and, like most anthropologists of his day, wrote more from the accounts of others than from his own field encounters. In the fashion of Tylor and Frazer, Marett often seems to present exotic examples as tantalizing curiosities, detached from their contexts and ordered through type. But among his types are basic religious feelings that he sees as transcending a Tylolean evolutionism and continuing to resonate in the religious sensibilities of his own contemporaries. Thus the book that emerged from his Gifford lectures he titled *Faith, Hope, and Charity in Primitive Religion*—an apparent oxymoron that reflects the ambivalent sentiments still found among scholars occupying the middle ground in religious studies. Marett was an early purveyor of British social anthropology who displayed a respect for “fundamental Religious Feeling” that we might rather expect in an explicit theology of experience; *mana*, his key term, he defined as the Power of Awe, or Power—which he always dignified with a capital P.¹⁴

Meanwhile, on the Continent, religiously engaged scholars, who had all felt the impact of Otto, began to look more carefully at the way “the holy” appeared in specific kinds of contexts. In Holland, Gerardus van der Leeuw, footnoting Marett, started from an idea of sacred Power to

fashion an ordered phenomenology of religion.¹⁵ Structured on the relationship between subject and object, van der Leeuw's phenomenology presented religious reality as something with which human beings have *interacted* in myriad ways. Sacred power remained sacred but was also manifestly and diversely human. Joachim Wach brought the German hermeneutic tradition of Dilthey and Troeltsch to religious traditions through sociology, which, as Gregory Alles points out, was a trendy new field when Wach took it up.¹⁶ The holy was still something to be understood subjectively but was now seen as embedded in specific kinds of social forms. In Scandinavia, Lutheran scholars moved away from traditional salvational understandings of the Old Testament. Emphasizing careful philological work, they took a broader historical view of the Hebrew Scriptures and put forward some interesting theses about the ritual traditions behind them.¹⁷ Among Scandinavian scholars, the most towering figure was clearly Sigmund Mowinckel, professor of Old Testament at Oslo. An acute textualist, Mowinckel was a scholar's scholar, but he had a broad peripheral vision, too. His most influential textual work was on the ritual background of the Psalms,¹⁸ yet in addition to a great many philological studies, he also wrote a judicious theology of the Old Testament for laypersons and a theoretical treatise in the history of religions.¹⁹ For the most part, all these continental scholars had theological credentials and explicit personal beliefs, which they understood to be both widened and honed more finely through their scholarly explorations of others' religions.

Like their more positivist fellows, these religiously oriented scholars reveal differently nuanced personal ambivalences to diverse materials of tradition. As their feelings about what they study become less straightforward, moreover, scholars from both sides of the spectrum seem to approach some common grounds. Crucial features defining these common grounds in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century can be identified by examining two cases: the classicist Jane Harrison, who scorned "theology" but was drawn toward the mysteries of Greek ritual, and the erstwhile biblical scholar Erwin Goodenough, who moved from a conservative Christian upbringing through liberal theology to become an eminent historian of symbols.

Beginning with Harrison places the emergence of the fertile middle grounds of religious studies in the brief Edwardian epoch, the window between the beginning of the twentieth century and the start of the First World War, during which Harrison's most memorable works were produced. This timing is significant, I think, because that epoch highlighted

the tensions between a naturalist outlook and the fascination with religion that are still endemic to historians of religions. Until the outbreak of World War I, naive Victorian beliefs about the progress of science were still common. But by the end of the nineteenth century, they had become less emotionally compelling, making room for Fabian Socialism, Psychical Research, and, I think, an ambivalent stance in the study of religions that is still with us.²⁰ Goodenough then reveals a religiously respectful variant of that stance from the middle of the twentieth century.

In their days, both Harrison and Goodenough were leading scholars in their fields. And both, significantly for the present work, have left memoirs that help us see their scholarship against their individual religious lives. These memoirs, like most, tend toward the ideal, identifying an order within complex lives. But despite any skepticism we may harbor about the selective detail foregrounded by our memoirists' hindsight, we can still take seriously the general directions in which they saw their attitudes toward religion move. And for our story, these are telling. Starting from opposite poles of the compass of personal engagement in religious studies, the two nevertheless end up sharing an exultation in the particulars of religious traditions—a sense that the specific materials of religious traditions have something exciting to say about humankind, something valuable that may not be easily known through any other means.²¹

Abandoning Theology to Save Religion in the Work of Jane Harrison

Of the Edwardian scholars remembered in the study of religion, the classicist Jane Harrison is the one whose work seems to reverberate most closely with that of scholars today. In contrast to Frazer, her older classicist contemporary, who filled out a light, skeletal narrative with assorted, loosely related facts, Harrison sought coherent patterns in the bounded field of Greek religion. She did this by looking at her textual materials through social-scientific frames—among the first of her generation seriously to do so. The social-scientific movements that influenced her, moreover, singled out motives for human behavior that were not simply rational: Durkheim's stress on social cohesiveness, Freud's unconscious. She recognized powerful nonrational forces behind the patterns of religion she delineated.²²

Harrison's feel for the power of religious forms plays against a sensibility that stands aloof from traditional religion. Two distinct models for piety were apparent in her childhood home: her father, of nonconformist

background, “incapable of forming a [religious] conviction”; and her stepmother, “a fervent semirevivalist.”²³ Harrison’s attitude was clearly closer to her father’s. Her stepmother, she tells us, admonished her charges that they must be “born again” and that “God would have our whole hearts or nothing.” By this last teaching young Jane sincerely tried to abide, she says, but “the holocaust I honestly attempted was a complete failure. I was from the outset a hopeless worldling.”²⁴ Nor did Harrison seek solace in traditional religion during her old age. In the conclusion of a memoir written in her seventies, she expresses a satisfied materialist metaphysics: “I have no hope whatever for personal immortality, no desire even for a future life. My consciousness began in a very humble fashion, with my body; with my body, very quietly, I hope it will end.”²⁵ Exposed to her stepmother’s evangelical religion early in life, Harrison followed it as a matter of course. At least in hindsight, however, she found it oppressive: common evangelical precepts about God’s wrath, salvation, and hell, she later confides, are “a grim and awful thing to tell a child.”²⁶ The profound revelations she would have in her adult life would come through intellectual, not consciously religious, pursuits.

Three books, Harrison tells us in her *Reminiscences*, had a particularly profound influence on her, marking “three stages in my thinking: Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Bergson’s *L’Évolution créatrice*, and Freud’s *Totemism and Taboo*” (80). Each book, moreover, added an element to the overall religious orientation she did finally develop. Aristotle freed her from her family religion; Bergson gave her a new vision of an Absolute; and Freud invested that vision with deep human dimensions.

Harrison’s encounter with the *Ethics*, prescribed during her first year at Cambridge, was exhilarating. She presents that encounter as a liberating experience, releasing her from misguided religious outlooks that lingered from her girlhood: “To realize the release that Aristotle brought, you must have been reared as I was in a narrow school of Evangelicalism. It was like coming out of a madhouse into a quiet college quadrangle where all was liberty and sanity, and you became a law to yourself” (80–81). The *Ethics* authorized Harrison’s newfound independence. Moreover, in highlighting “the *summum bonum* . . . as an exercise of personal faculty . . . [and] the perfect life that was to include . . . as a matter of course friendship,” the *Ethics* affirmed for Harrison the value not only of the individual but also of the intense personal relationships that would regularly stimulate her life and work. This was heady stuff “to one who had been taught that God claimed all” (81).

Whereas Aristotle gave Harrison a new sense of self, Bergson gave her

a new sense of spiritual possibility. Bergson's concept of *durée*, which can be simply translated as "temporal flow," Harrison gloriously describes as "that life which is one indivisible and yet ceaselessly changing."²⁷ *Durée* would then be able to provide an exalted referent for the mythic divinities she studied. Freud, finally, taught Harrison that the mysterious forms of these divinities had definite human referents, too. The plentiful references to sex and psychoses found in much of Freud initially put her off, she writes, nor was she a fan of psychoanalytic therapy.²⁸ *Totem and Taboo*, however, impressed her mightily: "Here was a big constructive imagination . . . probing the mysteries of sin, of sanctity, of sacrament—a man who, because he understood, purged the human spirit of fear."²⁹ Clearly, a fearless, probing imagination—which Harrison cultivated in herself—was something she valued.

Not mentioned among the three great influences on her psyche—but acknowledged elsewhere—is the work of Émile Durkheim, which offers some of the most immediate background to the understandings of religious truth she would put forward publicly. These she expressed succinctly in a talk given in 1913 before the Heretics, a Cambridge society to which she belonged, founded "to promote discussion on problems of Religion, Philosophy, and Art."³⁰ Her topic was a small group of contemporary young French poets known as the "Unanimists" (from *una anima*—"one spirit") and what they could reveal about conversion, which Harrison then took as "the essence of religion" (22).

Harrison was drawn to the Unanimists, now largely forgotten, through the ways in which they gave voice to the spiritual sides of her two great French intellectual heroes, Bergson and Durkheim. "Life is one—but you may think of that oneness in two ways. There is the stream of life in time . . . what Professor Bergson calls *durée*. . . . Or we may think of the oneness spatially, contemporaneously" in the social groups of Durkheim (8–9). To these abstract concepts of unity, the Unanimists gave concrete expressions in poetry that offered parallels to the suggestive particulars Harrison would find elsewhere in ritual and myth. Inspired poetry, like evocative ritual, could elicit the experience of universal life.

"The stream of life in ceaseless change, yet uninterrupted unity . . . the oneness of life lived together in groups, its strength and dominance . . . the value of each individual manifestation of life, and the . . . ecstasy that comes of human sympathy" (18–19)—these were the real spiritual truths recognized by Harrison at the peak of her career. Conversion, moreover—in the "old-world . . . evangelical" sense of being

born again—is nothing “but a sudden Unanimism” (19, 26). Invoking William James, Harrison sees them both as varieties of mystical experience. Thus, in the childhood religion that frightened her, she finds a kernel of truth she can accept—one that reflects a vision of human community in space and time. A year earlier, in *Themis*, she had identified a similar kernel of truth in the archaic forms of Greek religion.

Harrison wrote her two major works on Greek religion, the *Prolegomena* to its study and *Themis*, as a research fellow at her Cambridge alma mater, Newnham College.³¹ She had returned in 1898 after seventeen years as a private scholar based in London. During that time she had visited Greek archeological sites and museums throughout Europe, lectured with great success on Greek art and archeology, and produced several books. Of those, the most notable was *Mythology and Monuments of Ancient Athens*, which reflected some fashions of the age: an idealistic aesthetic current in the 1880s and 1890s married to a British rationalism interested in the facts.³² In Cambridge Harrison’s perspectives changed and widened. Her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* drew on her archeological expertise to present a view of Greek religion that gave priority to ritual. Innovative, but solid, it was well received among classicists; not so her next major work, *Themis*, which was more daring.

The new material Harrison brought to Greek religion in *Themis* was not the evidence of Greek archeology but parallels from the cultural anthropology of nonliterate peoples. In *Themis*, Harrison attempted to establish a basic initiatory and cyclical seasonal pattern as the basis of Greek—and implicitly all—religion. Her vision was not only wider but also higher than before. The introduction to *Themis* makes specific mention of Durkheim and Bergson. “Dionysos,” she wrote, “with every other mystery-god, was an instinctive attempt to express what Professor Bergson calls *durée* . . .”—the “one, ceaselessly changing” life.³³ Yet despite her flights of high revelatory insight, she found basic religious patterns grounded, à la Durkheim, in social forms, a perception of religion that moves sharply away from the still-dominant rationalism of Tylor and Frazer: “primitive religion was not, as I had drifted into thinking, a tissue of errors leading to mistaken conduct; rather it was a web of practices emphasizing particular parts of life, issuing necessarily in representations.”³⁴ Religious representations at once held expansive meanings and were embedded in human social realities.

Discussing the progression of her intellectual enthusiasms from her lectures in London to her major books, Harrison confides: “happily . . .

bit by bit art and archeology led to mythology, mythology merged in religion; there I was at home.”³⁵ At the same time, Harrison is emphatic in her agnosticism and insists that her home in religion is a hardheaded academic one: “Please don’t misunderstand me. It was not that I was spiritually lonely or ‘seeking for the light’; it was that I felt religion was my subject.”³⁶ Harrison obviously liked religion—it revealed matters of vital human significance to her that she felt comfortable writing about. She did not, however, like theology—“after-the-event explanations”³⁷ of experience, which she personally identified with a fearsome evangelical faith. Indeed, she claims, in a moment of spiritual exuberance, we “must . . . drop theology if we would keep religion.”³⁸ Here she gives voice to what may be the central cultural dynamic of the twentieth-century humanistic study of religion: an attempt to recover the truths that religion offers through analyses that demand loosening—if not abandoning—traditional theological understandings. Several decades later this same dynamic would be expressed by Erwin Goodenough during the course of his work on early Christianity and Judaism. His personal point of reference, however, was always a positively valued experience of tradition.

Goodenough Remembers a Happy Faith

In moving from matter-of-course belief in traditional doctrines as a child to a basic rejection of them as an analytic scholar, the intellectual side of Goodenough’s personal religious trajectory resembles Harrison’s. In the affective side of those trajectories, however, there was a crucial difference: Harrison never really seemed to accept her stepmother’s evangelical religion and disparaged it in her old age;³⁹ Goodenough was, for periods, fully engaged in religious practice and remembered his experiences warmly. Harrison, as we have seen her put it, “was from the outset a hopeless worldling,” but Goodenough never quite stops being religiously engaged.

Born in Brooklyn in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Goodenough worked actively throughout the early and middle decades of the twentieth, with his first academic work published in 1923 and his last in 1968. By midcentury, he was a preeminent professional in the field of religious studies in the United States, the president of the American Society for the Study of Religion from 1955 to 1962.⁴⁰ The course of Goodenough’s career, moreover, is indicative of a common secularizing turn taken by many scholars starting out religious in his era: it progressed from a theologically informed study of early Christianity to a more in-

clusive, academically framed examination of religious life and practice outside the immediate Christian world. Yet even as the orientation of Goodenough's personal beliefs shifted from "religion" to "science," as we have used the terms, the intense religious experiences of his Methodist boyhood stayed with him. These he describes in a late work entitled *Toward a Mature Faith*.⁴¹ Broadly reflective as well as autobiographical, the work attempts to reconcile Goodenough's later groundings in depth psychology with the religious life of his youth.

Goodenough emphasizes that his deeply devout family environment made him understand the vitality of religious experience, an understanding that would inform all his later scholarship. The Methodism he knew firsthand included an orthodox Calvinist side (he details the strict Sabbath prohibitions at home)⁴² and more rapturous aspects—exemplified in his Uncle Charlie, whom he characterizes as a mystic. He describes an experience at a camp meeting with Uncle Charlie, where, as a high school boy, Goodenough "was completely overcome, lost all power of walking, and had to be helped out by two men." Experiences like this, moreover, would leave a lasting imprint on the mature scholar. "However far I have come in later years from seeking such rapture, I have never forgotten its reality, and ever since, as I have read descriptions of ecstatic religious experiences . . . I have felt a sympathy with them. . . . These experiences are not aberrations, but the logical end of prayer and of most symbolism" (20).

Like Harrison, Goodenough describes an awakening of intellect in his college years that would eventually lead him to study history of religions. Goodenough's intellectual break with the past, however, was less radical than Harrison's and more gradual. Still intent on the ministry during his college years, he at first saw his newfound scholarly ambition as something separate from his religious career; the two would ideally be able to coexist without conflict. What had originally excited Goodenough's scholarly curiosity were college papers on the sources of Shakespeare's plays. Encouraged by his professor, he had dreamed of emotional fulfillment through the ministry while pursuing creative scholarship in literary history. "That the two drives, the drive to emotional experience and the drive to creative understanding, could have any relationship to each other, be coordinated into a single drive, had not yet entered my head" (24). The two drives do finally come together in Goodenough's historical studies of early Christianity, which thus explicitly appear as the fruit of a marriage of religious experience and analytic understanding.

During the course of Goodenough's academic life, the analytic aspects

of his work became increasingly pronounced. For a year and a half, he studied at Harvard Divinity School, “where empiricism was at its noblest” (27). He then studied in Europe for nearly three years, mostly at Oxford. During this period he discovered the “scientific mind,” which “is characterized by its lifelong distrust of old faiths and by its delight in getting facts which make new faiths necessary” (29–30). He realized the threat that the scientific mind could pose to traditional faith, but his own new intellectual orientations evolved incrementally, he tells us, without crisis. There was no world-shattering break for Goodenough reminiscent of Harrison’s epiphany at Aristotle’s *Ethics* but a gradual change in points of view: “When I had lost the old Faiths, already, like a snake, new skin had grown under them, so that I was never without the protection of an orientation” (30). Moreover, the new investigation carried out by the scientific mind could not only coexist with a feel for religion but could also become almost as intense: “Here was an atmosphere,” he writes of his early postgraduate intellectual environment, “that fired my enthusiasm as nothing since Uncle Charlie’s mysticism had done” (30). Goodenough found a marriage between his two drives that was both viable and intense.

This marriage found fruitful consummation in Goodenough’s life-work. Returning from Europe, Goodenough found himself theologically too “far left” (31) for most Protestant seminaries but did find a job as an instructor of history at Yale. He stayed at Yale, eventually becoming a professor of history of religions and university professor with appointments in five departments.⁴³ Although Goodenough’s work started from familiar Christian ground (his dissertation was on the theology of Justin Martyr), he became better known for his work on Hellenistic Judaism—first on Philo and later on Jewish symbols. The last became the subject of his most ambitious work, a thirteen-volume opus in the Bollingen series in which he treats vast amounts of iconographical detail in the contexts of cultural history, the dynamics of symbolism, and the psychology of religion.⁴⁴

Despite Goodenough’s wide geographical and analytical range, much of his work, he tells us at the beginning of the summary volume of his magnum opus, was driven by a question about Christianity: how could “the teaching of a Galilean carpenter . . . so quickly have become” a full-fledged “Greco-Roman religion even though it called itself the *Verus Israel*.”⁴⁵ Looking for a historical answer, Goodenough considered archeological evidence found in ancient Jewish synagogues and graveyards—evidence that seemed initially puzzling. For much Jewish religious archi-

texture of the Hellenistic period contradicted received ideas about orthodox Jewish iconoclasm, featuring images not only of cups and grapes—which could be dismissed as merely decorative—but also of human and apparently divine beings. From that and other evidence, Goodenough could infer that the seemingly quick transformation of Jesus' teaching into a Greco-Roman religion had in fact not been so quick but had a prehistory, with at least some communities within "Verus Israel" having begun to assimilate pagan forms into their religious life well before the beginning of the common era.

This conclusion, however, led to further questions, for just as widespread as pagan symbols in Jewish religious architecture were signs of antipathy to paganism in Jewish religious writings. So just what did Greco-Roman symbols mean for the Jews who adopted them? More questions followed, theoretical and historical: What happens when symbols migrate from one tradition to another? Was there a *lingua franca* of symbolism in Hellenistic time? Do symbols have any abiding psychological significance?⁴⁶ Starting with a problem of Christian salvation history, Goodenough was led to pursue questions that were less theologically weighty but more religiohistorically intriguing.

The expansion of Goodenough's sympathetic religiohistorical curiosity as his career unfolded seemed impelled in part by memories of a happily pious early home life, together with an awareness of just how far from that life he had traveled. The universe of faith his family knew before the two world wars was, he admits in his memoir, "basically a world of illusion." But speaking of the "elements of truth in anything by which men have lived with even partial success," Goodenough observes, "I have clung to those elements from my boyhood while I have gone into . . . a series of different worlds."⁴⁷ The informing imprint of Goodenough's childhood religion, further, continued to keep him distant from those iconic forms to which he devoted his thirteen-volume magnum opus. "I was brought up in a Protestantism," he writes, "which, for all my work with form-symbols, has made them essentially foreign to my personal experience" (68–69).

Intellectually a man of the Enlightenment, but still cherishing influential religious experiences of his youth, Goodenough appears, *pace* Schleiermacher, as a cultured *respector* of religion. Like the eighteenth-century men of reason who were numbered among religion's cultured despisers, Goodenough maintained "a critical attitude toward hypotheses" (29), including religious ones; but, not particularly like them, he still found value in the human religious imagination. Thus, about the big ques-

tions, he expressed agnosticism: “What is the meaning of life?” he asks. “I cannot say. Does it in itself have any purpose or meaning? We do not know.” Nevertheless, he continues, religion remains salutary: “How may we put meaning into life? . . . For this . . . we must have faith in our imaginations and their fantasies” (93). Reading Freud, Goodenough could speak of religion as an “illusion,” but he did not, as Hume and Enlightenment extremists did, take it as the dreams of *sick* men. Truly, Goodenough liked religion, but almost regretfully, he believed in science.

THE FASCINATING STUFF OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

If both Harrison and Goodenough felt the need to abandon traditional theology to restore the truth of religion, just where in tradition did they find the truth to restore? Harrison gives us a straightforward answer: it is not exactly religion that is the focus of her attention but ritual, which for her links religion and art: “When I say ‘religion,’ I am instantly obliged to correct myself; it is not religion, it is ritual that absorbs me. . . . Art in some sense springs out of Religion . . . and between them is a connecting link, a bridge, and that bridge is Ritual. On that bridge, emotionally, I halt.”⁴⁸

For Goodenough, the corresponding bridge was wider. He describes the objects of his life research as “the dreams, the poetic fancies, the symbols of all kinds, which have gone into making up what men have called religion.” He writes of these as “things” that “I as an individual have found valuable, and I as a historian see that our ancestors found valuable.”⁴⁹ This focus on the *things* of religion—rituals, icons, myths, dreams—is a striking feature of the contemporary humanistic study of religion. Often finding it difficult to engage with traditional theologies, historians of religion attempt to elicit important truths from diverse symbolic forms. If these have had value to others, we hope they may also have value for us as well.

For the symbolic materials used by people distant from us in space or time promise to reveal much beyond them. Goodenough understood symbols as “the words or forms in which our sub-verbal thoughts are embodied” (54). Thus, by penetrating the meaning of symbols we can comprehend the unsaid, the ineffable in cultures and humankind. Harrison’s mature stance toward the religious “representations” she studied is given expression in her last work on Greek religion, a short, generalizing synopsis of her views she titled her *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Now more in touch with the teachings of Freud than

Durkheim, she writes of how those teachings make meaningful the stuff of her dreaded “theology”: “Psychology sets theology in a new and kinder light. Those of us who are free-thinkers used to think of it rationally as a bundle of dead errors, or at best as a subject dead and dry. But conceive of it in this new light and theology becomes a subject of passionate and absorbing interest, it is the science of the images of human desire, impulse, and aspiration.”⁵⁰

Theology thus becomes transformed into a “science of images,” and the underlying object of religious studies is “human desire, impulse, and aspiration.” For Harrison, as a “free-thinker,” the study of religion is a self-consciously secular pursuit, but the symbolic material of religious traditions nevertheless remains of “passionate and absorbing interest”—valuable for what it can tell us about the deeper motives of humankind. For Goodenough, too, theology is replaced by a sort of science of images, which he pursued with extraordinary vigor in his thirteen volumes on Jewish symbols. But Goodenough had once cared dearly for theology and is similarly respectful to the “things” of religion he later studied. Writing of these things of religion, he declares, “To me they unquestionably have the most important place of anything in human life.”⁵¹ Through the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars have continued—with various degrees of reverence, passion, and puzzlement—to use the stuff of religious traditions to throw light on the shadows of the human psyche.

Religious Objects and Scholars' Traditions

If, in the hearts of at least some religious studies virtuosos, traditional religious observance has given way to the practice of the science of religion, what are the links between their experience of their scientific objects—the stuff of religious life they study—and that of the religious traditions they once cherished, or didn't, or never really knew? While those links sometimes seem quite strong, they are not always straightforward.

Certainly, they may be more complex for a lapsed Methodist like Goodenough than for a scholar whose personal religious commitment is alive and well. Kristensen, we recall—the theology student turned historian of religions at Leiden—thought that by understanding “traditional” artifacts “from within” a scholar may “grow himself religiously.” However dimly discerned across the abyss from ancient Egypt (or wherever), continuities could still be found between the scholars' own experiences and those of people acculturated to the symbolic forms that they study.

The latter, ideally, can stretch the former. This process may lead to unorthodox worldviews, to be sure, but ones that individual religious liberals regularly manage to maintain.

Goodenough's relationship to the religious materials he studied, however, was more problematic. Because his religious life was more alive in his past than during his scholarly present, he did not have much vital religious experience for the objects of his study to expand. Instead, those objects seemed to represent an alien other in his present experience—an other that he managed to identify with his earlier pious self. Although he admits, as we have seen, that the ancient Jewish symbols of his magnum opus were “essentially foreign to [the] personal experience” of his Methodist boyhood, he nevertheless realizes “that what other religions, or other branches of Christianity, were doing through symbol and ritual, we were doing directly in immediate expression.”⁵² His objects of study seem not so much to have invoked the intense religious experience of his youth but to have helped keep it present for him; this presence then helped him find profound value in the religious material that he now treated with scholarly distance.

Harrison, by contrast, with little happy religious experience to remember at all, discovers the study of ritual life as a new love to which she is passionately driven: “these ritual dances, this ritual drama, this bridge between art and life . . . it is things like these that I was all my life blindly seeking.”⁵³ These objects were destined for her, she seems to believe, and fulfilled a deep unconscious quest that was left unsatisfied before. In this sense they stand in *contrast* to her past experience of tradition, which never inspired her. If most scholars of religion do not talk of their passion for their material (or of their life in general) as expansively as Harrison, many are detached from their own traditions but are inexplicably drawn to study the traditions of others in ways similar to hers. Perhaps even most of all for people without well-formed religious understandings of their own, the stuff of other religious worlds can appear somehow numinous.

Religious Sensibilities Twice Refracted

Drawn to their objects of study in different ways, scholars of religion find in them striking meanings—often larger, more revealing, or at least with more varied and interesting nuances than their own traditions (or lack of them) seem to provide. In offering these larger meanings to people who do not easily find them in the modern Western world, the history of

religions presents them twice refracted. First, it presents them through the religions of *others*—distant either in cultural space or historical time or both. Understanding the effects of this first refraction, especially at the present historical moment, calls for a consideration of the particular colonial and postcolonial predicaments in which historians of religions have found themselves. Second, history of religions presents its objects not directly to readers' religious imaginations—whose existence in themselves they may deny—but to their aesthetic sensibilities, which can assimilate larger meanings in theologically neutral ways. This second refraction will lead us in part 2 to a detailed examination of some aesthetic moves found in religiohistorical writing. But let us first consider briefly contemporary religion scholars' postcolonial dilemmas. In encountering others' traditions somewhere in the middle grounds of empathy and analysis, how might historians of religion approach the collective burden of past Western colonialist sin? Although the burden cannot be avoided, for scholars who have taken religious people seriously, the sins do not seem mortal.

As a twentieth-century Western enterprise that attempts to encompass the traditions of the world, the history of religions certainly maintains something of the spirit of imperialism. It would, moreover, not be possible in its present form without profiting from its share of colonialist booty. A great deal of the stuff that intrigues us from Asia and Africa has arrived on Western shores through the offices of colonialist regimes that worked from practical, self-interested motives: administrators studied native law in order to rule more effectively; missionaries attempted to unravel primitive myths in the process of making converts to Western faiths. Further, endemic to the work of many of these, as well as to the work of apparently innocent folklorists and scholars, has been the image of the colonized subject as an alien other that cries for enlightening Western ways. At least this much the extensive recent scholarship on colonialism makes clear.⁵⁴

At the same time, however, to the extent that the study of others' religions has filled an existential void experienced by some Western intellectuals, the other presented in colonialist discourse—particularly in its romanticized versions—has testified to our lack, not to our superiority. Too often we have looked for depth in others' traditions just because we couldn't always find it easily in our own. Certainly, other traditions do not always—or even usually—reveal the same secrets to us that they do to those within them. We are likely, moreover, to differ among ourselves as to the real meanings of those secrets, just as do people within the tra-

ditions themselves. The inner worlds that historians of religions try to penetrate are subtle if nothing else—elusive and changing, but also, we like to think, apprehensible at deep levels of understanding. A Western project, history of religions serves Western religiocultural needs, but in doing so, it often lets non-Western voices be heard in ways more profound than they have been before. It is true that these are usually not just the same voices heard on their home ground, but, transformed in the imagination of the scholar, they may reverberate more tellingly here.⁵⁵

Moreover, the subtle reception of others' traditions by historians of religion has fed into a body of knowledge that is a discourse not so much about the Orient as about religious traditions. As we have seen in the work of Goodenough and Harrison, that knowledge encompasses Western cultures and histories, too, in ways—particularly evident in *Themis*—not always flattering to Western self-esteem. Thus, although the history of religions has in fact drawn on different orientalist knowledges, as an intellectual project attempting to generalize about religious traditions, it is not focused on an orientalist stereotype of any one subordinated civilization. It is as political as any knowledge is, to be sure, but the imperialism that drives it is sooner that of the Enlightenment intellect—an attempt to comprehend all there is within a single purview—than any specific colonialist agenda.

Nevertheless, orientalist images have pervaded scholarship in the history of religions and linger on, outliving the old colonialist era.⁵⁶ The part that history of religions may best be equipped to play in helping redeem the West from its collective colonialist guilt is to wean it away from those images. In doing so, we are likely to end up creating a picture of humankind as a complex whole—not of stereotypes or even archetypes but of diverse identities moving in counterpoint within and between cultures. In thus helping to depict the real religious problems (and possibilities) inherent in complicated ongoing processes of cultural and economic globalization, history of religions can be politically progressive.

Leavening an aggrandizing Enlightenment vision with a more integral plurality, history of religions is still distinguished by an enlightened analytic style that is not shared by all writers who have come in touch with the religions of the East. The influx of information about the exotic traditions of new imperial domains was not assimilated by everyone with an air of scholarly detachment. Some people tried more direct experiential means: in addition to the new science of religion, the turn of the last century also saw a resurgence in occultisms—new religious syntheses that promised adherents access to ageless divinities. In ways parallel to

those of scholars bringing different traditions together into studies of “comparative religion,” members of new occult movements mixed and matched religious traditions—from Egypt, India, the Rosicrucian West—into some dramatic pastiche.⁵⁷ From this cultural vantage point, scholars of religion can appear as those among the educated elite who were intrigued by others’ traditions but whose personal tough-mindedness (usually) kept them from active participation in the Order of the Golden Dawn or the Theosophical Society. If a number of early religionists were also members of the Society for Psychical Research, that organization at least held fast to what it took as principles of science, fostering a culture of healthy skepticism about specific psychic occurrences and of the consequent need for testing and experiment. Maintaining a scientifically oriented vision of the world, rational historians of religions tended to appropriate the numinousness they still saw in others’ traditions, not, like occult revivalists (or some of their own more romantic colleagues), through some experience they might see as spiritual, but through their sense of the aesthetic.

For sympathetic secular-minded scholars, this approach to the stuff of traditions through the aesthetic did not prove to be the troubling move it could be for the theologically inclined. Since Schleiermacher, resonances between religion and aesthetics had been discerned in the German theological tradition, where by the turn of the twentieth century a common reaction was to insist on a clear distinction between the two: this was an important theological context for Otto’s affirmation of the holy as a category of its own.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Otto, for one, still seemed in spite of himself to sense religious reverberations in “the aesthetic experience of nature,”⁵⁹ and non- (or anti-)theological intellectuals like Goodenough or Harrison, when they considered the issue, had no reason to find it particularly problematic. Quite the contrary—Harrison, as we might expect, waxes enthusiastic: “A ritual dance, a ritual procession with vestments and lights and banners, move me as no sermon, no hymn, no picture, no poem has ever moved me.”⁶⁰ Religious traditions for her here seem to offer the most powerful aesthetics imaginable, and she reveled in them.

In its appropriation of what is religious for others as something aesthetically comprehensible to modern, naturalistically minded humankind, religiohistorical endeavor presents its own version of the oft-noted displacement of religious experience in the secular world.⁶¹ But the responses of historians of religions have not been fundamentally political, like Marx’s, or psychological, like Freud’s. Responding to their religious ob-

jects aesthetically, many scholars in their writing transform their reactions into aesthetic objects of their own creation.

In doing so, successful interpretive writers usually manage to wield an imaginative synthesis of the opposite poles seen in the field. The explicit knowledge they offer is in the Enlightenment mold: analytic, grounded in a naturalistic worldview, oriented toward some larger academic question. But the details of tradition they show us lead to a romantic vision: a wonder at the power of myth, ritual, and religious life together with a sense that these may lead to the profoundest insights about humankind. Most scholars who have made an impact in the field have articulated a naturalist argument but have also demonstrated a broad human view.

These certainly include the five writers presented in the introduction and who will figure prominently in the next part of this book. Jonathan Z. Smith—of influential contemporary scholars perhaps the one most consciously indebted to the British rationalist tradition—treats his human subjects much more sympathetically than did his nineteenth-century predecessors. His presentations of small-scale religions as traditions of problem solving, as will be seen in chapter 5, evoke feelings not of condescension toward primitives engaged in bad science but of empathy at human beings caught in very difficult situations. The scholars more celebratory of the symbolic material itself—Geertz, say, or Doniger—present it from a convinced naturalistic perspective and orient it to vital intellectual questions as they probe its human depth. Even Eliade's vision of a nexus of symbols in sacred space and time—whatever its theological groundings—has been effective just because it is framed in neutral, nontheological terms. And Dumézil's vision, although sweeping across a very broad Indo-European horizon, is always grounded in thorough philological research. The peculiar aesthetic of religiohistorical writing is built just from bringing together the two poles of the field in creative ways. An analysis of this aesthetic is developed in part 2.