

2005

## The Study of Religion and the Rise of Atheism: Conflict or Confirmation?

Michael J. Buckley S.J.  
*Santa Clara Univeristy*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/rel\\_stud](https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/rel_stud)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Buckley, M. J. (2005). The Study of Religion and the Rise of Atheism: Conflict or Confirmation? in D. Ford, B. Quash and J. M. Soskice (Eds.), *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 3-24.

This material has been published in *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century* edited by D. Ford, B. Quash and J. M. Soskice. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511488405>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution or re-use. © Cambridge University Press

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

## CHAPTER I

# *The study of religion and the rise of atheism: conflict or confirmation?*

Michael J. Buckley S.J.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE QUESTION

'Religion' and 'theology' are not terms with fixed meanings and invariant applications. They are rather topics or commonplaces – not in the sense of the familiar and the trite, but in the classical sense of linguistic variables, terms ambiguous and capacious enough to house a vast diversity of meanings, arguments, and referents.<sup>1</sup> The interconnection of such topics constitutes neither a determined problem nor an exact proposition. It constitutes what John Dewey called 'a problematic situation', an indeterminate area out of which problems and their resolutions can emerge only if these ambiguous terms are given specific meanings and definite applications within particular inquiries.<sup>2</sup> Recognising the ambiguity of both 'religion' and 'theology', this paper proposes to obtain a greater purchase on the problematic situation they together delimit, first, by offering a few precisions on 'religion' as its meaning developed through history to reach its generic consensus in late modernity; and then, by exploring how the scientific study of religion, so understood, came to engage one of the arguments of modern theology: the existence or non-existence of God.

In a remarkable review of the scientific study of religion over a fifty-year period, Mircea Eliade provides a benchmark for this project by selecting 1912 as a date of particular consequence.<sup>3</sup> That year, five stars rose in the firmament. Émile Durkheim published his *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. Sigmund Freud 'was correcting the proofs of *Totem und Tabu*, to be issued in book form the following year', and Carl Jung was publishing his

<sup>1</sup> See Richard P. McKeon, 'Creativity, and the Commonplace', in Mark Backman, ed., *Rhetoric: Essays in Invention and Discovery* (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1987), pp. 25–36. For commonplaces as linguistic variables, see Aristotle, *Topics*, 1.13–18, 105a20–108a36; *Rhetoric* 1.2.1358a10–35; 2.23.1398a27–8.

<sup>2</sup> See John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), pp. 105–8.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, 'The History of Religions in Retrospect: 1912 and After', in *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 12–36.

*Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*. Raffaele Pettazoni's first monograph, *La religione primitiva in Sardegna*, appeared that same year, and Wilhelm Schmidt completed the first of the twelve volumes in his monumental study *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*.

In these five works, four very different methodologies advanced towards greater academic acceptance and influential presence in the scientific study of religion: the sociological, the psychological, the ethnological and the historical. Eliade paints all this in broad brush strokes, depicting the intrinsic value and perduring authority of each of his chosen authors. What he does not examine or evaluate, however, forms the interest of this essay. For these seminal and even paradigmatic studies from the early twentieth century bore witness, in all of their diversity of methods, to an agreement and a controversy about religion: an agreement about the genus that 'religion' had become over the centuries, and a controversy over the collateral that religion so understood would offer to belief and unbelief.

#### RELIGION: FROM VIRTUE TO CATEGORY OF 'THINGS'<sup>4</sup>

To chart something of the lengthy journey by which 'religion' reached its generic and accepted understanding by 1912, this essay proposes – as they do on the Mississippi – to take three soundings. It will drop a plumb line into the medieval controversies of Thomas Aquinas; then, gauge the modification of that tradition in the heady days of Baroque scholasticism; and finally allow Eliade's Five to exemplify the 'religion' secured by late modernity. Such discrete measurements might supplement, rather than repeat, the magisterial studies of such scholars as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Peter Harrison.

For Thomas Aquinas, '*religio*' – irrespective of how one comes down on its etymology – 'properly denotes or implies a relationship to God (*proprie importat ordinem ad Deum*)'.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, it designates a habit or a virtue by which one gives God what is due to God, and in this way lives 'in an appropriate relationship with God'.<sup>6</sup> But since it is impossible to render to God all that is owed to the divine goodness, religion always limps. Religion is like justice in that it renders to another what is his or her due. Because of its inherent inadequacy, however, it does not simply identify

<sup>4</sup> For the history of 'religion', see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 15–50.

<sup>5</sup> *Summa theologiae* 2-2.81.1.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-2.81.2.

with justice, but is a virtue joined to justice, i.e., a potential part of justice.<sup>7</sup> God enters into the constitution of religion not as its direct object, not that to which it immediately attends, but as the end or purpose of what *religio* does properly attend to, i.e., any human action or thing that embodies the worship and service of God. Such practices could be external activities like public adoration or sacrifice or vowing or, more importantly and primarily, internal actions such as devotion and prayer.<sup>8</sup> These individual or social actions and cultic units are not religion; they are the acts and objects of religion. They look to God; religion looks to them. Thus *religio* is a moral rather than a theological virtue, taking such human acts and practices as its direct object.<sup>9</sup>

For this reason, unlike the use of this term in the English Enlightenment, religion could never substitute in Aquinas for faith, though to be 'true religion' it had to be grounded on true faith.<sup>10</sup> But religion was comprehensive; it could command the acts of all the virtues and human activities insofar as they were directed to the service and honour of God.<sup>11</sup> William T. Cavanaugh narrows the range and acts of religion considerably by maintaining that *religio* for St Thomas 'presupposes a context of ecclesial practices which are both communal and particular to the Christian Church'. It certainly includes these practices, but there is no justification for limiting *religio* in this fashion. *Religio* can command a single and private act of worship or service as well as a communal one. Cavanaugh further and needlessly insists that 'religion refers specifically to the liturgical practices of the Church'.<sup>12</sup> Again these are certainly included in Aquinas's *religio*,

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2-2.80.prol and art. 1; 81.5.ad 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2-2.81.1.ad 1; 81.4. ad 4; 81.7: 'Mens autem humana indiget ad hoc quod conjungatur Deo, sensibilibus manuductione . . . Et ideo in divino cultu necesse est aliquibus corporalibus uti, ut eis quasi signis quibusdam mens hominis excitetur ad spirituales actus quibus Deo conjungitur. Et ideo religio habet quidem interiores actus *quasi principales et per se ad religionem pertinentes*, exteriores vero actus quasi secundarios et ad interiores actus ordinatos.' (Emphasis added.)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2-2.81.5. See *In Boeth. De Trinitate* 3.2: 'Ipsa tamen religio non est virtus theologica: habet enim pro materia quasi omnes actus, ut fidei, vel virtutis alterius, quos Deo tamquam debitos offert; sed Deum habet pro fine. Colere enim Deum est huiusmodi actus ut Deo debitos offerre.'

<sup>10</sup> Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 61ff. See *In Boeth. De Trinitate* 3.2: '...actus fidei pertinet quidem materialiter ad religionem, sicut et aliarum virtutum, et magis in quantum fidei actus est primus motus mentis in Deum; sed formaliter a religione distinguitur, utpote aliam rationem objecti considerans. Convenit etiam fides cum religione praeter hoc, in quantum fides est religionis causa et principium. Non enim aliquis eligeret cultum Deo exhibere, nisi fide teneret Deum esse creatorem, gubernatorem et remuneratorem humanorum actuum.'

<sup>11</sup> *Summa theologiae* 2-2.186.1.ad 2; 81.1.ad 1. See *In Boeth. De Trinitate* 3.2: 'Sic ergo omnes actus quibus se homo subicit Deo, sive sint mentis, sive corporis ad religionem pertinent.' And even further: 'et sic diligenter consideranti apparet omnem actum bonum ad religionem pertinere.'

<sup>12</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, 'The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State', *Modern Theology* 11/4 (October 1995), pp. 403-4. For the sweeping character of Aquinas's understanding of *religio*, see

but by no means exhaustive of it. Aquinas, relying explicitly upon Cicero, is far more generous in the inclusion he gives to *religio*. It can be pagan or Christian, private or social, as long as it directs one to the service and reverence of God.

By the same act, a human being both serves and worships God. For worship looks to the excellence of God, to which reverence is due. Service, however, looks to the subjection of the human person, who by reason of his condition is obliged to give reverence to God. To these two acts belong all the acts that are attributed to religion, because through all of them the human being acknowledges the divine excellence and his subjection to God, either by offering something to God or also by accepting something divine.<sup>13</sup>

This is far more sweeping than Christian liturgical practices and specific symbols and beliefs and is not constrained into the public/private distinction. *Religio* looks to all of the acts by which God is served and worshipped as '*principium creationis et gubernationis rerum*', whether Christian or not.<sup>14</sup>

For Aquinas, *pace* Wilfred Cantwell Smith, this virtue constituted the fundamental meaning of *religio* – a good habit, not 'an activity of the soul' and not just a 'prompting', but a developed capacity and inclination.<sup>15</sup> What is astonishing to record is the close conjunction that Aquinas draws between *religio* and *sanctitas* – in light of the role that 'the sacred' will play later in the works of Durkheim and Eliade. *Sanctitas* and *religio* differ not in essence but only in their grammar, as one might here translate *ratione*. *Religio* (*dicitur*) is said to look to all of the acts by which God is served and worshipped as '*principium creationis et gubernationis rerum*' whether Christian or not, while sanctity (*dicitur*) bespeaks not only divine worship but 'the work of all of the virtues or all good works by which the human person disposes herself for divine worship.'<sup>16</sup>

It is here that institution entered into the ambit of Thomistic '*religio*.' Those who dedicate their entire lives to this divine service are called *religiosi*, and their groupings and communities became 'religious orders' or

2-2.81.4. ad 2: 'Omnia, secundum quod in gloriam Dei fiunt, pertinent ad religionem, non quasi ad elicentem sed quasi ad imperantem; illa autem pertinent ad religionem elicentem quae secundum rationem sua speciei pertinent ad reverentiam Dei.'

<sup>13</sup> *Summa theologiae* 2-2.81.3.ad 2: 'Eodem actu homo servit Deo et colit ipsum; nam cultus respicit Dei excellentiam, cui reverentia debetur; servitus autem respicit subjectionem hominis, qui ex sua conditione obligatur ad exhibendam reverentiam Deo. Et ad haec duo pertinent omnes actus qui religioni attribuuntur, quia per omnes homo protestatur divinam excellentiam et subjectionem sui ad Deum, vel exhibendo aliquid ei, vel etiam assumendo aliquid divinum.'

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-2.81.3.

<sup>15</sup> See Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 32. See *In Boeth. De Trinitate* 3.2: 'religio est specialis virtus, in actibus omnium virtutem specialem rationem objecti considerans, scilicet Deo debitum.'

<sup>16</sup> *Summa theologiae* 2-2.81.3.

'religions'.<sup>17</sup> 'Religion' not only denoted a virtue, but also the 'status' of those whose vows were specified by that virtue.

In the thirteenth century, *religio* combined into a phrase that bespoke an Augustinian rather than a Ciceronian heritage. At least sixty-eight times, Aquinas, following a lead taken from Augustine, joined *christiana* with *religio*. Indeed, he made the avowed purpose of the *Summa theologiae* 'to treat those things that pertain to Christian *religio* in the manner that would be appropriate to the instruction of beginners'.<sup>18</sup> But what was meant by this *christiana religio* was not the institution and the set of characteristic beliefs, symbols, or ceremonial practices of the Church, as it is so often interpreted, but rather something much closer to what one would today call Christian piety or devotion. Aquinas, of course, specified 'piety' quite differently, but *religio* remained a virtue that would govern and be expressed in practices and devotions. For Aquinas, these latter were not religion, either severally or collectively; they were the objects of religion. With such an understanding, it could make perfect sense to assert that 'the highest reaches of Christian religion consist in mercy in so far as one is speaking of exterior works; but the interior affection of charity, whereby we are united with God, takes precedence over love and mercy towards our neighbor'.<sup>19</sup> Aquinas never gives any indication that Christianity is one institutional religion out of many, that religion was a genus specified into various communities of different beliefs, practices and traditions. In fact he never groups *religio* with other traditions such as the Jewish, Muslim or pagan.

In this understanding of 'religion', John Calvin and Huldreich Zwingli seem much closer to Aquinas. When Zwingli titled his book, *De vera et falsa religione commentarius*, he was not distinguishing between two communities with their characteristic and divergent beliefs, symbols and practices. He differentiated, as had Lactantius before him, between two different attitudes towards worship.<sup>20</sup> True religion is that piety or reverence that emerges from the comprehensive entrustment of oneself to the true God in faith; false religion occurs when this reverence is given to anything other than God.<sup>21</sup> When John Calvin published *Christianae religionis institutio* in 1536, he was writing not about 'the' Christian religion – one denomination

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2.81.1.ad 5 and 2-2.186.1.ad 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Prologue: '... ea quae ad Christianam religionem pertinent eo modo tradere secundum quod congruit ad eruditionem incipientium.'

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 2-2.30.4.ad 2: '... summa religionis Christianae in misericordia consistit quantum ad exteriora opera, interior tamen affectio caritatis, qua conjungimur deo, praeponderat et dilectioni et misericordiae in proximos.'

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, pp. 27–8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 35–6, 224 n. 83, 84. For the meaning of *vera religio* in Aquinas, see 2-2.81.3.sc.

among many other religious bodies – but about Christian piety. It was not until the nineteenth century that translations placed a definite article before the adjective ‘Christian’ and brought John Calvin into the more contemporary understanding of ‘religion’, one that he had never actually shared.<sup>22</sup>

This basic understanding of ‘religion’ allowed Schleiermacher to move consistently from a defence of religion as the intuition and feeling of the infinite in his youthful *Über der Religion* to the *Glaubenslehre* in which the foundational concept is piety (*Frömmigkeit*) or the feeling of absolute dependence. The intuition and feeling of the first identified with the piety of the second, and he was at pains to advance this understanding against the false attribution of religion to external forms, symbols and propositional beliefs. Kant equated his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* with a fundamental and habitual ethical orientation towards duty.

One can register the beginnings of a radical change in *religio*, however, by taking a second sounding, this time among theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and specifically as it was bodied forth in the massively influential textbooks of Francisco Suarez. *De virtute et statu religionis* (1608–9) continued much of the Thomistic tradition, with *religio* a moral virtue, realised in the vowed ‘religious’ state and sometimes modified by *christiana* to indicate the fundamental habit of Christian worship and service of God founded upon Christian faith.<sup>23</sup> But here one can discover also the subtle beginnings of what will become a sea change. For Suarez contended that the term *religio* – like ‘*fides*’ and ‘*votum*’ – was legitimately and ‘customarily applied (*tribui solere*) not only to internal affect, but also to the *external actions* and, indeed, to the *things (rebus)* by which God was worshipped as also to the *doctrina* that teaches such worship or ceremony’.<sup>24</sup> Religion in this sense is no longer simply a virtue; it is also both things such as external ritual and ceremonial objects and the teachings and the beliefs that instruct about their appropriate use. Scripture is cited for the legitimacy

<sup>22</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith has it exactly right: ‘To the author and those who first read it the title of Zwingli’s book meant, “An essay on genuine and spurious piety”; and Calvin’s, something like “Grounding in Christian piety”’ (*Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 37).

<sup>23</sup> Francisco Suarez, S.J., ‘Tractatus primus: De natura et essentia virtutis religionis’, in *Opus de virtute et statu religionis*, in *Opera omnia*, editio nova, vol. XIII (Paris: Louis Vivès, 1859), 3–76. The first two volumes, dealing with the virtue of religion, and XIV of the *Opera omnia*, were published by 1609, while the second two volumes were published posthumously at Lyons in 1623 and 1625. See Joseph de Guibert, S.J., *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice: A Historical Study*, trans. William J. Young, S.J. (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1972), p. 268.

<sup>24</sup> Suarez, ‘De natura et essentia virtutis religionis’, 8a: ‘... advertere oportet nomen religionis non solum interno affectui, sed etiam exterioribus actionibus, imo et rebus quibus Deus colitur, tribui solere, atque etiam doctrinae quae talem cultum vel caeremoniam docet.’

of this extension as is Clement of Alexandria ('*religio est actio quae Deum sequitur*'), but not Aquinas or the medieval doctors.

Thus, Suarez subsumes what Aquinas had called the acts or objects of religion into religion itself, and in doing so, he opens up *religio* to the cultural and anthropological meanings and inquiries that will constitute its character in modernity. He enters this extension of the meaning of *religio* as one already in common usage. Religion's objects have come to constitute religion. Harrison would trace to the English Enlightenment the emergence of *religio* as denoting the externals of worship and practice. But this attribution should go back farther, at least to the major influence that mediated scholasticism to modern philosophy, Francisco Suarez, 'Doctor Eximius'.<sup>25</sup> Because of his continuous presence within the textbook tradition, Suarez exercised a profound influence on subsequent centuries.

One must note also the virtually contemporary *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* (1590) by the contentious polymath José de Acosta. Acosta took the understanding of *religio* as 'the belief system that results in ceremonial behavior', as 'that which is used (*que usan*) in their rites' by the American indigenous peoples. It was also around this period that the credal content of religion could be somewhat separated from ceremonies, and so it was emphasised that 'religion' could substitute for 'faith' and become a genus – as Jonathan Z. Smith so helpfully traces. Now religion as a generic system of beliefs and practices could break down into the constituent species of 'Christianity, Mohametanism, Judaism and Idolatry'. The palm for advancing into popular reading the plural of 'religion' in this sense, i.e., for 'religions', seems to go to the redoubtable Samuel Purchas with the 1613 appearance of the first volume of *Purchas His Pilgrimage; or, Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages and Places Discovered from the Creation unto this Present* . . . In a year, following hard on its heels was Edward Brerewood's *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chiefe Parts of the World* (1614).<sup>26</sup> Here, we are much closer to modernity.

<sup>25</sup> Armand A. Maurer, C.S.B., *Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 356–7. Maurer cites Suarez's presence in the education of Descartes and among the philosophical influences on Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Christian Wolff.

<sup>26</sup> See Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious', in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 271–2. But the older usage did not die. Even when Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* or the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* took up 'religion', they bespoke the reverence that was due to God or the reasonable service of God. This was to continue in some variation the differentiation that obtained since the Middle Ages between the habit of religion and the objects – ceremonials, adoration, cult, and all of the virtues that *religio* could comprehensively command 'insofar as they were directed to the service and honor of God' (*Summa theologiae* 2-2.186.1.ad 2; 81.1.ad 1.).



A third sounding can be made as we come back to Eliade's *annus mirabilis*. Durkheim and Freud, Pettazoni, Jung and Schmidt are not talking about a particular human virtue or its characteristic functions. Religion was not a virtue; it had become 'things' – many of which it used to govern – but 'things' in the sense of discrete units such as sacrifice and vows, moral practices and rituals and commitments, and also myths, beliefs and symbols indicative of or common to a particular community. Religion was a congeries of such 'things', marked by the sacred or by taboo or by the fearful. One religious system of such beliefs and practices could and should be distinguished from another; its identity required it. And the conjoined units owned as sacred or interdicting were to be distinguished from another realm of 'things', that of the profane. Like 'science' and 'art', 'religion' changed from a quality of the human being or of a community to a territory of particular things, external things that could be studied by sciences such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and ethnology to determine a specific culture or cast of human character.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith describes – will subsequently question – this understanding of religion in its new form:

It is customary nowadays to hold that there is in human life and society something distinctive called 'religion'; and that this phenomenon is found on earth at present in a variety of minor forms, chiefly among outlying or eccentric peoples, and in a half-dozen or so major forms. Each of these major forms is also called 'a religion', and each one has a name: Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and so on.<sup>27</sup>

When one spoke of 'the Christian religion', similarity of phrase hid the profound difference between the sense carried by 'religion' in the nineteenth century and the understanding it bore for Aquinas and Calvin, Zwingli and even Suarez. Eliade's five authors might disagree on how religion should be further specified or what was worshipped, but they would agree that they were not dealing with human qualities, but with an aggregation of particular units.

Thus, in Durkheim's logistical reading, 'although religion is a whole composed of parts – a more or less complex system of myths, dogmas, rites, and ceremonies – they operate as if it formed a kind of indivisible entity'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 33. 'At the foundation of all systems of belief and all cults, there must necessarily be a certain number of fundamental representations and a mode of ritual conduct that, despite the diversity of forms that the one and the other may have taken on, have the same objective meaning everywhere, and everywhere fulfill the same functions. It is these enduring elements that constitute what is eternal and human in religion. They are the whole objective content of the idea that is expressed when religion in general is spoken of.' *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Durkheim's world bifurcates into the sacred and profane, and 'when a certain number of sacred things have relations of coordination and subordination with one another, so as to form a system that had a certain coherence and does not belong to any other system of the same sort, then the beliefs and the rites, taken together constitute a religion'.<sup>29</sup> Thus it was that 'religious phenomena fall into two basic categories: belief and rites. The first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are particular modes of action. Between all of these two categories of phenomena lies all that separates thinking from doing'.<sup>30</sup> What makes Buddhism a religion, Durkheim argued, is that 'in the absence of gods, it accepts the existence of *sacred things*, namely the four Noble Truths and the practices that are derived from them'.<sup>31</sup>

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud lays out two basic components of religion, what will emerge in other works as compulsive practices whose motivations are hidden and deeply treasured beliefs about powerful realities whose justifications are equally unconscious.<sup>32</sup> The most primitive form of these compulsive practices lay with taboo and exogamy, while the original focus of fear and reverence was the totem.<sup>33</sup> For Raffaele Pettazzoni, religion was itself one component within the more general category of culture. 'Religion is historically a form of culture and cannot be understood save in the framework of that particular culture of which it is a part, and in organic association with its other forms, such as art, myth, poetry, philosophy, economic, social, and political structure'.<sup>34</sup> Each of these denoted a set of organically interrelated things. As one spoke of Greek art or poetry constituted by their own proper objects, so one could speak of Greek religion in contrast with other religions and of religion in general in contrast with the other territories of art, myth, poetry and philosophy.

With almost scholastic precision, Wilhelm Schmidt defined religion both as beliefs and objects. 'Subjectively, it [religion] is the knowledge and consciousness of dependence upon one or more transcendental, personal

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.   <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.   <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35 (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey, with a biographical introduction by Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), pp. 36–7, 109–10; 97ff.

<sup>33</sup> 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices' (1907) had already charted the parallels between religious practices and obsessive neurosis, while *The Future of an Illusion* would point up the analogies between religious ideas and Meyert's amentia, 'a state of acute hallucinatory confusion'. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), pp. 55–6, cf. esp.n. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Raffaele Pettazzoni, 'Introduction to the History of Greek Religion,' in his *Essays on the History of Religions*, trans. H. J. Rose (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), p. 68. Ugo Bianchi points out that with *La religione primitiva in Sardegna* Pettazzoni indicates his shift from classical archaeology to the history of religions. Ugo Bianchi, 'Pettazzoni, Raffaele (1883–1959)', in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), vol. II, p. 261.

powers, to which man stands in a reciprocal relation. Objectively, it is the sum of the outward actions in which it is expressed and made manifest, as prayer, sacrifice, sacraments, liturgy, ascetic practices, ethical prescriptions, and so on.<sup>35</sup> The insistence upon reciprocal personal relations made it necessary for Schmidt to exclude early Buddhism. Later Buddhism would make the cut because it 'has included in its wide-reaching system innumerable personal deities'.<sup>36</sup> Finally, in *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*, Carl Jung takes for granted that religion is a composite of its own set of things, in contrast with 'things of a wholly other sort than religion'. It is a world of proper religious myths, rituals, hymns, dogmas and symbols, with 'its object, original sin'.<sup>37</sup> These components gave religion its unique concentration and differentiation from the sets of other objects. In fact, part of the contemporary problem lies in a shift from one to the other: 'To the degree that the modern mind is passionately concerned with anything and everything rather than religion, religion and its prime object – original sin – have mostly vanished into the unconscious. That is why, today, nobody believes in either ...'<sup>38</sup> It is religion that presents as religious objects or symbols the transformed contents of the unconscious, transposing and transforming them into religion's own world of objects or images.<sup>39</sup> 'In religion, the regressive reanimation of the father-and-mother imago is organized into a system.'<sup>40</sup>

In this generic constitution of religion as a set of particularly designated units, contrasting with the parallel territories of art or science or even politics, religion became a subset of human culture. One studies religion in order to come to understand something about the character of human beings themselves, something about a particular human culture. Religion has become the cultural evidence for the human. Durkheim spoke for

<sup>35</sup> Wilhelm Schmidt, S.V.D., *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories*, trans. H. J. Rose (New York: Dial Press, 1931), p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* was translated as *Psychology of the Unconscious: A Study of the Transformations and Symbolisms of the Libido*, trans. Beatrice M. Hinkle (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1947), p. 81. For the psychological truth of symbols and myths that are 'in actual truth ... misleading', see p. 262.

<sup>38</sup> C. J. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, Bollingen Series no. 20, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Pantheon, 1956), p. 72. This is a translation of *Symbole der Wandlung* (Zurich: Rascher Verlag, 1952), which is itself a fourth revised edition of *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*. For this citation in the earlier work, see pp. 81–2. Jung continues: 'This disbelief in the devilishness of human nature goes hand in hand with the blank incomprehension of religion and its meaning. The unconscious conversion of instinctual impulses into religious activity is ethically worthless, and often no more than an hysterical outburst.'

<sup>39</sup> Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, p. 59; *Psychology of the Unconscious*, pp. 72–3. See Jung's previous discussion of the writing of Miss Miller and the narrative of the Book of Job.

<sup>40</sup> Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, p. 99. For further projections into dogma, see p. 120.

almost all when he said that this study of religious phenomena in its structures and developments is finally 'to explain a present reality that is near to us and thus capable of affecting our ideas and actions. That reality is man.'<sup>41</sup> That is the reason that Jonathan Z. Smith can say so flatly, "'Religion" is an anthropological not a theological category' and insist that the history of 'religion' prior to the sixteenth century is irrelevant to contemporary usage.<sup>42</sup> Instead of inquiry into what is an appropriate response to the creative action and reality of God, there would be arguments about the cultures that constituted religion and its focus, whether god or gods needed to be involved in religion at all. And this brings this essay to its second question: how did this understanding of 'religion' enter into the atheistic discussion of these last centuries?

#### ATHEISM AND THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION

The proponents of the newly formulated scientific studies of religion, as represented by Eliade's Five, were drawn into the conflict about Christian belief, especially that about the existence of God, as each of the warring sides looked to these studies to supply it with new resources. Max Müller, who coined the title of the 'science of religion', claimed that the studies of the Vedas strengthened his Christianity, while E. B. Tylor believed that these 'scientific inquiries gave support to his personal stance of agnostic religious skepticism'.<sup>43</sup> Already in 1870, Sir John Lubbock (Lord Avebury) had brought out *The Origin of Civilization and the First Condition of Man*, proposing atheism as the initial and most primitive stage of religious belief and supplying this stage as an aboriginal prologue to Auguste Comte's famous triad. Appealing to the religious culture found among primitives, Lubbock found this *Uratheismus* not in an explicit denial of the reality of any god, but in the absence within these earliest cultures of all religion.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 1. Durkheim strongly advances the position that all religions are founded on the reality of the human. 'Even the most bizarre or barbarous rites and the strangest myths translate some human need and some aspect of life, whether social or individual.' *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious', p. 269. These settlements made in the generic notion of religion, as represented by Eliade's five figures, had been secured comfortably by the turn of the century and have had their own pervasive and substantial presence within contemporary theological discourse. One has only to read, for example, the *Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* by the distinguished theologian, Professor George Lindbeck, one of the most influential works in theology to appear in the 1980s, to find religion specified by three different kinds of 'things': propositional statements and beliefs, symbols and feelings, terms and the grammar for their use and practice.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Schmidt, *Origin and Growth of Religion*, pp. 58–9. Lubbock enlarged Comte's triad generously by such additions as fetishism, totemism, shamanism and anthropomorphism.

This was to counter the earlier assertion of major figures from the German Enlightenment, such as Herder and Lessing, that religion constituted a universal constituent of the human spirit, and, more recently, the claim of Christopher Meiners's *Allgemeine Kritische Geschichte der Religion* (1806–7) that 'no people has ever existed without a religion'. Meiners was one of the first modern writers to make such an assertion.<sup>45</sup> By 1912, the lists were drawn. How one analysed religion had come to affect heavily the credibility of theistic convictions. How was this analysis to be done? Religion was no longer a subset of virtue, but of culture, and, as a subset of culture, it was to be studied according to the path mapped out by the exemplary studies of culture. It was to busy itself with origins. Eliade recognised that during the latter half of the nineteenth century:

all Western historiography was obsessed with the quest of *origins* . . . Great scholars wrote about the origin of language, of human societies, of art, of institutions, of the Indo-Aryan races, and so on . . . this search for the origins of human institutions and cultural creations prolongs and completes the naturalist's quest for the origin of species, the biologist's dream of grasping the origin of life, the geologist's and the astronomer's endeavor to understand the origin of the Earth and the Universe.<sup>46</sup>

This focus upon origins was something of a departure from an eighteenth-century past. In his *Natural History of Religion*, for example, David Hume had divided the inquiry into religion between two distinct questions: what are the *foundations in reason* of religion, and what is the *origin* of religion in human nature?<sup>47</sup> The nineteenth century collapsed these questions into one, and the truth about religion was to be found in its origins.

So Durkheim attempted an understanding of contemporary religions by 'tracing historically the manner in which they have gradually taken shape'.<sup>48</sup> Origins would explain present reality. The real is not only the underlying; it is the antecedent, and the primitive was symptomatic of the prehistoric. So to understand religion 'we must begin by going back to its simplest and most primitive form'.<sup>49</sup> Hence Durkheim concentrates upon the elementary forms of religion. The findings here will determine the character of everything else:

<sup>45</sup> See Seymour Cain, 'The Study of Religion: History of Study', in Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* vol. XIV, pp. 65–6. Cain writes that Meiners was one of the first modern writers to make this assertion, see p. 65. Christoph Meiners, *Allgemeine Kritische Geschichte der Religion* (Hanover: Helwing, 1806–7), 2 vols.

<sup>46</sup> Mircea Eliade, 'The Quest for the "Origins" of Religion', in *The Quest*, pp. 37–53.

<sup>47</sup> David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. H. E. Root (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 'Author's Introduction', p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, p. 3.      <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

Although religion is a whole composed of parts – a more or less complex system of myths, dogmas, rites, and ceremonies – they operate as if it formed a kind of indivisible entity. Since a whole can be defined only in relationship to the parts that comprise it, a better method is to try to characterize the *elementary phenomena from which any religion results*, and then characterize the system produced by their union.<sup>50</sup>

The elementary was that from which religion results. Freud also believed – with some reserve – that one could get to the prehistoric by a study of primitives, seeing in them ‘a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own development’.<sup>51</sup> Freud would rely upon studies done on the aborigines of Australia, and, like *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Totem and Taboo* would assert that ‘it is highly doubtful whether any religion, in the shape of a *worship of higher beings*, can be attributed to them’.<sup>52</sup> Both Durkheim and Freud assert the worship of the totem as primordial and seminal of all religion.<sup>53</sup> Durkheim is content to establish this as fact and to recognise its origins as a surrogate for clan and community. Freud pushes beyond these findings of what he called ‘social anthropology’, back to Oedipal longings and the murder of the primal father. For psychoanalysis of the origins has shown that ‘at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father . . . Thus, while the totem may be the *first* form of father-surrogate, the god will be a later one.’<sup>54</sup>

Jung’s *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* also locates the origins of divinity within the projecting human subject: ‘Psychologically understood, the divinity is nothing else than a projected complex of representations which is accentuated in feeling according to the degree of religiousness of the individual, so God is to be considered as the representative of a certain sum of energy (libido).’<sup>55</sup> At this stage of the development of Jung’s psychological inquiries, God is the construction of the libido, fixed upon

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 33–4 (emphasis added). This determines the decision of Durkheim to focus upon primitive religions, specifically those of Australia, ‘because the facts are simpler, the relations between them are more apparent’.

<sup>51</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 3. One must, however, recognise that at least theoretically Freud was aware that ‘it is never possible to decide without hesitation how far their present-day conditions and opinions preserve the primaevial past.’ Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 4 (emphasis added).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 126. Freud accepts as his point of departure the statement of W. Wundt: ‘at some time totemic culture everywhere paved the way for a more advanced civilization, and, thus, that it represents a transitional stage between the age of primitive men and the era of heroes and gods.’

<sup>54</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, pp. 182–3.

<sup>55</sup> Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, p. 71. ‘This energy, therefore, appears projected (metaphysically) because it works from the unconscious outwards, when it is dislodged from there, as psychoanalysis shows.’

the mother rather than the father.<sup>56</sup> This search for origins, thus, as in Freud or Durkheim or Jung, could counter with rival theories of origins any claimed stability of belief in what the Christian could recognise as God.

Or it could constitute a support. The affirmation of the existence of God could also search for its evidences in the practices, symbols and beliefs that make up the texture of 'religion'. Wilhelm Schmidt's *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* took up Andrew Lang's theory of high gods, i.e., of supreme beings that predated in every primitive culture both animism and totemism:

Comparing the primitive cultures with the later ones we may lay down the general principle that in none of the latter is the Supreme Being to be found in so clear, so definite, vivid and direct a form as among the peoples belonging to the former [i.e., to primitive cultures] . . . This Supreme Being is to be found among all the peoples of the primitive culture, not indeed everywhere in the same form or the same vigor, but still everywhere prominent enough to make his dominant position indubitable.<sup>57</sup>

Thus an *Urmonotheismus* lies at the origins of all subsequent variations of the object of religion, a supreme being that is no more difficult for the primitive mind to infer than for it to recognise in anything made the necessity for a maker. Monotheism is at the origins, not the end, of human development. But against this primitive monotheism, Pettazoni was in 'repeated polemics' and saw monotheism emerge as a 'revolution against polytheism'.<sup>58</sup> Thus he identified the sky-god (Rangi) as primordial or superior in the Maori pantheon, one who stands behind and is ultimately sublimated and raised to a higher plane as Io, the uncreated beginning of all things.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 474. 'We have learned in the course of this investigation that the part of the libido which erects religious structures is in the last analysis fixed on the mother, and really represents that tie through which we are permanently connected with our origin . . . As we have seen, this libido conceals itself in countless and very heterogeneous symbols.' This reading becomes clearer when one considers the centrality that Jung, at this stage, gave to incest desires and fantasies. In women this desire shows itself in the Father-Imago, 'for the idea of the masculine creative deity is a derivation, analytically and historically psychologic of the Father-Imago and aims, above all, to replace the discarded infantile father transference in such a way that for the individual the passing from the narrow circle of the family into the wider circle of human society may be simpler or made easy.' Ibid., pp. 55-6.

<sup>57</sup> Schmidt, *Origin and Growth of Religion*, p. 257.

<sup>58</sup> Bianchi, 'Pettazzoni, Raffaele', vol. II, p. 262.

<sup>59</sup> Raffaele Pettazzoni, 'Io and Rangi', in *Essays on the History of Religions*, trans. H. J. Rose (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), p. 42: 'It appears then that so lofty an attribute as omniscience also proves to be deeply rooted in the sky-natured substance of the Maori Supreme Being. On the whole it is Rangi the Sky who stands at the back of Io the Supreme Being. Lofty though the idea of Io is both in religion and speculation, its foundations lie in the nature worship of a sky-god. Io is in theory the universal cosmic principle, and as such the creator of Rangi and Papa and of the gods in the Maori pantheon. But in the last analysis Io is Rangi himself sublimated and raised to a higher plane. This substantial identity is reflected, as above shown, not only in belief, but, what is more important, in ritual and religion.' For Io as the 'uncreated beginning of all things', see p. 37.

Thus, the quest for origins awakened a question that had hitherto been unknown in the West: how necessary was 'God' or some such figure for what had come to be called 'religion'? If Western thought had disposed of the medieval virtue of religion, could one not also dispose of what had been its purpose? Both E. B. Tylor and George Frazer had found religion without god. Religion, for Tylor, was 'belief in spiritual beings', and ancient peoples reasoned to these individual spirits within each thing. Gradually 'religion' developed from animism to the gods of polytheism. Frazer began with the personal and impersonal forces conjured by magic and took from William Robertson Smith the worship of the totem as the original foundation of all religion. Religion emerged out of magic as the human means of control moved from laws of contact and imitation to pleading and vows offered to win over the supreme spirits or gods.<sup>60</sup> Spirits, forces, totems or gods, supreme god – the question which the inquiry into origins posed to the religious believer was far more comprehensive: did religion with its idea of god arise out of the self-revelation of god or did god arise as a cultural creation of human beings – a creation one could trace in the evolutionary progress of the idea? The pedigree of the term and the primordial character of its referent were called upon to settle the issue of the truth of fundamental theological claims. What was at the beginning became definitive.

Why? Two immediate reasons suggest themselves to explain why the origins and character of the gods told directly upon the arguments for the existence of God: the argument from universal consent and the argument from the primordial revelation described in Genesis.

#### *Universal consent*

Design in the physical universe had furnished the principal evidence for the affirmation of the existence of God by thinking men in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an affirmation grounded on discoveries advanced by the greatest scientific minds of this enlightened period such as Newton and Boyle and incorporated into the pervasive physico-theologies to which all the sciences were expected to contribute. In the nineteenth century, however, this justification of religious belief was yielding to three factors: the growing autonomy of the physical sciences as insisted upon by such as Pierre Simon de Laplace; the reserve about any extension of theoretical knowledge beyond objects of possible experience with David Hume and Immanuel Kant; and – most influentially – the evolutionary etiology of what had

<sup>60</sup> Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, pp. 36–7.



been taken as contrived design. The patterns in nature could no longer furnish in so unchallenged a fashion the corroboration and even the warrant for grounded religious belief. Charles Darwin, as paradigmatic a figure in the late nineteenth century as Isaac Newton had been in the eighteenth, recognised that a nail had been driven into a coffin: 'The old argument from design in Nature as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails now that the law of natural selection has been discovered.'<sup>61</sup>

Foundational religious reflection in the West shifted from nature to human nature, from the patterns found in one to the exigencies demanded by the other. Now God was not to explain design, but to make the ethical enterprise possible or human history intelligible. Otherwise there was only absurdity, mindless and ungrounded affirmations. To affirm the reality of God became, in Kant's formulation, a 'subjective necessity', a postulate whose denial would leave human beings with categorical commands whose attainment could only be haphazard and random. But the great classical atheists of the nineteenth century such as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, took up the argument precisely at this point, at the philosophical appeals to human nature as warrant for the affirmation of the existence of God. The case was read exactly in reverse. Not only did humanity not need God for the coherence of its development, but the progress of the human entailed the denial of God in any recognisable reading of that term. The corruption of the one became the necessary condition for the generation of the other. The ethical or social advance of humanity demanded that it claim for human beings themselves the excellence that they had historically projected onto an imaginary subject.

At the same time, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, there was another shift in the focus of fundamental thinking. Major thinkers in greater numbers were looking for the foundations of all warranted assertions not so much in a prior analysis of human cognition or epistemologies or phenomenologies of spirit – a nineteenth-century enterprise that reaches for its beginning back to John Locke. Their search increasingly was turning to language and action as fundamental, to various forms of semantics and pragmatics and existentialisms that found these to be 'the house of being'. Generically, this constituted a turn to human experience in its various forms of expression as foundational, as that expression is embodied in words or in deeds. Semantics and pragmatics were increasingly seen as prior and fundamental to analyses of human consciousness and, even more, of the nature of things.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin and Selected Letters*, ed. Francis Darwin (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), p. 63.

As John Locke had prophetically anticipated the shift of Western foundational thinking to epistemologies, so Giovanni Battista Vico had anticipated the massive shifts that would occur in the late nineteenth century from concerns about cognition as foundational to language and action. For Vico insisted that human beings can adequately know – have *scienza* about – not what confronts them in nature or in consciousness, but only what they have made.<sup>62</sup> Culture, then, becomes all-important – whether literary and artistic products or social and religious practices and institutions.

Thus the semantic and pragmatic turn in foundational thinking was somewhat mirrored in theological reflection by a turn towards the scientific study of religion. This turn did not counter, but transposed, the concern of the previous period for warrant either to assert or to deny the reality of a transcendent, even Christian, God.

As the nineteenth century advanced, then, the conviction was declining that either contrived designs within nature or the exigencies of human nature could ground a reasonable assertion of the reality of God. But there was still another ‘topic’ from which arguments for the existence of God had classically derived strength and credibility since the dawn of civilisation: the argument from the universal consent of humankind. Belief in the divine had been recognised as always and universally a part of human convictions, and this had been philosophically recognised as telling from the time of Plato’s *Laws*<sup>63</sup> or Aristotle’s *De Caelo*.<sup>64</sup> Like the corresponding

<sup>62</sup> Gianbattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968). In this wider sense, *scienza nuova* embraces both philosophy and philology. See ‘Introduction’, F3. The philologists include grammarians, historians, and critics ‘who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and the deeds of peoples,’ Book I, #138–40.

<sup>63</sup> Plato, *The Laws* 10.886a–888d. In Plato’s *Laws*, the Athenian argues that the existence of the divine is ‘the most certain of all realities’, advancing stories and prayers and sacrifices as evidence against those whose ‘want of faith in the stories heard so often in earliest infancy, while still at the breast, from their mothers and nurses – stories, you may say, crooned over them, in sport and in earnest, like spells – and heard again in prayers offered over sacrifices in conjunction with the spectacle which gives such intense delight to the eye and ear of children, as it is enacted at a sacrifice, the spectacle of our parents addressing their god, which assured belief in their existence, in earnest prayer and supplication for themselves and their children. Then again, at rising and setting of the sun and moon, they have heard and seen the universal prostrations and devotions of mankind, Greek and non-Greek alike, in all the various circumstances of evil fortune and good, with their implication that gods are no fictions, but the most certain of realities and their being beyond the remotest shadow of doubt.’

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, *De Caelo* 1.3.270b5–8. In the problematic method of Aristotle, the same consensus, found in the usages of religion, served to confirm astronomical theories about the primary body: ‘Our theory seems to confirm experience and to be confirmed by it. For all human beings have some conception of the nature of the gods, and all who believe in the existence of gods at all, whether barbarian or Greek, agree in allotting the highest place to the deity, surely because they suppose that immortal is linked with immortal and regard any other supposition as inconceivable.’

evidence from nature and human nature, universal consent would vary thematically as it ran through two thousand years of intellectual history in the West.<sup>65</sup>

Charles Darwin maintained that by the middle of the nineteenth century, with the demise of design and morality as bases of theistic appeal, universal consensus was the last argument left. 'At the present day, the most usual argument for the existence of an intelligent God is drawn from the deep inward conviction and feelings which are experienced by most persons.' Darwin could not share these feelings. 'It may be truly said that I am like a man who has become colour-blind, and the universal belief by men of the existence of redness makes my present loss of perception of not the least value as evidence.' The issue of divine existence is joined at 'universal belief', and Darwin is prophetic in assessing the damage that the study of religion will work. 'This argument would be a valid one if *all men of all races had the same inward convictions of the existence of* one God; but we know that this is very far from being the case.'<sup>66</sup> That is why both sides of this controversy looked to the emerging scientific study of religion for resources and confirmation. Was the consensus universal and sempiternal or was it at least primitive and prehistoric?

### *Fundamental revelation*

There was a second reason and a more theological one why the scientific study of religion figured critically in the rhetoric for and against atheism. Genesis had taught that a primordial self-revelation of God took place with the creation of humanity, a revelation believed by Christians to be brought to its fullness finally in Jesus Christ. The various denominations of Christian faith claimed to be responses to that revelation. Now, just as contemporary physicists expect to find now in the cosmos the residual radiation that bespeaks the 'big bang' of some sixteen billion years ago, so the credibility of the scriptures was to be confirmed or denied

<sup>65</sup> The argument from universal consent will vary according to the parameters offered by a particular philosophy, but even when the doctrines and practices of the popular cults were dismissed as absurd by, for example, the Epicureans, this school would still assert that belief in the gods has not been established by authority, custom or law, but rests on the unanimous and abiding consensus of humankind. The Epicureans traced this universal belief to an internal, self-justifying *prolepsis*, while the Stoics, acknowledging its cogency and connecting it with the ritual practices of divination and the public recognition of epiphanies, credited its origins to the self-manifestation of the internal rationality of the universe. Even the New Academy accepted universal consensus as a tradition within the Roman Republic. Again, religion bore to consciousness the universality of belief in the divine, and this had stood as evidence for the affirmation of God for two millennia. For these divergent understandings of universal consensus, see Michael J. Buckley, S. J., *Motion and Motion's God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), Part II, pp. 89–156.

<sup>66</sup> Darwin, *Autobiography*, p. 65 (emphasis added).

by what one discovered in religion's beginnings. Not that one necessarily expected to uncover primordial revelation, but at least to come upon the effects of that revelation in the history of religions. Joseph J. Baierl, the American translator of Wilhelm Schmidt, was typical of the apologists of that time:

The apologist's task is, indeed, a manifold one: to present the essence, scope, and content of primitive revelation; to show, in the light of prehistory, anthropology, and ethnology, that the earliest known men were capable of receiving such a revelation; to point out how many branches of natural science actually confirm its historicity; and, finally, to reconstruct its fate after men's fall and dispersion.

And what must Baierl's reconstruction expect to prove?

Even though the light of revelation dimmed as the race grew, and even though the darkness of paganism practically extinguished it, yet it continued to glow among those peoples who remained at the most primitive levels of culture; until at last it was entrusted to the keeping of God's chosen people, Israel, and thus became man's common heritage once more.<sup>67</sup>

In a very different vein, Pettazzoni finds Schmidt's *Urmonotheismus* 'a return, by a different way, to the old position of the doctrine of revelation'.<sup>68</sup> So the scientific study of religion, whether as resource or as threat, was inescapably drawn into the controversies about the existence of God. If the inquiry into primordial or primitive religions disclosed no presence of an *Urmonotheismus*, not only did the argument from universal consent fail, but the Judeo-Christian affirmation of a primordial revelation was read as unsustainable.

Not only were Eliade's Five inducted into these partisan conflicts, they were marked by the colours under which they enlisted. Their religious affiliations came to accredit or discredit their study of religions. Eliade noted this with Wilhelm Schmidt: 'Schmidt, though a very able scholar, was also a Catholic priest, and the scientific world suspected him of apologetic intentions.'<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, Gaston Richard – once the disciple Durkheim thought the best qualified to be his successor – bitterly criticized the Master for the injection of 'dogmatic atheism' into his sociology of religion. Thus:

it becomes all the more necessary to show that where religion exercises the maximum influence on society, as among primitive peoples, it manages entirely without

<sup>67</sup> Joseph J. Baierl, 'Introduction' to his translation of *Primitive Religion* by Wilhelm Schmidt (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1939), p. iv. Actually this work is an amalgam of Schmidt's writings done by the translator, adapted to Baierl's series of apologetic works.

<sup>68</sup> Raffaele Pettazzoni, 'The Formation of Monotheism', in *Essays in the History of Religions*, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> Mircea Eliade, 'The Quest for the "Origins" of Religion', pp. 45–6.

the idea of God. The essay on values gives us the last word on the religious philosophy of Durkheim but it is the task of *Les formes élémentaires* to present the scientific proof.<sup>70</sup>

#### RELIGION AND THEOLOGY: FINAL REFLECTIONS

But no matter how differently the story of origins could have been told, evaluated and employed, I wonder if something far more profound did not get lost in the translation between the Middle Ages' and the contemporary understanding and scientific study of 'religion'. And I wonder if what got lost was 'God' – God as the purpose, and, in this way, the specification of *religio*. Christianity believes that God gave human life not simply itself and things created to enhance it, but God gave Himself. For Aquinas, religion occurred as a virtue within an individual or a community when one apperceived something of this and gave oneself to God in some way, as through vow or sacrifice or prayer. *Religio* thus bespoke God as specifying purpose and took its own shape from what was appropriately rendered to God – so much so that Aquinas could say that the whole purpose of his *Summa theologiae* is to treat those things that pertain to Christian religion.<sup>71</sup>

Much of the scientific study of religion stood religion on its head. It turned the focus of *religio* upon human beings, with the symbols, beliefs, practices indicating stages in their development, and with God or the gods subsumed as yet another indicator of human culture and its evolvment. Religion, as Jonathan Z. Smith insists, became an anthropological category. When God is assessed primarily as one more unit within a congeries of cultural units and criteria, the issue of atheism has already been engaged and settled. The god that is one more thing does not exist. The god that obtains his intrinsic interest and importance because of the light he sheds upon human life does not exist. God is either incomprehensibly absolute in His being and in His goodness and so adored in His self-communication, or God is not at all. It remained only for the inherent contradiction of such a settlement to work itself out dialectically in the explicit negation of what had already been implicitly denied.

But a Christian theologian need not be satisfied that this is the end of the road for theology and the scientific study of religion. Could religion – even understood as this congeries of individual units specified by the

<sup>70</sup> G. Richard, 'Dogmatic Atheism in the Sociology of Religion', in *Durkheim on Religion: a selection of readings with bibliography* by W. S. F. Pickering (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 254, 270–2.

<sup>71</sup> *Summa theologiae* 1. Prologus.

sacred – could religion not also be a productive theological category, i.e., could it not offer subject matter for inquiry that is precisely theological? Could the scientific study of religion disclose something about God, not simply about human culture? If the Christian finds, for example, the classic Pauline signs of the Spirit of God – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – is it not of theological interest to inquire what presence in this religion has fostered so sacred an atmosphere?<sup>72</sup> And cannot the Christ of Christianity – classically the *norma normans non normata* – illumine rather than universally be set in competition with what is discovered in the scientific study of religion? Christian theology might well attend to such a study, to seek not so much data about human culture but quite explicitly what it can learn of God.

*Nostra aetate*, for example, recognised that women and men have perennially questioned the various religions of the world about God, taken up with a haunting search: ‘What is that ultimate and unutterable mystery which engulfs our being, and whence we take our rise, and whither our journey leads us?’ From the dawn of humanity, it maintains, there has emerged ‘a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life’.<sup>73</sup> Do Christian theologians – precisely in their recognition both of the normative character of God’s revelation in Christ and also of the ‘lives of these people with a profound religious sense’ – have nothing to learn about God from the centuries of that experience?

Such theological attention and inquiry could well be extended to the world religions of our own time. Medieval theology could search the newly discovered books of Aristotle and Averroes and use neo-Platonic Dionysius to learn something of God. Is there nothing for us to learn about God from contemporary Islam? If in Hinduism, human beings have for millennia ‘contemplated the divine mystery’, does this contemplation have nothing to say to our theology – not simply to ascetical disciplines, but to what Bonaventure called our apperception of God?

One of the deleterious effects of the study of religions has been to treat these communities and traditions of wisdom and prayer as if they were univocal species of the one genus, ‘religion’, mutually exclusive species among which one must make a choice, territories in competition with one another. But one wonders if we have not become the victims of our

<sup>72</sup> Galatians 5: 22–23.

<sup>73</sup> *Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra aetate)* in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder), #1, p. 661.

own language, and if even the word 'religion' is inappropriate to denote the realities or communities they name – so very different in their character as in their claims. It is not at all evident that – with appropriate modifications but without any of the artificial harmonies that bespeak a soft syncretism – one could not participate fully both in a Catholic and in a Quaker community, nor even confess oneself a Christian who has also assimilated much of the teachings of early Buddhism. The contemporary use of the word 'religion' would seem to forestall such an integration, but the early Church was able to assimilate great elements out of Neo-Platonism, Stoicism and Neo-Pythagoreanism. We call these ancient traditions schools of philosophy, but I wonder whether, if we came upon them today, afresh, we would not call them religions, some even quasi-religious orders.

The word, 'religion' as we use it, may not be very helpful, introducing commonalities and disjunctions that may be unwarranted. Nevertheless, we are at present stuck with the term 'world religions'. *Nostra aetate* maintained that 'often' – I repeat the word, often – 'they reflect a ray of that Truth that enlightens all human beings'.<sup>74</sup> If that is the case, it is an unrealised task for contemporary theology – keeping the normativity of God's revelation in Christ – to search the 'world religions' for what they can tell us about God. Such a carefully disciplined inquiry should amplify or deepen rather than necessarily contradict what one has learned of God from Christianity. There is no time now to argue and nuance this suggestion with the distinctions it obviously cries for, but only to propose that the scientific study of religion could well call the theological enterprise to an inquiry quite different from that which obtained in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For, to allow the final word to Nicholas Lash: 'Every Christian, and hence every Christian theologian, is called to journey in the direction of deeper knowledge of the things of God, and the journey is a homecoming, for God is our end as well as our beginning.'<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 661–2.

<sup>75</sup> Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 5.