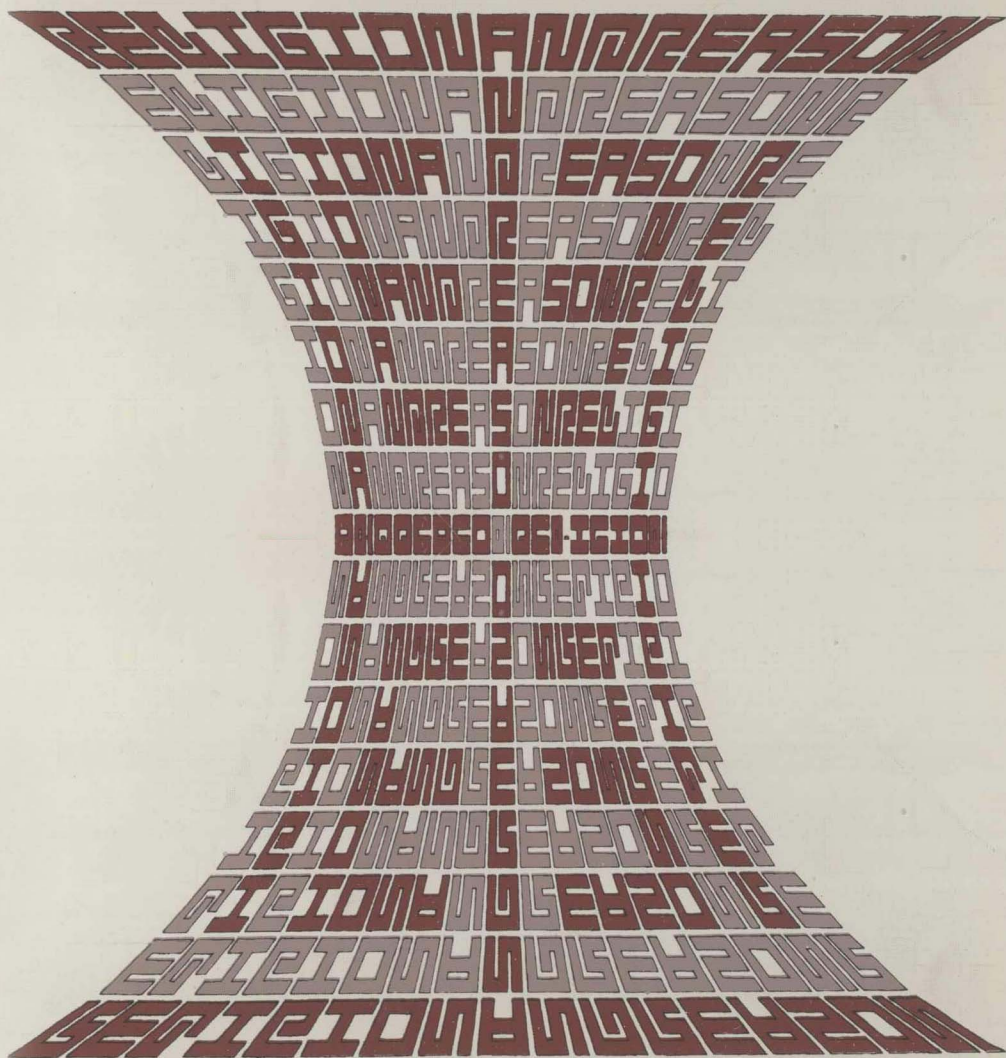


# contemporary approaches to the study of religion

volume II: the social sciences



frank whaling (editor)

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# Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion



# Religion and Reason 28

*Method and Theory  
in the Study and Interpretation of Religion*

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## Preface

The two volumes of *CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION* were conceived as a sequel to Jacques Waardenburg's *CLASSICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION* published in 1973. Waardenburg had told the story of the development of the study of religion as an academic enterprise from its beginnings in the nineteenth century until the time of the Second World War. The aim of the present volumes is to bring the story up to date from 1945 to the present day.

It became evident that this was a mammoth task that called for the energies and abilities of more than one person and the space of more than one book. A team evolved to write two books, and these two volumes are essentially the product of a team. The team is excitingly international including as it does two scholars from Germany, one from New Zealand, three from Great Britain, two from the United States, two from Holland, and for good measure one who divides his time between Britain and the United States. Although lacking the presence of a non-western scholar, with this qualification the team is cosmopolitan and representative.

After it had been decided that this project was to be a team effort, the question remained of how recent developments in the study of religion were to be described and analysed. One possibility was to proceed historically: to begin at 1945 and to show year by year how methods and ideas had evolved. Although not impossible, this approach would have been difficult even for one person to attempt. It would, of necessity, have involved a good deal of repetition, and the likelihood of repetition would certainly have been increased through the presence of a team.

In place of a historical narrative, an alternative procedure has been adopted. Each member of the team has summarised the developments in the study of religion since 1945 in the area of his or her own expertise. In volume one, Ursula King analyses historical and phenomenological approaches, Frank Whaling looks at comparative approaches, Kees Bolle sums up studies of myths and other religious texts, Ninian Smart

grapples with the scientific study of religion in its plurality, and Frank Whaling places the study of religion in its global context and looks at the relationship of the philosophy of science to the study of religion. In volume two, David Wulff investigates psychological approaches, Michael Hill, Günter Kehrer and Bert Hardin share the task of interpreting sociological approaches, Tony Jackson deals with social anthropological approaches, Jarich Oosten looks at cultural anthropological approaches, and Wouter van Beek reflects on cultural anthropology and the many functions of religion. In this way, a breadth and depth of expertise is brought to bear upon this important topic.

This does not mean that there is never any overlap of subject matter. Names such as Lévi-Strauss, Pettazzoni, Eliade, Dumézil, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and so on, inevitably crop up in more places than one, and this is to the benefit of the whole. Our practice has been to include a bibliography after each chapter, even though some of the books appear more than once. The only exception applies to Ninian Smart's typically perspicacious small chapter. Insofar as the books on that bibliography are all found elsewhere, it has simply been left out.

Whether our age contains academic giants such as Müller, Weber, Durkheim, Jung, and the like, who loomed large in Waardenburg's work is debateable. The five modern scholars mentioned above supplemented by others such as Widengren, Zaehner, Parrinder, Berger, Smart, Panikkar, Wach, Brandon and Nasr, to name but a few, are hardly negligible. However a feature of our age is the rapid development of varied currents in the study of religion, some of which are small yet not unimportant. It is to the credit of the members of our team that they have dealt with both the smaller and the larger streams within the wider river of their own approach, and that, while doing justice to their own area, they have not lost sight of the total field of religious studies.

I am grateful to my colleagues for their endeavour. They have brought to this project a plurality of nationalities, a plurality of methods, and a plurality of insights. This means that these two volumes are not wedded to the approach of any particular school in the study of religion, they take an overview of them all; it means that the scholars involved are flexible enough to enhance the work of a team.

The co-ordination of a team so talented and yet so scattered has

inevitably led to delays, and I am grateful to my colleagues for their patience. Thanks are due also to Lamin Sanneh and John Carman of the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions for advice and hospitality during the editing of this project. Above all I am happy to pay tribute to the unfailing help and encouragement of the General Editor of the RELIGION AND REASON series Professor Jacques Waardenburg, whose original book inspired this series of two volumes on CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION, and whose advice has accompanied everything that has been done.



## Contents

Preface	vii
1. Introduction Frank Whaling (Edinburgh, UK)	1
2. Psychological Approaches David Wulff (Wheaton, Massachusetts, USA)	21
3. Sociological Approaches (1) Michael Hill (Wellington, New Zealand)	89
4. Sociological Approaches (2) Günter Kehler and Bert Hardin (Tübingen, Federal Republic of Germany)	149
5. Social Anthropological Approaches Tony Jackson (Edinburgh, UK)	179
6. Cultural Anthropological Approaches Jarich Oosten (Leiden, Holland)	231
7. Cultural Anthropology and the Many Functions of Religion Wouter van Beek (Utrecht, Holland)	265

## Introduction

FRANK WHALING

*Edinburgh*

This volume is the second in a series of two volumes that deal with contemporary approaches to the study of religion. The first dealt with contemporary approaches to the study of religion in the humanities, whereas the present work concentrates upon the social sciences. It was the original intention to include within one cover all the contemporary approaches to the study of religion. However for reasons of space this did not prove possible. This introduction therefore refers only to the contents of CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION: THE SOCIAL SCIENCES. Readers are recommended to obtain the other volume which focuses on the study of religion in the humanities. Ideally these two works belong together and the introduction to volume one, while concentrating upon the humanities, gives an overview of the contents and issues in both volumes.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION forms a sequel to Professor Jacques Waardenburg's CLASSICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION. In that book Professor Waardenburg analysed the history of the study of religion from the time of Max Müller to the Second World War, and he also provided extracts from the writings of over forty leading scholars of the period to illustrate his analysis. That approach was possible in regard to the earlier period when the study of religion was emerging as an area of study in its own right. Lines of development were simpler and more clear-cut. By comparison the present period looks far more complicated.

Not only has the study of religion as a whole become more complex, the study of religion in each part of the whole has become more varied as well. Each particular approach to the study of religion has sown new seeds so that there is life and interest in individual methods of studying religion in their own right as well as in the contribution they make to the whole. In our first volume on the humanities we traced in depth contemporary approaches within the history and phenomenology of religion, the study of myths and texts, comparative religion, the scientific study of religion in its plurality, the philosophy of science in its relation to the study of religion, and the study of religion in its global context. In this present volume we turn our attention to the social sciences and to contemporary psychological, sociological and anthropological approaches to the study of religion.

This book is the work of a team of scholars. The days have passed when it was possible for one person alone to survey a gamut of different approaches. Seven scholars from three continents have combined their expertise to bring together the fruits of a wide range of knowledge in an integral effort. David Wulff from Massachusetts writes on the psychological approach to the study of religion, Michael Hill from Wellington New Zealand and two scholars from Tübingen in Germany Günter Kehrner and Bert Hardin write on the sociological approach to the study of religion, and two Dutch scholars Wouter van Beek of Utrecht and Jarich Oosten of Leiden team with a British scholar Tony Jackson of Edinburgh to write on the anthropological approach to the study of religion. It is appropriate that in a field of study that has become so inter-disciplinary, so international, and so inter-linked a global team of colleagues should have formed together to create this work. This international team-work may well be symbolic for the future study of religion. It will be noted that the five nations represented on this team do not include any from outside the West and, while there may be elements of regret in this circumstance, it is faithful to the so-far mainly western provenance of the social sciences and the social scientific study of religion.

Our definition of 'contemporary' is to some extent arbitrary. Our basic starting-point is 1945 which marks the end of the Second World War. There are two reasons for the choice of this date. It would be a

reasonable date to choose anyway because it signifies an evident interruption in the evolution of world history, the start of the atomic age, and the signal for the onset of a new global age which holds out prospects, both horrendous and exciting, in all spheres of human endeavour. As well as being a 'watershed year' in its own right, 1945 represents the cut-off point in Waardenburg's CLASSICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION, and this is all the more reason for starting our analysis at the end of the Second World War. In fact some of our chapters go back before 1945 in order to put contemporary developments onto a broader canvas. For example, David Wulff traces his account of contemporary approaches to the psychological study of religion with the founding fathers such as William James, and he makes the point that the two main trends within the psychological approach, the descriptive and explanatory ones, have continued from the beginning until now; likewise Kehrer and Hardin trace the main contemporary theoretical developments in the sociology of religion back to Pareto, Durkheim, Weber and Malinowski; moreover Jackson points out that social anthropological fieldwork is often begun anything up to twenty years before it is finally written up. It would be artificial to suppose that 1945 constituted a completely new departure in the study of religion or in anything else. Nevertheless for our purposes, and for good reasons, it ushers in the period of CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION.

One aspect of this contemporary period is the increasing diversification of the discussion of religion within the social sciences. New movements have arisen, and debate within established movements has intensified, inside each discipline and between each discipline. Within separate nations or language groups as well as within each discipline new paths have been trod and new discussions have been begun. Even within such a relatively homogeneous group of disciplines as the social sciences there is often a wistful lack of knowledge about developments in the study of religion outside one's own discipline, and sometimes of the breadth of developments *within* one's own discipline. And if this observation is true of disciplines it is often even more true about language groups which are prone to follow directions and trends that are influenced by linguistic boundaries. Part of the contribution of this book is

to bring together and put into some sort of framework and order the many and varied discussions about religion within the length and breadth of the social sciences.

This is done in two ways. Firstly, this book brings out clearly, in several places, the various strands within western scholarship. For example, Kehrer and Hardin examine American theories such as the structural-functionalism of Parsons, the sociology of knowledge of Berger, and the evolutionary model of Bellah, Dutch theories of phenomenological sociology, and German notions such as the systems theory of Luhmann, and the work of the Frankfurt School upon the sociology of religion; Jackson outlines the different approaches of the British, French and American schools within the social anthropology of religion; Wulff highlights the work of the varied elements of the American, German and French schools within the psychology of religion; Hill singles out the American, British and French contributions to the sociology of religion; Oosten indicates the ethnocentric presuppositions built into western cultural anthropology and then shows the richness and variety within the West of the 'process of confrontation, translation and communication' that constitutes the anthropological study of religion; and van Beek exhibits in a less systematic but equally effective way the inter-linking disciplinary and national cross-currents within the anthropology of religion. In the second place, the division of labour and the difference of nationalities within the team ensure that a broad coverage is given to different areas of knowledge and language groups. Thus, while ranging as widely as they wish, Kehrer and Hardin bring to bear upon their analysis a German perspective, van Beek and Oosten bring a Dutch perspective, Wulff brings an American perspective, Jackson a British perspective, and Hill a New Zealand perspective. Within the anthropology of religion, Jackson concentrates upon social anthropology, Oosten upon cultural anthropology, and van Beek upon the dialectic between society and the individual. Wulff impressively surveys the whole range of issues in the psychology of religion, while Kehrer and Hardin share with Jackson the task of summarising the wide span within sociology of religion. In this way the usual parochialism of nations and disciplines is surmounted. As we intimated earlier, the subtle parochialism of veiled western superiority is not transcended in

that it assumes that western ethnocentricity will be overcome in a *western* way. However until there are more non-western social scientists of religion and more concentrated in-depth social scientific studies of non-western major religions (as opposed to primal religions) it is likely that this situation will continue and our volume reflects reasonably accurately the present academic context.

Throughout the work, in addition to the discussion of the major trends within the psychology, sociology and anthropology of religion, certain themes recur. We will review some of these themes briefly now. In the first place the question is raised of the relationship between the study of religion in general and the study of religion within the approach concerned. Are the psychology of religion, sociology of religion, and anthropology of religion part of the general study of religion, part of the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and anthropology, or equally involved in both particular disciplines and the general study of religion? In principle the latter alternative is the ideal situation wherein there is a dual involvement within the discipline concerned and the wider study of religion, and it is for this reason that we hope that readers of this volume will also read **CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION: THE HUMANITIES** in order to locate the social scientific approaches to the study of religion within the total study of religion. At the same time it is true to say that there has been a concern to emphasise the role of the discipline concerned. This can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, a division has been made between religious psychology, sociology, and anthropology, and the psychology, sociology and anthropology of religion. In the first instance, although much useful work has been done, psychology, sociology and anthropology are placed at the service of particular religious groups. Thus 'sociologie religieuse' in France and certain elements within religious developmental psychology have, as part of their concern, the motive of helping the mission and nurture of the church in one or more of its branches. They belong therefore more properly to the orbit of Christian theology than to the social sciences. Although a number of Christian theologians have made useful contributions to the field—we may cite Troeltsche and Niebuhr as obvious examples—the social scientific study of religion cannot be subordinated to Christian theology. The

wider question, on the other hand, is whether the study of religion within the social sciences is not subordinated to the concerns of the social sciences. This has been the implicit criticism of some of the phenomenologists of religion who have been at pains to emphasize the irreducible elements in religion such as the 'sense of the sacred' or the 'idea of the holy'. Is not religion subordinated to culture in cultural anthropology, to society in social anthropology and sociology of religion, and to the human psyche in psychology of religion? It would be easy to set up this discussion in terms of 'either-or', either the social sciences or religion, and as we shall see in a moment much depends upon how we define the word 'religion'. In this book careful consideration is given to social scientific theories that do attempt to explain religion, notably Marxist notions that religion is a product of the social environment and can be understood solely in socio-economic terms and Freudian notions that religion is the projection of man's psychological needs. At the other extreme, as Michael Hill points out, there are those scholars mainly within theology but occasionally within philosophy who would want to stress the transcendent elements within religion at the expense of those elements open to social scientific scrutiny. If the study of religion is conceived to be the investigation of transcendent reality conceived as God, Allah, Yahweh, Brahman, or Nirvāṇa in the major religious traditions, or the investigation of mediating foci within the major living religions such as Christ, the Qur'ān, the Torah, Ātman or Īśvara, and the Buddha or Śūnyatā, then such a study is not directly the concern of the social scientific approaches. They operate according to the principle of the 'exclusion of the transcendent,' not in the sense that the transcendent does not or need not exist but in the sense that it is not their business to investigate transcendent reality as such. As David Wulff points out the principle of the 'exclusion of the transcendent' is a negative rather than a positive injunction which leaves out of account the possible significance of the transcendent in the fundamental structure of religious consciousness, nevertheless the methodological tool of leaving aside all judgments about the existence of religion's transcendent objects, neither affirming nor denying their reality, is a useful working element in the social scientific approach. According to the principle of the division of labour a *via media* emerges whereby other

disciplines within Religious Studies concern themselves with historical data, phenomenological structures, textual analysis, theological notions of transcendence, philosophical beliefs, aesthetic values, and so forth, and the social sciences are left free to make their own unique contribution to the study of religion. By being true to the techniques, methods and theories of their own disciplines, social scientists are enabled to make their maximum contribution to the study of religion in the light of their own interests. Lying behind this assumption is the notion that the social scientific approaches to religion complement one another and that together they complement the approaches toward the study of religion adapted by disciplines outside the social sciences. This notion of complementarity is implicit throughout most of this book.

In the second place the question is raised of the role played by definitions of religion. The task of defining religion is notoriously difficult, the definitions given are varied, and the types of definitions that are advanced bring other consequences in their wake. Although dealing only with the social scientific approaches to the study of religion, our contributors mention a number of definitions of religion that depart in different directions. One classical divide is that between nominal and real definitions of religion. The latter types of definition tend to reify hypothetical constructs into 'essences' that are taken to be universal, for example Spiro's definition of religion as 'belief in superhuman beings and in their power to assist or harm man'. This definition is real by contrast with Geertz's more symbolic and nominal definition of religion as 'a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existing and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic'. In addition to the divide between nominal and real definitions, there is the further classical divide between inclusive and exclusive definitions. Inclusive definitions may define religion widely as a quantum of religiousness universally present in man *qua* man over against religion as membership of a religious community, or they may see religion in an inclusively Durkheimian manner as the need for individuals to be regulated by some shared commitment to a central set of beliefs and values (for example American civil religion), or they may



comprehend traditions such as communism, humanism and nationalism as belonging to the same species as religion. By contrast exclusive definitions will attempt to sharpen the boundaries between 'religion' and 'non-religion', between conventional religious systems and central core value systems divorced from religious communities, between the capacity for self-transcendence built into man *qua* man and the practice of that self-transcendence within a religious fellowship. This debate is especially common within the sociology of religion, and it affects the way the process of secularisation is analysed. If religion is defined as belonging to a religious institution, when the institution grows or declines there is a corresponding growth or decline in religion. If religion is the religiousness that is part of man's human nature the situation is different for religion defined as religiousness cannot 'become secularised', it can only change form and expression. The chapters on sociology of religion complement each other because Hill inclines more to an exclusive definition and Kehrer and Hardin incline to a more inclusive definition of religion. Although inclusive and exclusive definitions of religion appear to be radically different, our contributors point out that scholars such as Berger and Luckmann, who diverge in this radical fashion in regard to definitions, are nevertheless able to collaborate satisfactorily, and the same applies to our contributors themselves.

Another divide within definitions of religion focuses upon definitions that relate to the individual rather than the social group. David Wulff points out that psychologists of religion tend to focus their definitions of religion upon the religiousness of the individual and especially upon the religious experiences of individuals. These in turn may be defined exclusively in terms of experience of the transcendent or divine, or more inclusively in terms of any deeply serious attitude towards the world of experience out of which emerges, however inchoately, a sense of life's meaning. Wouter van Beek, with his interest in psychological anthropology, defines religion in terms of the dialectic between the individual and the social group.

The debate about definitions of religion has significant ramifications in a number of directions. There is no one agreed definition of religion in the social sciences, but the variety of definitions serves to indicate the