Until quite recently there was very little science in the social scientific study of religion. As a child of the “Enlightenment,” social science began with the conviction that religion was not only false but wicked and best gotten rid of as soon as possible. Of course, there was nothing new about atheism: many ancient Greek philosophers rejected the gods, as did various schools of Indian and Chinese philosophy (Collins 1998). Indeed, according to Clifford Geertz (1966), atheists exist in preliterate and “primitive” societies, making it likely that there were atheists even in Neanderthal times.

What Thomas Hobbes and his friends began more than three centuries ago was, however, something quite original. Not only were they the first to use the tools of a developing social science to attack religion, but they tried to make a religion out of their science—an intellectual tradition that reached full flower more than three centuries later in Carl Sagan’s recent popularizations, in which the “Cosmos” is the proper object of awe and “Nature” is always capitalized (Barbour 1990; Ross 1985). In one paragraph of his enormously influential work Leviathan, Hobbes dismissed all religion as “credulity,” “ignorance,” and “lies,” explaining that although the gods exist only in the minds of believers, and are but “creatures of their own fancy,” humans “stand in awe of their own imaginations” ([1651] 1956, 1: 98). Two centuries later, there had been a considerable evolution in academic jargon, as demonstrated by the German philosopher Ludwig von Feuerbach when he made a similar claim in his book Das Wesen des Christentums: “Man — this is the mystery of religion — projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject. . . . God is the highest subjectivity of man

abstracted from himself” ([1841] 1957, 29–31). Religion is merely a reflection of society, which is why “the secret of theology is nothing else than anthropology” (ibid., 207). Seventy years later, Emile Durkheim reiterated (without attribution) Feuerbach’s major premise, asserting that “god … can be nothing else than [society] itself, personified and represented to the imagination” (1915, 206). This is one of the two themes that have dominated social scientific theories of religion for more than three centuries: first, that the gods are illusions generated by social processes; second, that the gods are illusions generated by psychological processes. Only recently has the scientific standing of these claims been effectively challenged by social scientists.

In this introduction, we first summarize the intellectual history of the social scientific study of religion as atheism, tracing the links through major scholars across the centuries. Then we examine the recent shift toward a more truly scientific approach, documenting the fact that this transformation was mainly the result of the increased participation of persons of faith. Against this background, we note “survivals” of the traditional atheistic biases, albeit in a somewhat muffled form, and seek to show that a scientific study of religion is entirely possible for both believers and unbelievers, if not perhaps for aggressive ideologues of either commitment. Finally, we offer an overview of the remaining chapters.

WHEN ATHEISM WENT PUBLIC

At the start of the English Civil War, with *Leviathan* written but not yet published, Hobbes fled London for Paris. This was the first of several Paris sojourns to evade punishment for his views—by Oliver Cromwell for his defense of monarchy and by the Royalists for his attacks on religion. However, Hobbes’s political difficulties ended in 1660, when the Restoration placed Charles II on the English throne, for Hobbes had been the new king’s boyhood tutor, and Charles was sympathetic to his views. Indeed, under Charles II, an intellectual climate favorable to irreligion flourished in England, which has continued ever since, perhaps culminating in the spectacle of Anglican bishops ridiculing belief in “the Old Man in the sky” (see Robinson 1963), while a Cambridge theologian (Cupitt 1997) is praised in the *Times Literary Supplement* by another British theologian (Nineham 1997) for dismissing “God” as pure subjectivity.

When Voltaire spent three years in England (1726–28), he was startled by the open and widespread atheism there, remarking, “In France I am looked upon as having too little religion; in England as having too much.” Similarly, Montesquieu reported from England in 1731, “There is no religion in England … if religion is spoken of everyone laughs” (both quoted in Durant and Durant 1965, 116). This climate of opinion favored a new generation of militantly atheistic social thinkers, the most famous of them today being David Hume, who wrote in his famous essay “Of Miracles”: 
There is not to be found in all history any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusion in themselves; of such undoubted integrity as to place them beyond all suspicions of any design to deceive others. It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors. It is strange that such prodigious events never happen in our days. But it is nothing strange that men should lie in all ages. (Hume [1748] 1962, 121–23)

Meanwhile, across the Channel, stimulated by the English example, French philosophes were also devoting themselves to bringing about a world free of all illusion and superstition—a world beyond belief. “All children are atheists—they have no idea of God,” Jean Meslier (1664–1729), a Catholic priest who was in secret an atheist, asserted in his posthumously published Testament. “Men believe in God only upon the word of those who have no more idea of him than they themselves. Our nurses are our first theologians; they talk to children about God as they talk to them of werewolves” (quoted in Durant and Durant 1965, 613–14).

For more than three centuries, social scientists tried not only to explain religion away but to replace it. Voltaire wrote endlessly of the need to attack religion in preparation for the coming triumph of philosophy. The philosophes were “fanatic; they preach incessantly, and their avowed doctrine is atheism,” the English M.P. and littérateur Horace Walpole (1717–97) wrote home to a friend in 1765, after having become acquainted with Voltaire, Turgot, Condorcet, Diderot, and Rousseau (quoted in Durant and Durant 1965, 781). And so it went. Early in the nineteenth century, Auguste Comte coined the word “sociology” to identify a new social science that would replace religion as the basis for making moral judgments. In their turn, Marx and Engels hailed the coming victory of scientific atheism, just as Freud later promised the triumph of psychotherapy over the neurotic illusions of religion. All of these attacks on religion were presented as “social science,” taking two primary forms: the cultural or comparative approach, and the psychological approach. It is therefore appropriate to trace the role of atheism in the history of social science by giving primary attention to these two fields.

**ATHEISM AND THE CULTURAL APPROACH**

In any era when there is a substantial amount of travel, humans notice cultural variations, and when they do, religious comparisons always come to the fore. Thus, more than two millennia ago, the Greeks took a particular interest in the similarities and differences among religions in their part of the world. In his *History*, Herodotus paid extensive attention to comparing gods and rituals and
to tracing how they might have spread, based on his personal observations of about fifty different societies. For example, he wrote:

I will never believe that the rites [of Dionysus] in Egypt and those in Greece can resemble each other by coincidence. . . . The names of nearly all the gods came from Egypt to Greece . . . but the making of the Hermes statues with the phallus erect, that they did not learn from the Egyptians but from the Pelasgians, and it was the Athenians first of all the Greeks who took over this practice, and from the Athenians, all the rest. ([ca. 450 B.C.] 1987, 152–53)

The European Age of Exploration produced a new era of travelers’ tales and once more prompted cultural comparisons, and when what many historians regard as the “first [serious] work of comparative religion” (Preus 1987, 8) was composed in 1593 by Jean Bodin, a former Carmelite monk, it was written on behalf of atheism. In the Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime, Bodin argued that by virtue of the competing claims to truth made by the clutter of faiths found around the world, “all are refuted by all.” Although he did not dare publish it, his manuscript was “circulated widely and became an underground classic widely read by seventeenth-century free-thinkers” (Preus 1987, 9).

A century later, however, opponents of religion hit upon the device of disguising their intentions by writing books and pamphlets to discredit pagan religions, including not only Greco-Roman paganism, but all of the non-Christian faiths found in the New World, Africa, and Asia. By appending perfunctory professions of Christian faith, they deflected accusations of heresy or atheism, knowing full well that their readers would recognize how these same critiques of paganism applied to Christianity (Manuel 1959). In 1697, Pierre Bayle published his Dictionaire historique et critique in Rotterdam. In it he concentrated on the myriad sexual sins committed by the Greco-Roman gods and goddesses, including incest, indiscriminate adultery, castration, and homosexual and heterosexual rape, all “spelled out and discoursed upon with mock solemnity.” As Frank Manuel has noted: “The more evidence Bayle could accumulate on the lusts of the gods and goddesses, the degrading acts to which they were impelled by their passions, the greater his delight. . . . Bayle recreated a world of sex-mad divinities” (1959, 27).

As we have seen, Bayle’s emphasis on sexuality had been anticipated by Herodotus, who also seems to have missed no opportunity to report sexual aspects of religion, especially if they were bizarre. For example, in his discussion of the worship of Pan, who was portrayed as a goat both in Egypt and Greece, Herodotus acknowledged that no one really believed that Pan was a goat, “nay, they think him like other gods; but why he is so depicted is not pleasant for me to say.” He explained, however, that this practice had originated in Egypt among the Mendesians: “In this province, in my time, a monstrosity took place: a he-goat coupled with a woman, plain, for all to see. This was done in the nature of a public exhibition” ([ca. 450 B.C.] 1987, 151).
Attacks on paganism also provided a safe device for revealing priests as impious, lecherous frauds, and miracles as nothing but trickery or credulity. For example, in his *Histoire des oracles* (1687), a “best-seller” of the time, Bernard Le Bouvier de Fontenelle feigned an air of piety in “unmasking” pagan religious ceremonies, and especially the oracles at Delphi, as carefully planned and staged fakery. In witty, readable prose (quite unlike the ponderous texts of some contemporary Dutch and German scholars), Fontenelle regaled his readers with tales of priestly trickery and deceit, confident that they would know that his real target was all religion, and particularly Christianity. Fontenelle’s *De l’origine des fables* (written before 1680, but not published until 1724) portrayed the religion of “savages” and “backward peoples” around the world. How are we to account for the astonishing myths that are accepted as factual among various human groups? “Men see marvels in proportion to their ignorance and lack of experience.” The roots of religion are in “the unimaginable ignorance” of early mankind (Fontenelle quoted in Preus 1987, 42).

By the time Fontenelle wrote, educated Europeans knew a good deal about non-European faiths, because by then comparative religion had become a very active field of scholarship, drawing upon the flood of new accounts written by travelers, missionaries, and colonial administrators—in 1661, for example, the Dutch scholar Godefridus Carolinus produced a 50-volume work on the many “heathen” faiths.

In addition to describing beliefs and practices, many such writings were works of synthesis, in which the emphasis was given to similarities among religions, or what Fontenelle described as “an astonishing conformity” across cultures. Thus, the universality of serpent cults was detailed at length, and, although unmentioned, the similarity to the account of the Fall in Genesis would have been noticed by every reader. Most scholars of comparative religion agreed with Fontenelle that these similarities were owing to the fact that religious beliefs had been “drawn from barbarism by the same means, and that the imaginations of ... distant people are in agreement” (Fontenelle quoted in Preus 1987, 43).

Few, if any, early writers of works on comparative religion were motivated primarily by scholarly concerns. Rather, they were mainly engaged in demonstrating Bodin’s principle that “all are refuted by all”: There was no innocence in Fontenelle’s history of oracles; nothing which touched the origins, mechanics, ritual, and beliefs of any religion was treated without premeditation during this revolutionary period in the spiritual consciousness of Europe. ... Throughout the eighteenth century no discussion of pagan or exotic religion ever lost its heretical overtones, however fervid the philosophers’ protests that they were only combatt[ing] the false gods.... When the Holbachian atheists appeared in mid-century they found no difficulty in translating the[se] works ... into virulent anti-Christian tirades. (Manuel 1959, 50)

The use of the comparative method to attack religion was not a short-lived tactic of skeptics in a more repressive time. The effort to expose the human ori-
gins of any particular religion by stressing its similarities to all religions has long been a standard feature of social science. It is inherent in the “critical attitude of the anthropologists,” Thomas Whittaker pointed out, to reveal that even “the most distinctive [Christian rituals] are transformations of worldwide savage or barbaric rites” (1911, 3). The most famous work of this kind is, of course, Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890 and then issued in twelve volumes from 1907 through 1915. Frazer compiled an enormous set of examples in order to argue that tales of crucifixion and resurrection are standards of world mythology, dwelling at length on myths of gods or princes who died upon or next to a sacred tree—the “golden bough.” The fame of the book (as with Freud’s similar works) has much more to do with its literary appeal than with any contributions to social science (which are at best slight). Frazer’s appeal to professional anthropologists would seem to have been his devotion to documenting that there is nothing original whatever in any Christian tradition, or in any religious tradition, for that matter. All is generic, occurring again and again (especially if one’s standards of similarity are sufficiently elastic).

Although, as we have seen, this method did not originate with Frazer, his example turned it into a virtual cottage industry for several generations of anthropologists—especially those who did little or no fieldwork. Hence, in addition to “identifying” many myths as concerning crucifixion and/or resurrection, among the more frequently cited “similarities” are those equating various forms of ritual cannibalism with the Christian practice of communion, and those showing that the Christ story is but one of many in which a god impregnates a human female. This approach has been especially prominent in textbooks, where one easily detects that the authors’ intentions were, not to convey that the religions of preliterate societies are more sophisticated than we might suppose, but that Christianity is far less sophisticated than we might like to believe.

From the start, comparative students of religion attempted to further discredit religions by ratifying Fontenelle’s assertion that their origins are to be found in the inadequacies of the “primitive mind.” Thus, in a book published anonymously in Brussels in 1704, a writer named La Créquinière depicted various rites and practices of mystics in India, Hebrew prophets, and Greco-Roman priests, and “what is perhaps most significant, compared them all to children.... A psychology of infantile primitive mentality was already in the making” (Manuel 1959, 18). That is, it was claimed that religion arose among credulous and not very bright “savages” and continues in “civilized” societies because of its appeal to the “lower orders,” whose mental development remains at the primitive level. As already noted, this view was fully developed by Fontenelle in his book on the origins of myths. Indeed, Durkheim’s famous contemporary Lucien Lévy-Bruhl praised Fontenelle’s work as “wonderfully correct” for being the first to propose an evolutionary theory of religion, tracing it from its brutish origins to modern times (1899, 135–38). In fact, Comte’s evolutionary stages of religious development were explicitly built upon Fontenelle’s
Comte claimed that the most primitive stage of such evolution is the “theological” or religious stage. During this stage, human culture is held in thrall by “the hallucinations produced by an intellectual activity so at the mercy of the passions” (1896, 2: 554).

But if Comte attributed religious ideas to hallucinations rooted in the passions, at least he did not propose that the primitive mind reflected inferior biology, as Charles Darwin did. In *The Voyage of the Beagle, 1831–36*, Darwin described the people of Tierra del Fuego as subhuman beasts, no more capable of enjoying life than “the lower animals” ([1839] 1906, 228–31). Similarly, Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton (1890, 82) claimed that his dog had more intelligence than did the natives in South Africa. Galton’s friend Herbert Spencer (1896, 1: 87–88) agreed that the “primitive mind” lacks “the idea of causation” and is without “curiosity.” These views were virtually universal throughout the nineteenth century and, in slightly more moderate form, persisted well into the twentieth—as late as the 1920s, Lévy-Bruhl wrote several entire books to illustrate that the mind of primitive peoples is “prelogical,” a view Durkheim (1913) emphatically endorsed.

Indeed, Durkheim based his famous theory of religion on (quite inaccurate) ethnographic accounts of Australian tribes precisely because he believed them to be the most primitive contemporary humans and thought that they would thus exhibit the “most primitive and simple form” of all religion (1915, 3). He admitted that some religions “call into play higher mental functions . . . are richer in ideas and sentiments. . . . [and contain] more concepts.” But, he argued, these variations are not sufficient to preclude application of lessons learned from study of the most primitive faiths to the most complex. Durkheim thus traced the religion of primitive and modern believers alike to the collective representation of society. “[T]his reality, which mythologies have represented under many different forms, but which is the universal and eternal objective cause of these sensations *sui generis* out of which religious experience is made, is society,” he wrote (ibid., 418). That is, religion consists of members of a society in effect worshipping their own reflection—a secret that only scientists, and not believers, can penetrate. A careful reading of Durkheim suggests that he was not nearly so concerned to show that the religious rituals of primitives such as Australian aborigines were as sophisticated as those of Christians as he was to show that the rituals practiced in Christianity were not much more sophisticated than those of “savages.” For the truth is that Durkheim and the other early social scientists mentioned thus far were not really all that interested in primitive religion. Their real agenda was to link all religion to primitive irrationality and thus to bring contemporary religion into intellectual disrepute. No one has put this better than E. E. Evans-Pritchard:

*[T]he persons whose writing have been most influential [on the subject of the primitive mind] have been at the time they wrote agnostics or atheists. . . . They
sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way. Religious belief was to these anthropologists absurd. (1965, 15)

Nevertheless, the “primitive mind” was a doomed concept once scholars actually began to do fieldwork. For the fact is that, unlike Darwin, none of the prominent social scientific proponents of the primitive mind thesis had ever actually met a member of a primitive culture. All of their information came from the library, from written reports by various travelers. It has subsequently been shown that the source material used by the pioneers in the social scientific study of religion, from Comte and Spencer to Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim (Freud was mostly content to intuit his material) was incorrect, extremely misleading, and often simply fabricated (Evans-Pritchard 1965, 6). Once trained anthropologists came face-to-face with the objects of their study, the primitive mind notion collapsed under irresistible contrary evidence. The fatal blow was delivered by Bronislaw Malinowski, who carefully demonstrated the ability of the Trobriand Islanders to think rationally and to fully comprehend cause and effect. In a famous passage ([1925] 1992, 28–29), Malinowski explained that these “primitives” resorted to supernatural means only as a last resort. They did not employ supernatural means in an effort to rid their gardens of weeds or to repair fences. They did turn to the supernatural to try to influence the weather. Malinowski’s views were soon embraced by all of the leading anthropologists of the time, and at the end of his life, even Lévy-Bruhl recanted (Evans-Pritchard 1981, 120).

Unfortunately, the collapse of the primitive mind thesis did not also result in the collapse of the notion that religion was, at its basis, essentially irrational—indeed, Malinowski was content to argue only that it was not irrational for primitive believers to believe, given the state of knowledge available to them. But he was not willing to grant equal rationality to civilized believers, for they should know better—Malinowski was as opposed to religion as any of his peers or predecessors (Evans-Pritchard 1965).

This double standard has continued to dominate comparative analyses of religion. In an essay in which he condemns the practice of dismissing religious beliefs as irrational merely because science “knows” them not to be true, the distinguished Melford E. Spiro noted:

Implicit in my argument that the rationality of belief, regardless of its truth, must be assessed relative to the scientific development of the society in which it is found, is the thesis that irrationality is peculiarly characteristic of Western religious belief. It is in Western culture that the findings and the world-view of science are salient; it is in Western culture, therefore, that religious beliefs are often antithetical to scientific beliefs. (Spiro 1964, 109)
The comparative approach has thus converged with psychology in attributing religiousness to mental incapacities. And in proportion to their retreat from tracing religion to deficiencies of the primitive mind, social scientists have been busy imputing it to ignorance and to psychological abnormalities. Weston La Barre, a famous anthropologist, traced all religion to psychosexual problems, for example, claiming, “A god is only a shaman’s dream about his father” (1972, 19).

ATHEISM AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

In his famous Treatise of Human Nature, David Hume proposed that “the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences” ([1739–40] 1969, 42–43). Moreover, he claimed that only through the study of this science can we adequately comprehend religion, for only as we are “thoroughly acquainted with the extent and force of human understanding, [can we] explain the nature of the ideas we employ.” Hume’s belief that psychology was the science to which religion must succumb was widely shared. As Peter Gay has put it: “Not content with making psychology into a science, the Enlightenment made it . . . into the strategic science. It was strategic in offering good, ‘scientific’ grounds for the philosophes’ attack on religion” (1969, 167).

This line of attack did not start with Hume. The science of the “psychology of religion” had already begun to develop in England by the late 1600s, encouraged by the climate of opinion favorable to religious skepticism mentioned earlier. Of course, even during the reign of Charles II, one needed at least to pretend to accept the existence of God, however distant and inactive one’s conception of divinity. But within this limit, pretty much anything went—anything not very pious, that is, since devout Puritans and Catholics alike were regarded as enemies of the crown. “Englishmen did not need to expose the impostures of pagan oracles . . . when their real target was ritualistic Judaism and Christianity” (Manuel 1959, 58). In any event, it was the third earl of Shaftesbury who seems to have originated the psychology of religion (or, more accurately, the abnormal psychology of religion) in his immensely influential, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times. Of course, he did not employ the term “psychology”—it was another century before it came into use. Instead, Shaftesbury referred to a new science concerned with “the Study of Minds” ([1711] 1978, 1: 290; all emphasis in original), its aim being “Comprehension of ourselves” (285–86). This new science “has Pre-eminence above all other Science . . . teaching the Measure of each and assigning the just Value of every thing in Life,” and “By this Science Religion itself is judged” (297). By application of this “superior science,” Shaftesbury reduced religion to fear, anxiety, and illusion. Thus, “there are certain humours in mankind which of necessity must have vent. The human mind and body are both of them naturally subject to commotions” (14) and religious enthusiasm occurs “when we are full of Disturbances and Fears within, and have, by Sufferance and Anxiety, lost so much of the
natural Calm and Easiness of our Temper” (33). Furthermore, religious revivals and belief in miracles are rooted in mass delusions—a sort of pious contagion:

And in this state their very Looks are infectious. The Fury flies from Face to Face: and the Disease is no sooner seen than caught. . . . And thus is Religion also Pannick; when Enthusiasm of any kind gets up; as oft on melancholy occasions, it will do. For Vapors naturally rise; and in bad times especially, when the Spirits of Men are low, as either in publick Calamitys, or during the Unwholesomeness of Air or Diet, or when Convulsions happen in Nature, Storms, Earthquakes, or other Amazing Prodigys. (ibid., 15–16)

Another Englishman, a friend of Shaftesbury’s named John Trenchard, was a co-founder of the discipline that might be called the abnormal psychology of religion. Trenchard’s *Natural History of Superstition* (1709) also blamed religious zeal on an unbalanced mind. This 50-page pamphlet caused a considerable stir and was translated into French, becoming a favorite of continental atheists. As Manuel (1959, 72) has observed, Trenchard’s *Natural History* undoubtedly influenced Hume’s attacks on religion, and it was denounced by the bishop of Mann as a “most pestilent book.”

Trenchard gained much greater prominence and influence, however, when, in collaboration with Thomas Gordon, he began to publish a weekly newspaper in London in 1719 called the *Independent Whig*. In it, for several years, Trenchard continued his denunciations of all but the most tepid, “rationalistic” Deism. His lasting fame came in 1720, when the *London Journal* began to run a weekly column by him and Gordon under the pseudonym “Cato.” Trenchard thus gained access to a large national audience—the *Journal* being England’s most influential paper at that time.

In all, 138 of *Cato’s Letters* appeared, most of them on issues of political philosophy and good governance, but some continuing Trenchard’s efforts to reveal the psychological inadequacies of religious believers. He characterized the “holy enthusiast” as a “mischievous madman” (essay of April 6, 1723) and observed that such piety was “doubtless a fever in the head, and, like other fevers, is spreading and infectious. . . . The enthusiast heats his own head by extravagant imaginations, then makes the all-wise spirit of God to be the author of his hot head . . . because he takes his own frenzy for inspiration.” At this point in the essay, Trenchard digressed to explain the rise of Islam:

> a barbarous, poor, and desert nation, half-naked, without arts, unskilled in war, and but half-armed, animated by a mad prophet, and a new religion, which made them all mad. . . . It is amazing how much they suffered, and what great things they did, without any capacity for doing them, but a religion which was strong in proportion as it wanted charity, probability, and common sense. (Trenchard and Gordon [1720–24] 1995, 849–55)

He concluded with a plea that the truth of any religion must be found through reason, not revelation. The next week came more of the same, in an attack on
claims by a prominent Quaker that faith can be discovered from within, through meditation and reflection, for “Jesus Christ is operating within us.” Trenchard would have none of this. He claimed to know that there are many thousands … who have actually tried all experiments of watching, internal prayer, outward and inward resignation, separation from worldly thoughts and actions, acquiescence of mind, and submission to the operations of the deity, yet have found themselves, after all, just where they set out … and therefore, until I can feel something in my self, or discover some traces in others, which I cannot account for from lower motives, I shall take the liberty to call the pretenders to it, enthusiasts. (ibid., 855–64; emphasis added)

Trenchard then rehashed all of his claims about religion as madness. Cato’s Letters were a huge success and subsequently were reissued in what eventually added up to eight volumes, all of which have since been reprinted many times.

A book entitled Pantheisticon: or, The form of celebrating the Socratic-Society (originally published in Latin in 1720 and in English translation in 1751) by John Toland, another English pioneer in the psychology of religion, added a new element by distinguishing between the religion of the masses and the religion of the enlightened elite. Toland devised a religious service to be conducted only behind closed doors, Praise to the All, and included hymns to free inquiry, to truth, and to knowledge, none of these to be sung until the servants had withdrawn from the banquet room. “We shall be in Safety,” he wrote, “if we separate ourselves from the multitude; for the multitude is Proof of what is worst…. Persons of the strictest Moderation, behave Towards frantic, foolish, and stubborn Men, as fond Nurses do towards their babbling Minions…. Those who flatter not Infants in these Trifles are odious and disagreeable to them” (quoted in Manuel 1959, 67). As Manuel has explained, according to Toland, in agreement with Shaftesbury and Bayle, there were “two religions in every society, one for men of reason and one for fanatics, one for those who comprehended the marvelous order of the world and one for … ignorant men full of terrors which they allayed with ludicrous rituals” (ibid., 66).

These are not, we should note, merely “antiquated” views. Whether religion is attributed to outright psychopathology, to groundless fears, or merely to faulty reasoning and misperceptions, the claim that it is irrational still permeates the psychology of religion. Until recently, the notion that normal, sophisticated people could be religious has been limited to a few social scientists willing to allow their own brand of very mild, “intrinsic” religiousness to pass the test of rationality.2 Gordon W. Allport, who coined the term “intrinsic” religion, suggested that mature adults could have faith, so long as it was subject to continuing and constructive doubts, but dismissed stronger affirmations of faith as “primitive credulity,” and as “childish, authoritarian, and irrational” (1960, 122). Indeed, Allport’s distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic religion precisely parallels the distinction between the religion of reasonable people and of fanatics proclaimed by Shaftesbury, Trenchard, and Toland three centuries ago.
The irrationalist premise persists in many forms. The most influential of these equates religion with psychopathology and is notable for the open contempt and antagonism expressed toward its subject. Sigmund Freud thus explained on one page of his famous psychoanalytic exposé of faith, *The Future of an Illusion*, that religion is an “illusion,” a “sweet—or bittersweet—poison,” a “neurosis,” an “intoxicant,” and “childishness to be overcome” ([1927] 1961, 88). As to the causes of this dreadful illusion, Freud offered a story about how in primitive times a dominant father hoarded all of the females. To gain sexual access to females, the sons rebelled and killed and ate their father in a cannibalistic orgy. From their subsequent guilt and their concern to prevent reenactments of this occurrence, the sons established religious taboos against incest and cannibalism, and began to worship their martyred father as God—thus did religion come into the world.

This Freudian “explanation,” which surely is as crude and implausible as any myth of even the most “primitive” people, is respectfully summarized at great length in many textbooks—Daniel L. Pals’s highly praised and widely used *Seven Theories of Religion* (1996) gives it a lengthy chapter, as does J. Samuel Preus in his well-known *Explaining Religion* (1987). Given that Freud’s theory of personality has been widely discredited and rejected in psychology, one can but wonder why his work on religion lives on. In *Religion and the Individual*, C. Daniel Bateson, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis suggest an answer: “[E]ven a cursory look at this literature underscores the fact that one can pursue a psychological study of religion for motives other than an honest attempt to understand the nature and consequences of religion. To be blunt, some psychologists have tried to conduct smear campaigns against religion in the guise of science” (Bateson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993, 15). Among them is Michael P. Carroll, who recently filled many pages in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* with claims that praying the Rosary is “a disguised gratification of repressed anal erotnic desires”—a substitute for playing “with one’s feces” (Carroll 1987, 491). In similar fashion, Mortimer Ostow asserts that Evangelical Protestantism is merely regression “to the state of mind of the child who resists differentiation from its mother. The messiah and the group itself represent the returning mother” (Ostow 1990, 113).

Contemporary non-Freudian psychologists also have been prolific in diagnosing the “religious mentality.” At first glance, their views seem more credible, because they do not claim that religious people are mentally ill per se. Instead, they are content to claim that sincerely religious people just do not think very well, having very rigid intellectual processes—that faith reflects “authoritarianism.” The invocation of authoritarianism to explain “fundamentalism” has been common since World War II. It began when T.W. Adorno and his colleagues (Adorno et al. 1950) conceived of an “Authoritarian Personality” for whom religious belief relieves pressures stemming from inability to tolerate any intellectual contradictions or ambiguities. Authoritarianism not only makes
people religious, they claimed, but the two factors combine to make them bigots as well—all this despite the fact that no competent study ever has demonstrated any correlation between authoritarianism and religiousness (see Stark 1971b; Bergin 1983). Gordon W. Allport (1963) made similar claims about what he called extrinsic religion. As should be clear from the earlier quotation from his work, Allport’s motives were polemical, not scientific, and his writing on the subject amounts to little more than claims that his own brand of liberal social values, slightly tinged with vague notions of the sacred, is good religion, while anything involving serious belief in the supernatural is bad religion. Slowly, psychologists have begun to acknowledge the fundamental biases in Allport’s work, especially James Dittes (1971) and most recently Kirkpatrick and Hood (1990).

**ATHEISM AND LIBERTY**

As will be clear from the chapters that follow, we do not think that an “outbreak” of irreligion began in the seventeenth century because religion was losing its credibility in an age of science. For one thing, this was hardly the birth of atheism, which is probably as old as religion. As noted, irreligiousness is ubiquitous—common in “primitive” societies as well as in the most modern. Indeed, the Bible takes note of atheists in Old Testament times (e.g., Psalm 14) and the noncanonical Wisdom of Solomon deals with them at length. Nonbelievers were “a fairly frequent phenomenon in the Middle Ages,” Max Gauna acknowledges (1992, 34). “There are many who believe neither in good or evil angels, nor in life after death, nor in any other spiritual and invisible thing,” the prior of Holy Trinity, London, wrote late in the twelfth century (quoted in Coulton 1930, 3: 7). François Berriot (1984) provides an extensive portrait of what Gauna characterizes as “the hidden current of the Renaissance [which was] ‘atheism’ itself” (1992, 18). In 1542, Antoine Fumée wrote in answer to John Calvin’s request for information about atheists in Paris that “unbelievers were numerous” there (quoted in Gauna, 1992, 74). Calvin’s letter of inquiry was prompted by his conflicts with powerful atheists in Geneva (Collins 1968).

What was unusual during the “Enlightenment” was the extensive public expression of atheism—that it was possible to form and sustain an anti-religious social movement. Thus, in 1672, Sir Charles Wolseley wrote that “irreligion in its practice hath been the companion of every age, but its open and public defense seems to be peculiar to this” (in Durant and Durant 1963, 567). Even this was not a first. Almost 2,000 years earlier the Greek philosophical school known as the Epicurians denied the existence of any gods—arguing that even if supernatural creatures do exist, they are irrelevant, for they do not know that humans exist and take no interest in the material world (Gaskin 1989; Whittaker 1911). What was unusual about this period in Greco-Roman history was also what was unusual about the era of the “Enlightenment,” not the existence of irreligious-
ness, but the freedom to express it in public. Shaftesbury was fully aware of this parallel, noting:

Not only the Visionaries and [religious] Enthusiasts of all kinds were tolerated, your Lordship knows, by the Antients: but on the other side, Philosophy had as free a course, and was permitted as a Ballance against Superstition. And whilst some Sects, such as the Pythagorean and latter Platonick, join’d in with the Superstition and Enthusiasm of the Times; the Epicurean, the Academick, and others, were allowed to use all the Force of Wit and Railery against it. ([1711] 1978, I: 18)

The prominence of “village atheism” in nineteenth-century America had the same basis. And, as is demonstrated by the fate of the village atheist, atheistic expression soon loses its shock value and then its audience. Believers learn to ignore it and unbelievers aren’t interested—which is why organized atheism has become so anemic. Indeed, as will be seen, that is why the professional atheist so often finds academic employment in “religious” disciplines such as religious studies, religion, or theology faculties (Allen 1996). Competent social scientists, let alone real historians, would have nothing to do with such preening silliness as the “Jesus Seminar.”

FAITH AND A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO RELIGION

Now, more than three centuries later, any of these early social scientists, “granted a . . . glimpse of the intellectual future” would be amazed “by the spectacle of numerous scholars of our own day expending their energies in the study of religion” (O’Toole 1984, I). What early social scientists would find particularly upsetting is that there is no lack of things to study—that religion not only has failed to disappear, but is, in many ways, stronger than ever. And what the pioneers might find even more offensive is that the field no longer consists primarily of militant irreligion. Granted, even today most social scientists continue to display a substantial bias against those who take their religion very seriously (“fundamentalist” being a deadly epithet), but unabashed village atheism no longer passes for scholarship. These days one must discuss the causes of the decline in Catholic religious vocations, for example, in appropriately sober tones, not merely herald it as proof that people are becoming immune to “papist foolishness.” This is not to deny that a substantial proportion of modern social scientists are atheists. But the unintended consequences of their atheism has been to assume that religion is a rapidly dying institution and not worth studying. Consequently, scholars interested in the social scientific study religion were driven to construct their own special institutional niche, combining greater respect for the subject matter with greater respect for the canons of science. It is worthwhile briefly to recount these developments.

The militant atheism of the early social scientists was motivated partly by politics. As Jeffrey Hadden reminds us, the social sciences emerged as part of a new political “order that was at war with the old order” (1987, 590). This new
order aimed to overthrow the traditional European ruling elites and repressive political and economic structures, a battle in which the churches, Protestant as well as Catholic, often gave vigorous support to the old order. In response, social scientists declared against religion as well as state. And, although most probably were not prepared to follow Denis Diderot’s proposal “Let us strangle the last king with the guts of the last priest,” most found the pairing apt and the end result desirable.

However, in the early part of the twentieth century, as the center of gravity of the social sciences shifted from Europe to America, the image of religion as a political enemy waned and anti-religious antagonisms were muted. Lacking a compelling motive to attack religion, but also tending to be personally irreligious (Leuba 1916), American social scientists mostly ignored religion altogether (Swatos 1989). Like insects embedded in amber; the views of the founders were dutifully displayed to generations of students, but the social scientific study of religion was far more of a museum than an area of research—“It was as if the founders had said it all” (Hammond 1985, 2).

Following World War II, a rapidly increasing number of American social scientists began to do research on religious phenomena. Their interest was stimulated by the vigor of American religion, which not only refused to wither away, but seemed to grow in popularity. Indeed, during the 1940s and the 1950s, a substantial religious revival appeared to be taking place in the United States. This was probably primarily a media event, sustained by the proliferation of church construction projects, which were necessitated by the rapid growth of new suburbs. Nonetheless, it stimulated a great deal of research and legitimated support for such research by major granting agencies. Research on religion also was stimulated at this time by the repeated encounter with stubborn religious “effects” by those working in other areas—for example, religion has a substantial independent impact on marriage, divorce, fertility, educational attainment, infidelity, crime, and drug and alcohol consumption, to name but a few areas (Wuthnow 1979; Stark and Bainbridge 1997; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997).

But, perhaps ironically, the most important factor in creating a truly scientific study of religion was the growing participation in it of persons of faith. This initially was stimulated by the growth of social science in church-affiliated colleges and universities and the creation of denominational research departments. This soon led to the formation of new organizations to sustain “religious” sociologists in the face of the militant disdain and discrimination they encountered in secular social science circles. Thus, the American Catholic Sociological Society (ACSS) was organized in 1938 by 220 American Catholic sociologists seeking shelter against the withering atheistic (and often Marxist) abuse they suffered within the American Sociological Society. Many of these members specialized in “church sociology,” in that they used social science methods to evaluate various Catholic programs and institutions. In 1940, the American Catholic Sociological Society began to publish its own journal, the American Catholic Sociological Review. Then, as the ecumenical spirit grew in post–World
War II America, the Catholics were prompted to rename their journal *Sociological Analysis*. By then many members of the ACSS held appointments in secular schools, and the work of non-Catholics soon began to appear in *Sociological Analysis*. With the change in name, there also came a change in editorial policy; the journal was forthwith devoted entirely to social scientific research and theorizing on religion. By 1970, leaders of the ACSS found that its designation as a Catholic organization had become unrealistic, and so the name was changed to the Association for the Sociology of Religion. Then, to be consistent, in 1993, *Sociological Analysis* was renamed *Sociology of Religion*. Thus, ended the era of American Catholic sociology. But, while it lasted, it sustained some very gifted scholars, who made major contributions to the scientific study of religion, including Joseph Fichter, Thomas F. O'Dea, and, of course, Andrew Greeley, whose career has far transcended “Catholic” sociology.

The Religious Research Association (RRA) was the Protestant counterpart of ACSS, its initial members being staff of the research divisions of various denominations. This group originated as an informal “committee” that began to meet in 1944 (Hadden 1974). These meetings were formalized in 1951. In 1959, the RRA began to publish the *Review of Religious Research.*

The first stirrings of concern for a scientific approach to religion among Americans in secular academic circles took the form of a regular faculty seminar that began at Harvard during the 1940s, involving scholars most of whom had at least mild personal religious commitments, including Walter Huston Clark, Gordon Allport, Horace Kallen, James Luther Adams, Paul Tillich, Pitirim Sorokin, J. Paul Williams, and Talcott Parsons (Newman 1974; Glock 1998). This seminar led directly in 1949 to the organization of the Committee for the Scientific Study of Religion, which in 1956 was renamed the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR). In 1961, the SSSR first published the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. In response to the journal, membership in SSSR leaped from around 200 in 1960 to more than 800 by 1962 (Newman 1974).

Meanwhile, stimulated in part by these American developments, the social scientific study of religion was resumed in Europe with the formation of small organizations in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, each of them consisting of Catholic scholars. In 1948, the International Conference for the Sociology of Religion was organized by sixteen Catholic social scientists from France, Belgium, and the Netherlands (Dobbelaere 1989). Like their American counterpart, these European groups have ceased to be exclusively Catholic, and they now even accept members from the New World. However, they have remained quite small and, consequently, several European journals devoted to the social scientific study of religion proved to be very short-lived (Beckford 1990). Nevertheless, two of these efforts succeeded: *Archives de Sciences sociales des Religions* and *Social Compass*, both founded in the 1950s, the former in France and the latter in the Netherlands. In 1985, British social scientists founded Religion Today, which subsequently was renamed the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 