

CURRENT TRENDS IN THEORIES OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES: A CLUE TO PROLIFERATION OF RELIGIONS WORLDWIDE

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ABSTRACT: *The thrust of this paper is to unveil the current trends in the theories of religious studies since 1970 till date and to show how they have led to proliferation of religious groups worldwide. The presupposition here is that there has been existing theories in comparison to happenings in contemporary times. The existing theories include: (1) theories of religion propounded for the primitive period, which have a leaning towards distinguishing between the sacred and the profane; and (2) those for the Middle Ages that orchestrated polemic and apologetic writings as a result of the renaissance. Thus, the need for a comparative treatment of religion became clear, and this prepared the way for more modern developments that paved way for Pentecostalism, Spiritism sects, etc. The sacred defines the world of reality, which is the basis for all meaningful forms and behaviours in the society. The profane is the opposite of the sacred. By theories of religion one means a body of explanations, rules, ideas, principles, and techniques that are systematically arranged to guide and guard religious practices for comprehension. These theories are categorized into substantive theories, focusing on what the value of religion for its adherents is, and functional or reductionist theories, focusing on what it does. The method adopted to obtain the goal of this study is through library research. Selected theories of religions propounded by some scholars are discussed in this study and these include: Cognitive theory, Rational Choice theory, the Theory of Religious Economy, Sensitivity theory, and Phenomenology of Religion. In all these, their theories have coloration of their respective perspectives/disciplines. Four types of scholars were engaged in the rise of the study of religion—(1) those who see religion as a creative force that is important in the world today; (2) second type of scholars who, while being non-religious or irreligious, are still interested in the study of religion; (3) a third type of scholars who wish to remain solely at the level of scholarship without becoming involved in the religious or other concerns of the wider world; and (4) the fourth type of scholars who, engage in the wider study of religion as phenomenologist, historian, theologian, or whatever. From the perspectives of categorizing theories of religious studies, focusing on what religion is and does, the wide variety of theories here discussed in this paper and those not discussed, the current trend of religious movements, the diversified opinions of scholars about theories of religion indicate that there is a huge proliferation of religion and religious groups today. Thus it has been demonstrated in this paper that due to the plethora of opinions about what religion is and does, and the quest for man to satisfy his felt needs, spiritually, materially or otherwise, are the reasons for the proliferation of religions worldwide.*

KEYWORDS: Current Trends; Theories; Religions; and Proliferation.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly debates over modernization and social change in the late twentieth century have raised far reaching questions about the possible consequences of religious group conflict and differences

in behavior, identity, and opinion. Different theories of religion pervade the academia to explain happenings in religious parlance. It is therefore the thrust of this paper to unveil the current trends in the theories of religious studies since 1970 till date and to show how these have led to proliferation of religious groups worldwide.

The current trends in the theories of religious studies, 1970 to the present date, as the title of this paper depicts, presupposes that there has been existing theories in comparison to happenings in contemporary times. Therefore, it would be expedient to discuss some of these presuppositions before delving into the current state. Such presuppositions include: (1) theories of religion propounded for the primitive period, and (2) those in the Middle Ages, which prepared the ground for the modern period, the 18th and 19th centuries being a threshold.

This research is essentially a library work; therefore, effort was made to glean relevant materials from scholars' works contained in available books, CD-ROMS, and the Internet. The setting of the research is such that definitions of relevant terms were given, synopses of prominent theories of some scholars were highlighted before proceeding to discuss prominent theories of the specific periods in History. The overall effect is to show how human beings have progressively developed in the knowledge of religious studies till date.

Religion Defined

In modern usage, religion covers a wide spectrum of meanings that reflect the enormous variety of ways the term can be interpreted. At one extreme, many committed believers recognize only their own tradition as a religion, understanding expressions such as worship and prayer to refer exclusively to the practices of their tradition. But Professor Ejizu, having acknowledged various definitional confusion of religion offered by many renowned scholars in the academia uses the term religion, "To refer to man's experience of the holy and ultimate reality, as well as the expression of that awareness in concrete life" (Ejizu, 2008: 7). Furthermore, he says, "Religion is fundamentally world-view; therefore it provides a unified picture of the cosmos usually consisting of a web interconnected beliefs ideas and symbols that are believed to undergird human life and the universe as a whole".

THEORIES OF RELIGIONS

Theories of Religious Studies are coherently a body of explanation, rules, ideas, principles, and techniques that are systematically arranged for comprehension. They help scholars evaluate and unravel the underlying principles of the study, of why religion exists, how it developed, what needs religion serves among the people group, especially when seen as distinct from actual practice. Tweed writes that: Scholars in humanities and of social science have understood theories in a variety of ways, and one helpful over-view lists five primary notions of what they are and how they function: (1) deductive nomological view, which understands theories as systems of universal laws deduced from axioms and corresponding to mind-independent to external reality; (2) the law-oriented view, which trumpets the same ideal but suggests we cannot identify universal laws but only "law-like regularities"; (3) the idealizing notion of theory, which further refines the deductive-nomological view by suggesting that the regularities—not laws—should be understood

as "ideal types", or the scholars' idealizations of human motives; (4) the constructivist view theory, which goes further still in rejecting the idea of attaining universal laws as it challenges correspondence theories of truth and proposes the theory offers only "contextual understanding motives", and (5) critical theory, which agrees with constructivists in their criticism of the deductive nomological approach but emphasizes power relations and ethical issues (Tweed, 2006: 7-8).

Study of Religion

According to Frank Whaling, a working summary of what constitutes the 'study of religion' is: "The notion that such a study is the objective and comparative study of religion. Thus in principle it is the study of all religions from a viewpoint not isolated within any one of them. In other words it is a fair and full study of all religions" (Whaling, 2006, "*Theory and methods in religious studies: Contemporary approaches to the study of religion*", retrieved from <http://www.basr.ac.uk/diskus/diskus7/whaling.htm>, November 7th 2008. 6.40 p.m.).

Primitive Period

It was a period in History that relates to no use of, or relying on complex modern technologies to provide comfort and efficiency in human activities. In context of this paper, the primitive period was a time in History when the religious and philosophical development of humanity has not been organised into separate and distinct evolutionary stages or schemes by scholars. Anthropologists, such as Tylor and Frazer are notable scholars who worked assiduously to elucidate the myths of people who lived in this time of History. According to Frazer's scheme, human beings first attributed natural phenomena to arbitrary supernatural forces (magic), later explaining them as the will of the gods (religion), and finally subjecting them to rational investigation (science) (Tylor, 2007, CD-ROM).

The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages formed the middle period in a traditional schematic division of European history into three 'ages': the classical civilization of Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and *modern* times. The Middle Ages of Western Europe are commonly dated from the end of the Western Roman Empire (about 4th or 5th century) until the rise of national monarchies, the start of European overseas exploration, the humanist revival, and the Protestant Reformation starting in 1517. These various changes all marked the beginning of the Early Modern period that preceded the Industrial Revolution. In other words, the Middle Age was a period in History that spanned from about A.D 350 – 1450. For the purpose of this paper, we shall concentrate on the High Middle period, A. D. 1050-1450, that preceded and ushered in the modern age, to represent the Middle Ages for the simple reason that this is the period in History of great learning ("Theory of Religion", 2004, CD-ROM).

Categorising Theories of Religious Studies

Theories of religion can be categorized into substantive theories, focusing on what religion is, and functional or reductionist theories, focusing on what it does. Influential substantive theories have been proposed by Tylor and Frazer among others, focusing on the explanatory value of religion for its adherents. The theologian, Rudolf Otto, proposed a theory, which focuses on the importance of religious experience, more specifically experiences that are both fascinating and terrifying. M.

Eliade, on his part, proposed a theory that focuses on the longing for other worldly perfection, that is, the quest for meaning, and the search for patterns in mythology in various religions (“Theory of Religion”, 2004, CD-ROM). These aforementioned substantive or essentialist theories among others focus on the contents of religions and the meaning, which the contents have for people. This approach asserts that people have faith because beliefs make sense to them.

Influential functional theories have been proposed by Karl Marx, focusing on the economic background; Sigmund Freud’s, focusing on neurosis as a psychological origin of religious beliefs; while Emile Durkheim proposed a theory that focuses on the social function of religions. For Max Weber, his theory of religion has to do with the interaction between society and religion. The rational choice theory has been applied to religions among others by the sociologists, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge. They assert that religion is able to function as a compensator for rewards that are yet to be obtained (“Theory of Religion”, 2004, CD-ROM). These functional or reductionist theories focus on the social or psychological functions that religion has for a group. This approach tends to focus more on the subconscious motives why people have beliefs that are irrational, and they are popularly known as scientific approach to religious studies.

Annotated Views of Some Scholars in Theories of Religious Studies

1. E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s Views of Theories of Religion

The Anthropologist, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), did extensive ethnographic studies among the Azande and Nuer peoples who were considered "primitive" by earlier scholars. The Azande and the Nuer, including their neighbours, the Dinka live in central Africa belonging to the Sudanic language group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire). They are the major black ethnic groups in southern Sudan (“Azande”, 2007, CD-ROM).

Unlike the previous scholars, Evans-Pritchard did not see these people primitive, and did not propose a grand universal theory, but he did extensive long-term fieldwork among "primitive" peoples, studying their culture and religion. In summary, Evans-Pritchard preferred detailed ethnographical study of a tribe and their religion to form a theory about the tribe's religion because there are many unverified speculation about the origins of many religions. He did not propose a theory of religions, but only a theory of the religion of the particular people group whom he studied in detail in order to avoid over generalization, a fault so obvious in other theorists.

Other Anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz, approached religious studies through a historical analytical method and advocated thorough ethnographical studies of the people group to avoid generalization of theories that cover everybody.

2. Karl Marx’s Views of Theories of Religion

The social philosopher, Karl Marx (1818–1883), held a strictly materialist world view and saw economics, including class distinctions, as the determining factor of society. He saw the human mind and human consciousness as part of matter. His famous statement in the Communist Manifesto is: “The history of all societies up to the present is the history of class struggles” (Yinger, 1971: 116). According to Marx, the dynamics of society was fuelled by economics.

He saw religion originating from alienation and aiding the persistence of alienation, he says that, “Religion is supportive of a status quo in correspondence with his famous saying that religion is opium of the people”. This view is however contradicted by the existence of certain religious

groups, like the liberation theologians and other theorists. For example, Milton Yinger says that, "opium is the religion of the people" (Yinger, 1970: 163), which is a direct opposite of Marx's thesis in this regard. Marx, further saw religion as a source of happiness, though illusory and temporary, or at least a source of comfort. He says that religion is not a necessary part of human culture.

3. Edward Burnett Tylor's and James George Frazer's Views of Theories of Religion

The Anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), defined religion as belief in supernatural beings and stated that this belief originated as explanations to the world. Belief in supernatural being grew out of attempts to explain life and death. Tylor's theory assumed that the psyches of all peoples of all times are more or less the same and those explanations in cultures and religions tend to grow more sophisticated via monotheist religions, like Christianity. Tylor saw backwards practices and beliefs in modern societies as 'survivals' but he did not explain why they survived ("Theories of Religion". <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 7.00 p.m.).

On his part, James George Frazer (1854-1941) in his outstanding position among anthropologists was established by his publication in 1890 of *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, where he followed Tylor's theories to a great extent, but he distinguished between magic and religion ("Theory of Religion", in Encyclopaedia Britannica Deluxe Edition, 2004, CD-ROM). For Frazer, magic is used to influence the natural world in the primitive man's struggle for survival. He asserted that magic relied on an uncritical belief of primitive people in contact and imitation. For example, precipitation may be invoked by the primitive man by sprinkling water on the ground. Frazer asserted that according to primitive people, magic worked through laws. In contrast religion is faith that the natural world is ruled by one of more deities with personal characteristics with whom can be pleaded, not by laws ("Theories of Religion". <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 7.00 p.m.). From analysis, Tylor's and Frazer's theory suffers from not adequately addressing the social aspect of religion because according to them, religion and animism are purely intellectual moves with the social aspects being simply secondary. Although they reveal the intellectual component of religion as an attempt to explain things, it is clear that religion involves much more ("Seven Theories of Religion", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 7.00 p.m.).

4. Emile Durkheim's Views of Theories of Religion

Quite different from most other scholars, Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) saw the concept of the sacred as the defining characteristic of religion, not faith in the supernatural. He saw religion as a reflection of the concern for society ("Theory of Religion", in Encyclopaedia Britannica Deluxe Edition, 2004, CD-ROM). Durkheim's interest in sociology as an academic discipline where he championed the importance of society - social structures, social relationships, and social institutions - in understanding human nature. This led him to religion, and according to him "...religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden" ("Seven Theories of Religion", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 7.00 p.m.). Durkheim focused on the importance of the concept of the "sacred" and its relevance to the welfare of the entire community. From Durkheim's view, religious beliefs are thus symbolic expressions of social realities; without those social realities serving as a foundation, religious beliefs would have no meaning. Many have disputed this reductionist

attitude, arguing that religion is more than just an expression of social realities. Although Durkheim has helped us to understand that religion has a social function, it is clear that more is going on. Durkheim's approach gave rise to functionalist school in sociology and anthropology. Functionalism is a sociological paradigm that originally attempted to explain social institutions as collective means to fill individual biological needs, focusing on the ways in which social institutions fill social needs, especially social stability.

5. Max Weber's Views of Theories of Religion

Max Weber (1864-1920) developed theories that stemmed from the sociological classifications of religious movements. He thought that the truth claims of religious movement were irrelevant for the scientific study of the movements. He portrayed each religion as rational and consistent in their respective societies (Whaling, 1995: 15). Weber acknowledged that religion had a strong social component, but diverged from Durkheim by arguing in his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that religion can be a force of change in society. In the book, Weber writes that modern capitalism spread quickly partially due to the Protestant worldly ascetic morale. Weber's main focus was not on developing a theory of religion but on the interaction between society and religion, while introducing concepts that are still widely used in the sociology of religion. These concepts include: (1) Church sect typology, (2) Ideal type, a hypothetical "pure" or "clear" form, used in typologies, and (3) Charismatic authority. Weber saw charisma as a volatile form of authority that depends on the acceptance of unique quality of a person by this person's followers. Charisma can be a revolutionary force and the authority can either be routinized (change into other forms of authority) or disappear upon the death of the charismatic person ("Theories of Religion", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 7.08 p.m.).

6. Sigmund Freud's Views of Theories of Religion

Freud (1856–1939), a psychologist, viewed studies on religious theories from his perspective. He saw religion as an illusion. By illusion he meant a belief that people want very much to be true. Unlike Tylor and Frazer, he attempted to explain why religion persists in spite of the lack of evidence for its tenets. Freud asserted that religion is a largely unconscious neurotic response to repression. By repression he meant that civilized society demands that we cannot fulfill all our desires immediately, but that they have to be repressed. Rational arguments to a person holding a religious conviction will not change the neurotic response of a person. This is in contrast to Tylor and Frazer who saw religion as a rational and conscious, though primitive and mistaken, attempt to explain the natural world. Freud not only tries to explain the origin and persistence of faith in individuals but in his 1913 book, *Totem and Taboo*; he even developed a speculative story about how all monotheist religions originated and developed ("Theories of Religion", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 7.10 p.m.). In the book he asserts that monotheist religions grew out of a homicide in a clan of a father by his sons. This incident was subconsciously remembered in human societies. His view on religion was embedded in his larger theory of psychoanalysis (Whaling, 1995: 256).

7. Rudolf Otto's Views of Religious Theories

Being a psychologist and a theologian, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) focused on religious experience, more specifically, moments that he called numinous which means "Wholly Other". He described

it as *mysterium tremendum* (terrifying mystery) and *mysterium fascinans* (awe inspiring, fascinating mystery). He saw religion as emerging from these experiences (“Theories of Religion”, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 7.10 p.m.). He further asserts that these experiences arise from a special, non-rational faculty of the human mind, largely unrelated to other faculties, so religion cannot be reduced to culture or society. Some of his views, among others that the experience of the numinous was caused by a transcendental reality are unverifiable and hence unscientific. His ideas strongly influenced phenomenologists such as Mircea Eliade (Whaling, 1995, 131).

8. Mircea Eliade's Views of Theories of Religion

Mircea Eliade's (1907–1986) approach grew out of the phenomenology of religion. Like Otto, he saw religion as something special and autonomous that cannot be reduced to the social, economical or psychological alone (“Theory of Religion”, in Encyclopaedia Britannica Deluxe Edition, 2004, CD-ROM). Like Durkheim, he saw the sacred as central to religion, but differing from Durkheim, he views the sacred as often dealing with the supernatural, not with the clan or society (Berger, 1969: 35). For him, the daily life of an ordinary person is connected to the sacred by the appearance called hierophany (a being who interprets and explains obscure and mysterious matters, especially sacred doctrines or mysteries)—theophany being a special case of it. Eliade's methodology was studying comparative religion of various cultures and societies often relying on second hand reports. He also used some personal knowledge of other societies and cultures for his theories, among others, his knowledge of Hindu folk religion. He has been criticized for vagueness in defining his key concepts. Like Frazer and Tylor he has also been accused of out-of-context comparisons of religious beliefs of very different societies and cultures and has also been accused of having a pro-religious bias (Christian and Hindu), though this bias does not seem essential for his theory (“Theory of Religion”, 2004, CD-ROM).

Other authors, too numerous to mention, have also propounded their theories of religion with a coloration of their respective perspectives; the ones mentioned here being a handful taken at random. The knowledge of these theories facilitates the discussions of the theories of the various periods of History, which has been enunciated in the thesis contained in the introduction.

THEORIES OF RELIGION BEFORE THE MODERN PERIOD

The practice of religion in every culture of people group all over the world is as old as human existence on earth. Due to lack of proper information, modern day scholars have classified the religions that existed before now as primitive. They went further to propose theories that explained their behavioral existence. But scholars such as Mircea Eliade, however, have emphasized the importance of contemporary fieldwork in recapturing a sense of the religious life of early humankind. We therefore first and foremost consider the religious life of archaic people so as to notice the trend in the modern times.

1. Theories of Religion in the Primitive Period

Primitive religion is a name given to the religious beliefs and practices of those traditional, often isolated in preliterate cultures, which have not developed into urban and technologically sophisticated forms of society. The term is misleading in suggesting that the religions of those peoples are somehow less complex than the religions of "advanced" societies. In fact, research carried out among the indigenous peoples of Oceania, the Americas, and sub Saharan Africa have revealed rich and very complex religions, which organize the smallest details of the people's lives ("Theories of Primitive Religion", 2008,. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 3.45 p.m.).

Theories propounded to explain happenings in primitive religion were bereft of the total knowledge of what is involved; at best they were emended messages that suit their proponents. One of such was proposed by F. B. Jevons in his book, *Introduction to the History of Religion* in 1896. For him, primitive religion was a uniform evolutionary development from totemism – animism being to polytheism and to monotheism (Evans-Pritchard, 1978: 5). Commenting on this, Evans-Pritchard says that, "It is a collection of absurd reconstructions, wild speculations, suppositions, and assumptions, inappropriate analogies, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and especially in what he wrote about totemism, just plain nonsense". According to Evans-Pritchard, those who wrote to dent the image of primitive religions did so because they sought and found in primitive religions a weapon, which they thought, "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".

Theories of the nature of primitive religion have moved between two poles: one intellectualistic and rational, the other psychological and irrational. Tylor and Frazer, both saw primitive religion as characterized preeminently by a belief in magic and unseen forces or powers, and this represents the intellectual - rational position ("Theories of Primitive Religion", 2008,. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 3.45 p.m.)..

Tylor's definition of primitive religion as Animism, a belief in spiritual beings, expresses his interpretation that the basis of primitive religion is the belief that is detached and detachable vital forces make up a supra-human realm of reality, that is, just as real as the physical world of rocks, trees, and plants (Berger, 1969: 35). Animism refers to the view that the human mind is a nonmaterial entity that nevertheless interacts with the body via the brain and nervous system. As a philosophical theory, animism, usually called pan-psychism—the doctrine that all objects in the world have an inner or psychological being.

There are also opposing interpretations of primitive religion based from an experimental and psychological approach to the study. For example, R. H. Codrington's study of the Melanesians (a group of Pacific Island peoples), enabled him to describe their word, Mana, as a supernatural power or influence experienced by the Melanesians. This has provided a basis for other scholars to explain the origin and interpretation of primitive religion as rooted in dynamic power of nature. Variations

of this theory may be seen in the works of Lucien Levy - Bruhl, who distinguished between a logical and pre-logical mentality in analyzing the kind of thinking that takes place through this mode of experience ("Theories of Primitive Religion", 2008,. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 3.45 p.m.).

Another intellectual - rationalist approach to primitive religion is exemplified by Emile Durkheim, who saw religion as the deification of society and its structures. The symbols of religion arise as "collective representations" of the social sphere, and rituals function to unite the individual with society. Symbols are essentially implored in social process, for no social process is attained or done without the application of symbols. Turner writes that:

The symbol becomes associated with human interests, purposes, ends, and means, whether these are explicitly formulated or have to be inferred from the observed behavior. The structure and properties of a symbol become those of a dynamic entity, at least within its appropriate context of action (Turner, 1967: 20).

On divine beings, available theories speak of the Creator – gods as deities of the sky. The sky as a primordial expression of transcendence is one of the exemplary forms of sacred power. Deities of the sky are often considered to possess an ultimate power. Summarily, underlying all the forms, functions, rituals, personages, and symbols in primitive religion is the distinction between the sacred and the profane. The sacred defines the world of reality, which is the basis for all meaningful forms and behaviors in the society. The profane is the opposite of the sacred (Berger, 1969: 35).

This characteristic distinction between the sacred and the profane is present at almost every level of primitive society. The tendency to perceive reality in the terms provided by the sacred marks a fundamental difference between primitive and modern Western societies, where this distinction has been destroyed. The openness to the world as a sacred reality is probably the most pervasive and common meaning in all forms of primitive religion and is present in definitions of time, space, behaviors, and activities.

The sacred is able to serve as a principle of order because it possesses the power to order. The power of the sacred is both positive and negative. It is necessary to have the proper regard for the sacred; it must be approached and dealt with in very specific ways. Profanity is tantamount to secularization – a conception of the events in question as nothing but profane. The dichotomization of reality into sacred and profane spheres, however related, is intrinsic to the religious enterprise (Berger, 1969: 36).

Theories of Religion in the Middle Ages

In the ancient world and in the middle ages the various approaches to religion grew out of attempts to criticize or defend particular systems and interpret religion in harmony with changes in knowledge. The same is true of part of the modern period, but increasingly the idea of the non-descriptive or explanatory study of religions, and at the same time the attempt to understand the genesis and function of religion, has become established. With this view, the 19th century was the formative period, a threshold, for the modern study of religion. The ensuing accounts of the history

of the subject here take it up to the modern period and then considered the various disciplines connected with religion in detail – that is, in relation to their development since the 19th century (“Theory of Religion”, 2004, CD-ROM). In the middle ages, it was an observable phenomenon that there was much tension between Christianity and paganism that infiltrated from the north of Europe which permeated the whole lands. There was hero worship of sages like Socrates as though they were Catholic saints. In fact idolatry and syncretism were in vogue. These orchestrated polemic and apologetic writings that pervaded the academia of this period. Thus, the need for a comparative treatment of religion became clear, and this prepared the way for more modern developments.

Also preparatory for the modern study of religion was the new trend toward more or less systematic compilations of mythological and other material, stimulated partly by the Renaissance and partly by the discovery of America and other lands—conveying to the inhabitants of Europe a new perspective on the richness and variety of man’s customs and histories. The exploration of the religions of the non-European world began and this brought about a deep understanding of cultures of other peoples, which were unparalleled in that area of religious study until modern times. Thus, the inquiries of the 16th to 18th centuries initiated an accumulation of data about other cultures that stimulated studies of other men’s religions and went beyond apologetic concerns, which hitherto had been dominant (“Theory of Religion”, 2004, CD-ROM).

Current Trends in Theories of Religious Studies

There has been a plethora of religious theories since about four decades ago, that is, from 1970, each demanding patronage from all a sundry, particularly, adherents of religions. Some of these theories include, Cognitive theory, Rational Choice Theory, The Theory of Religious Economy, Sensitivity Theory, Phenomenology of Religion, etc. These new theories, which have been in vogue and classified as scientific approaches to the study of religion, dictate the trend of religious studies in modern times. They compliment the psychological, philosophical, phenomenological and reductionist theories of Karl Barth, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud et. al. of the Middle period.. Reductionism in the physical sciences is an attempt to demonstrate that the central concepts and conclusion of one science can be accurately and completely understood by the principles of another science (Idinopulos and Yonan eds; 1994: 1). For the scope of this research, we only present a handful of a swarm of scientific approaches that dictate the trend of religious studies in modern times.

1. Cognitive Theory

Cognitive theory is a theory of psychology that attempts to explain human behaviour by understanding the thought processes. The assumption is that humans are logical beings who make the choices that are most sensible to them. “Information processing” is a commonly used description of the mental process, comparing the human mind to a computer.

Todd Tremlin, the author of *Minds and Gods – The Cognitive Foundations of Religion*, answers in his book the questions of why people believe in supernatural beings and specifically, why they believe in particular beings. The answers Tremlin offered in his book indicate that gods are described not primarily as theological concepts or as social or cultural constructs but as the products of human cognition (Tremlin, 2006: 6). A palpable solution to the question, according

to him, can be found in the manner the brain functions. It is central to what comes into the body and what goes out – it interprets and interacts with the external world and it concerns the physical system and mental conceptions of our inner world. Minds and Gods are connected because supernatural beings as well as the religious system which they are part of are among the plethora of mental conceptions acquired, represented and transmitted by human brains. The cognitive science of religion holds for our understanding of human religiosity – man can only accommodate religious ideas which his brain can precipitate, and that religious concepts can easily become personally compelling (Tremelin, 2006: 6).

Tremelin's palpable solution to the question posed about human cognition is corroborated by Sharon Begley in his article, "Is God All in Our Heads?" in Newsweek, an International Newsmagazine. He writes that, "As a neurologist, he accepts that all we see, hear, feel, and think is mediated or created in the brain" (Begley, 2001: 3). He further said that it is not surprising to him that a religious experience is actually actively reflected in the brain.

Contributing to the cognitive theory on why religions exist, Pascal Boyer says that:

There are several standard sceptical answers to the perennial question of why religions exist. They are said to provide explanations for natural phenomena, dreams, the origin of the world and the presence in it of human beings, or the existence of evil and suffering; they provide comfort in the face of suffering and death; they help to hold society together and give a basis for morality; or they are simply an expression of human gullibility and willingness to believe anything (Boyer, 2001: Retrieved November 22, 2008 from the World Wide Web: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>).

At the heart of his explanation is the notion that religious beliefs arise from the *normal* functioning of the human mind. To account for this he introduces the notion of "inference systems": that is, explanatory devices adapted to different sorts of events. These devices are called on to explain ordinary occurrences such as a tennis ball breaking a window, but Boyer's claim, which he develops at length with abundant citation of anthropological material, is that exactly the same principle underlies the generation of religious beliefs in invisible beings and hidden influences on events.

This counter-intuitive notion is the basis of his theory of religion. He argues that, our ordinary explanatory devices gives rise to religious ideas, which is why certain kinds of religious belief are common all over the world whereas other, conceivable, beliefs are rare or absent. Moreover, these mental processes are not accessible to introspection; they produce beliefs but we don't know how these arise, which is why such beliefs are so persuasive.

Having established the basis of his approach, Boyer then goes on to apply his theory to various kinds of religious phenomena. These include gods and spirits, death, rituals, other types of rituals, and doctrinal beliefs. Here he provides a wealth of anthropological material. Also, Boyer discusses what perhaps the most intriguing question of all is:

Why are certain people apparently immune to religion? If it is normal for the human mind to form religious beliefs, does this mean that people who fail to do so are abnormal? Unfortunately, Boyer

does not have an answer. Theories about the origin of religion apply only in the aggregate; they tell us about group psychodynamics but not about individual mental processes. What we can say, however, is that if it is true that religious belief is natural, religion will always be with us and will not be displaced by rationalism or science. Scientific thinking goes contrary to the spontaneous tendency of the mind: "science is every bit as 'unnatural' to the human mind as religion is 'natural'" (Boyer, 2001, "Religion explained: The human instincts that fashion gods, spirits and ancestors", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 2.50 p.m.).

Piaget (1896-1980), another psychologist, indicates that there are two major aspects to the Cognitive theory: the process of coming to know and the stages we move through as we gradually acquire this ability. Piaget was one of the most influential researchers in the area of developmental psychology in the late 20th century, and through his work, we understand the details of this theory. However, for the purpose of this paper we cannot discuss them, but suffice it to mention that the Cognitive theory is a one of the current trends to reckon with in religious studies.

2. Rational Choice Theory

The theory defines rationality as "marked by consistent, goal-related activity", and it sees religion as essentially a rational response to human needs hence the title Rational Choice Theory. The rational choice theory has been applied to religions, among others by the sociologists Stark and Bainbridge, since World War one and two respectively. They see religions as systems of "compensators". Compensators are a body of language and practices that compensate for some physical lack or frustrated goal. Compensators can be categorised into specific compensators, that is, compensators for the failure to achieve specific goals, and general compensators, compensators for failure to achieve any goal. Stark and Bainbridge, define religion as a system of compensator that relies on the supernatural. They assert that only a supernatural compensator can explain death or the meaning of life ("Theory of Religion", 2004: CD-ROM).

Studies have revealed in modern times a trend in religious proliferation which has roots in the maturing of cults and sects into denominations. Stark and Bainbridge say that there are four models of cult formation: the Psychopathological Model, the Entrepreneurial Model, the Social Model and the Normal Revelations model (Stark and Bainbridge, 1996, "Google Books Questia Selected Preview", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 2.50 p.m.). Some religions are better described by one model than another, though all apply to differing degrees to all religions. The inclination to these models is one of the reasons for religious plurality, which is a trend in religious practises in modern times. Thus, the rational choice theory is noticed to be one of the trends responsible for religious proliferation.

3. The Theory of Religious Economy

The theory of religious economy is the application of rational choice theory as a theory of religion. The theory of religious economy argues that the economic model of supply and demand has a significant role in the development and success of organized religions (Muller, 1975: 35-46). A religious economy consists of a market (i.e. a demand for religion) and a supply of different religious organizations. A competitive free market or economy makes it possible for religious

suppliers to meet the demands of different religious consumers. By offering an array of religions and religious products, a competitive religious economy stimulates activity in the marketplace.

This sees different religious organizations competing for followers in a religious economy, much like the way businesses compete for consumers in a commercial economy. Theorists assert that a true religious economy is the result of religious pluralism, giving the population a wider variety of choices in religion. Berger writes that:

The polarization of religion brought about by secularization and the concomitant loss of commonality and/or reality *ipso facto* leads to pluralistic situation. Hence the sociological and social-psychological characteristic of the pluralistic situation is that religion can longer be imposed but must be marketed like a commodity (Berger, 1969: 138).

According to the theory, the more religions there are, the more likely the population is to be religious and hereby contradicting the secularization thesis. However, secularization can polarize religion and can also lead to pluralisation, which in turn de-monopolizes religious structures.

Revival is a phenomenon in religious parlance that is noticed as a trend which sustains religious groups. According to Rodney Stark, revival is another aspect of religious change which coincides with secularization. Over time established religious groups will spawn smaller and less worldly sub groups of the faith. This trend of revival provides a plausible explanation why religion never seems to fade away and to why previously prominent religious organizations have dissipated. Revival produces a shift in which religious groups may metamorphosize into another group thereby leading the demise of a form of religion.

In all, we submit like other scholars who have researched into the theories of religious studies that the economic theory of religion serves a number of important functions, one of which is to provide an alternative to the state and to the local community in enforcing good social behaviour in general and property rights in particular. A religious doctrine changes in a manner predictable by economic theory. Although applied to a particular period and culture, particularly in the middle period, the theory is perfectly general and has implications for behaviour in other cultures and other periods in history.

4. Sensitivity theory

This is a comprehensive, psychological theory of religion. The theory emphasizes that people are attracted to religions due to felt needs. It suggests that there are 16 basic propensities in man that influence the psychological appeal of religious behaviour. These desires include: power, independence, curiosity, acceptance, order, saving, honour, idealism, social contact, family, status, vengeance, romance, eating, physical exercise, and tranquility. Steven Reiss, the author of this new theory says that:

These basic human needs – which include honour, idealism, curiosity and acceptance – can explain why certain people are attracted to religion; why *human beings*, God's images express psychologically opposite qualities, and the relationship between personality and religious experiences (Reiss, 2000, "Google Books Questia Selected Preview", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>, retrieved November 22, 2008, 2.50 p.m.).

Reiss' research suggests that the quest for independence is a key psychological desire that separates religious and non-religious people. In a study published in 2000, Reiss found that religious people expressed a strong desire for interdependence with others (mostly Christians), but those who are not religious, however, showed a stronger need to be self-reliant and independent. The study also showed that religious people valued honour more than non-religious people, which Reiss suggests as a reason many people embrace religion to show loyalty to parents and ancestors. According to Reiss, people embrace those aspects of religious imagery that express their strongest psychological needs and deepest personal values. For him, "People who have a strong need for order should enjoy ritualized religious experiences, whereas those with a weak need for order may prefer more spontaneous expression of faith," Reiss emphasized that the theory addresses the psychology of religious experiences and has no implications for the validity or invalidity of religious beliefs.

5. Phenomenological Approach to Religious Studies

This theory concerns the experiential aspect of religion, describing religious phenomena in terms consistent with the orientation of the worshippers. It views religion as being made up of different components, and studies these components across religious traditions so that people can understand them. The phenomenological approach to the study of religion owes its conceptualization and development, in a large part, to the following three scholars, Chantepie de la Saussaye, Kristensen, and van der Leeuw. Their perspectives throw light on this theory for a better understanding, however, details of their work is not the focus of our work. The term, phenomenon of religion is used to mean nothing than the investigation of the phenomena of religion on one hand, or it means the comparative study and the classification of different types of religious phenomena, on the other hand. There is little, if any, regard for specific phenomenological concepts, methods, or procedures of verification.

An Overview of Trends in The History of Religion

In the first place the stress was placed upon the securing of material to fuel the study of religion. The amount of data has grown exponentially over the last one hundred and fifty years and it continues to grow by the year. It is impossible to keep track of it all and the computer revolution has only served to accelerate this trend.

Secondly, more stress was placed upon historical, textual and allied matters to begin with. This was often allied to a concern to get back to the beginnings of religion whether textually or anthropologically and there was less interest in contemporary matters.

Thirdly, the study of religion began as a purely male preserve and as a mainly western matter. Western Europe took the lead followed by the United States. Although more women have entered the field and although scholars from Australasia, Asia, Africa, the other Americas and Oceania have become involved – in the case of Japan in rapidly increasing numbers – it still remains a mainly western male preserve. Although Edward Said's 'Orientalism' highlighted the implicit colonial aspect of this trend it has continued in other ways, including post-modernism, and continues still (Whaling, 2006: 76).

Fourthly, interest arose originally in the study of the major religious traditions as exemplified in Muller's 'Sacred Books of the East'. Studies of these traditions advanced in depth of analysis as did studies of dead religions such as those of Greece, Rome and the ancient Near East. Studies of minor traditions, esoteric traditions, new religious movements, secular religions and so on emerged later.

Fifthly, there arose a tacit division of labour between different academic disciplines as they arose. Each one of the disciplines studies religion from their perspectives. For example, Anthropologists tended to study primal societies, historians and textual scholars go for literate traditions, sociologists incline to modern societies in their social form, psychologists have religious experience as their main interest, theologians delve into beliefs systems, while phenomenologists pay attention to the phenomena of religion, and so on.

Sixthly, there arose in the later eras a desire to study religion in order to 'understand'. This was fuelled by the rise of phenomenology but was implicit elsewhere in different ways. The data of religion were used to open up the possibility of a deeper understanding of religion and religious traditions, both in the past and in the present.

Seventhly, with the rise of the social sciences, interest arose in the functions of religion in society rather than the substance of religion as such. Marx, Freud and Durkheim with their atheistic backgrounds contributed to this trend that became more prominent, although often centred in methodology rather than religious unbelief as such.

In the eighth place the question of the religious allegiance or non-allegiance of the scholar, the insider/outsider debate, became more prominent as a general issue. This could become a heated matter or involve an implied consensus to the effect that the 'insider' could have access to the inwardness of religion and to personal faith and spirituality in a way not available or known to the 'outsider'. The outsider on the other hand, could sometimes see more of the wider picture. The study and the practice of religion are different but the practitioner of religion can effectively study religion whereas the 'pure' student of religion cannot easily practise it.

Ninthly, there has arisen recently the debate about the word 'religion' and the words for 'religions' such as Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. Helpful here is the differentiation between different meanings of the word 'religion'. It can mean religiousness in the sense of personal religion, religion in the sense of religious traditions serving religious persons, religion in the sense of religious traditions as wider socio-historical entities, religion as ideal religion to which religious traditions aspire, and religion as a discipline over against other disciplines. More work is needed to bring out these nuances. More work is needed also to bring out the complexities within each religious tradition, not only between different 'sects' but also between conservatives, fundamentalists, liberals and radicals. Attempts to get rid of the words 'religion' and 'religions' have been made from W. C. Smith's 'Meaning and End of Religion' onwards but it is more important to engage with the substance of 'religion' and 'religions' lying behind the attempts to get rid of these words.

In the tenth place there is the present need to coordinate better the study of religion. It has become fragmented. It is located within different disciplines including Religious Studies, Theology, Sociology, Psychology, History, Phenomenology, Language Studies, Literature, Aesthetics, and so on. It is engaged in different levels and types of Religious Education in schools, colleges, universities and further education bodies. It is concerned in different ways with schools, hospitals, the wider health service, the armed forces, prisons, the social services and so on. It serves different ends including the need to understand one's own and other traditions, the need to critique one's own and other traditions, the need to recognise different motives for studying religion (by women, by former colonial peoples, by other races, by people of different sexualities and so on), the need to grapple with or go beyond pluralism and multi-culturalism. There is the need for dialogue between different kinds of scholars of religion and for the consolidation of Religious Studies departments as unifiers of the field of Religious Studies.

In the eleventh place the study of religion in recent times has moved perhaps unwittingly in the direction of the study of contemporary religious traditions, especially in the West, through the medium of sociology and anthropology. However, the study of religion remains implicitly the study of all religious traditions at all times and in all places in relation to all of their aspects not only their contemporary social concerns.

Finally, there is an uncanny sense of ending where we began when it was stated that four kinds of scholars were engaged in the rise of the study of religion. Those four types remain not dissimilar today. We still have the scholars who see religion as a creative force that is important in the world today in enabling us to understand religious traditions and the world better and whose fine scholarship is partly aimed at increasing inter-religious understanding and mitigating any clash of cultures. We still have the second type of scholar who, while being non-religious or irreligious, is still interested in the study of religion. A contemporary example would be John Hinnells, an atheist, who writes, "I question whether one can understand any culture and history - political or social - without understanding the relevant religions" (Hinnells, 1978: 6). A third type of scholar remains the so-called scientist of religion who wishes to remain solely at the level of scholarship without becoming involved in the religious or other concerns of the wider world. And the fourth type of scholar remains the liberal scholar of all religions who, while having his or her attachment to a particular religion, engages in the wider study of religion as phenomenologist, historian, theologian, or whatever. Different scholars may straddle these boundaries that are not totally exclusive. It is important that they engage in dialogue with each other as the study of religion moves into a new age.

With these discussions on religious studies since few decades ago, even though we do not claim to be exhaustive, we do hope that we have documented a handful of the trends that would give an insight and stimulate a further research into the clue for religious proliferation worldwide.

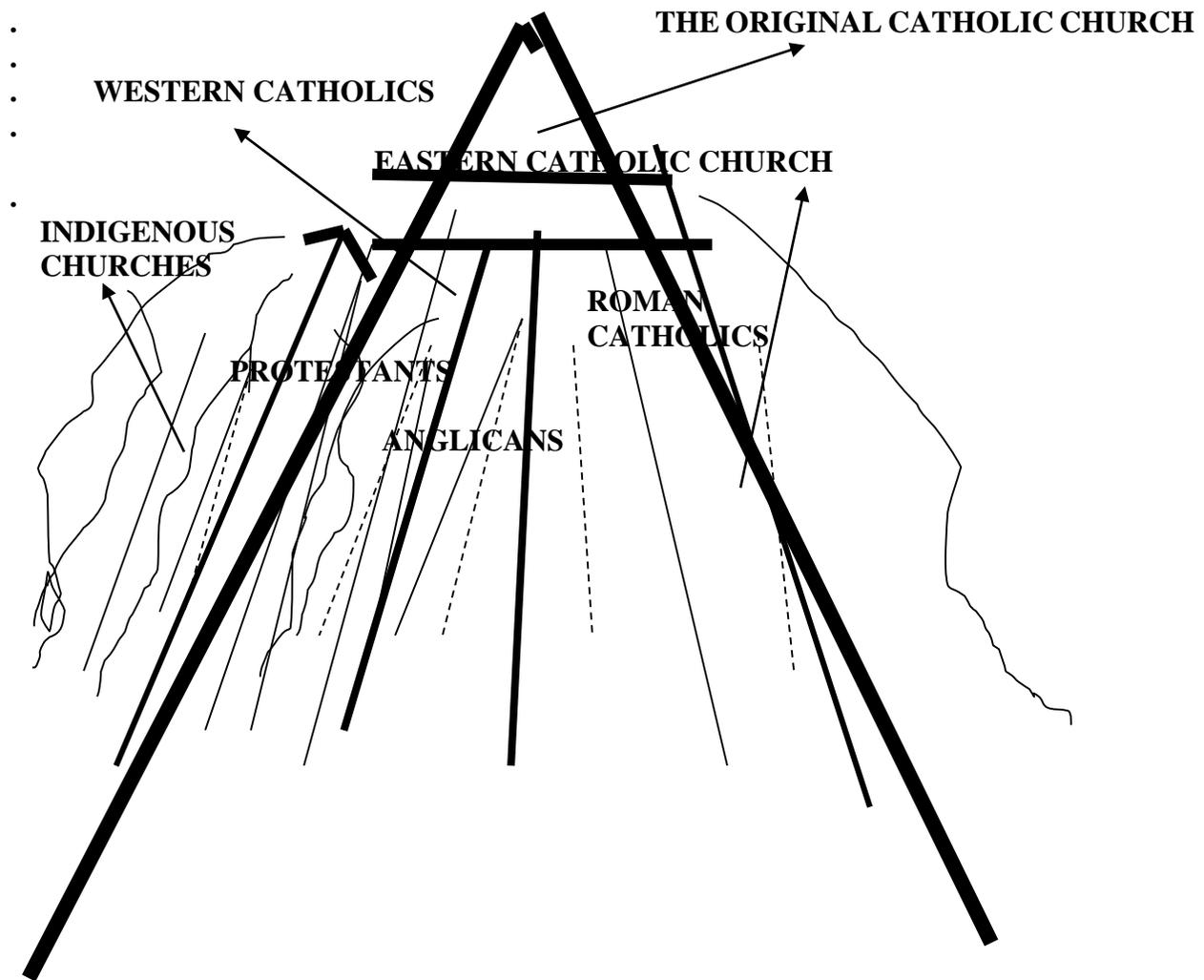
CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

Fig 1: Indicating the Spread of Christian Denominations

By taking after Jerkins (2005), I here demonstrate that there is much proliferation of Christian denominations that stemmed out from the lone and original Catholic Church after the Lutheran Reformation in 1517 as can be seen in the figure 1 above. The bold lines in the figure above marked out boundaries of major Christian groups, while the thin lines represent other minor but established groups that came out from the main groups. We have the Western and Eastern Catholic groups before the reformation. After 1517, we now have the Roman Catholics, the Anglican, and the Protestants from where we have a plethora of denominations such as the Pentecostal Movement and including the Indigenous Christian groups. The broken thin lines indicate news sects that are constantly branching off from their original bodies. Since this happens among Christian groups, the situation may not be different in other religious groups of the world.

CONCLUSION

Modernity has posed acute challenges to traditional religions due to the developments in science and technological advancement in recent times. In the West, it is a general trend that membership in mainstream Christian denominations began to decline, and candidates for the priesthood were less numerous since the 1960s. For a large number of people in modern societies, religion is neither good nor bad but simply irrelevant, given the many alternative ways to find meaning in various forms of cultural pursuits, ethical ideals, and lifestyles. These challenges to religion are partly a result of the prestige of science (Paden, 2007, CD-ROM).

The sciences describe a universe without reference to deities, the soul, or spiritual meaning. In addition, critical studies of biblical history have demonstrated that the Bible is not unique among ancient religious and historical documents. For example, the biblical stories of the Garden of Eden and the Deluge (universal flood) are common to other ancient Middle Eastern religions. Other factors that have contributed to a decline in religious participation in the modern world include the presentation of religion as a pre-scientific form of superstitious thinking, as a source of political control and divisiveness, as a confirmation of established patriarchal values, or as an emotional crutch. In addition, many families are no longer able to maintain stable religious traditions because they are disconnected from traditional, supportive religions or as a result of mixed or nonreligious marriages. We have noticed a family of 15 adults in our station where everybody belongs to different Christian denominations. Another influence has been the loss of community and social commitment that has followed in the wake of increased mobility. Frequent changes of location can result in a sense of impermanence or instability.

Despite all these factors, religion has not disappeared, and in many places it is thriving. Although secularization has had its effects, religion has been kept alive as a result, in part, of the adaptation of religion to secular values; the repositioning of conservative religion in direct opposition to secular values; and the emergence of new religious movements that meet the specific and diverse spiritual needs of people in contemporary society.

In many instances, religion has been able to adapt to modernity by accommodating the diversity of contemporary culture. Many religious traditions have broadened the concept of God to allow for the coexistence of various faiths, have acknowledged gender equality by ordaining women, and have adopted outward characteristics of modern culture in general. Many groups have benefited from the use of electronic media and networking, and some have developed religious functions for the Internet, including electronic prayer groups. Modern marketing techniques have been employed to increase membership. Many churches incorporate the latest kinds of support groups, counselling techniques, and popular music.

Evangelicalism in its various forms, including fundamentalism, offers a different response to modernity. Conservative movements, which have appeared internationally in every major religious tradition, have gained vitality by protesting what they see as the conspicuous absence of moral values in secular society. In times of anxiety and uncertainty, such movements present Scripture as a source of doctrinal certainty and of moral absolutes. Against the secularism of the day,

evangelical movements have succeeded in creating their own alternative cultures and have acquired considerable political influence.

For all its challenges to traditional religious identity, modernity has at the same time created new spiritual opportunities. Thousands of new religious movements emerged around the world in the late 20th century, offering alternative forms of community to people otherwise removed from past associations and disenchanted with modern values. Collectively, these new religions offer a large number of options, addressing virtually every conceivable type of spiritual need. In a sense, modernity has created needs and problems for which new movements are able to present themselves as solutions. Some offer ethnic revitalization; others, techniques of meditation and self-improvement; and still others, the power of alternative or spiritual forms of healing. Buddhist and Hindu derived movements continue to have considerable followings among Westerners searching for truths beyond the Judeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore we live in a time in History, where home life has become less stable; an international movement such as the Unification Church emphasizes the holiness and divine restoration of the institution of the family.

Currently, one of the most rapidly growing religious movements is Pentecostalism, which takes its name from the festival day when the first Christian community felt the power of the Holy Spirit poured out on them. Pentecostalism's grass roots services provide direct, ecstatic spiritual experiences.

A quite different but also widespread form of spirituality is that of the so-called New Age Movement, which offers individuals the opportunity to reconnect with mystical dimensions of the self and thus with the wider cosmos—relationships that are typically obscured by secular culture and often are not addressed in biblical traditions. From the perspectives of categorizing theories of religious studies, focusing on what religion is and does, the wide variety of theories here discussed in this paper and those not discussed, the current trend of religious movements, the diversified opinions of scholars about theories of religion, indicate that there is a huge proliferation of religion and religious groups today. Thus it has been demonstrated in this paper that due to the plethora of opinions about what religion is and does, and the quest for man to satisfy his felt needs, spiritually, materially or otherwise, are the reasons for the proliferation of religions worldwide.

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