Born in the village of Biebrich am Rhein, Dilthey was the son of a liberal-minded, Calvinist clergyman and court preacher to the Duke of Nassau. His mother was the daughter of a renowned musician who instilled in her young son such a love for listening to music that he came to regard it as a religious act. It was the wish of his parents that he follow in his father's footsteps and become a clergyman. Thus, after completing his secondary education at the Gymnasium in Wiesbaden, and despite his own preference for law, he was encouraged to take up the study of theology, first at Heidelberg, then at Berlin. His major instructors at both schools were historians of philosophy whose rather pantheistic leanings, combined with the lingering influence of his childhood exposure to the Pietistic emphasis of his parents upon the inward experience of God, awakened in him the possibility of devoting the rest of his life to uncovering the "history of the Christian Weltanschauung of the West." While, therefore, he would go on to pass some qualifying examinations in the field of theology for the sake of satisfying parental expectations, and would even preach a trial sermon or two in his hometown, his real interest had shifted from theology as such to its history and the evolution of philosophy, science, and world history in general.

Like many other of his European contemporaries whose ties with traditional Christian beliefs had been loosened by the postrevolutionary, scientific spirit of the age, he had lost much of his faith in traditional Christianity, replacing its other-worldly attitude with the this-worldly enthusiasm of Romantic humanism. He would remain interested throughout the rest of his life in the scientific and historical study of religion, but he no longer felt qualified to serve in the ministry. He instead threw himself into scholarly work, and in hopes of retrieving what he still suspected was the genuinely religious-philosophical Weltanschauung lying buried under the wreckage of traditional theology and metaphysics, he dedicated much of his time and energy to the study of great thinkers like Bruno, Goethe, Schleiermacher, and Hegel, whose panentheistic interpretation of religion he found most appealing. But unlike Comte, he never conceived it to be his vocation in life to serve as the prophet of some new religion. After professorships at Basle, Kiel, Breslau and Berlin, he retired from teaching in 1905 and devoted himself exclusively to his scholarly research and writing. He died in 1911, without ever having completed his Life of Schleiermacher or any other of his major projects.

Dilthey on Religion. Given the dynamic interplay between the conceptualization of any cultural system as a whole and selection of its relevant parts (ideas, persons, actions, artifacts, etc.), any concept of religion is problematic. As a working definition, however, religion may be described as that cultural system whereby humans seek supreme happiness in terms of their relation to that which is invisible, either in the sense of unseen supernatural powers activating the regular processes and chance events of nature (as in primitive religion), or, under the influence of religious geniuses (prophets and mystics) trying to blend the tragic dimensions of life, in the sense of some strange and unfamiliar personal force emanating from the depths of life with which the lonely ascetic might commune, or finally, when traditional mythology is reinterpreted in a more rational and comprehensive way, in the sense of an unseen supernatural order, in the context of which everything takes its value and meaning.

Among the objective expressions of such religiosity are the various religious worldviews
Weltanschauungen: a theistic defense of the freedom of both man and God; a panentheistic affirmation of divine immanence in the world; or even a revolt against otherworldliness. For most people today the possibility of experiencing such religious states of mind in their own personal existence is sharply circumscribed. By encountering an historically religious phenomenon like Luther, however, one can imaginatively relive ways of life that are beyond one’s existential capacity. The experience of the other can become one’s own lived experience (Erlebnis), which in turn can become the key for understanding (Verstehen) the historical reality of the other. As an exercise in wringing from every experience its content, this will not only alert one to the relativity of every sort of belief (including one’s own), but also increase knowledge of oneself, and renew one’s appreciation for the continuity of the creative force operating at the heart of human history.

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