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

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

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

In place of a historical narrative, an alternative procedure has been adopted. Each member of the team has summarised the developments in the study of religion since 1945 in the area of his or her own expertise. In volume one, Ursula King analyses historical and phenomenological approaches, Frank Whaling looks at comparative approaches, Kees Bolle sums up studies of myths and other religious texts, Ninian Smart
grapples with the scientific study of religion in its plurality, and Frank Whaling places the study of religion in its global context and looks at the relationship of the philosophy of science to the study of religion. In volume two, David Wulff investigates psychological approaches, Michael Hill, Günter Kehrer and Bert Hardin share the task of interpreting sociological approaches, Tony Jackson deals with social anthropological approaches, Jarich Oosten looks at cultural anthropological approaches, and Wouter van Beek reflects on cultural anthropology and the many functions of religion. In this way, a breadth and depth of expertise is brought to bear upon this important topic.

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

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

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

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