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Anthropology of Religion

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Abstract

An anthropological approach to religion is characterised by engagement with the people studied through participant observation in the field. Although the ethnographer might be changed by this experience, the majority of anthropologists are constrained by academic and cultural conventions that prevent them from fully engaging with it. The challenge for anthropologists is to find a language that moves beyond the security of phenomenological or scientific approaches to religion, without becoming apologists for any one theological perspective.

The study of religion has been central to anthropology since its inception. As an inclusive, comparative study of human societies, from their prehistoric origins to the present, anthropology has sought to describe, classify and explain religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, the term 'religion' is elusive and problematic. While some early missionaries denied that the 'savage' peoples they encountered had any religion at all, others saw religion everywhere. There has also been a tendency to label anything we do not understand in other cultures, past or present, as religious or mystical. The term often lacks even an approximate translation in non-Western languages, and scholars often fall back on the 'I know it when I see it' line of argument.

There are many different strands or schools of thought within the anthropological study of religion, and as Lambek (2008: 2) has observed, it is the conversation or tensions between these approaches that serve to define anthropology as a discipline, as opposed to sociology, religious studies, theology, philosophy, ethics or one of the many other subjects that include religion within their remit. An anthropological approach (to paraphrase Lambek, 2008) is holistic, treating religion as an aspect of culture rather than a separate sphere of activity. It is universalistic in its scope, with all of human society past and present in its purview. The ethnographic, comparative method is central to the discipline, and it seeks to maintain a delicate balance between local knowledge and qualitative data on the one hand and universal categories and generalisable 'facts' that lend themselves to theoretical speculation on the other. Context is central to any anthropological study. In the case of religion, this means that

history, politics, social, environmental or economic factors may be given as much weight as ritual, theological speculation or cosmological understandings of the world. Lambek's final two defining characteristics of an anthropological approach are that it is dialogical and critical. There has certainly been a move in recent years to give those studied a more authoritative voice in the interpretation of their beliefs and practices, while recognising that an academic readership requires a different conversation, one that engages with scholarly debates and produces cultural translations that can appear alien to those whose religion is described. The critical, reflexive element in anthropology has often agonised over, or at least debated, the extent to which any genuine dialogue can take place. While this has led to greater diversity in style and genre, some would argue that a dialogical approach merely masks the hegemonic control exercised by the anthropologist who collects, interprets and presents another religion or society.

In an almost poetic depiction of what constitutes an anthropological approach to religion, Michael Lambek (2008, pp. 4–5) describes it as 'neither fully objective nor fully subjective . . . poised in the mediating space of culture or the social . . . participating in a dialectic that both objectifies and subjectifies.' In what could even be regarded as a *vade mecum* for the anthropologist of religion, he describes 'good anthropology' as that which,

. . . understands that religious worlds are real, vivid, and significant to those who construct and inhabit them and it tries, as artfully as it can, to render those realities for others, in their sensory richness, philosophic depth, emotional range, and moral complexity. In acknowledging the value and power of such worlds, but also their variety and competition, anthropology must understand them as so many means for acting, asking, shaping, and thinking, rather than as a set of fixed answers whose validity either can be independently assessed (objectivism) or must be accepted as such (relativism).

However hard the anthropologist of religion may seek to be a sympathetic observer and interpreter, and to avoid any form of crude reductionism, it remains the case that for the majority the limit of their understanding will be, as Lambek suggests, an acknowledgement of religious worlds as real and significant *to those who construct and inhabit them*. In this sense the study of religion is not on a par with the study of economic or political structures or rules around who one marries or how one addresses one's in-laws. Jonathan Haidt (2007) observed in the case of morality that, 'We all look at the world through some kind of moral lens, and because most of the academic community uses the same lens, we validate each other's visions and distortions,' a problem he sees as particularly acute in some of the recent scientific writing on religion (which could certainly include cognitivist approaches within the anthropology of religion, but also a much broader sweep of anthropological writing).¹

In *Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* (Lambek 2008, p. 8), the majority of the articles selected by Lambek deal with the 'religious and symbolic construction of the world more than the way such constructions respond to it.' One could argue, and I would somewhat controversially hold this view, that most of what we choose to study under the rubric of religion is to some extent a response to the world (seen and unseen), rather than or as much as a construction of it, and is certainly understood as such by the vast majority of people who profess or can be said to practice any form of religion – however broadly and inclusively defined. Despite the richness and depth of over a century of anthropological investigation and writing, the prevailing professional scepticism as to the existential, ontological status of religion (the 'reality' of gods, spirits, deities, ancestors, or the practical efficacy of ritual or magic or the existence of a dialogue with the non-material world), can so easily sound and feel patronising. The problem is not so much that anthropologists of religion find it hard to enter into or accept the cosmological underpinnings of other worlds – as opposed to merely explicating them – but that there is a disciplinary consensus as to what can be written about and that takes fright at any suggestion that 'the natives' (including our own natives – religious practitioners in Western societies) might just be onto something. The attempt to find a new language that does not merely deconstruct religion – something that is second nature to anthropologists – or place it securely in a contextual box that contains everything except that which gives it its life and energy, is arguably the greatest challenge facing those who wish to study religion through an anthropological lens.

Religious Experience

Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), Professor of Anthropology at Oxford from 1946 to 1970, is remembered, among other things, for his studies of the Azande peoples of Central Africa, with whom he lived between 1926 and 1930. Evans-Pritchard was not afraid to engage in spirited debates with his Zande interlocutors and, despite the colonial context of his ethnography, he gives the reader a flavour of individuals and cultures grappling with issues of central importance to them. Throughout his work, Evans-Pritchard presents Zande oracles, magic and witchcraft as a logical, coherent set of beliefs and practices. He came to regard the consulting of an oracle before undertaking an action as a sensible way of ordering one's affairs – no better or worse than any other. When entering into discussions of rationality with his Zande informants, Evans-Pritchard never patronised them by assuming that they were incapable of making sound judgments or defending their beliefs and practices. An example was his encounter with witchcraft. According to the Azande, moving lights emanate from the body of the sleeping witch as the activated witchcraft substance stalks its prey. Evans-Pritchard writes:

I have only once seen witchcraft on its path. I had been sitting late in my hut writing notes. About midnight, before retiring, I took a spear and went for my usual nocturnal stroll. I was walking in the garden at the back of my hut, amongst banana trees, when I noticed a bright light passing at the back of my servants' huts towards the homestead of a man called Tupoi. As this seemed worth investigation I followed its passage until a grass screen obscured the view. I ran quickly through my hut to the other side in order to see where the light was going to but did not regain sight of it. I know that only one man, a member of my household, had a lamp that might have given off so bright a light, but next morning he told me that what I had seen was witchcraft. Shortly afterwards, on the same morning, an old relative of Tupoi and an inmate of his homestead died. This event fully explained the light I had seen. I never discovered its real origin, which was possibly a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate, but the coincidence of the direction along which the light moved and the subsequent death accorded well with Zande ideas. (Evans-Pritchard 1976, p. 11)

Evans-Pritchard, in reflecting afterwards on the event, sought to reassert his own Western cosmology. The alternative would have been to accept an Azande view of the world, based on the belief that human beings can be witches and can project a visible witchcraft substance that has the power to kill other human beings. While not wishing to go this far, it is nevertheless clear that Evans-Pritchard did not simply dismiss the world-view of his Zande informants as primitive or inferior. He allowed himself to be drawn into its logic, and to reason from within Zande categories of thought.

This movement from scepticism to shared experience with those in the culture studied, and then back to some external point of reference, is common among anthropologists working on religious themes. Tanya Luhrmann (1989) studying urban witchcraft in London in the 1980s was similarly drawn into the worlds of her informants, yet without ultimately accepting their underlying cosmologies. Luhrmann describes humour and play as two attitudes basic to witchcraft, and in an evocative description of a 'Maypole' ritual performed by her coven in an urban room, shows how humour and play can awaken a sense of wonder in those participating. A cord attached to the ceiling served as a maypole, and the participants used strings of coloured yarn instead of ribbons. The dancers' intention was to weave into the 'maypole' those things that they wished to weave into their lives. Apparently an even number of participants are needed to wind a maypole successfully, but as there were eleven persons present the coven chose to disregard this ordinary reality rather than to leave anybody out.

The result, to begin with, was chaos and confusion. Everyone was laughing as we dodged in and out, creating a tangled knot of yarn. It was scarcely a scene of mystical power; a ritual magician would have blanched pale and turned in his wand on the spot. But an odd thing began to happen as we continued. The laughter began to build a strange atmosphere, as if ordinary reality was fading away. Nothing existed but the interplay of colored cords and moving

bodies. The smiles on faces that flashed in and out of sight began to resemble the secret smiles of archaic Greek statues, hinting at the highest and most humorous of Mysteries. We began to sing; we moved in rhythm and a pattern evolved in the dance – nothing that could ever be mapped or plotted rationally; it was a pattern with an extra element that always and inevitably would defy explanation. The snarl of yarn resolved itself into an intricately woven cord. The song became a chant; the room glowed, and the cord pulsed with power like a live thing, an umbilicus linking us to all that is within and beyond. At last the chant peaked and died; we dropped into trance. When we awoke, all together, at the same moment, we faced each other with wonder. (Luhmann 1989, pp. 334–5)

Luhmann remained grounded in her sceptical stance to witchcraft despite the ‘interpretive drift’ that she observed in her reactions and interpretations of events. Some anthropologists have gone further, not only participating in the rituals of others and sharing the emotions that arise, but outright acceptance of the cosmological stance of informants. Paul Stoller studied as a ‘sorcerer’s apprentice’ among the Songhay of Niger in West Africa and recorded that ‘The Songhay world challenged the basic premises of my scientific training. Living in Songhay forced me to confront the limitations of the Western philosophical tradition. My seventeen-year association with Songhay reflects the slow evolution of my thought, a thought profoundly influenced by Songhay categories and Songhay wisdom’ (Stoller & Olkes 1989, p. 227). Stoller, unlike so many others who have studied religion or ritual in other cultures, did not manage, or perhaps wish, to shrug off a Songhay world view on his return to the familiarity of American culture. Perhaps fear had fundamentally reshaped Stoller’s understanding of reality, for he fled Niger when he believed himself under attack by another sorcerer.

For Edith Turner, participation in a healing ritual among the Ndembu of Zambia, in which she had been invited by a healer called Singleton to act as one of the ‘doctors’, was equally an experience of transformation, although an altogether happier one. The ritual, known as Ihamba, involved the removal of a deceased hunter’s tooth from the back of a sick woman. Turner had witnessed the Ihamba before, earlier on the same visit in 1985, and with her late anthropologist husband, Victor Turner, when they had lived with the Ndembu in the 1950s. But she had not previously been a central participant in the ritual. The saying of ‘words’ to clear the air was an important prelude to what happens in this kind of healing, in which the participation of relatives and significant community members is essential. Having brought various grievances into the open, including her own, Turner writes:

I felt the spiritual motion, a tangible feeling of breakthrough going through the whole group . . . Suddenly Meru [the patient] raised her arm, stretched it in liberation, and I *saw* with my own eyes a giant thing emerging out of the flesh on her back. This thing was a large gray blob about six inches across, a

deep gray opaque thing emerging as a sphere. I was amazed – delighted. I still laugh with the realization of having seen it, the ihamba, and so big! We were all just one in triumph. The gray thing was actually out there, visible, and you could see Singleton's hands working and scrabbling on the back – and then the thing was there no more. Singleton had it in his pouch, pressing it in with his other hand as well. The receiving hand was ready; he transferred whatever it was into the can and capped the castor oil leaf and bark lid over it. It was done. (Turner 1992, p. 149)

I suspect that the divide among scholars of religion is not primarily between those who are happy to go along with the fieldwork experience without seeking to analyse it and those who participate while keeping a firm grasp of the differences between a 'primitive', 'mystical' mentality and a scientific, rationalistic one (although this division does exist). The real distinction is probably between those who have experienced something extraordinary, moving, or profound that makes sense within the conceptual framework and context of the people performing the ritual or participating in an event, even if at odds with the ethnographer's own rational understanding, and those who have simply not had such an experience. There are, after all, sceptics and believers within all societies, so why not among anthropologists too? Even Tibet's Dalai Lama is able to leave open a window of doubt concerning his own reincarnated status, however central this belief may be to his own identity and to the faith of the Tibetan people. Anthropology is distinguished by its method, and since the days of Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen's participation in Aboriginal ceremonies in Queensland at the end of the nineteenth century, and Malinowski's espousal of participant observation in the Trobriands a few decades later, ethnographers have understood that surveys and statistics, interviews and the collection of material objects cannot yield the same interpretive depth as that which comes from sharing in the lives of those being observed.

Edith Turner is as concerned as any other Western-trained observer might be to question the status of the tooth that Singleton later produced from the can in which the ihamba spirit was imprisoned. However, like the Kwakiutl shaman Quesalid, described by Franz Boas and Lévi-Strauss (1963), who started off as a sceptic set on disclosing the trickery involved in shamanic healing but who ended up becoming a great healer, Turner came to understand the difference between the outer appearance of objects and their essence (material or immaterial). There is a Buddhist story concerning a pilgrim who promised to bring his elderly Tibetan mother a relic of the Buddha. On his return from India, he realised that he had not fulfilled his promise, and picked up a dog's tooth from beside the road. This was presented to his mother as a tooth of the Buddha. The old woman made a shrine and prayed in front of the 'relic' with great devotion. After a while the pilgrim was amazed to see a glow emanating from the shrine. The tooth had taken on an aura of sacrality. Quesalid found that while he might have concealed objects in his mouth

to 'suck out' of patients, his healing was none the less effective. Having seen the gray blob come out of Meru, Edith Turner was convinced of the ihamba spirit's reality, and was able to appreciate the distinction made by many peoples the world over between the inner spirit form and the house or casing that can represent and contain it. From this, it follows that concealing an object in the mouth or producing a tooth is not 'trickery' but giving outward, visible expression to the normally invisible, but nevertheless palpable, action of the spirits. Missionaries and anthropologists used to assert that Africans mistook their 'fetishes' for animate objects, because of their failure to understand that a consecrated statue becomes a powerful object not because it is worshiped as a god (or devil), but because it has the power to attract and contain spiritual forces, acting as a repository for them. According to Christian Eucharistic theology the elements of bread and wine are ritually transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ in a 'hypostatic union', while retaining their outward appearance. The so-called fetishes and sacred objects of African peoples are more akin to the tabernacle that contains the consecrated elements (the god), than the god itself.

The gap between Western and non-Western conceptions of the instances of spiritual forces in the material world is much narrower than many assume. Pilgrimage cults that gather around weeping or moving plaster statues of the Virgin Mary in contemporary Irish Catholicism, for instance, attest to not dissimilar beliefs in the embodied immanence of the supernatural. Like a shaman, a stigmatist uses his or her body as an inscription or container of divine presence.

Modes of Thought

Anthropologists of religion have frequently returned to the question of modes of thought. When discussing religious experience, for instance, an anthropologist is often asking implicitly whether 'the other' is fundamentally like 'us'. Is there a conceptual dividing line between pre-scientific and scientific ways of thinking? If there are different mentalities, or ways of thinking, are they present in each one of us, in all societies, or in different measure in different societies? When asked whether he accepted Zande ideas of witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard gave the 'yes and no' kind of answer that must be familiar to many field anthropologists:

In my own culture, in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and reject, Zande notions of witchcraft. In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them. . . . If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts. (Evans-Pritchard 1976, p. 244)

One scholar who spent his life pondering the question of mentalities was Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). Like his French contemporary,

Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl thought that religion was socially based, but he increasingly distanced himself from the Durkheimian school, known as the *Année Sociologique*. He wanted to establish a 'science of morals' by comparing ethical codes in different societies. Considered as one of the founders of cultural relativity, Lévy-Bruhl stressed the need to see each culture as a whole in order to uncover the relationships and assumptions that govern it. He put forward, but later modified, the notion that there are two different types of 'mentality', one primitive and pre-logical, characterised by 'mystical participation', and the other modern, objective and rational.

Nineteenth-century evolutionary theorists such as Herbert Spencer, E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer shared three common assumptions: (i) the idea of progress, (ii) an unquestioned faith in the efficacy of the comparative method, and (iii) the notion of a psychic unity among all peoples. If left on their own, all societies would pass through the same stages of social evolution. The supposition was that eventually all societies would reach the same peak of rational, civilised thought and behaviour that characterised Victorian Britain. In contrast, Lévy-Bruhl challenged the third of these assumptions. He concluded that the formal rules of logic that governed rational thought did not actually apply in many simpler societies. According to Lévy-Bruhl, the West has an intellectual tradition based on the rigorous testing and analysis of hypotheses going back centuries, so that Europeans are logically oriented and tend to look for natural explanations to events. But the 'collective representations' of 'primitive' peoples tend to be 'pre-logical' or 'mystical'. Lévy-Bruhl never denied that all people everywhere use logical thought in relation to practical and technical matters. He claimed only that the mystical interpretation of an event will always predominate in a 'primitive mentality'. The notion of faith in a Western context similarly depends upon believing something that cannot be proved and invokes the language of paradox and mystery as a way of dealing with contradictions.

In his search for a comparative understanding of 'mentalities', Lévy-Bruhl sought to challenge both the intellectualist school of Tylor and Frazer, by stating that mental processes are not everywhere the same, and the cultural relativists like Boas, who rejected any attempt to make generalising statements about peoples. Malinowski had claimed that the apparently irrational behaviour of 'primitives' stems from faulty logic, a misapplication of the rules of reason, not from different assumptions concerning the way the world works. As a result of criticisms that he had made too rigid a distinction between mystical and logical mentalities, Lévy-Bruhl later clarified that there is a mystical mentality that is more marked and more easily observable among the so-called 'primitive peoples', but which is present in every human mind (Lévy-Bruhl 1975, 1985), an observation that has continued to engage the attention of anthropologists interested in religion and cognition.

Byron J. Good (1994), an American medical anthropologist, is among those who have recently revisited the 'mentalities debate'. For Lévy-Bruhl, religion belongs to pre-logical thinking, characterised by experience of non-material realities, whereas medicine would be classified as part of logical thinking, a response to the empirical world. For Good, in contrast, there is a close relationship between science, including medicine, and religious fundamentalism. He seeks to collapse the distinction between the realm of the sacred (religion) and profane (science). The relationship between the two turns in part on our concept of 'belief', with modern medical systems acting as if, 'Salvation from drugs and from preventable illness will follow from correct belief' (Good 1994, p. 7).

Good turns to the Canadian scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith in order to explore further the etymology of the term 'belief', concluding that our understanding of the term is relatively recent. In Old English 'to believe' meant to 'hold dear'. For Chaucer, it was 'to pledge loyalty'. Belief in God was not therefore a claim to hold to something that could not be proved, but a promise to live one's life in the service of God, like a bondsman to his lord. Only by the end of the seventeenth century did 'belief' indicate a choice between two possible explanations or propositions, so that 'I believe in God' implied a choice between believing that God existed and claiming that God was merely a human creation. Both medical scientists and fundamentalist Christians, according to Good, use 'belief' in this contemporary sense of choosing between options, one true and one false. The matter of 'correct belief' is of vital importance, implying the choice between a right and a wrong way of seeing the world.

The concept of belief as currently understood and used in English may be difficult or impossible to translate into other languages. Mary Steedly (1993), an American anthropologist who has worked among the Karobatak in Sumatra, reported that her hosts kept posing a question that she interpreted as 'do you believe in spirits?' Steedly did not want to say 'no' to avoid damaging her relations with the people but felt unable to lie by answering 'yes.' Only after some months did she realise the Karobatak were not asking her 'Do you believe spirits exist?' but 'Do you trust the spirits?' They wanted to know whether she maintained a relationship with them. Medieval Christians who asserted belief in God did not proclaim God's existence, which was presupposed, but their loyalty to God. The key difference between Mary Steedly and the Karobatak was the presence or absence of alternative views of the world.

There are other ways of distinguishing modes of thought besides Lévy-Bruhl's. According to Mary Douglas (1966), there is a difference between personalised and impersonal thinking. Some cosmologies, including those of China and sub-Saharan Africa, relate the universe directly to human behaviour, whereas the impact of the Enlightenment on Western thought, including European Christianity, has led to a decline in supernaturalistic

ways of viewing the world. As the New Zealand anthropologist Paul Gifford states, for Westerners:

Reality is generally not experienced in terms of witches, demons and personalised spiritual powers, and Christianity has changed to take account of this. . . . In Africa most Christians operate from a background little affected by the European Enlightenment; for most Africans, witchcraft, spirits and ancestors, spells and charms are primary and immediate and natural categories of interpretation. . . . Most Africans have an 'enchanted' worldview. (1998, pp. 327–8).

The English historian Robin Horton (1994) has long contrasted the 'closed' nature of African traditional thought, in which there is only one belief system available, to the 'open' world view of modern Europe and America, where there are alternative belief systems. We have already seen that Tylor, Malinowski, and others were wrong to assume that science would eventually put paid to both magic and religion. Science merely provided one more element, albeit an immensely powerful and significant one, in the cosmological choices available. It is clear, however, that not everyone can cope with alternatives, which erode certainties and absolute values. According to Horton (1994, pp. 256–7):

These people still retain the old sense of the absolute validity of their belief-systems, with all the attendant anxieties about threats to them. For these people, the confrontation is still a threat of chaos of the most horrific kind – a threat which demands the most dramatic measures. They respond in one of two ways: either by trying to blot out those responsible for the confrontation, often down to the last unborn child; or by trying to convert them to their own beliefs through fanatical missionary activity. . . . Some adjust their fears by developing an inordinate faith in progress towards a future in which 'the Truth' will be finally known. But others long nostalgically for the fixed, unquestionable beliefs of the 'closed' culture. They call for authoritarian establishment and control of dogma, and for the persecution of those who have managed to be at ease in a world of ever-shifting ideas. Clearly, the 'open' predicament is a precarious, fragile thing.

Jonathan Haidt (2007) makes a similar contrast between two types of society, or approaches to morality, which he terms 'contractual' and 'beehive', but draws rather different conclusions. The contractual approach is based on the individual as the primary unit of society, and creates laws and social contracts to ensure that the individual is free to pursue his or her own ends so long as they do not impinge on the freedoms of others. A beehive approach, on the other hand, is based on the group and its territory. It is culturally conservative, fearing both attacks from outside and subversion from within.

The beehive ideal is not a world of maximum freedom, it is a world of moral order and tradition in which people are united by a shared moral code that is effectively enforced, which enables people to trust each other to play

their interdependent roles. It is a world of very high social capital and low anomie.²

While most liberal, Western academics would probably place themselves unquestioningly in the former category, and would take it for granted that contractual societies 'are good, modern, creative and free, whereas beehive societies reek of feudalism, fascism, and patriarchy' (Haidt 2007). Haidt notes that in both the USA and Europe surveys suggest that religious believers are 'happier, healthier, longer-lived, and more generous to charity and to each other than are secular people' (Haidt 2007).

The competing market place of ideas that constitutes modernity is the home less of rational scientific thought than of a jumble of assorted ideas, some compatible, others contradictory. Scientific rationality and the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment are among the competing options, and however pervasive their influence they have not superseded or replaced a 'religious' view of the world, although they often run alongside or live together with such a world view. One can be both a religious believer and a scientist, or an academically trained anthropologist and an initiated witch or shaman. How such apparently incompatible world views are reconciled depends on the nature of the society in question and of the individual's experience, intellectual predilections and personality. What almost all the varied contributions of anthropologists to the study of religion share is a depth and complexity that arise from an intimate and embodied knowledge of their subject. Religion is not just 'out there' but simultaneously observed and experienced from within. It is the gap between this experience and the intellectual culture of the academy that paradoxically both provides intellectual rigour to the study of religion but which also all too often emasculates its subject matter. As Edith Turner observed, we are still struggling to overcome our reserve when dealing with religion as a subject, and have yet to learn how to treat religious experience on a par with other aspects of culture as ethnographic fact.³

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Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd gives Fiona Bowie proper credit as the original author of this article. Wiley-Blackwell also identifies that this article is an updated and expanded version of an earlier article by the same author: Bowie, F (2006) 'Anthropology of Religion' in Robert Segal, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford.

Short Biography

Fiona Bowie's research is mainly in the anthropology of religion and kinship, with a particular interest in Africa and the intersection of anthropology

and social policy in the field of adoption and the circulation of children. She has also written on women's spirituality within the Christian tradition and on Welsh language and identity. Her initial fieldwork in the early 1980s was on Christian missions (the Focolare Movement) among the Bangwa (Nweh speakers) of South West Cameroon. She has continued to follow this relationship between the Bangwa and Focolare in Cameroon, Europe and the USA, and to look at the ways in which the Bangwa maintain transnational personal and cultural links in the diaspora – the subject for her Audrey Richards lecture at the University of Oxford in 2005. She has written numerous articles and chapters on these topics, and has co-edited and edited several volumes including *Women and Missions* (Berg, 1993), *The Coming Deliverer* (University of Wales Press, 1997) and *Cross Cultural Approaches to Adoption* (Routledge, 2004). Her text book, *The Anthropology of Religion* (Blackwell 2000, 2nd edn, 2006) has been translated into several languages, including Polish, Czech and Chinese. Fiona Bowie has contributed articles on Africa, gender, religion and spirituality to various dictionaries and encyclopaedias, including *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, *Contemporary Religions* (Longman), *The World's Religions* (Lion), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Macmillan) and *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*. Fiona Bowie studied anthropology at the Universities of Durham and Oxford. She has held visiting lectureships at the University of Linköping in Sweden and the University of Virginia in the USA and has worked for the Open University and the University of Wales. She currently teaches anthropology at the University of Bristol.

Notes

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¹ See also the small survey described in Bowie (2003) on the personal religious stance of anthropologists who chose to specialise in the study of religion.

² <http://www.edge.org/documents/archive/edge222.html>, accessed 13 September 2007.

³ Personal communication. This endeavour, to treat religion and religious experience ethnographically, rather than at one remove and at a safe level of abstraction, forms the basis for much of Turner's teaching at the University of Virginia.

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