

The anthropological study of religion

Human beings pose questions about nearly everything in the world, including themselves. The most fundamental of these questions are answered by a people's religious beliefs and practices, which are the subject of this book. We will examine the religious lives of a broad range of human communities from an anthropological perspective.

The term *anthropological perspective* means many things. It is a theoretical orientation that will be discussed later in the chapter. It is also an approach that compares human societies throughout the world—contemporary and historical, industrial and tribal. Many college courses and textbooks focus on the best-known religions, those that are practiced by millions upon millions of people and are often referred to as the “world's great religions”—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, among others. This book will expand the subject matter to include and focus on lesser-known religious systems, especially those that are found in small-scale, traditional communities. As we do this, we want to look for commonalities as well as to celebrate diversity.

This book will not simply describe a series of religious systems. We will approach the study of religion by looking at particular topics that are usually included in the anthropological definition of religion and providing examples to illustrate these topics from the anthropological literature. We obviously are unable to present the thousands of religious systems that exist or have existed in the world, but we can provide a sample.

The anthropological perspective

The subject of this book is religion as seen from an anthropological perspective. What does this mean? The term **anthropology** refers to the study of humanity. However, anthropology shares this subject matter with many other disciplines—sociology, psychology, history, and political science, to name a few. So how is anthropology different from these other disciplines?

One way in which anthropology differs from other subjects is that anthropology is an integrated study of humanity. Anthropologists study human societies as systematic sums of their parts, as integrated wholes. We call this approach **holism**. For example, many disciplines study marriage. The anthropologist believes that a true understanding of marriage requires an understanding of all aspects of the society. Marriage is profoundly influenced by politics and law, economics, ethics, and theology; in turn,

marriage influences history, literature, art, and music. The same is true of religious practices and beliefs.

The holistic nature of anthropology is seen in the various divisions of the field. Traditional anthropologists speak of *four-fields anthropology*. These four fields are physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural anthropology. Today, with the rapid increase and complexity of anthropological studies, anthropologists are becoming more and more specialized and focused on particular topics. The often-simplistic concept of anthropology as being composed of the integrated study of these four fields is rapidly breaking down, but a review of these four fields will acquaint those who are studying anthropology for the first time with the essential nature of the discipline.

Physical anthropology is the study of human biology and evolution. Physical anthropologists are interested in genetics and genomics; evolutionary theory; the biology and behavior of the primates, the group of animals that includes monkeys, apes, and humans; and paleontology, the study of the fossil record. Anthropologists with a biological orientation discuss the evolutionary origins and the neurobiology of religious experience.

Archaeology is the study of people who are known only from their physical and cultural remains; it gives us insight into the lives of now extinct societies. Evidence of religious expression can be seen in the ruins of ancient temples and in the art and writings of people who lived in societies that have faded into history.

The field of **linguistic anthropology** is devoted to the study of language, which, according to many anthropologists, is a unique feature of humans. Much of religious practice is linguistic in nature, involving the recitation of words, and the religious beliefs of a people are expressed in their myths and literature.

Cultural anthropology is the study of contemporary human societies and makes up the largest area of anthropological study. Cultural anthropologists study a people's social organization, economics and technology, political organization, marriage and family life, child-rearing practices, and so forth. The study of religion is a subject within the general field of cultural anthropology. However, we will be drawing on all four subfields in our examination of religion.

The holistic approach

Studying a society holistically is a very daunting task. It requires a great deal of time—time to observe human behavior and time to interview members of a society. Because of the necessity of having to limit the scope of a research project, anthropologists are noted for their long-term studies of small, remote communities. However, as isolated small communities become increasingly incorporated into larger political units, anthropologists are turning more and more to the study of larger, more complex societies. Yet even within a more complex society, anthropologists maintain a limited focus. For example, within an urban setting, anthropologists study specific companies, hospitals, neighborhoods, gangs, clubs, and churches. Anthropological studies take place over long periods of time and usually require the anthropologist to live within the community and to participate to a degree in the lives of the people under study, while at the same time making objective observations. This technique of study is referred to as **participant observation**.

Students of anthropology are initially introduced to small communities such as **foraging bands**, small **horticultural** villages, and groups of **pastoral nomads**. They become familiar with the lives of the Trobriand Islanders off the coast of New Guinea, the Navaho of the American Southwest, the Yanomamö of northern South America, the Murngin of northern Australia, and the San of southern Africa. Some people refer to these societies as being “primitive,” but *primitive* is a pejorative term, one laden with negative connotations such as inferior and “less than.” A better term is **small-scale**. When we say *small-scale*, we refer to relatively small communities, villages, and bands that practice foraging, herding, or technologically simple horticulture.

We will also be examining aspects of what are often referred to as the “world’s great religions.” Like the term *primitive*, the term *great* involves a value judgment. These familiar religions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. They are similar in that the origins of these religions are based on the lives of a particular individual or founder, such as Moses, Christ, Mohammad, and the Buddha. These religions have spread into thousands of different societies, and their adherents number in the millions. The small-scale societies that are more traditionally studied by anthropologists, by contrast, are usually not based on the lives of particular prophets or founders. They tend to be limited to one or a few societies, and their adherents might number only a few hundred or a few thousand.

If they involve only a very small number of people, then why study these small-scale religions? Among the many questions that anthropologists ask about humanity are the following: Are there characteristics that are found in all human societies, what we might call **human universals**? And when we look at universals, or at least at very wide-spread features, what are the ranges of variation? Returning to the example of marriage, we could ask the following questions: Is marriage found in all human societies? And what are the various forms that marriage takes? We might ask similar questions about religion. To answer these questions, anthropologists go out into the field, study particular communities, and write reports describing these communities. Questions of universality and variability can be answered on the basis of descriptions of hundreds of human societies.

In addition, the goal of anthropology is to study the broad range of human beliefs and behaviors, to discover what it means to be human. This is best accomplished by examining religious and other cultural phenomena in a wide variety of cultures of different sizes and structures, including our own. It is often said that the aim of anthropology is to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Only through cross-cultural comparisons is this possible.

The study of human societies

Ethnography is the descriptive study of human societies. People who study human societies and write ethnographies about them are cultural anthropologists; they are sometimes referred to as **ethnographers**.

However, not all descriptions of human societies are written by ethnographers. For example, an archaeologist is someone who studies the physical and cultural remains of societies that existed in the past and are known today only from their ruins, burials, and garbage. Yet archaeologists can, to a limited degree, reconstruct the lives of people who lived in ancient societies. Sometimes the only descriptions we have of people’s

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lives are those written in diaries and reports by explorers and colonial administrators. Although these descriptions are far from complete and objective, they do provide us with some information.

Although we will visit a few societies that are known solely from their archaeological remains, most of the examples in this book are from societies that exist today or have existed in the recent past. Many of the societies we will discuss were first visited and described by anthropologists in the early to mid-1900s. Although these societies have changed over time, as all groups do, and although many of these societies have passed out of existence, anthropologists speak of them in the **ethnographic present**; that is, we discuss these groups in the present tense as they were first described by ethnographers.

Throughout this book we will be presenting examples from the ethnographic literature. These communities are found throughout the world, including some very remote areas. To better understand their nature and distribution, we can organize these societies into **culture areas**. A culture area is a geographical area in which societies tend to share many cultural traits. This happens because these groups face similar challenges from the environment and often come up with similar solutions and because cultural traits that develop in one group easily spread to other nearby groups.

Each human society—and even subgroups within the society—exhibits unique characteristics. The common traits that define a culture area tend to lie in the realm of subsistence activities and technology, a common response to the challenges from the environment, although some similarity in other facets of the society, including religion, may also be found. For example, the California culture area, whose boundaries are somewhat different from the present-day political unit, includes a group of communities that exploit acorns. Acorns require processing that involves many steps and much equipment, but they provide a food resource that is plentiful and nutritious and that can be stored. These features permit the development of permanent and semi-permanent communities, unlike those developed by most foragers.¹ Table 1.1 lists the major culture areas of the world along with the names of representative groups. All of the groups used as examples in this book are included. Many are located on the maps at the front of this book.

Table 1.1 Culture areas of the world

Culture area	Societies discussed in text	Features
<i>North America</i>		
Arctic Coast	Inuit, Yup'ik	Hunting of sea mammals and caribou, fishing; shelters made of snow blocks, semisubterranean sod houses, summer tents made of skins; dog-drawn sledges, tailored skin clothing; settlement in small family groups.
Northern Subarctic	Chipewyan, Winnebago	Hunting caribou, fishing; conical skin tents, bark or skin canoes, snowshoes, toboggans; highly nomadic bands with chiefs.
Great Basin-Plateau	Paiute, Shoshoni	Acorn collecting, fishing, hunting of small game; small brush windbreaks, elaborate basketry; band organization.
California	Cahuilla, Chumash, Pomo	Acorn collecting, fishing, hunting of small game; simple brush dwellings, semisubterranean lodges; basketry; multiplicity of small contrasting tribes, semipermanent villages.

<i>Culture area</i>	<i>Societies discussed in text</i>	<i>Features</i>
Northwest Coast	Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw, Tlingit	Salmon and deep-sea fishing, hunting and collecting; large rectangular plank dwellings with gabled roofs, large canoes, lack pottery, elaborate development of decorative art; permanent villages, chiefs, elaborate system of rank.
Plains	Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Crow, Kiowa, Lakota, Ojibwa	Hunting of bison, some horticulture; tipi dwellings; transport by dog, later horse; absence of basketry and pottery, hide utensils; large bands, competitive military and social societies, warfare important.
Eastern Woodland	Iroquois, Seneca	Horticulture, hunting; multiple-family dwellings of bark (longhouses); matrilineal clans, village chiefs.
Southeast	Cherokee, Natchez	Similar to Eastern Woodland with Mesoamerican influence.
Southwest	Apache, Hopi, Navaho, Akimel O'odham, Tewa, Yaqui, Zuni	Intensive cultivation of beans, maize, and squash; pueblos consisting of great multifamily terraced apartments, single-family dwellings with more nomadic groups; highly developed pottery and loom weaving; village as largest political unit.
Mesoamerica	Aztec, Huichol, Maya	Intensive agriculture; state societies with developed technology including monumental stone architecture, stone sculpture, system of writing, woven textiles, metallurgy; fully developed dynastic empires, social classes.
<i>South America</i>		
Marginal	Siriono, Yahgan	Hunting, fishing, and gathering; family as basic social unit.
Tropical Forest	Jivaro, Mehinaku, Pirahã, Yanomamö	Slash-and-burn horticulture; villages often consist of one communal dwelling located on rivers; bark canoes and dugouts, clubs and shields, bows and arrows, blow guns, bark cloth, hammock, tobacco; village settlements under chiefs, warfare strongly developed with cannibalism present.
Circum-Caribbean	Arawak, Carib	Intensive farming, hunting and fishing; pole and thatch houses arranged in streets and around plazas surrounded by palisade; hammocks, poisoned arrows, loom weaving of domesticated cotton, highly developed ceramics, gold and copper worked; large villages, social classes, chiefs, extreme development of warfare.
Andean	Araucanian, Inca	Intensive irrigation agriculture; paved roads, monumental architecture, highly developed ceramics, weaving, and metallurgy; large cities, divine ruler over large empires.
<i>Africa</i>		
Mediterranean	Berbers	Agriculture and sheep herding; marginal Near Eastern culture, towns and cities; Islam.
Desert	Tuareg	Livestock herding (horse and camel) and tent shelters; intensive fruit and cereal cultivation, camels, sheep, goat herding, stone and plaster dwellings; Islam.
Egypt	Egyptians, Nubians	Flood-irrigated agriculture (wheat and barley); early civilization.
Western Sudan	Fulani, Hausa	Agriculture and cattle herding; urban centers, dynastic rule and empires; Islam and animism.
Eastern Sudan	Dinka, Nuer	Cattle herders and scattered agriculturalists; Islam and animism.

(continued)

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Table 1.1 Culture areas of the world (continued)

<i>Culture area</i>	<i>Societies discussed in text</i>	<i>Features</i>
East Horn	Abyssinians, Somali	Agriculture and cattle herding; Coptic Christianity.
East African Cattle	Bunyoro, Maasai, Swazi, Zulu	Cattle herding, dairying, hoe agriculture; iron work, age grades, warfare, ancestor worship.
Madagascar	Tanala	Marginal Indonesian culture; wet rice irrigation agriculture.
Khoisan	Ju/'hoansi San	Hunting and gathering; nomadic bands, brush shelters.
Guinea Coast	Beng, Bushongo, Dogon, Fon, Kpelle, Yoruba	Hoe agriculture, root crops and maize; large dynastic kingdoms, city and towns, market centers, judicial systems, craft guilds, artistic development.
Congo	Azande, Kongo, Mangbetu, Pygmies	Yam and banana cultivation; double-court kingdoms, markets, native courts; iron and brass work; Pygmies: hunting and gathering, trade with agriculturalists.
<i>Eurasia</i>		
Southwest Asia	Bedouin	Cereal irrigation agriculture, plow, herding; Islam.
Central Asian Steppe	Mongols	Horse domesticated for transportation, milk, hides; Islam.
Siberian	Tungus, Tuva, Yakut	Fishing, hunting, reindeer domestication; conical skin dwellings; tailored skin clothing.
East Asian civilizations	Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Okinawan	Intensive agriculture including wet rice and animal husbandry; ancient civilizations; urban centers and industrialization; several religious systems including Shinto and Buddhism.
Southeast Asia	Balinese, Hmong, Javanese	Wet and dry rice agriculture, water buffalo; bamboo houses; Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam.
India	Nayar, Toda	Plow agriculture, wheat and barley; caste system.
European	Basques, Viking	Mixed agriculture and animal husbandry; urbanization and industrialization; mainly Christian.
<i>Oceania</i>		
Indonesia-Philippine	Berawan, Dyaks, Ifugao, Tana Toraja	Irrigation and terracing, wet rice agriculture, water buffalo; large multifamily dwellings on piles, betel chewing, elaborate textiles, blow guns; Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, animism.
Australia	Murngin, Yir Yoront	Hunting and gathering economy; simple windbreaks, spears and spear-throwers, bark containers; independent bands, highly elaborate kin organization; totemism.
Melanesia	Asmat, Buka, Dani, Fore, Gururumba, Trobriand Islanders	Yams and taro horticulture, fishing; elaborate ceremonial houses, high development of wood carving, canoes, bows and arrows; isolated hamlets under local chief, regional specialization in economic production, trading voyages; chronic petty warfare.
Micronesia	Palau, Truk	Yams and taro horticulture, fishing, collection of breadfruit and coconut; expert navigation in sailing canoes; intertribal warfare.
Polynesia	Maori, Samoan, Tikopia	Taro, yams, coconut, breadfruit cultivation, fishing; large thatched dwellings, tapa cloth, kava, tattooing, sculpture in wood and stone, outrigger canoes with sails; hereditary social classes and divine chiefs; mana, tabu.

Table 1.2 Food-getting strategies

	<i>Foragers</i>	<i>Pastoralists</i>	<i>Horticulturalists</i>	<i>Intensive agriculturalists</i>
Examples	San, Murngin, Shoshoni	Nuer, Maasai	Gururumba, Yanomamö, Azande	Aztec, Korean, Amish
Food getting	Food collectors: gathering, hunting, fishing	Animal husbandry	Farming with simple hand tools	Farming with advanced technology (e.g., irrigation, fertilization, plows)
Community variables	Low population density, small community size	Low population density, small to medium community size	Moderate population density, medium community size	High population density, large community size
Settlement patterns	Nomadic or seminomadic	Nomadic or semi-nomadic	Basically sedentary, may move after several years	Permanent settlements
Specialization	No full-time specialists, some part-time	Few full-time specialists, some part-time	Few full-time specialists, some part-time	Many full-time specialists
Social stratification	Generally none	Some	Some	Significant

Besides geographical distribution, there are other ways in which anthropologists organize societies. One commonly used scheme is to organize societies in terms of their subsistence strategy, focusing on how they make a living (Table 1.2). Commonly used categories are foragers, horticulturalists, pastoralists, and agriculturalists. Of course, these are not precisely delineated categories but divisions of a continuum. Foragers are peoples without any form of plant or animal domestication. They tend to live in small, isolated groups that are found today primarily in areas that are difficult to farm. Horticulturalists are peoples who garden in the absence of fertilization, irrigation, and other advanced technologies. Pastoralists are peoples whose primary livelihood comes from the herding of domesticated animals. Peoples who plow, fertilize, and irrigate their crops are termed *agriculturalists*. The latter develop relatively large communities with more complex technologies. Societies that have the same subsistence strategy generally have other features in common, such as settlement patterns, population density, and the presence of specialists.

The Fore of New Guinea: an ethnographic example

In the preceding sections of this chapter we learned about some basic concepts of anthropology, such as holism, and we were introduced to the concept of ethnography. Now let us turn our attention to a particular example to illustrate these ideas.

The holistic approach sees human behavior as a complex set of interacting behaviors and ideas. In examining a society, we might begin with a particular problem that interests us, but we soon realize that to truly understand this problem, we have to look at many other aspects of the society.

An example of this was a study of the Fore, a group of about 14,000 horticulturalists living in the eastern highlands of New Guinea (Melanesia culture area). The problem that brought the Fore to the attention of the Western world was a medical one. The solution to the problem brought the Nobel Prize in Medicine to one of the investigators.

When the Australian government first contacted the Fore in the 1950s, a significant number of individuals were found to be suffering from a particular illness. The illness was having a major impact on the population: about 200 people were dying of the illness each year, the victims being primarily women and children.

This illness is characterized by a variety of symptoms, but the most obvious ones are jerking movements and shaking, which make planned motor activity difficult. The course of the illness is about nine months. At the end the victim can no longer stand or sit up and can no longer eat or drink water and soon dies. The Fore call this illness *kuru*, which means “to tremble with fear” in the Fore language.

The medical team that was sent in to deal with the disease sought the cause. Because it appeared to be largely confined to the Fore, the team thought it might be genetic or due to a toxin in the environment. However, *kuru* was finally determined to be the result of an infectious agent called a prion. The major question was how the *kuru* prion was passed from one person to another. Was it passed on through contaminated water, through the air, or through sexual activity? The answer to the puzzle was proposed by anthropologists: cannibalism.

It was the custom of the Fore to eat the body as part of the funeral rituals—one aspect of their religious practices. The body of the deceased was carried down to an abandoned field, where kin dismembered and cooked it. Close relatives then consumed the pieces. Because cooking does not destroy the prions, some of them entered the bloodstream through cuts and open sores and eventually entered the brain, where, many years later, the person began to show symptoms of the disease. Because women and children, who have lower social status, were more likely to eat the brain, they were the most likely to develop the disease.

The modern medical community now had an explanation for what caused the disease and knew how it was transmitted from one individual to another. The government had a “cure” to the epidemic: eliminate the practice of cannibalism. As a result, cannibalism stopped, and *kuru* eventually disappeared, although this took some time because the disease has a long incubation period. However, the Fore themselves did not understand this explanation and stopped eating the bodies of their dead only because not to do so would mean spending time in jail. The Fore did not accept the scientific explanation of the disease. Think about how difficult it would be for the doctors to convince the Fore that *kuru* was caused by tiny prions that no one could see. One might as well be talking about tiny evil spirits that also cannot be seen.

The Fore knew the cause of *kuru*, at least in their world. It was the result of sorcery. Sorcery is the evil form of magic, which we will discuss in Chapter 7. The **sorcerer**, the person who practices sorcery, would steal something that was once a part of or in contact with the victim, such as a piece of clothing or a lock of hair. The material was then made into a bundle along with some leaves, bark, and stones and was bound up into a package. After reciting a spell, the sorcerer would place the bundle into muddy ground, and as the bundle rotted, the victim would develop the symptoms of the disease. This belief influenced everyday behavior, as individuals were careful to hide things that could be retrieved and used by a sorcerer.

In spite of this caution, people still developed *kuru*. In this case, a **divination ritual** was used to reveal the identity of the sorcerer causing the illness. As we will see in Chapter 7, many people use such techniques to reveal things that are difficult or impossible to discover by other means. Once the sorcerer was identified, the Fore had many options to counter the activity of the evildoer. A person with *kuru* might also have consulted a healer.

The fact that *kuru* struck primarily women had significant social consequences. Many men lost wives through *kuru*, and the shortage of women meant that many men were unable to find wives. In addition, men with children who had lost their wives had to perform many domestic chores normally reserved for women, including farming.

The ethnography of the Fore and the description of *kuru* illustrate the concept of holism (Figure 1.1). From the Western point of view, we begin with a medical problem: a disease. Then we see how this fatal disease affects various aspects of the society because of the death of women of childbearing age. This includes marriage, the family,

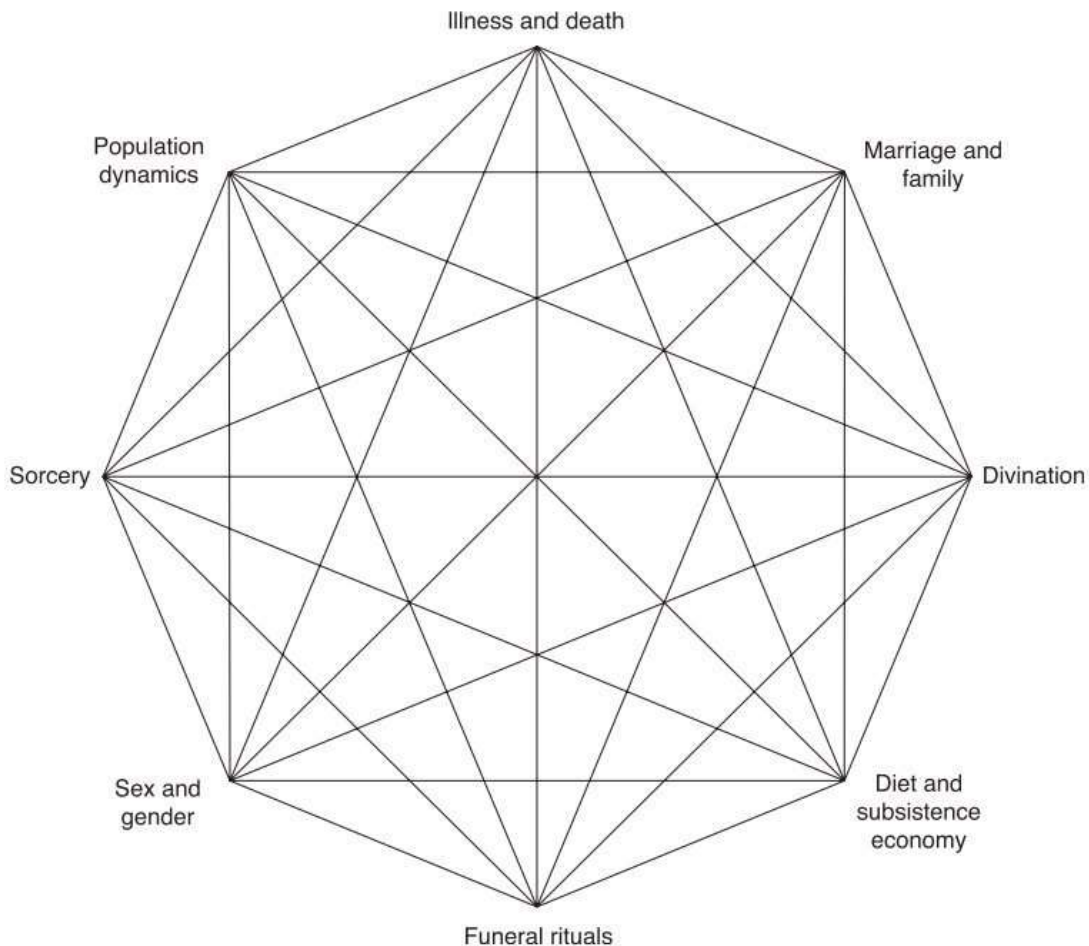


Figure 1.1 Holism. A complete understanding of the disease *kuru* among the Fore of New Guinea requires an understanding of the relationship of *kuru* to other aspects of Fore culture, some of which are shown in this diagram.

the raising of children, farming, and so forth. Also, we see how the society attempts to explain and deal with the disease through religion. A description of *kuru* among the Fore as only a medical problem fails to provide us with a complete understanding of that disease.

Two ways of viewing culture

We can ask the question: What causes *kuru* among the Fore? From our viewpoint a complete answer to that question includes both biological factors (the disease-causing organism) and cultural factors (the practice of cannibalism). However, the Fore themselves would give another answer to this question: *Kuru* is caused by sorcery. Another aspect to the holistic approach is to consider both insider and outsider perspectives.

An anthropologist—or any scholar, for that matter—cannot be completely neutral and objective when describing a culture. Observation, recording, and analysis involve processing data in one's mind. One's own cultural background, education, training, and other factors will act as a filter or lens that colors what are thought of as objective observations. Physicians, using a medical model, searched for the cause of *kuru* through techniques learned in medical school that are based on a set of postulates developed through the scientific method. Although the physicians were able to discover the biological cause of *kuru*, the disease-causing protein, they were unable to discover the mode of transmission. Medical science identifies a series of transmission pathways, and none of them offered a valid explanation. It took anthropologists, viewing the situation from a holistic, anthropological viewpoint, to make the connection between *kuru* and cannibalism, although this had to be confirmed through a set of procedures mandated by the scientific method.

The physician and the anthropologist are outsiders looking in. They see Fore culture in terms of Western philosophy and theory. They speak of the Fore using words that categorize experience in a particular way. This is referred to as an **etic perspective**. There are advantages to an etic perspective. Just as a friend or therapist might see patterns to a person's life that the person might overlook, an outside analyst might see patterns of behaviors or beliefs in a culture that the members of that group might be unaware of. Another advantage is that the anthropologist can apply a consistent form of analysis to many different societies that are being studied. This permits anthropologists to make comparisons between societies and perhaps to discover some universal principles about human behavior.

Yet the Fore see their world from an altogether different perspective, using linguistic categories and basic assumptions about their world that differ profoundly from ours. To the Fore, sorcery is the ultimate cause of *kuru*, and this makes sense in their culture. An **emic perspective** is one that attempts to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied. Of course, the big question is, how successful can we really be at this?

Cultural relativism

How do you feel about the Fore practice of cannibalism? In the course of looking at different societies, anthropologists often observe behaviors that seem strange and

sometimes disturbing. We have grown up in a particular society, and the behaviors and ideas of our own society seem to us to be natural and correct. It is also natural to use our own society as the basis for interpreting and judging other societies. This tendency is called **ethnocentrism**.

Anthropologists realize, however, that a true understanding of other peoples cannot develop through ethnocentric interpretations. Thinking of other people as primitive, superstitious, and immoral only colors our observations and prevents us from reaching any kind of true understanding about human behavior and thought. Anthropologists attempt to remain neutral and to accept the ways of life of other communities as appropriate for those who live in these communities. Anthropologists attempt to describe and understand people's customs and ideas but do not judge them. This approach is known as **cultural relativism**. The goal is to study what people believe, not whether or not what they believe is true.

For example, funeral rituals differ from other rituals in one major respect: there is a dead body. All societies have ways of disposing of the corpse in one way or another. Burial is quite common, but there are a number of variables such as where the grave is located, what the body is buried in, what objects are buried with the body, and so on. Bodies can also be placed in trees to decay, and later the bones may be cleaned and buried. Bodies can be cremated, and the remains kept in a container, buried, or scattered at sea. Among the Yanomamö of Venezuela and Brazil, the cremated remains are ground into a powder. At various times after a person's death, the family gathers together and prepares a banana stew into which some of the cremated ashes are mixed. Then they drink the mixture. And, of course, as we saw with the Fore, there is the custom of eating the body.

The practice of drinking cremated remains or eating human flesh would probably horrify most North Americans, and its practice in U.S. society would probably lead to some type of reaction on the part of the society—most likely psychiatric confinement. On the other hand, the Yanomamö are horrified by the U.S. practice of burial because it leads to the decay of the body in the ground. They believe that the finest expression of love is for close relatives to provide a final resting place for their loved ones within their own bodies. Is this practice wrong, immoral, or dangerous? The answer to this question, of course, lies within the cultural practices of the group and how that group defines correct and appropriate behaviors.

Postmodernism

We may wonder if it is at all possible for someone from one society to truly get to know and understand people living in another society. Beginning with the Renaissance, scholars based their knowledge on the ideals of rationality, objectivity, and reason. Science was seen as the means for the discovery of knowledge, truth, and progress. This way of approaching an understanding of the world is termed **modernity**. It was thought that through modernity order could be created out of chaos. Based on the principles of modernity, scholars believed that it was possible to gain a true understanding of all peoples and all societies.

Beginning in the 1980s, the **postmodern** movement had a broad academic impact across many disciplines. In stark contrast to the ideas of modernity, postmodernism denies the possibility of acquiring, or even the existence of “true” knowledge about

the world. All knowledge is seen as being a human “construction” that we must try to “deconstruct.” The postmodern movement emphasizes the limitations of science, that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, that there are multiple viewpoints and truths, and the importance of being aware of our own viewpoints and biases. In contrast to modernity’s emphasis on order, postmodernism sees contradictions and instabilities as being inherent in any social group or practice.

The value of postmodernism for anthropology has been to reinforce the idea of multiple ways of seeing the world—that there is no one right way to think or to do things. This is an extension of the concept of cultural relativism. Postmodernism serves as a reminder of how the ethnographer herself can influence the fieldwork situation. As a result, ethnographers are more self-conscious and more aware of their own positions and biases (Box 1.1). Every person sees the world through the lens of his or her own culture. We cannot remove the lens, but we can become more aware of it.

Postmodernism, taken to its logical extreme, says that it is impossible for a person from one culture to understand someone from another culture. Perhaps it is even impossible for any one person to truly understand any other person. Given all this, could anthropology as a discipline even exist? Most anthropologists have taken a middle ground approach—appreciating the lessons of postmodernism while attempting to avoid this extreme point of view.

Box 1.1 Karen McCarthy Brown and Vodou

Karen McCarthy Brown first met Mama Lola in 1978. On the basis of a dozen years of research and writing, Brown would write the classic ethnography *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*.² This book was at the forefront of many important trends in anthropology. It was centered on the experiences of a single individual and was influenced by feminist and postmodern ideologies. In the book, Brown speaks candidly of her own experiences doing participant observation research and how she became involved in the religion of Vodou to a degree that perhaps even goes beyond that standard—becoming a Vodou priestess herself. (The Vodou religion will be discussed in Chapter 11.)

The book focuses on the life and practices of Mama Lola, a Haitian immigrant living in New York City. Among the themes of the book is the persecution experienced by Haitians in the United States and the difficulties they face in trying to practice their religion. Brown continues to focus on religious practices that take place outside of standard religious institutions. This kind of activity has become a major part of religious life in modern urban cultures. This is especially true in the United States, where religious pluralism is on the rise, partly owing to recent immigration patterns.

Universal human rights

Some anthropologists, however, question the approach of complete neutrality represented by cultural relativism and the approach of complete subjectivity of

postmodernism and ask: Are there any basic human rights and universal standards of behavior? This is an area of debate, one that often focuses on the religious practices of other peoples that may include such customs as physical alterations of the genitalia or cannibalism.

Cultural relativism is one of the basic concepts necessary to anthropology, and it should not be put aside lightly. Our first approach to any cultural practice should be to try to understand it in context—to understand the meaning it has for people in that culture. After doing so, however, is it possible to say, “I understand this practice and why this culture does it, but it is still wrong”? The difficulty in this is knowing where to draw the line, and strict criteria must be used. One such set of criteria was proposed by Robert Edgerton:

I shall first define [maladaptation] as the failure of a population or its culture to survive because of the inadequacy or harmfulness of one or more of its beliefs or institutions. Second, maladaptation will be said to exist when enough members of a population are sufficiently dissatisfied with one or more of their social institutions or cultural beliefs that the viability of their society is threatened. Finally, it will be considered to be maladaptive when a population maintains beliefs or practices that so seriously impair the physical or mental health of its members that they cannot adequately meet their own needs or maintain their social and cultural system.³

It is important to note that the criteria are based on the survival of the society and its ability to function—not on an outsider’s perception of morality. Edgerton includes as an example the high levels of stress and fear related to witchcraft beliefs in some cultures, a topic to which we will return in Chapter 10.

The Aztec practice of cannibalism is another example. The prehistoric Aztecs were an agricultural society located in the Mesoamerica culture area. In Aztec society a small elite used religious and military power to conquer neighboring groups. They took tribute in the form of gold and other valuables from the people they conquered. Both slaves and captured prisoners of war were sacrificed and eaten. The benefits of the conquest went almost exclusively to the elite. One analytical approach to the practice of cannibalism by the Aztecs argues that it was an adaptation to a protein-poor environment. A culturally relativistic approach would also point out that the sacrifices were done to please the Aztec gods. Edgerton argues against both of these interpretations.

Edgerton points out that sacrifice and cannibalism were conducted with very little ritual preparation—bodies were rolled down steeply sloped temple steps to be butchered below. The bodies were dealt with in much the same way as a side of beef might be. Human flesh was considered a delicacy and greatly desired, to such an extent that wars were fought with the primary goal of gaining human captives for sacrifice.

The negative impacts were not only on the neighboring groups. The Aztec elite did not share the wealth with the commoners. Even commoners who served in the army did not do so as equals. While the nobles wore helmets, armor, and shields, the commoners had none of this equipment. As Edgerton writes, “The splendors of Aztec culture cannot be denied, but they were achieved at great cost by the many largely for the benefit of the ruling few.”⁴

Despite this questioning, cultural relativism remains of utmost importance to anthropologists. Our first approach should always be to try to understand a culture's beliefs and behaviors in context, to learn what meaning the world has through their eyes.

The concept of culture

In the previous examples of the Aztec and the Fore, we observed a number of specific behaviors and beliefs. For example, an anthropologist living among the Fore for a period of time would, of course, record descriptions of Fore life in much more detail and cover many other aspects of their lives—marriage and family, child rearing, hunting and farming, trade, technology, political organization, folklore, and so on. It is obvious that the body of behaviors and beliefs of the Fore are quite different from ours. These behaviors and beliefs make up Fore **culture**.

In anthropology the term *culture* is used as a technical term. It does not refer to the arts or the “finer things of life.” Although the term is widely used and discussed, finding a definition that is acceptable to all anthropologists is a difficult task.

The British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) first used the term *culture* in its anthropological sense. In 1871, Tylor wrote, “Culture . . . is that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”⁵ In this definition Tylor recognized that culture is a “complex whole,” which is a reference to the holistic concept. And he noted that culture includes customs that people acquire by growing up in a particular society; that is, culture is learned.

When we look at a group of social insects, such as ants, we see a society in which individuals behave in certain stereotypic ways. When we look at a group of humans, we also see certain behaviors that appear to be stereotyped, repetitive, or customary. Yet besides the much greater complexity of human behavior, there is a major difference between ant and human behavior. Ant behavior is innate; that is, it is coded in the genes—it is a part of the ant's biological heredity. Although some aspects of human behavior are likely to be innate, the preponderance of human behavior is learned, handed down from one generation to the next, and is shared by a group of people. Culture is seen in the way people dress, how they greet one another, how they go about their chores, and how they worship their gods. For example, the actions that are performed in a ritual are actions that are learned from someone else, perhaps a parent or a priest, and thus they are passed down from one generation to the next.

One of the consequences of the social transmission of culture is that human behavior is complex and variable. Unlike biological inheritance, in which change occurs slowly through the mechanisms of biological evolution, learned behavioral patterns can change very rapidly in response to changing conditions. Also, the human species, which is very homogenous biologically, exhibits a great many different cultures.

Another important feature of culture is that it is based on the use of **symbols**. Symbols are shared understandings about the meaning of certain words, attributes, or objects, such as the color red symbolizing *stop* in traffic signals. The connection between the two is arbitrary; there is no obvious, natural, or necessary connection. For example, in most Western societies black is the color associated with mourning. However in other cultures, the color associated with mourning may be white, red, or even green.

Culture is learned primarily through symbols. Language can be thought of as a string of symbols, and we learn, communicate, and even think through the use of these symbols. Symbols are obviously an important area of discussion for the study of religion. The Christian cross, for example, symbolizes not just the religion itself, but a particular philosophy and history. Chapter 3 discusses the nature of symbols and their role in religious practice.

Viewing the world

The idea of culture involves much more than describing human activity. People also have different belief systems and different perceptions and understandings of their world and their lives.

Culture gives meaning to reality. We live in a real, physical world, yet this world is translated through the human mind onto a different plane. We look out a window and see a mountain rising above us. To the geologist the mountain is a structure made of rock formed through natural processes. To the hydrologist concerned with bringing water to a desert town, the mountain is the place where snowfields are found. To the biologist it is the home of a great many plants and animals, many of them perhaps endangered.

To many people, however, a mountain is much more than a physical thing. The mountain might be the home of the gods or the place where the souls of the dead congregate after death. Mountains figure prominently in many Biblical stories; for example, Mount Sinai was where Moses received the Ten Commandments, and Mount Ararat was where Noah's ark came to rest. Psalm 121 reads: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."⁶ Other sacred mountains include Mount Olympus, where the gods of ancient Greece lived, and the four sacred mountains of the Navaho world. We may label these images as being part of the imagination of a people, yet to the people the sacredness of a mountaintop may be as real as the presence of rocks, snow, or plants.

The study of religion

The beginning point of any discourse is to define the object of study—in this instance, **religion**. Yet the task of defining this term is a challenging one indeed. We must avoid using a definition that is too narrow or one that is too vague. Many definitions that have been proposed have been so narrow that they apply only to some cultures and only to some of the phenomena that anthropologists traditionally place within the domain of religion. Such definitions often are ethnocentric, including only those ideas that are considered "religious" for that culture. In such definitions many topics, such as magic and witchcraft, are often excluded. On the other hand, a definition that is too inclusive and vague loses much of its meaning and usefulness.

In spite of the difficulties of defining religion, anthropology is a social science, and the methodology of science requires that we define our terms. We need to use an **operant definition**. This is one in which we define our terms so that they are observable and measurable and therefore can be studied. So what would a good operant definition of religion be? We can start by looking at the various ways in which scholars have attempted to define the term.

Attempts at defining religion

Many definitions of religion share many of the elements that we included in our definition of culture. Perhaps we can define a religion as a system of beliefs and behaviors, based on a system of symbols. But how can we distinguish religious beliefs and behaviors from other aspects of culture? After all, we can recognize, for example, particular beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that define political or economic processes.

Analytic definitions focus on the way religion manifests itself or is expressed in a culture. An example would be defining religions by stating that religious practices generally include rituals.

Ninian Smart, for example, stated what he felt were the six dimensions of religion.⁷ These comprise the following:

- the institutional dimension (organization and leadership);
- the narrative dimension (myths, creation stories, worldview);
- the ritual dimension (rites of passage and other important ritual activities);
- the social dimension (religion being a group activity that binds people together);
- the ethical dimension (customs, moral rules);
- the experiential dimension (religion involving experiences of a sacred reality that is beyond ordinary experience).

Functional definitions focus on what religion does either socially or psychologically. For example, rituals would be seen as a means to bring a group together and bring individuals comfort. Theorists who have used a more functional definition of religion include Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and anthropologists Émile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz. Geertz wrote:

A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.⁸

One of the problems with functional definitions is that they could apply equally well to beliefs and behaviors that are not religious in nature. Others feel that functional approaches are reductionist, reducing religion to a few feelings and behaviors that are not, in and of themselves, religious. For both these reasons, it can be difficult to separate religious and nonreligious systems using a functional definition. This does not mean that the social and psychological functions are not important. They are, and functionalism as a theoretical approach to studying religion (discussed further below) has much to offer. As a definition, however, it alone is not sufficient.

An **essentialist definition** of religion looks at what is the essential nature of religion. It emphasizes the fact that religion is the domain of the extraordinary—things beyond the commonplace and the natural. On the basis of this idea we would say that a religion is a system of beliefs and behaviors that deals with the relationship between humans and the sacred supernatural.

The term **supernatural** refers to things that are “above the natural.” Supernatural entities and actions transcend the normal world of cause and effect as we know it.

In the supernatural world, wondrous things occur. Supernatural beings defy the basic laws of nature. In the supernatural world, objects move faster than light, heavy objects fly, and creatures become invisible.

However, not all supernatural phenomena are thought to be religious. Consider the folktale in which the handsome prince is turned into a frog. This is surely a supernatural occurrence—handsome princes do not turn into frogs in the natural world—but this occurrence is hardly a religious one. To address this problem, we add the term *sacred* to the definition of religion. *Sacred* denotes an attitude wherein the subject is entitled to reverence and respect.

Many theorists have defined religion in terms of the supernatural as the core religious beliefs of any religious system. In 1871, Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as **animism**, a belief in spirit beings (gods, souls, ghosts, demons, etc.). Much later, Melford Spiro defined religion as an “institution consisting of culturally patterned interactions with culturally postulated superhuman beings.”⁹

The problem with an essentialist definition is that such definitions often become too specific, focusing narrowly on spirit beings for example, or risk being too vague if they only reference the supernatural. As with other definitions we have looked at, essentialist definitions by themselves may not be enough but do point to areas of great importance in religion.

A true understanding of the breadth of religious practices among the world's societies will become clear as you progress through this text. We encourage you to keep an open mind and settle on your own definition as you gain more knowledge and understanding. However, as was discussed previously, as an endeavor in the social sciences, this text needs an operant definition in order to proceed.

One would like to have a simple definition of the term *religion*. However, the search for a simple, yet useful definition remains elusive. Religion is a concept constructed by the human mind that includes a particular set of human beliefs and practices. As a cultural construct it is strongly influenced by culture and by philosophical and theoretical backgrounds. The practices that are included under the rubric of religion vary from scholar to scholar, and definitions that focus upon religious systems found in large, urban societies differ considerably from those found in small-scale societies. Each definition previously explored offers clues to important elements of religion, but each by itself is incomplete.

Perhaps it is best to think of religion as a set of cultural beliefs and practices that usually include some or all of a basic set of characteristics. While not an exhaustive list, it will provide us with an operant definition as we move ahead with our studies of religious systems. These characteristics are as follows:

- a belief in anthropomorphic supernatural beings, such as spirits and gods;
- a focus on the sacred supernatural, where sacred refers to a feeling of reverence and awe;
- the presence of supernatural power or energy that is found in supernatural beings as well as physical beings and objects;
- the performance of ritual activities that involve the manipulation of sacred objects to communicate with supernatural beings and/or to influence or control events;
- an articulation of a worldview and moral code through narratives and other means;

- provides for the creation and maintenance of social bonds and mechanisms of social control within a community;
- provides explanations for the unknown and a sense of control for the individual.

The domain of religion

The discussion of definitions highlights the contrasting concepts of etic and emic. The very concept of religion as a separate cultural category is a Western one. Western cultures are divided into very distinct cultural domains, such as economics, politics, technology, and, of course, religion. As we move through our day, we move from one domain to another, yet the domains do not overlap, or they overlap to a small degree. For example, when we go to work, we might punch a clock or sign in, for “work” is a distinct segment of our life, which we can define in terms of location, activity, relationships to coworkers, and so forth. Religion as a domain may be restricted to very specific activities held in special places during specific times—a Sunday morning church service, for example. When we use the term *religion*, we might immediately picture such things as special buildings dedicated to religious activities (churches, temples, and mosques) and full-time specialists who perform religious rituals (priests and rabbis).

Our analysis of religion becomes more difficult when we turn our attention to more traditional societies. If we analyzed small-scale religious systems by applying the definitions and concepts that have been developed in Western cultures, we would likely find that certain elements that we consider to be vital parts of our religious systems simply do not exist—in *our terms*. For some people it follows from this that other religious systems are “defective,” “incomplete,” “primitive,” “false,” or “full of superstitions.” Clearly, this leads us into highly ethnocentric conclusions that cloud our ability to understand the religious systems of other peoples.

When we study traditional societies using an emic (insider) approach, there might be no equivalent term to our concept of religion. Religion is not separated out from other dimensions of life but is fully integrated into the fabric of beliefs and behavior. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote, “To the believer, they are parts of the universe; to the observer, they are parts of a religion.”¹⁰

Theoretical approaches to the study of religion

Just as there are many definitions of religion, there are also many approaches to the study of religious phenomena. Here we will describe five approaches that anthropologists have used to study religion: evolutionary, Marxist, functional, interpretive, and psychosocial.

The evolutionary approach

The **evolutionary approach** was centered on the questions of when and how religion began. This viewpoint developed in the late 1800s when the focus was on the concepts of science, logic, and monotheism as the pinnacles of human achievement. Scholars of the time emphasized empiricism, or observing and measuring, saying that the only real knowledge is scientific knowledge; any knowledge beyond that is impossible.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of the concept of a general evolution of culture. It was thought that religion naturally evolved from the simple to the complex and that this evolution was a natural consequence of human nature. An interest in the religion of “primitive” peoples arose from the supposition that “primitive” peoples represented an early stage of cultural evolution and that one could learn about and understand the historical roots of the religion of “civilized” societies by studying living “primitive” peoples.

Edward B. Tylor used this approach in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871).¹¹ He concluded that all religions had a belief in spiritual beings. Whereas the religions of “civilized” peoples included beliefs in gods and souls, those of “primitive” peoples focused on the belief in spirits and ghosts. He termed this early belief system *animism*.

Tylor thought that the belief in spirit beings was the natural and universal conclusion reached by all peoples through the observation of sleep and dreams, possession, and death, during which the soul is thought to leave the body, temporarily or permanently. Because other animals are also living, they must also have souls that leave the body when the animal dies. All living things are animated by souls, as are nonliving things such as waterfalls and mountains.

In attempting to find a common thread in all religious systems, Tylor failed to discover the great variability among the world’s religious systems. This was in part because Tylor did not go into the field to become immersed in the complexity of a particular culture. Instead, he relied on reports of explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators who described, often in simplistic and biased ways, the peoples they encountered in their travels.

Robert R. Marett developed the concept of a simpler, more basic, and more ancient supernatural force that he labeled *animatism*.¹² Marett thought that the idea of animatism simply grew out of human emotional reaction to the power of nature. This belief in an impersonal supernatural power is well articulated in the religions of Polynesia and Melanesia, where it is referred to as *mana*. In Chapter 7 we will discuss the ideas of another scholar from the evolutionary school, James Frazer, who wrote extensively about magic, a category that he considered to be separate from religion. Frazer saw a natural progression in cultures from magic to religion to science.¹³

The evolutionary approach has many critics. Many of the ideas found in this school of thought are ethnocentric—for example, Tylor’s idea that the religion of “primitive” peoples focused on spirits and ghosts while more “civilized” peoples focused on gods. In addition, any ideas about the origin of a cultural practice are, of course, highly speculative. Although the idea of cultural progression, with Western societies being more “evolved” than smaller-scale traditional ones, is no longer used in anthropology, the general question of the origins of religion has remained a concern.

However, many contemporary anthropologists use an evolutionary approach. After all, the history of human society has witnessed progressive changes through time from foraging to horticultural to agricultural and, finally, industrial societies. Scholars look for correlations between these changes and various aspects of a society, including religious system. For example, foraging societies are often characterized by shamanic practices with part-time religious practitioners while on the other hand, state societies are characterized by full-time religious specialists who may be members of a highly organized priesthood.

The Marxist approach

Another influential theorist of the 1800s was Karl Marx. Like many of this era, Marx was critical of religion. However, Marx did not criticize the logic of religion as others had done. He felt that religion reflected society so that any criticism of religion must therefore also be a criticism of society. Indeed the **Marxist approach** to religion cannot be understood without the framework of his approach to society. He saw religion as a human construction, more specifically as a construction of those in power.

Marx felt that religion did not reflect the true consciousness of people but a false consciousness designed to divert people's attention from the miseries of their lives. This misery was seen as being the result of exploitation of the masses by those in power under the capitalist system. Of course, religion existed before capitalism. Marx's basic view is that religion is a natural consequence of the human experience of distress. In the past, this may have arisen as a result of the human struggle with nature. However, Marx's focus is on the capitalist system in which this struggle has shifted to human conflict with other humans. Religion is seen both as a means of compensation and as a way of getting people to go along with a capitalist culture that is not in their best interests. For example, he felt that religion teaches people to be obedient to authority as a condition for achieving future happiness through salvation:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.¹⁴

Critics of Marx point out that there usually is no single, dominant ideology in a society; instead, there are different ideologies that correspond to different subcultures and different classes.

The functional approach

In contrast to the evolutionary and Marxist schools, the **functional approach** asks the question: What does religion do? What role do religions play in a society? For example, a religion might enforce social cohesion by bringing members together for rituals and providing a foundation for shared beliefs. Religions might also function on the individual level to relieve individual anxiety by providing explanations and meaning.

Émile Durkheim, for example, saw society as problematic.¹⁵ Although sanctions exist to keep people in line, Durkheim thought that these were not enough. He believed that the key lies in the **collective conscious**, a system of beliefs that act to contain natural selfishness of individuals and to promote social cooperation. Collective representations, or symbols, are a reflection of the collective conscious. During rituals, these collective representations are displayed, resulting in a reattachment to the value system of the group.

Both Durkheim and Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown saw society as being like an organism in which the parts act to maintain the whole.¹⁶ Radcliffe-Brown also thought that for

society to survive, certain feelings need to be encouraged in people's minds. He thought that anything of great social value is seen as possessing supernatural power; the greater the value, the more powerful it is. Rituals, then, function to express the basic sentiments of a society and to pass these ideas down from generation to generation. Religion, in general, is seen as an integrative force in society.

Radcliffe-Brown's approach to function was in terms of a part contributing to the maintenance of the whole society. Another important theorist in the functional school, Bronislaw Malinowski, had a different approach (Box 1.2). Malinowski looked at religion and other features of a society in terms of their purpose in meeting basic human needs. For example, in his analysis of magic, Malinowski stressed that magic is a logical system that people turn to in times of uncertainty or emotional

Box 1.2 Malinowski and the Trobriand Islands

Bronislaw Malinowski was born into the nobility in Krakow, Poland, in 1884. He studied mathematics and physical sciences and received his Ph.D. from the University of Krakow in 1908. However, illness prevented him from continuing his research, and while recovering, he read *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer, a classic anthropological work that describes magical beliefs in cultures around the world. Malinowski later wrote in 1926, "no sooner had I begun to read this great work than I became immersed in it and enslaved by it."¹⁷ Reading this book changed his life. From then on, Malinowski devoted himself to the study of anthropology, and he traveled to England to study at the London School of Economics.

In 1914, Malinowski joined an expedition to the Pacific. He would not return to Europe until 1920 because, being a Polish subject, he was considered to be an enemy alien by the British during World War I. However, during the war he was allowed to continue his research in the Pacific and to spend the time between expeditions in Australia. Because of these circumstances, Malinowski spent a greater amount of time conducting field research than had ever been done before. This included a total of twenty-six months spent in the Trobriand Islands, located off the coast of New Guinea.

During his stay in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski completed the most detailed anthropological study that had been done up to that time, and the Trobriand Islands remains one of the most fully described of any small-scale society. Unlike other anthropologists of his day, Malinowski participated in the life of the society he was studying. He pitched his tent in the middle of the village and learned the language. Malinowski was a pioneer of the participant observation method that became a hallmark of the field of anthropology.

Malinowski became a major figure in the development of British anthropology and influenced nearly everyone who trained in the field during the 1920s and 1930s. Among his pioneering contributions was the concept of *functionalism*. He thought that culture does something—that social institutions exist to fulfill the needs of, and serve the interests of, members of a society.

stress. Magic functions to provide control and certainty in an otherwise uncertain world.

The functional approach is still used today and will be referred to in future chapters. Researchers have recognized many phenomena that we will address as contributing to the health and maintenance of the society or the individuals in that group. In general, religious phenomena function to provide answers and explanations and to provide a course of action.

The functional school is not without its critics. Some see functionalism as committing the error of reification (treating something abstract as if it were concrete and alive). Can we really talk about social institutions having needs and purposes in the same way that humans do? Functionalism is also seen by some as being tautological (a circular argument) because it argues that we know that something must be functional because it exists; it exists because it is functional. Does every institution and cultural practice have a function? Historians of religion argue that analyzing religion in terms of functionality implies that religion is purely illusory, existing only to fulfill those functions. For instance, some functionalists see religion as just a crutch for the masses or a power play by the ruling class. Instead, historians of religion emphasize a powerful and lived experience of a sacred reality.

Others argue that while the functional approach is useful, more care needs to be taken in terms of which possible functions are logically valid. For example, Melford Spiro states that when arguing that a certain function is the cause of a religious behavior, it is necessary for individuals to both recognize and seek to satisfy that functional requirement. He argues that an unintended functional consequence (recognized only by outsiders) could not possibly be its cause.

The interpretive approach

Clifford Geertz was an American anthropologist who popularized the metaphor that culture is a text to be read and in which anthropologists can read meaning.¹⁸ Part of his inspiration for this **interpretive approach** was the work of the sociologist Max Weber and his concept of *verstehen* (i.e., understanding the other's point of view).¹⁹ This Weberian approach was opposed to the more popular functionalist approach of the time. Geertz emphasized that the task of anthropologists was not to discover laws or study origins and causes but instead to make sense of cultural systems by studying meaning. Anthropologists need to seek to interpret the culturally specific "webs of significance" that people both create and are caught up in. Interpretive anthropology can discover and interpret these webs of meaning through detailed ethnographic descriptions.

Religion specifically is described as a cluster of symbols that together make up a whole and provides a charter for a culture's ideas, values, and way of life. The set of symbols provides ways to interpret the world. Geertz described symbols as playing a double role. They are both "models of" and "models for" in that they both represent the way things are while also directing human activity. Geertz argued that religious symbols establish very powerful moods and feelings and help explain human existence by giving it an ultimate meaning. These symbols claim to connect humans to a reality that in some ways is "more real" than everyday life, thus giving religion a special status above and beyond regular life.

Geertz felt that the study of religion needed to take place in two stages. The first stage is an analysis of the systems of meaning that are embodied within religious symbols. The second stage involves relating these systems to social structures and psychological processes. Critics point out that in reality he devoted much more time to the first stage than to the second.

The psychosocial approach

The **psychosocial approach** to the study of religion is concerned with the relationship between culture and personality and the connection between the society and the individual. One example is the work of Sigmund Freud.²⁰ Freud's model of the mind and his concept of defense mechanisms have been used both by Freud himself and by his followers to explain religious phenomena. For example, defense mechanisms are psychological maneuvers by which we distort reality in ways that help us to avoid conflict and reduce anxiety. The most important of these for our discussion is projection, in which the subject is transposed and the emotion is projected. So "I hate X" becomes "You hate X." Psychosocial anthropologists believe that individual emotions also get projected at the cultural level.

The best example of this is studies that look cross-culturally for correlations between various beliefs and behaviors. One example of this approach uses this methodology to hypothesize a connection between the characteristics of parents and the characteristics of supernatural beings. Childhood experiences are dominated by powerful figures—parents. Children build up parental images that stay with them throughout life. In adult life these parental images are projected onto spirit beings. For example, if parents are generally nurturing, the expectation is that the gods would be considered to be nurturing as well. However, correlation does not equal causation, and this and several other issues challenge the correlational approach.

Box 1.3 Evans-Pritchard and the Azande

E. E. Evans-Pritchard was born in Sussex, England, in 1902. After receiving his master's degree in Anthropology from Oxford University, he went on to study at the University of London, where he became one of Malinowski's first students. He conducted several field expeditions to Central, East, and North Africa from 1926 until the beginning of World War II. During the war he left teaching and research to join the military. After the war he returned to academia and ultimately held the position of chair of Social Anthropology at Oxford University.

Evans-Pritchard is best known for his work with the Azande of southern Sudan, which was then the British colony of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Between 1926 and 1930 he made three different visits and spent a total of twenty months among the Azande. Following his work with the Azande, he went on to study the Nuer. He had found the Azande to be friendly, but his work with the Nuer was much more difficult. In the early days of his research in particular, they were hostile and uncommunicative, and he was frequently ill.

The Azande are known today as the classic anthropological example of witchcraft in a small-scale society. Evans-Pritchard's early articles on the subject were greatly influenced by the functional perspective of his teacher, Malinowski. For example, Evans-Pritchard believed that witchcraft beliefs provided explanations for events and helped to uphold moral standards (see Chapter 10). Ultimately, however, he was not satisfied with this type of explanation alone. He emphasized the importance of looking at beliefs and behaviors from an insider perspective and wanted to show how even seemingly irrational beliefs were in fact logical and coherent from the emic perspective.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1937).

The biological basis of religious behavior

What we perceive and think of as our reality is actually a creation of our brain. Our awareness of what is “out there” is based upon input from a series of receptors such as our eyes, nose, and tongue. The stimuli that are picked up by these receptors enter the brain, where they undergo processing before they enter our consciousness. For example, the clear, detailed, three-dimensional, colored world revealed through sight is an illusion created by our brain from a hodgepodge of electrical impulses produced by the photoreceptors in the retina of our eyes. Color is a complete illusion of something that does not exist in the real world, but is our brain's way of representing differences in the wavelength of electromagnetic energy.

And not all of the information that enters our brain from the outside enters our consciousness. For example, there was a patient who was blind because of a series of strokes that completely destroyed the visual cortex of his brain; his eyes and optic nerves, however, remained healthy. Information entering the brain from his eyes was used by his brain to permit him to walk down a hallway full of objects on the floor without stepping on them. His brain knew where the objects were even though his consciousness did not.²¹

This then brings up the question: Does our brain create realities that are indistinguishable from “reality,” whatever that means? An important part of religion is religious experiences, which range from feeling good to hallucinations and revelations. Could, for example, seeing a ghost, having an out-of-body experience, or being visited by an angel be examples of brain-created realities? The answer is yes.

Figure 1.2 shows a pair of brain scans that compare brains at rest with brains of individuals in deep meditation. The bright areas are regions that are active during particular mental activities. In the meditating brain, we see an increase in activity in the frontal lobe, indicative of increased concentration, and a decrease in activity in the parietal lobe. This latter area is in the region associated with people's orientation of their bodies in time and space. Changes in activity in this area may be related to the development of out-of-body experiences or to a sense of blurring of the boundaries between self and other. In another interesting area of research, it has been found that patients suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy, when the functioning of the brain goes haywire, report their seizures as intense religious experiences.

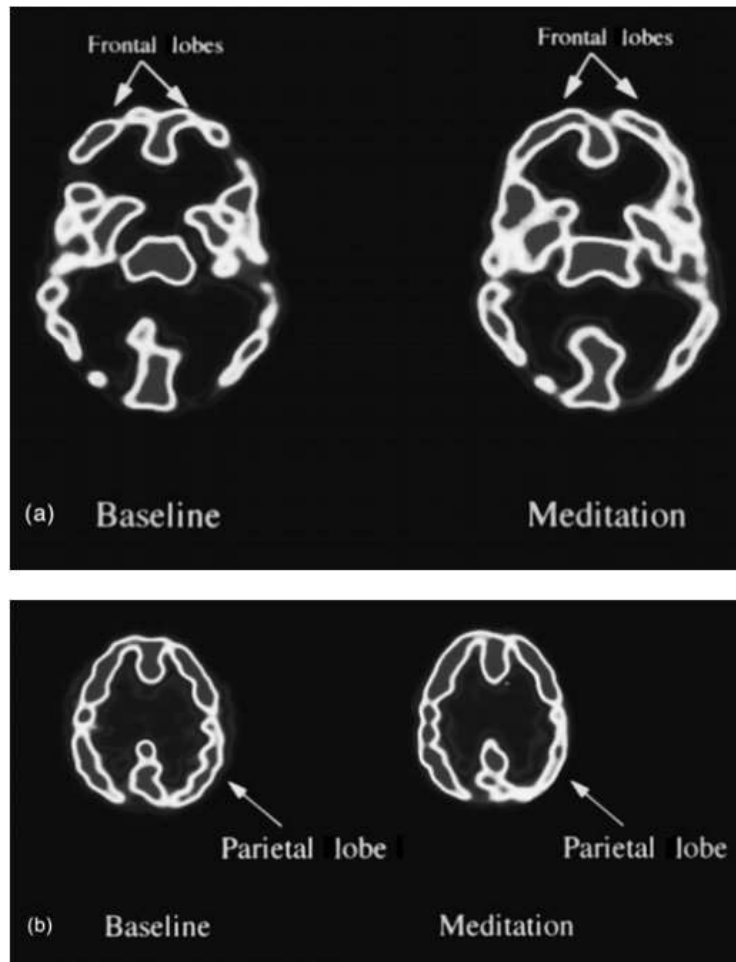


Figure 1.2 Brain scans. Single photon emission computer tomography (SPECT) images of the brain of a Tibetan Buddhist showing baseline image at rest and in deep meditation. Top images show increased activity in frontal lobe in area associated with focusing attention and concentration. Bottom images show decreased activity in parietal lobe in area responsible for sense of orientation in space and time.

It is tempting to associate religious feelings and experiences with a particular point within the structure of the brain—a God module perhaps. However, most neuroscientists who are interested in these issues see religious experiences as more complex, involving changes in many different regions of the brain.

Considering biological influences is a part of anthropology's holistic approach. It is something we will consider as we discuss phenomena such as altered states of consciousness and near-death experiences.

Beliefs in spirit beings

Another aspect of the biological basis for religion is the impact of the way the human mind works. An interesting application of this is a phenomenon that appears to be

common to all human religious systems, concepts of supernatural anthropomorphic causal agents within their environment. (The term **anthropomorphic** refers to things that are not human but have humanlike characteristics and behave in humanlike ways.) This is the core of the concept of animism, the belief in spirit beings, which was introduced earlier in this chapter.

One explanation for the development of a belief in spirit beings is based on the concept of theory of mind. **Theory of mind** refers to the idea that people know, or think they know, what is going on in other people's minds. People recognize and often identify with perceived feelings, desires, fears, and other emotions in other human beings. The presence of a theory of mind is thought to be what makes us human, although evidence suggests that there may be some development of theory of mind in other animals, albeit on a very limited scale. This is what allows people to explain other peoples' behavior and to predict what others will do in a particular situation. Thus a theory of mind is essential for the development of complex social patterns.

Many scholars believe that the human brain actually extends the theory of mind into the minds of animals and other living and nonliving entities. It is this extension that leads to anthropomorphism and attribution of humanlike qualities to animals. The idea that nonhuman entities and forces possess "minds," that they have intentions, emotions, and interact with the human world, is the basis for the development of a belief in spirit beings.

If anthropomorphic supernatural beings interact with the human world, then things do not happen simply because they follow the rules of nature. This explains why things occur that lie outside rational analysis. And this also provides the means, through ritual, to influence and perhaps to control nature.

The evolution of religion

With the emerging interest in biology and religion, new explanations for the origin of religion have been proposed that look at the question from the perspective of biological evolution. If humans have a biological mechanism for religion, why did it evolve?

Evolutionary explanations are actually not all that different from the functional, needs-fulfillment explanations we discussed earlier. Some evolutionary scientists have suggested that religion evolved as a way to fulfill social needs such as encouraging cooperation between individuals, reinforcing kinship ties, and imposing order and stability on society. Others have focused on emotional needs and have argued that as humans became more intelligent and self-aware, anxiety would have been a natural response. Once we are aware that we exist, we become aware that we will die and therefore begin to worry about dying. The evolution of greater awareness and consciousness would create a dysfunctional, anxiety-ridden species if religion had not evolved as an adaptation to cope with this by providing explanations of and meanings for both life and death.

Other theorists have focused on the nature of human **cognition** as an explanation for the origin of religious beliefs and experiences. (*Cognition* is a general term for processes of the human brain that include perception, learning, memory, concept formation, and problem solving.) Religion is seen not as existing to serve a purpose but rather as an accidental by-product of the way the human brain works.

The human brain appears to have two different and innate ways of interpreting the world. One has to do with physical things like rocks, the other with psychological things, such as people. We interpret a rock moving through space and a person moving through space very differently. To a person we attribute such things as intentions, beliefs, goals, and morality or lack thereof. These two systems seem to be biological adaptations that help us to deal with objects and with people. However, these systems go awry in ways that provide the foundation for religion.

For example, we are dualists; we see mind and body as two separate and distinct entities. Despite what psychologists know about how the brain works, we intuitively feel that we merely occupy our bodies, not that we actually are our bodies. This provides the foundation for a belief in both bodies without souls and souls without bodies. A dead body is seen as lacking its soul. The soul without the body is often believed to survive and have another, separate existence after death. A further extension of souls without bodies would also include other supernatural beings, such as gods.

The second way in which cognition feeds into the evolution of religion is the human tendency to overextend our system of social understanding and infer purpose, goals, intention, and design even where there is none. We attribute human characteristics to an amazing range of inanimate objects as, for example, the computer that seems to purposely break down at the most crucial moment. Humans seek and find patterns in random arrays—what looks like a face in a stucco ceiling or the Virgin Mary on a grilled cheese sandwich.

Pascal Boyer has pointed out that although religious concepts do violate some expectations about the world, they do preserve other expectations. He focuses in particular on the social nature of human beings and the inferences that the human brain draws that regulate social interaction. For example, Boyer points out that gods and other supernatural agents are seen as being very human-like in cultures around the world. Yet there are obviously crucial differences. Boyer points out that gods differ from human in that they have access to all the possible information that is relevant to the issue at hand in a social interaction.

However, gods are rarely omniscient cross-culturally. For example, the idea that “God knows you are lying” seems more natural than “God knows the content of every refrigerator in the world”—unless in your refrigerator is something that you stole. The main point of Boyer’s discussion is that supernatural concepts are just extensions of everyday cognitive categories and the way that the human brain processes information. As he writes, “People do not invent gods and spirits; they receive information that leads them to build such concepts.”²²

Conclusion

As we have seen in our discussion of the definition of religion and different approaches to the study of religion, ethnocentrism can be and has been a major impediment to developing a true understanding of religious beliefs and practices in other societies. The goal of anthropology is to move past ethnocentrism toward an approach of cultural relativism. This is especially true in the study of religion. The anthropological approach—and the central way of looking at the religious world in this book—is to study what people believe and do in regard to a sacred supernatural, not to judge

whether these beliefs and actions are based in an objective truth or not. The anthropological study of religion calls for a methodological agnosticism.

Although **agnosticism** has taken on the connotation of not having made up one's mind, the original meaning of the word is different. Agnostics say that the nature of the supernatural is unknowable, that it is as impossible to prove the nonexistence of the supernatural as it is to prove its existence. In this book we will be seeking neither to prove nor to disprove but merely to observe. In the words of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, writing in the seventeenth century, "I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn human actions, but to understand them."

Summary

Anthropology is the study of humanity. Anthropologists study human societies as integrated wholes, an approach that is termed *holism*. This approach is seen in the broad scope of anthropology, which is often divided into the fields of physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. This approach requires that societies be studied over long periods of time, during which the investigator lives within the community and participates in the lives of the people under study, a technique known as participant observation. The final product is an ethnography, a descriptive study of a human society.

An outside observer of a community usually imposes his or her system of analysis on the group under study (etic perspective). It is natural to use one's own society as the basis for interpreting and judging other societies, a tendency called ethnocentrism. Many anthropologists attempt to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied (emic perspective) and describe and understand people's customs and ideas but do not judge them, an approach called cultural relativism. The goal is to study what people believe, not whether or not what they believe is true.

A central concept in anthropology is culture. In 1871, Tylor wrote, "Culture . . . is that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Culture includes all aspects of the human experience that are passed down from generation to generation. Culture gives meaning to reality; we live in a real, physical world, but our minds interpret this world through a cultural lens and even create new realities.

Religion is a difficult concept to define when we try to include all human societies. An analytic definition focuses on the way in which religion manifests itself or is expressed in a culture. A functional definition is concerned with the role that religion plays in a society. Finally, an essentialist definition looks at what the essential nature of religion is and emphasizes the fact that religion is the domain of the extraordinary. Our definition looks at religion as a set of cultural beliefs and practices that usually include a basic set of characteristics and draws on elements of all three of these approaches.

There have been many theoretical approaches to the study of religion. The evolutionary approach, developed in the late 1800s, focused on the questions of when and how religions began and how they evolved from the simple to the complex. This evolution was seen as a natural consequence of human nature, and the religions of "primitive" peoples were remnants of an earlier, simpler evolutionary stage. Early religions included animism, the belief in spirits and ghosts, and animatism, the belief in a generalized supernatural force.

The Marxist approach is based on the writings of Karl Marx, who saw religion as being a construction of those in power, designed to divert people's attention from the miseries of their lives. This misery was seen as being the result of exploitation of the masses by those in power under the capitalist system. He saw religion both as a means of compensation and as a way of getting people to go along with a capitalist culture that is not in their best interests.

The functional approach asks the question: What does religion do? For example, Malinowski concluded that magic functions to provide control and certainty in an otherwise uncertain situation. The interpretive approach is associated with Clifford Geertz who believed that the task of anthropologists was to make sense of cultural systems by studying meaning. He described religion as a cluster of symbols that provides a charter for a culture's ideas, values, and way of life. Religious symbols help explain human existence by giving it an ultimate meaning. The psychosocial approach is concerned with the relationship between culture and personality and the connection between the society and the individual.

Many theorists have suggested that religion is a by-product of the functioning and evolution of the human brain. The brain is capable of creating new realities. The theory of mind is the idea that one knows what is going on in another person's mind. This leads to the attribution of humanlike qualities to nonhuman entities and forces, the basis for the development of a belief in spirit beings. Thus we infer purpose, goals, intention, and design throughout the universe.

Study questions

1. How does one go about conducting a holistic study of a society? How would this be different from a study on a specific topic?
2. We can examine human societies from an etic or an emic perspective. Do you think it is possible to really understand a society other than your own from an emic perspective?
3. How would you balance cultural relativism and universal human rights? Do you think that you could remain neutral in your judgment of all of the behaviors you might see in a small-scale society?
4. What is the basic difference between a society and a culture? Can these two terms be used interchangeably?
5. Think back to a ritual that you have attended—a wedding ceremony, for example. Write three brief descriptions from each of the following viewpoints: analytic, functional, and essentialist.
6. One of the major debates in studies of human behavior is that between nature (biology) and nurture (culture). Do you think that there is any biological basis for the development of religion in human societies? Do you think that someday someone might discover a society that has no religious practices?
7. Some scholars have argued that religion is not definable in any real sense. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: "We sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the definition a kind of ornamental coping that supports nothing."²³ Discuss.

Suggested readings

Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

[A cognitive anthropologist explains religion in terms of everyday thought processes.]

David J. Linden, *The Accidental Mind: How Brain Evolution Has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, and God* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008).

[A neuroscientist discusses the functioning of the human brain and its relationship to religion, among other things.]

William Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (2nd edn) (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004).

[An overview of theoretical approaches to religion.]

Carl Sagan, *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000).

[A skeptical look at supernatural beliefs and phenomena.]

Michael Winkelman and John R. Baker, *Supernatural as Natural: A Biocultural Approach to Religion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008).

[An introduction to the study of religion with an emphasis on evolution and neurology.]

Suggested websites

www.aaanet.org

Website of the American Anthropological Association.

<http://sar.americananthro.org/>

The Society for the Anthropology of Religion of the American Anthropological Association.

www.religioustolerance.org

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance.

Notes

- 1 Note that we are using the ethnographic present in describing these cultures. Members of the California tribes no longer gather and process acorns, and their way of life is very similar to non-Native American peoples among whom they live.
- 2 M. M. Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
- 3 R. B. Edgerton, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony* (New York: The Free Press, 1992.)
- 4 Ibid., p. 93.
- 5 E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871), p. 1.
- 6 All Bible quotations in this text are taken from *The King James Bible*, except where otherwise noted.
- 7 N. Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (3rd edn) (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), pp. 8–10.
- 8 C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 90.
- 9 M. E. Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definitions and Explanations,” in M. Banton (Ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), p. 96.

- 10 W. C. Smith et al., *The Meaning and End of Religion* (San Francisco: Harper, 1978).
- 11 E. B. Tylor, op. cit.
- 12 R. R. Marett, *The Threshold of Religions* (London: Elibron Classics, 2005), first published in 1909.
- 13 J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1922).
- 14 K. Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (February, 1844).
- 15 É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), first published in 1913.
- 16 A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion and Society," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society*, 75 (1945), pp. 33–43.
- 17 B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1948), p. 94.
- 18 C. J. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), first published in 1973.
- 19 M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
- 20 S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953).
- 21 A. Abbott, "Blind Man Walking," *Nature News*, December 22, 2008. www.nature.com/news/2008/081222/full/news.2008.1328.html.
- 22 P. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 161.
- 23 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1953), #217.