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As noted in the previous sections, certainly by the time of the early Greek philosophers, people in the Western world were speculating on the origins of religion, and doing so through comparison with other cultures. Xenophanes had speculated on how people imagine gods in their own image and appearance, and Herodotus had noted how deities from a foreign culture had migrated to and been adopted by people in his own culture. To some extent these philosophers/historians were engaged in a sort of rudimentary anthropology of religion. However, the discipline of anthropology, as it is currently conceived, is a relatively recent phenomenon rooted in the spirit of the eighteenth-century Western Enlightenment. As its name suggests anthropology (*anthropos*—human being + *logos*—study) is the study of human beings, persons, or humanity (or as encountered in older, now inappropriate, non-gender-inclusive language, the “study of man”). In telling ways the discipline of anthropology is also rooted in the age of discovery and colonial expansion, which began in the fifteenth century. The European contact with New World cultures, as well as with people from societies in Africa and the East, led to a fascination with the appearance, behaviors, and artifacts of these “others.” When conjoined with the emerging theory of evolution—for Charles Darwin had published his influential *The Origin of Species* in 1858—early anthropologists began to see their

studies as contributing to the understanding of human evolution. Thinkers such as Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) had extrapolated the theory of the evolution of species to the evolution of societies in what is sometimes referred to as social Darwinism. Eurocentric attitudes concocted the notion that European societies (and Western monotheistic religion) represented the apex of an evolutionary process in which non-European societies and people could be seen as lower on the evolutionary ladder. Many early anthropologists were thus measuring skulls and other body parts of so-called primitive tribes to demonstrate how these meshed with the archaeological discoveries of prehistoric hominids. It was thought that people who lived in technologically simple societies, in a close interrelationship with nature (i.e. hunter-gatherers, or small scale agriculturalists), were physically, mentally, socially, and religiously closer to some ancient extinct hominids such as Neanderthals. Much of this kind of anthropology has mostly been abandoned, as the study of human biological evolution has been ceded to physical anthropologists, archaeologists, and biologists. From the late nineteenth century, anthropology began a shift in emphasis toward the study of human culture, and this is its defining characteristic today. The notion of social and cultural evolution is still promoted in various forms but is in tension with the prevailing theories that regard particular societies and cultures as developing according to their distinctive historical and environmental circumstances, and not as situated along some imaginary path in which high technology or large cities are necessary features of the evolutionary frontline.

Culture, society, and religion

Franz Boas (1858–1952) is often regarded as the father of American cultural anthropology. Trained as a scientist and geographer (Boas had a doctorate in physics), he naturally did not repudiate the value of scientific observation and data collection, which he held to be the cornerstone of cultural studies. Boas, nevertheless, understood culture as a malleable and dynamic category, and its study as not an exact science, and thus one in which humanistic features, such as the study of historical processes, should play a part. At the same time, in England, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) was promoting the indispensable value of fieldwork—that is, of living for extended periods of time within a foreign society, learning the language of its people, and participating in its ways of life. His approach has come to be known as participant observation, for participation needs to be blended with scientific distance, observation, and data collection. When conducting fieldwork, anthropologists should not remain distant from the people they are studying, but should, as much as is reasonably possible, interact with them and share in their culture, striving to be able to understand it from the cultural native's own point of view. However, unlike the native of a particular culture, the anthropologist must attempt to reflect on the gathered pieces of cultural information and endeavor to uncover larger or underlying patterns, interpreting and theorizing on the human condition. This heritage of Boas and Malinowski is still vibrantly alive in anthro-

pology, which seeks to understand what it is to be human, primarily through the study of others whose societies and cultures seem markedly different from our own. British anthropologists have been associated with emphasizing the social scientific dimensions of the discipline, while the American heritage has emphasized, particularly recently, the interpretation of culture. However, the distinction between British social anthropology and American cultural anthropology can be misleading, for although the styles of individual anthropologists may lean in one or the other direction, the discipline of anthropology strives for holism in understanding others and requires the study of the dynamics of both social configurations and culture. Such studies are known as ethnographies.

While the term society may be somewhat less problematically defined simply as any group of people who share some cohesive element, “culture” is as elusive a term to define as religion. Anthropologists do not use the term culture to mean “having an elite set of behaviors” as in the expression, “They are uncultured boors!” All societies have culture. Culture is the full corpus of the collectively shared beliefs and activities of any social group. Culture plays an important role in binding social groups together, and those who do not share crucial aspects of culture are regarded as outsiders. Culture is transmitted through the generations, and among members of a social group, and many of its features may be so deeply rooted as to be simply assumed by members to be the way things are. This is why studying one’s own culture is not preferred in anthropology, because the contrast offered by another society’s cultural practices enables one to discern deeply embedded structures in one’s own cultural behaviors. So while simply reaching out to shake someone’s hand as a gesture of greeting, or belching in public after a good meal, may appear to be normal etiquette in certain cultures, they are not so in others. Such rules of etiquette are obvious markers of difference and may be relatively trivial in their implications, but people may also be particularly attached to certain powerful cultural symbols in non-trivial ways. A public gesture of irreverence, such as defacing a political symbol (e.g. burning the American flag), or despoiling a religious icon (e.g. tearing up a photo of the Catholic Pope, making satirical depictions of the Muslim prophet Muhammad, destroying Buddha images or a Hindu temple) can cause outrage, and even induce some people to acts of violence, including murder. Religious beliefs are not trivial factors in a person’s existence, and the study of religion therefore requires that one develops an awareness of the weight of its influence on individuals and their societies.

The anthropological study of religion thus brings the two nebulously defined categories of religion and culture into relationship with each other. Since culture is such a broad category, religion may be regarded as a cultural system that is a subset of it, since religious history, beliefs, and practices form a distinctive set of cohesive cultural elements for particular social groups. For instance, when one begins to study the society and culture of the nation of India (bound by a political cultural system), one discovers that there are large numbers of smaller social groups that one might examine (which cohere due to other cultural factors), most of which overlap and intersect with each other. There are political divisions (e.g. states, cities, villages),

geographical regions (e.g. Himalayan, coastal, desert), kinship relations (e.g. caste, tribal), and religious groups (e.g. Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian, Parsi, etc.) among others. One might more narrowly study the culture of any of these subgroups. Thus Hinduism or Hindu culture appears to be a simple subset (in the category of religion) of Indian culture. When examining Hindu religious culture one would further discover that there are sectarian subdivisions focused on particular deities—e.g. Shaivas, Vaishnavas, or Shaktas, who worship Shiva, Vishnu, and the Goddess, respectively—or followers of particular charismatic religious leaders—e.g. Sai Baba, Bhagwan Rajneesh (Osho)—or sub-categories based on religious approaches—e.g. ascetic renouncers, or householders who prefer devotional worship—and so on. So the idea of religion being a subset of the larger culture seems to be clear, as does the notion that there are subsets within the culture of any particular religion, such as Hinduism. However, when actually attempting to study a particular Hindu householder, one may discover that he hopes to be an ascetic renouncer on retirement, listens to the talks of both Sai Baba and Osho, performs devotional worship to Shiva, Vishnu, and the Goddess, and has a wife who has embraced Buddhism and who influences him with its religious philosophy. He may be a businessman, but with Marxist political leanings, who belongs to a caste that has large numbers in a desert state of Rajasthan near the Pakistan border although he now lives in Bangalore, a big city in the country's interior. On satellite television channels, he and his children watch music videos and evangelical Christian broadcasts that originate in the West. Through internet outsourcing of jobs, he works part-time calculating the annual income tax returns for American householders. Is he really a Hindu? Of course he is, within any reasonable parameter of the category. Do his religious beliefs affect his business practices and influence his political leanings? Of course they do.

It is instructive to be reminded that categories such as religion, culture, Indian, Hindu, householder, Marxist, devotional worshipper, Shaiva, or urban dweller are intellectual categories created for our convenience, to enable us to think about the world and better understand it and ourselves. However, the individual human being is not the smallest unit within such categories, who, like an odd, even, or prime number, can be placed (or pigeonholed) into the appropriately described mathematical set. It might actually be more correct to say, if only to elicit some attention to the point, that all those intellectual sets could be placed within the individual, for the human mind is the creator of such categories, including religion. It is at least true to suggest that individuals belong to multiple categories and through their personas (i.e. their actual shifting beliefs and behaviors) attempt to sustain, yet constantly transform, the very categories into which they seek to place themselves and others. It is thus naïve to think of religion as a monochromatic cultural subcategory bounded by firm lines, and separated from other spheres of life. Religion, as embodied in any individual, to some degree permeates virtually every aspect of that person's social reality, and is a dynamic, ever-changing thing. A person's religion is no more static than the person herself. Thus the category of religion, within the framework of the discipline of anthropology (i.e. the study of human beings) needs to be examined

with as much attention to its complexity, subtlety, and shifting features as one would expect to grant to the study of any other feature of human culture.

Approaches and themes in the anthropology of religion

Early theorists

A pioneer in the discipline of anthropology and in the anthropological study of religion was Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917), whose two-volume *Primitive Culture* presents many of his ideas. Tylor is associated with promoting the concept of animism, through which he hoped to explain the origins of religion and its evolutionary development, and develop a science of culture studies. Tylor argued that when our ancestors wondered about differences among such states as sleep, dreams, and wakefulness, and between life and death, they applied their rational faculties to these observed phenomena, but were impeded by a lack of correct supporting information. They thus surmised that spirits or souls animated or gave life to things. Tylor regarded this belief in supernatural beings, which are thought to reside in humans, animals, and the natural world, as the earliest form of religious thinking. The separation of spirits, and their independent existence apart from the living beings and other natural phenomena that they were believed to inhabit, subsequently led to the development of polytheistic beliefs, since certain individual spirits were raised to the status of deities. Eventually, this assortment of disparate deities was coalesced into the concept of one overarching power, leading to monotheism. Tylor had simultaneously been promoting the theory of the cultural evolution of societies from savage (i.e. hunter-gatherer) to barbarous (i.e. domestication of plants and animals) to civilized (i.e. possessing writing). Thus monotheism was merely the animism of civilized societies. Tylor suggested that contemporary “primitive” (i.e. small-scale, non-urban, technologically simple) cultures were akin to ancient “savage” societies and would undergo inevitable stages of development culturally and religiously. It became commonplace among anthropologists to think that the study of such “primitive people,” who were regarded as somehow retarded on the path of cultural progress (and even mental development), would provide clues to the past, revealing how the earliest of our ancestors actually thought and acted. The quest for the origins of religion among human beings was a vibrant theme in the early anthropology of religion.

Certain of Tylor’s ideas were effectively criticized by the folklorist Andrew Lang (1844–1912). Lang, who had initially followed Tylor’s ideas, later pointed to evidence that various primitive societies practiced monotheism at the outset and did not begin with polytheism or more rudimentary forms of animism. The Catholic priest and anthropologist, Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), in support of this observation, actually tried to argue that all primitive societies were originally monotheists, and that monotheism was the original form of all religions. To some extent, theorizing on the evolutionary development of religion, conducted by those aligned with

Tylor's ideas, was a type of response opposing other Christian-influenced assertions that the religions of primitive societies were degenerate forms of an original monotheism. Theories on the origins of religion also emerged from other disciplines, such as from Max Müller (1823–1900), a philologist (*philos*—love + *logos*—word) who specialized in the study of Sanskrit and Indo-European languages. Müller speculated that our early ancestors were awe-struck by and worshipped forces of nature, such as the brilliance of the sun or of lightning. However, eventually, through a common error produced by all language, in which the word is mistaken for the thing itself, and where the thing's qualities tend to be personified, these natural forces began to be regarded as governed by supernatural agents or deities. Mythology was thus a “disease of language.” It was soon apparent that such theories on the origins of religion were either proved to be incorrect, only partially true, or simply unproductive notions because they could not be tested, testing being the hallmark of science, with which anthropology strives to be in alignment. However, new thematic concerns developed in the anthropological study of religion.

James George Frazer (1854–1941) was a prolific writer and a classic example of the “armchair anthropologist.” It is said that he spent about twelve hours every day for sixty years, without a single day of rest, in academic study, and had a personal library of over 30,000 books. Widely read and extremely erudite, Frazer made marked contributions to our understanding of religion, particularly myth and ritual, through his monumental work, *The Golden Bough*. It is a highly readable encyclopedic study, full of comparative ethnographic data, for Frazer strove to find patterns in beliefs, practices, and institutions across cultures. For instance, Frazer offered useful categories for magical practices, among which he discerned two main types. Homeopathic or imitative magic is based on the law of similarity, as in the example of drums being beaten to resemble thunder to induce rain. Contagious magic, however, is based on the law of contact or contagion, as when a sorcerer uses fingernail clippings or burns an item of clothing that has been in contact with victims to make them suffer. Frazer noted that these categories are often combined, and he thus used the term “sympathetic magic” for both, since they are based on a belief that things are connected to each other through some hidden relationship.

Frazer also accepted Tylor's scheme of distinguishing between magic, science, and religion, but placed these three in an evolutionary sequence. Magic, he argued, was the most primitive, since it recognized a simple congruence or similarity between certain ideas, such as using a voodoo doll to represent a person. Magic, he thought, was a kind of pseudo-science, based on an incorrect understanding of the natural laws in the world. Religion reflected a higher order of thinking, indicating an intellectual evolution in a society, but was also more primitive than science, which he argued would progressively surpass religion in the most culturally developed societies. Such ideas are still prevalent today, even though the studies of field-working anthropologists and sociologists suggest that they are incorrect. Frazer's comparative work has been criticized by anthropologists who recognize that in his quest for finding universal patterns Frazer had not given enough attention to the specifics and contexts (and therefore rather significant differences) of particular cultural

behaviors. The sharp distinction that Frazer, Tylor, and others had drawn between magic and religion was also brought into question. Studies demonstrated that the kinds of practices and underlying attitudes that were classified as magic—or more negatively labeled as “superstition”—were abundant in most of the major religions. The more one examined the evidence, the more unreasonable it appeared to place magic and religion into firmly separate categories.

Some scholars have also pointed to characteristics within science, such as patterns of authority, attitudes towards specialists, faith-like tendencies to accept unquestioningly, and so on, that resemble religious attitudes and behaviors. While these are not intrinsic to the method of modern science, which discourages blind faith and encourages experimental verification, the culture of the scientific establishment, and particularly the way it is regarded by some sectors of non-scientists, lead some to suggest that science is not far removed from the category of “religion.” For instance, some members of certain religious groups see science as promoting a worldview that challenges their own, and thus relate to science as if it were another rival religious system. Others, rejecting religion but not adequately understanding the attitude of healthy skepticism in the scientific approach to understanding, treat the opinions of renowned scientists and the content of articles published in renowned scientific journals as unquestionably sacrosanct.

From the perspective of the discipline of religious studies, it is instructive to recognize that, unlike modern science, religion is not one, fairly clearly defined and agreed upon, uniform set of attitudes or practices. When people (including scientists) attempt to compare or contrast religion and science, they are often erroneously only comparing faith-based religious traditions against the imperative in science not to accept anything on blind faith. Religion is assumed to mean “Christianity,” or “Islam,” which, of course, it is not. Comparing science and religion is like comparing skimmed milk from cows to, say, all varieties of cheese. The exploration of similarities and differences can be instructive, teaching us much about definitions, categories, relationships, and so on, but may ultimately be grounded in some agenda that seeks to establish the nutritional superiority or equality, or some such valorization, of one over the other.

More pertinently for the discipline of religious studies, research evidence seems to indicate that in the centuries since the introduction of the scientific method, despite its impressive explanatory power, and the widespread appeal of the technological advancements that it has provided, science has not replaced, but co-exists with, the human religious impulse. Thus the evolutionary scheme of the early theorists, in which science should replace religion in culturally advanced societies, does not appear to hold true. Instead there is a rise in religious fundamentalism in many parts of the world, where believers use satellite broadcasts, the internet, and advanced technologies developed through science. In other locales, although conventional religious practices, such as congregational church attendance and so on, may have eroded, these have been replaced with new approaches to spirituality, as in the rise of the so-called “new age” movement and religions.

Social-functionalist approaches

Returning to our survey of the history of major ideas in the anthropology of religion, we note that the early theorists proposed that the basis of religion was psychological or sensory. They also regarded religion as deriving from rational, although incorrect, inferences about personal (e.g. dreams) or natural (e.g. lightning) phenomena. A different approach to the understanding of religion was offered by Bronislaw Malinowski, known for his promotion of participant observation as a crucial method in the anthropological study of cultures. Malinowski also emphasized the need to study a society holistically, and to examine how its various institutions were interrelated. Attempting to study religious beliefs and practices in isolation from a group's political, educational, or economic structures, and such, leads to inadequate or even distorted understandings of how religion functions within that society. Malinowski wrote influential books based on his fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders, a Melanesian culture. In his *Magic, Science, and Religion* (1925), he discussed the relationship among those three categories, arguing that all three were present in all societies no matter how primitive. He thus rejected the line of thinking put forward by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) and others that pre-literate peoples had an archaic, irrational, and pre-logical mentality and were thus completely absorbed in a mystical state of mind.

Malinowski argued that magic, science, and religion always coexist because they serve different functions. For instance, when the Trobriand Islanders fished in relatively safe waters, such as lagoons, they simply relied on their technical skills. The same was true in the methods they used for planting and harvesting. However, they did perform magical rites when sailing in the open ocean. They also used magic after clearing the land before planting (to inhibit insects and disease), after planting (to ensure the seeds sprouted), and after the seeds sprouted (to ensure that they grew well). Thus science (i.e. rational, technical knowledge) was used in conjunction with magic. Malinowski proposed that magic developed as an emotional response to the frustration people felt with the limits of their technical know-how in practical situations. It gave them a feeling of control and confidence in processes over which they otherwise felt powerless. Thus science has a practical function, while magic serves a psychological function. Religion, too, he argued, has a psychological function, but deals with a different set of anxieties, such as the fear of death, which it seeks to alleviate. While science gives people a feeling of control over the natural world, religion provides them with a sense of control over their fate, and derives as an extension of their innate instinct for self-preservation beyond death. Thus religion also provides society with a certain stability, for it nurtures solidarity when the community gathers for religious rituals in situations, such as the death of an individual, which threaten to rupture the social fabric. Some of Malinowski's ideas were later criticized as being unwarranted extrapolations from a single example. Thus, although certain behaviors were true of the Trobriand Islanders, they were not necessarily true of all human beings, societies, and cultures. Also, although religion may at times help people cope with death, it is not the only mechanism for doing so,

and while coping with anxieties may be one of its functions, it is not necessarily what constitutes the basis for religion itself. Malinowski's approach is often categorized as psychological functionalism, since it involved examining cultural phenomena, such as religion, to discern how these functioned in response to physiological and psychological needs.

Another style of functionalism, known as structural functionalism, is associated with the work of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955). Influenced by the social theorists Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown emphasized the need to attend to the network of social relationships that provided societies with their structure. While psychological functionalists focus on individuals, social functionalism regards social roles and relationships as pre-eminently important. With regard to culture (and thus religion), Radcliffe-Brown stressed the need to explain or interpret social activities over theorizing about the origins of religion. The focus is on what is actually happening in a social group, as opposed to imagining how its ideas may have emerged. Just as the stomach's activity is to secrete gastric fluids, but its function is to break foods down so they can be assimilated by the body's tissues, the study of social activities can point us toward understanding their social functions. Like the stomach's digestive function, which plays a crucial role in the body's well-being, the function of any social activity plays its part in the well-being of a social system, which Radcliffe-Brown likened to organic systems. Although interpretation could focus on meaning (i.e. the beliefs that myths or symbols strive to express), rather than function (i.e. how these work to provide social order), he gave preference to the latter. This, he suggested, is because religious actions, such as rituals, are more worthy of attention than religious beliefs, since the latter are grounded in social attitudes or social values shaped and maintained by ritual acts. Actions such as these inform ideas.

Within a society's social values, that is, the shared interests of a particular group, one finds ritual values, and these in particular relate to the realms of magic and religion. Ritual values may be positive (if acts are prescribed) or negative (if they are prohibited). Furthermore, these ritual values should not be studied to establish whether they are magical or religious, or whether they alleviate personal anxieties or depend on a belief in supernatural agents. They are studied to understand how they reinforce the social networks that bind persons together into what constitutes a meaningfully ordered life. Religious rituals celebrate the features through which social integration occurs. Also, rituals are both expressive and symbolic, and it is necessary to uncover the meanings of these symbols, since shared meanings hold society together.

In an effective critique of Malinowski's rationale for religion, Radcliffe-Brown pointed out how magic and religion do not only serve to eliminate fear and anxieties, but can actually cause them, for people may fear the effects of malicious magical acts or the vengeful actions of divine spirits. To illustrate his ideas Radcliffe-Brown offered an alternate interpretation to Malinowski's psychological functionalism for certain food prohibitions associated with childbirth in the Andaman Islands, where he did his fieldwork. For a few weeks before and after the birth of a child, both

parents are expected to avoid certain foods, such as pork or turtle meat, which are regarded as taboo. The term “taboo” derives from the Polynesian word *tabu* or *tapu*, and refers to a strong social prohibition, the breaking of which is considered offensive or even abhorrent. One might say that, in Radcliffe-Brown’s terminology, fasting is a social value in Andaman society and that the pork or turtle meat have a certain ritual value. Their ritual value is negative since they are prohibited and serve as a taboo. If the soon-to-be parents eat taboo foods, the Andaman Islanders believe that the parents will get ill, or that such an act might be harmful to the baby. Malinowski’s theory might suggest that the ritual prohibition or magical activity of maintaining the food taboo is a way of coping with the anxiety that parents feel in the period of unpredictable and potentially dangerous circumstances surrounding childbirth. However, Radcliffe-Brown suggests that without the taboo fasting rites, the parents (certainly the father) might not normally feel any anxiety. Society, however, expects that they should. The rites are there to generate a shared sense of anxiety and concern that brings the father into solidarity with the mother, and supports social connectedness. Another such example from a different context is ritualized weeping at funerals, where a society “expects” people to cry, and professional mourners may even be hired. Most scholars now recognize that it is an error to choose between individual and social rationales for activities, for both psychological and social functionalism may provide insights into the forces that shape religious culture.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1902–1973) approach is also categorized as structural-functionalism, in that the activities of persons within a social group are studied to understand how these contribute to forming and sustaining the overall structure of their society. His approach is exemplified in his studies—one of which concerns their religion—of the Nuer, an East African tribal society. In his *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Evans-Pritchard demonstrates that the practices (i.e. witchcraft, oracles, and magic) of these sub-Saharan African people are not the result of pre-logical or mystical mentalities and other such ideas, but that they comply with the culture’s own internal logic, which is not so very different from how civilized societies cope with the world. If a misfortune befalls a member of the Azande, such as a stone granary collapsing on people sheltered there, the Azande are quite aware of the kinds of reasons in natural law why that might happen. They know that the supporting timbers of the structure might have been weakened by termites and that those people were there because they sought shade to avoid the heat, and so on. However, these rational explanations do not adequately address the question of why that particular granary fell on those particular persons while they were in the structure. Why was there that particular conjunction of factors leading to the tragic event? This is where a phenomenon such as witchcraft plays a role in their conception of reality, for they believe that other members of their social group may have consciously or unconsciously bewitched those who were injured. Oracles may be used to determine who is responsible for the witchcraft, which exercises its effects, and whose damaging effects might also be cleansed, in what one could label as magical ways. Extrapolating from such observations, Evans-Pritchard argued that

non-scientific (i.e. religious, magical, etc.) beliefs and practices play a role in offering explanations for those things that a society's scientific understanding is as yet incapable of providing. The Azande system of thought is thus intimately connected to social activities, social structure, and the lives of individuals.

Evans-Pritchard may be classified as a functionalist because, as in the preceding example, he demonstrated how witchcraft, oracles, and magic function within Azande social structure. However, he theoretically and methodologically takes functionalism further than his predecessors because he argues that the function of religion and religious activities is to provide meaning. Thus he theoretically bridges the styles of functionalism of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown and the interpretive approach later associated with Clifford Geertz. Evans-Pritchard also saw the anthropologist's role as akin to a translator of a foreign language, for anthropologists translate a foreign culture (language included) into a form that makes sense to persons in the anthropologist's own culture. Furthermore, he stressed that social structure must be studied in its historical context. Societies change over time, and psychological theories (e.g. Malinowski's), and social functionalism (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown's) often ignored these processes because they tended to focus on the immediate conditions of individuals or a social group. Evans-Pritchard also drew attention to the problems inherent in the insider-outsider perspective when studying religion. Outsiders, he argued, tend to see religion as a delusion and theorize that it arises from psychological, sociological, biological, or some such primary factors, while the theories of insiders tend to regard religion as a way of conceptualizing reality and living meaningfully within it.

Interpretive approaches

Among the most influential contributions to the anthropology of religion in recent decades are the theoretical works of Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), who is often regarded as the father of interpretive anthropology. His book *The Interpretation of Cultures* contains a number of seminal articles on a variety of topics that present his approach. Despite the difficulty inherent in defining religion, in his "Religion as a Cultural System," Geertz offered a particularly useful one. It illustrates the value of striving to think about categories and how to define them. Religion is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [and women] 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.

Although this definition has subsequently been criticized—perhaps unfairly—for not overtly or adequately addressing issues of social power, or not attending to historical processes, or not assisting the researcher in identifying just what is a religious symbol,

Geertz's explanation of his definition reveals much about the interpretive approach that he promotes.

Geertz stresses that one should try to understand the meaning of symbols that make up a cultural system (these systems include science, art, philosophy, ideologies, common-sense, and religion), not by imposing one's own ideas, but by trying to decipher what the symbols mean to the insiders of that culture. We are creatures suspended in webs of significance of our own creation. Just as a wink may be accurately, but superficially, described as a rapid closure of one eye (i.e. "thin description"), "thick description" of the act would seek to uncover its varieties of contextual meanings, such as warning someone, or greeting them, or humorously performing a caricature of someone winking, and so on. The more of these nuanced meanings of its symbols that can be unpacked, the better one is able to understand the cultural system being studied. Thus with regard to religion, the anthropologist might discover that what initially appears to signify one thing (when viewed through one's own cultural lens, or through an understanding of another cultural system although not the one under examination), could in fact, upon closer investigation (and this is best done by seeking the "native's point of view"), actually have quite a different meaning. To illustrate this point one scholar used the example of Jain *puja*, ritual worship, which in other contexts (e.g. Hinduism) might be interpreted as trying to please a deity or ask for favors through offerings of flowers, burning incense, and lighting a lamp. However, when Jains perform a *puja* to a Jain saint or Tirthankara, both with materials and in a form that resembles a Hindu *puja*, such an interpretation would be incorrect. Since the Tirthankaras are believed to have passed beyond the realms of worldly existence, they are beyond access and cannot grant favors to devotees. Thus Jain devotees actually perform the *puja* as a form of reverence for an ideal they themselves hope to attain and to obtain religious merit. Such interpretive analysis requires, among other things, sustained time within the culture, patience, good access to the language, and genuine efforts to decipher the meanings behind symbols and actions.

Geertz's definition of religion envisions it as a cultural system within a social group's broader culture. Geertz defines culture as "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [and women] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." Intrinsic to this definition is the observation that people are not just acted upon by their cultural symbols, but that they influence, add to, and transform them. Furthermore, the symbols of a religious cultural system act both as models which depict a vision of the world (a worldview) and serve as models for how one ought to behave within this envisioned reality. The symbols generate emotional states (i.e. moods) and are conducive to certain behaviors (i.e. motivations) which may or may not actually occur. When people reach the limits of their rational, analytic capabilities (e.g. uncanny events), their physical and emotional endurance (e.g. the existence of human suffering), or their moral insight (e.g. the persistence of evil), limitations that threaten to rupture their sense of reality, the religious symbol set steps in to make the world meaningful.

To achieve this construction of an encompassing worldview, in which the baffling, brutish, or hollow features of existence are rendered meaningful, religions may employ rituals, shared activities that help forge a vision of the “really real.” Religions do not deny the problematic aspects of reality; they construct a world in which these are rendered tolerable. Even though common-sense constructs a more narrowly circumscribed, less outlandish reality, religious worldviews, which may include seemingly wildly imaginative notions about heavens, hells, divine beings, and other such ideas about the past, the future, moral values, rationales for evil, suffering, and so on, become understood by believers as the way the world truly is. The religious worldview comes to be regarded as more real than the common-sense or scientifically constructed perspectives, because the sentiments and actions that religious reality induces are more powerful and meaningful than those provided by the non-religious perspectives. For believers, the religious system reflects their most comprehensive sense of the actual order of the world. The ethos that the religious worldview generates, that is, the underlying attitude (e.g. mood, aesthetics, moral style) of believers towards themselves, others, and their picture of the world, reciprocally influences their worldview. So there is a circular series of reinforcing influences in which the symbol system (which is not static) induces feelings and actions by constructing an image of reality, and reinforces and sustains it to such a degree that the imagined reality appears more real than any other competing or subsidiary perspective, so that the feelings and activities thus generated contribute to the sustenance and creative development of the symbol system.

Geertz thus promotes a two-pronged approach to the anthropological study of religion. While much attention has been paid to social-structural and psychological processes, which he agrees are essential to the study of religion, religious activities such as ancestor worship are not just means of regulating political succession, and spirit worship is not merely a way of scheduling agricultural practices. He calls for attention to the analysis (i.e. interpretation) of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols that constitute a religion.

Among the contemporary critics of the symbol-centered approach to defining religion is Robin Horton, whose primary fieldwork has been in Africa. Horton sees religion as grounded in dependent social relationships, which are then extended beyond the human realm (animals aside) to supernatural entities. He is also aligned with the intellectualist tradition, first promoted by E. B. Tylor, which regards human behavior, including its religious dimensions, as derived from rational thought applied to complex issues. Furthermore, the religious realities of various peoples, although they may appear strange or irrational to Western scholars, should be taken at face value (i.e. this is what they actually believe to be true), rather than attempting to suggest that people are manipulating beliefs in order to secure political power, gain social status, profit economically, and so on. Of course, they may well be engaged in all of those pursuits, but these are done in both religious and secular contexts, and do not nullify their beliefs. It is also condescending and patronizing when Western intellectuals try to put a meaningful face on the odd belief systems of other cultures, because they still seem to convey that the Western system is true and

best, while the other understanding of reality is functional (i.e. “it works for them”) but untrue. Horton argues that the Western notions about reality are actually no different, and their oddity is particularly apparent when viewed through the lens of history (e.g. the earth-centered cosmos, creationism).

Structuralist approaches

The French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908), advanced another approach to the study of myths, rituals, religion, and other aspects of human culture. It is known as structuralism, because it seeks to uncover, through analysis, structures in people’s ideas and activities that derive from deeper structures within the very way our consciousness appropriates and processes information. Anthropologists wondered why myths, if they are purely imaginative creations, and although they derive from different cultures, widely separated geographically or deriving from different historical periods, often seem to share similar themes or values. Thus Lévi-Strauss’s style of structural analysis moves away from preoccupation with studying a particular myth or rite, and may examine hundreds of variant forms before attempting to decode the intrinsic patterns. In his *The Raw and the Cooked*, Lévi-Strauss notes that a pervasive pattern evident in the study of myths is the existence of bipolar structures in tension with each other. These may be such polarities as male–female, left–right, sky–earth, nature (raw)–culture (cooked), and so on, which through myth find a resolution to the tension of opposites. A well-known application of this approach was Wendy Doniger’s study of myths of the Hindu god Shiva, who in his persona fuses the seemingly irreconcilable opposites of eroticism and sexual asceticism. Some have criticized Lévi-Strauss’s approach as being too ambitious in trying to say something universal about the human mind, and have suggested that structural analysis is most effective when applied in a more culture-specific manner, as Doniger did in her study of Shiva. However, others feel that such attempts at broad generalizations are beneficial and serve as a useful remedy to the overly cautious micro-studies that characterize much anthropological research.

An extremely influential theoretical framework for understanding rites of passage was put forward by Victor Turner (1920–1983), an American anthropologist, in his *The Ritual Process*. Turner focused on the overlooked threshold or “liminal” period, a loosely structured and creative period, which, in ritual, demarcates the passage from one stable state to the next. Liminality is a “betwixt and between” state, characterized among its other features by “communitas.” Communitas derives from the feelings of liberation to think and act creatively, and the freedom from constraints that are placed on those who occupy more static social positions. Thus the liminal period and its attendant communitas disrupt conventional structures allowing for the transformation of the individual into a newly constructed state. Turner went on to apply these concepts to a wide array of social phenomena, including adolescence (a life-passage example), the hippie movement (a historical, social, and cultural example), pilgrimage (religious ritual activity), and drama

(performance studies). Using pilgrimage to illustrate his theory, one can imagine how pilgrims leave the constraints of their social group and set out for some distant pilgrimage site in a process that often involves ordeal and the breaking down of their traditional cultural supports. They may meet up and travel with fellow pilgrims, sharing in features of *communitas*, in which their individual statuses at home have yielded to an egalitarian status. No longer the rich merchant or the poor carpenter, now both are pilgrims. In the great Muslim pilgrimage, known as the Hajj, all pilgrims wear a white robe that further dissolves differences which would otherwise be evident through their appearance. Finally, when the journey is over, pilgrims return to their home societies, but their experiences and new statuses confer on them a capacity to transform and shape their social milieus. Thus, the liminal state is a breeding ground for personal and social change.

Another prominent contributor to the anthropology of religion is Mary Douglas (1921–2007), who strove to uncover broad structural patterns in symbols across cultures. Her approach is sometimes labeled symbolic anthropology, while Turner’s approach has been somewhat clumsily called processual symbolic anthropology to highlight its focus on dynamic transition states. In *Natural Symbols* Douglas offered a remarkable structural schema through which to classify social and cultural organization, including elements of religion. She designated two categories: “group” and “grid,” which at their poles may be either “strong” or “weak.” “Strong group” is the high degree to which a social group exerts pressure to control its members (e.g. the military), and differentiates itself from others, while “weak group” is the reverse (e.g. hermits). “Strong grid” refers to a highly organized cultural system, which is broadly encompassing in its worldview, highly coherent, and consistent, and which circumscribes a person’s life with rules and prescriptions. “Weak grid,” of course, belongs to loosely articulated, less rule-bound cultural schemes. Religious systems may thus be plotted on the group and grid axes. Consider Catholic priests, who are constrained by both the religious community to which they belong and the highly systematized Christian worldview and its attendant regulations on the priesthood. They might be placed in the “strong group/strong grid” quadrant of Douglas’s system. However, early Christianity, as it appears through the letters of the apostle Paul, might be characterized as “strong group” (i.e. closely knit), but “weak grid” (i.e. regulations still in flux, worldview not yet systematized).

In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas advanced her analysis of how symbols, such as those regarding ritual purity and pollution, reveal a universal propensity among human beings to install order into their surroundings, and how the ritual maintenance of these categorical distinctions provides social order. Purity and order are associated with sanctity, and disorder with unholiness. Taboos reflect potential violations of crucial features of the culture’s classification scheme, and press those items or actions into the sacred/unholy or religious realm. Douglas illustrated her approach by examining the Jewish dietary laws found in the Biblical book of Leviticus, analyzing the nature of the animals that were permissible and prohibited (e.g. shellfish), and the underlying categories that seemed to inform these restrictions. For instance, a crab (prohibited) is akin to a fish (permitted), in that it lives in water,

but unlike a fish it has legs like a land animal. Since it was problematic to classify the crab according to traditional, culture-specific categories, she argues, it was to be avoided. Similarly, through its prohibition, pork carries a certain unholy power for Jews and Muslims, since its consumption can defile one's religious purity.

Douglas also demonstrates how, when entities fall outside the clear categories, they are often regarded with ambivalence, being both feared and yet held to possess some uncanny, dangerous, and sacred power. Similarly, one finds in widely varying cultures, parallel attitudes to sexual ambiguity, social misfits, menstrual blood and other bodily outflows or by-products, and whatever else does not easily fall into a culture's norms of order. One might apply Douglas's theory to the Hijras of India, a group that considers themselves a third gender, being neither male nor female. Hijras are typically born male but dress as women and many eventually undergo a castration operation to remove their male genitalia. Falling neither into the simple categories of male or female, they are believed to have special powers relating to fertility, and are often asked to sing or dance at wedding celebrations. People fear offending them, for their curse might cause infertility or some other sexual dysfunction. Similarly, the Aghori ascetics of India seek to transcend the bonds that characterize the existence of ordinary people by embracing the very things that are shunned as polluted by Hindu society. They often reside close to cremation grounds (a ritually impure area in Hindu culture), use a skull cup as a begging bowl, and are even reputed to eat human flesh—an abhorrent food to Hindus—on occasion as part of their unusual spiritual practices. Whereas they are avoided by most Hindus and dreaded—but occasionally consulted—for the supernormal powers they are believed to have acquired, they may nonetheless be respected for their potential proximity to spiritual liberation.

Evidently, even as this brief survey of the approach reveals, anthropological perspectives can make valuable contributions to our understanding of religion. Because anthropologists often study small societies in remote locations, they enable us to learn about features of human religiosity less evident merely through studying the world's major religious traditions. Religious studies scholars have long had access to the religious writings of literate societies, but since anthropologists sometimes study non-literate groups, they are able to examine such religious phenomena as rituals and orally transmitted myths, which would otherwise be inaccessible. It is unfortunately still true that many religious studies scholars who are immersed in the study of scriptural texts are only vaguely aware of the value of field studies among religious practitioners who actually use or are influenced by those texts. Religious texts tend to articulate grand ideas, present doctrines, offer theological arguments, prescribe actions, and so on. Ethnographies, however, can reveal how those ideas find expression in the lived experiences of individuals, and to what extent the prescriptions are actually practiced, and demonstrate the context within which religious literature is itself generated. They may reveal religious beliefs and practices not mentioned in the texts at all.

Anthropological studies are thus crucial complements to the study of religious texts if one wishes to understand living religious traditions. As in most of the social

sciences and humanities (and perhaps in all human intellectual endeavors), trends in anthropological methods have often resonated with the cadences of fashionable ideas in Western culture. But anthropologists have also made significant contributions to transforming misguided theories and trends. Anthropologists are still pioneering efforts to reveal the intrinsic limitations of the discipline's Euro-American-centered orientations, by wrestling with "insider-outsider," "self-other," "participant-observer," and other such categories, which in parallel form problematize all perspectives in the study of religion, so that our understanding of humanity's cultures may be more genuinely holistic.

Influential social-scientific theorists on religion

E. B. Tylor (1832–1917): English anthropologist; pioneer in the anthropological study of religion; theorized on animism as the basis of all religious beliefs.

Andrew Lang (1844–1912): Scottish folklorist who contributed to the development of the anthropology of religion through his emphasis on collecting and comparing the myths and legends of a wide assortment of the world's cultures.

J. G. Frazer (1854–1941): Scottish mythologist and classic "armchair anthropologist"; known for his contributions to the study of magic in various cultures; authored the influential *The Golden Bough* (1890).

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917): French founder of the modern discipline of sociology; theorized on totemism as the earliest form of religion.

Max Weber (1864–1920): German sociologist and political theorist on religion; noted for his studies of the religions of China and India, but particularly for his analysis of the relationship between capitalist economic systems and Protestantism.

Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954): Catholic priest and anthropologist; known for his theory of original monotheism.

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955): British social anthropologist, associated with structural functionalism as an approach to the study of societies and culture.

B. Malinowski (1884–1942): Polish-born anthropologist; known for his emphasis on fieldwork and participant observation in the study of societies and their cultures.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973): British social anthropologist; contributed to functionalism linked to the interpretive approach.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908): French anthropologist; pioneer of structuralism as an approach to the study of human social and cultural creations, such as myth and ritual.

Victor Turner (1920–1983): Scottish-born American anthropologist; known for his theoretical contributions on rites of passage, which he effectively extrapolated to analyze a variety of phenomena, including social movements and performance.

Mary Douglas (1921–2007): British social anthropologist who made contributions on the interpretation of symbols and values through category analysis; renowned for her analysis of food taboos in the biblical book of Leviticus, and her discussions of purity and pollution.

Clifford Geertz (1926–2006): American anthropologist; regarded as the father of interpretive anthropology; provided an influential definition of religion as a cultural system.

Peter Berger (b. 1929): American sociologist associated with the notions of social reality as a creation within the consciousness of individuals, and his analyses of secularization processes.

Rodney Stark (b. 1935): American sociologist of religion, known for his work on religious cults, and the development of early Christianity.

Sociological, political, and economic approaches

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), a French scholar, is often regarded as a father of modern sociology, the study of human societies. Near the end of his life Durkheim wrote *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, in which he offered an interpretation for the nature of religion. Durkheim noted the tendency of human beings to set apart certain aspects of reality and grant these a special status, which he designated as the category of the “sacred.” There was nothing intrinsically sacred about these features, beliefs and practices, because what was held to be sacred by one society was not necessarily sacred (i.e. thus “profane”) to other social groups. However, he understood religion to have a cohesive effect on societies, and thus defined religion as a coherent system of practices and beliefs pertaining to sacred entities, which unites the adherents of that system into a collective known as a “Church.” He also strove to discern the most basic form of religion among human societies, and with the data available to him at the time (primarily studies of one Australian aboriginal tribe), determined this to be totemism.

Durkheim noted that the totem (often an animal, vegetable, or plant) stood as a symbol of a kinship group or clan’s god (i.e. “the totemic principle”), and

also represented the clan itself. He eventually surmised that the god of the clan was therefore nothing other than the clan itself. Extrapolating to other societies, he suggested that in most religious traditions, the society's god is, in truth, simply the social group, personified and offered to the imaginations of the group's members as their totem, the symbol of their collective selves. The members regard the totem with reverential awe, and all items related to the totem share in the totemic principle—in its sacred power. A social group, he suggested, is beyond the full comprehension of any individual member, and during large gatherings, individuals experience a host of feelings, or a “collective effervescence,” which they might imagine to derive from a deity. In essence, the concept of a soul, or the feeling of relatedness to something greater and divine, merely derives from the totemic principle (i.e. the god which is the social group) as conceived or perceived within each individual. By implication, people, often unknowingly, worship their religiously structured social group as their god, because they derive feelings of power, security, and so on from it. Were one to apply Durkheim's theory to Christianity, for example, one might suggest that Christ (i.e. the totemic principle or god for Christians) is not much more than a symbol of the collective community of the Christian faithful (i.e. the Church), who experience deep feelings of awe, reverence, and such, particularly when gathered for communal worship.

Of course, there are many shortcomings in Durkheim's understanding of religion. It was methodologically flawed because he derived his theory from a very narrow and atypical religious system, namely, totemism among an Australian aboriginal group, and then extended his findings to all human societies and religions. His category of “profane” seems to be poorly explored and is simply a default of what is not regarded as “sacred.” In many instances in particular societies, it is not easy or even reasonable to separate one category from the other. For example, certain illnesses may be held to have both religious and non-religious causes and cures. Are they thus sacred or profane? Durkheim's theory is so broad that it could be applied to virtually any social group, such as sports teams and their fans, and while these have many of the characteristics of creating unity and generating strong emotions under the banner of the team's emblem (e.g. the St. Louis Cardinals), the nature of sporting events strikes most people as somehow different from the nature of religion. His understanding is so centered on social unity that it does not adequately shed light on individualist approaches to religion as embodied by renouncers, mystics, and the like. Quite importantly, Durkheim equates religion with one of its functions (i.e. social cohesion), and here too he ignores religion's capacity to divide rather than unite members. Nevertheless, Durkheim's thought has valuably directed scholarly attention to the many, and often crucial, social features of religious phenomena.

Religion, economics and politics

Another influential social analyst was the German theorist Max Weber (1864–1920), whose contributions lead many to consider him equally as a political economist and

as a historian. He is often associated with the notion of *Verstehen*, the German word for understanding. This is because Weber spearheaded the need to understand by interpreting the meanings that individuals provide for their social actions. In contrast to history, which emphasizes causal connections between events, sociology should seek to uncover patterns in the systems of meanings that govern the activities of people in social groupings. In his focus on the interpretation of meaning, Weber prefigured the theoretical approach of the interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz. To aid in the process of interpretation, Weber proposed the notion of ideal types. Ideal types are models that can serve as yardsticks against which actual individuals or social phenomena may be compared. Just as certain persons may have such strong musical talents as to be considered virtuosos, while others are less musically gifted, Weber suggested that individuals have a range of religious affinities and capacities. Through his studies of the religions of India, China, and the West, Weber attempted to extract usable typologies of religious functionaries and processes. For instance, among prophets he distinguishes between two main types, the exemplary and the emissary. Exemplary prophets teach by example about the attainment of experiences, often centered on a contemplative lifestyle that they themselves have had. One might consider the Buddha as having such characteristics. Emissary prophets, by contrast, carry a message that they believe they have received from an active divine source, and feel compelled to transmit the teachings to others.

One of Weber's most influential contributions to the study of religions was his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. There Weber convincingly argued that the values of certain branches of Protestant Christianity (particularly Calvinism), which promoted hard work and frugality, and which indirectly, if not explicitly, saw economic success as a sign of a favorable status in the eyes of God, had meshed with capitalistic economic structures, and actually contributed to shaping the character of capitalism in the West. His study was significant because scholars discerned parallels in other non-Christian cultures, such as in Judaism and in Chinese societies, and demonstrated that religious values may be so intimately intertwined with economic realities in a society that these features ought not to be ignored.

The relationship of religion to economic and political structures in society was also discussed by the German philosopher and social activist Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marx's most influential book is *Das Kapital* (*On Capital*), which presents his theories on economics. Essentially, Marx argued that the capitalist economic system, in which capitalists profit from the labor of workers, although mutually beneficial to both, ultimately tends to favor the capitalist at the expense of the laborer. Were the workers to control the means of production of goods, which could only be accomplished by a revolution—since those who had their hands on the reins of power would not relinquish them without a fight—the wealth of a society would be more equitably distributed. Enormously influential, his writings inspired the social revolutions in the former Soviet Union and China.

Marx is renowned for his saying that religion is the “opium of the people.” He saw religion as a response by people to escape from the injustices of the social and political realities they experienced. The existence of religion in a society was a clear

sign of social injustice and genuine suffering. However, what was particularly malicious, according to Marx, was the capacity for those in power to use religion to continue to keep the masses oppressed. The critique of any social, legal, or political system should have at its foundation a criticism of religion, because religion offers the core illusion which turns people's concerns away from actual human realities and needs. Like an opiate, fabricated and administered by people to themselves, and manipulated by some for its effects on others, religion is an effort to assuage humanity's suffering through flight into a dreamlike state, where people are kept asleep to the actual conditions of their exploitation and social abuse. Interestingly, some later theorists have seen Marx himself as akin to a latter-day prophet of a secular religion, rousing his fellow human beings to free themselves from delusion, and follow a path that held the promise of a utopian future centered not on a god in some heaven, but on humanity here on earth. Marx's appraisal of religion has been criticized for reducing the full compass of human spirituality to its negative consequences and to its foundations as merely embedded in social and economic causes. It also ignores the socially integrative and stabilizing functions of religion, and the many roles religions have sometimes played in uplifting the poor in societies and in inspiring the growth of facets of culture such as music, art, architecture, and literature.

It is instructive to note how, enamored by the successes of the scientific method, many early theorists sought to apply it not merely to the study of nature, but to a wide range of human phenomena. This led to the development of a variety of disciplines, such as the study of social organization (sociology), culture (anthropology), politics (political science), economics, consciousness (psychology), religion (*Religionswissenschaft*) and so on, in which the scientific method is applied with varying degrees of rigor. More significantly, many of the early studies display a negative disposition towards religion, which is seen as an aberrant human activity, deriving from perceived weaknesses in the human constitution, such as ignorance, fear, or fantasy. Such pejorative attitudes still persist among a cohort of scientists and social scientists. Religion exists and persists because people misunderstand the laws of nature and how human societies operate (which scientific study will reveal), because they fear the unknown (and there is nothing to fear but fear itself), or because they escape into illusions of their own designs in order to cope with harsh reality. While these explanations and many others certainly hold true in many instances and do contribute to our understanding of religion, most religious studies scholars understand that they do not adequately account for the human religious response. They are therefore regarded as reductionist explanations, since they reduce the complexity of the phenomenon of religion in human societies to overly simplified causes, functions, or effects. It would seem strange, if not absurd, if one were to propose simplistic dismissive rationales for why human beings make music or produce art, why we philosophize, or work. However, religious authorities or attitudes have often stood in the way of scientific endeavors (Galileo's trial by the Catholic Church, and the ongoing evolution versus creationism debates, are telling examples), occasionally triggering a response in kind by the scientific community.

Contemporary sociological approaches

The contemporary period entertains, for the most part, a much more nuanced and embracing approach to the study of religion among social scientists. Attempts at grand theory and universal explanations of causes and functions have yielded to efforts to offer more limited perspectives and insights into religion. To some extent this seeming humility derives from a shifting scientific paradigm and the contributions of postmodern theories in the social sciences. Each scientific observer is “situated,” observing phenomena from a particular vantage point. Their perspectives are not the only, correct, and true ones. Just as relativity theory demonstrates that even a measurement of time by a stationary observer will differ from a measurement by one who is moving, postmodernism suggests that our appraisals about life, the human predicament, and so on are always colored by the particulars of our own conditions. Does this mean that men cannot adequately, and thus should not, study women? Or that Muslims should not study Buddhists? Or that atheists should avoid the study of religion? Of course not! However, it does mean that each study provides only a partial perspective, offering its own valuable, but limited, viewpoints on the items examined. The structure of this text is designed to highlight such an orientation toward the study of religion, introducing students to a variety of perspectives, and implicitly suggesting that exposure to the widest array of disciplinary approaches will enable us to better understand the phenomenon of religion.

A compelling sociological perspective on religion is offered by Peter Berger (b. 1929) in *The Sacred Canopy*. According to Berger, religious symbols and their meanings construct a reality that envelops ordinary reality, forming a sort of protective canopy of sacredness and order, under and through which the drama of human life unfolds and is made sense of. Religious authorities maintain the structures of this sacred reality, which is infused with such power that it inculcates the meaning systems of individuals and groups, who contribute to its preservation. Ordinary actions are understood and explained in relation to the sacred reality, and rituals are means of forging the two realities into one. Extraordinary events are also explained within this sacred framework. Berger tends to separate mystical experience, which seems to share commonalities across vast social, cultural, and historical divides, from so-called organized or social religions. Secularization, he suggests, has begun to erode the fabric of the sacred canopy, leaving individuals without the sheltering home that religious worldviews once provided. Berger later acknowledged that this breakdown has not led to the demise of religion in favor of secular structures such as bureaucracies, as he once thought it might, because new religious forms appear to be emerging to take the place of the older mainstream religions. Nevertheless, the fragmentation of major overarching religious worldviews has led to a privatization of religious realities, and the mind which once felt at home in the religiously constructed world is left feeling homeless. Berger’s approach to the study of society is regarded as humanistic (rather than being a social science) and he proposes that societies themselves are modes of consciousness, constructed by

individuals primarily through the use of language, the most powerful of symbol or sign-making systems. Interestingly, he proposes that the discipline of sociology is itself a mode of consciousness, and that one of its operative motifs should be to debunk the social structures that it studies. By this he means that the study of any social structure requires one to look through what is often taken for granted as real, true, ordinary, or accepted, to uncover the reality constructs therein that have been shaped by human consciousness and embedded into individuals' understandings of their social worlds. The examination of unquestioned notions of respectability, of marginal or devalued viewpoints, and of suppressed modes of speech can aid in uncovering the bricks and mortar of these social constructions.

Also in the contemporary period, scholars such as Rodney Stark have studied the rise of religious movements and the forces that drive religious conversion in individuals and in social groups. Certain sociological theories propose that religious conversion is grounded in ignorance, in some flaw in one's capacity to reason, in escapes from reality, and so on. However, Stark's is among the voices that propose that rational choice contributes intrinsically to such religious realities. This approach has been hailed by some as a dramatic shift in the direction of sociological theories about religion. The theory suggests that people act rationally when choosing religious paths, and the social realities and historical processes of religious movements may also be better understood if one looks for the rational motivations behind the behaviors of religious groups. Even acting in accord with strict moral laws that govern one's own life (e.g. asceticism, celibacy), or acting altruistically for the benefit of others (e.g. charity, martyrdom), which at first glance seem contrary to the rational norms of survival or self-interest, may actually be options selected by adherents because they reasonably think that these are appropriate choices (based on the information available to them, and their understanding of it). Rational self-interest is often at the root of individual and social motivations, and religion is no exception. This theory is most certainly not proposing that rational choice is the only factor in shaping religious conversion, adherence, and behaviors, but that it is a crucial and often overlooked component.

In collaboration with Stark, W. Bainbridge also put forward a theory that all religious movements that have connections with the non-religious or secular social elite (e.g. wealthy merchants, members of the ruling class), themselves undergo processes of secularization. These movements progressively lose their links with supernatural realities as they accommodate themselves to secular culture in order to gravitate to the centers of power. New religious movements better servicing the needs of the (typically, non-elite) populace by providing meaningful links to supernatural realities soon arise to take the place of the large, secularized religious organizations. Having lost their credibility with the masses, entire secularized religious movements may collapse as they confront certain newer religions that have successfully gained in popularity. Eventually, even these new sects, characterized by emotional intensity and often offering a critique of the elite mainstream, might themselves fall victim to the same processes of secularization, as they grow in size and power, join the elite, and lose their vitality.

One more noteworthy contemporary theorist, who could arguably be placed within several other divisions of this book, is Jonathan Z. Smith, who is often described as a neo-Durkheimian, because of his interests in the social, human-centered traits of religion. Smith's theorizing is wide-ranging. Quite significantly, with regard to the concerns of this text, he suggests that religion and its scholarly study are relatively recent phenomena, and a creation of academia. While the archeological and historical record, and even contemporary observations, do show people engaged in relating in various ways to deities, including reciting words, performing activities, adhering to ideas, and so on, it is the scholar of religion who designates any such datum as "religious," and therefore worthy of study as such. Therefore, the study of religion requires the student not only to select something to focus upon, but to demonstrate convincingly how this object of study serves as an effective example in his/her imaginative generalizations and comparisons about "religion." These choices do not have to comply with what particular groups consider to be their "community" proper, or their approved "canon" of literature. There is nothing expressly regarded as "outside" the scholar's range of choices. The scholar should not be constrained by the definitional criteria of religious "insiders." An extension of this is Smith's argument that all of academia, and the disciplines of religious studies, anthropology, and so on, within them, reveal a Protestant or anti-Catholic bias. By this, he is not referring to the Protestant or Catholic traditions *per se*, but attitudes they exemplify. He means that there has been a long-standing tradition of giving preferential attention to philosophical thinking over ritual activity and material reality (e.g. Protestant vs. Catholic). The history of scholarship demonstrates a preoccupation with the origins of a religion, as if authentic religion is to be found there, just as Protestant Christianity is focused on the Bible, rather than in the full historical sweep of a religious tradition throughout its existence. Theological arguments, metaphysical notions, and so on are seen as carrying the stamp of what the religion is really about, while the things that people do, individually and collectively, the objects that they manipulate and their bodily engagement with these (e.g. in Catholic sacramental practice), are seen as secondary and less important religious phenomena. As a result, social, historical, and political features of religions also get marginalized.

Smith is also noted for his critique of comparative studies in religion, such as those by Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade, which seek to demonstrate shared propensities among human beings across disparate cultures. Smith emphasizes that there is much to be gained by looking at the differences rather than the commonalities. For instance, there are often fiercely defended (even to the point of violence) distinctions on fine points of theology or morality between certain sub-sects of religious groups who to most casual outsiders would appear to be virtually indistinguishable from one another. Yet these procedures of drawing distinctions between "them" and "us," or of "othering," and of boundary creation, are a hallmark of human behavior and often particularly linked to religion. Another feature that is central to Smith's varied contributions is his insistence that the scholar of religion

should not be content merely with accumulating data, or even discerning patterns, structures, and so on. Rather scholars should persistently pursue the question “so what?” with regard to their observations, in order to elicit even more textured understandings of human religiosity.

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