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Chapter 1

Theories and Controversies

Introduction

The unfortunate fact is that man has been created with a body and a soul as well, and this original sin, after having incessantly haunted the reflective mind through myth, religion, theology, and metaphysics, comes now to lay its curse on anthropology. Physical and cultural anthropology are divided by a deep rent between soul and body, mind and matter, which is no easier to bridge over in science than in the somewhat looser speculations which precede it. (Malinowski, 1923, p. 314)¹

Anthropology claims to be an inclusive discipline, with *anthropos*, "human kind," as its object of study. The natural sciences, philosophy, history, theology, classical studies, and even jurisprudence have all been called upon in order to throw light on this exploration of human beings in all their complexity. In studying human society we are looking at both ourselves and others, and the dialectical relationship between self and other, the individual and the group, lies at the heart of anthropology. Who is this "other"? And what can the other tell us about ourselves, our culture, our society? Are the others human? And what does this mean? Do small-scale "primitive" societies mirror the evolutionary past of the "civilized" world? What if any are the underlying similarities between peoples? Are we all so different that each culture and society can only be looked at in isolation – with little or no basis for comparison? Is religion a product of society, merely a human invention and projection? Or is there "more in heaven and earth" than the material or social scientist can explain? Are religious motivations and impulses a response to external spiritual energies and revelations, or the result of a deluded mind and false consciousness? Is religion universal, or will it soon disappear under the weight of technology and reason?

These conflicts, noted by the great Polish ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski over 60 years ago, are still the stuff of current and heated debate.

It will become obvious that there is no one anthropological approach to the study of religion, and those who in reading this book are looking for a “right answer” are bound to be disappointed. The onus is on readers to examine the data, draw their own conclusions and build their own bridges “between soul and body, mind and matter.”

The first part of this chapter plunges straight in with an examination of various issues in the study of religion. These include the differing perspectives of positivistic scientific anthropologists on the one hand, who feel obliged to point out that all religion is irrational, and on the other those whose belief in Western concepts of truth and order has been profoundly shaken as a result of contact with alternative “indigenous” cosmologies. I also look at the assumptions and methodologies characteristic of anthropological approaches to religion, and their relation to the phenomenological method of religious studies. Theories concerning the origins of religion preoccupied many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers, and affected the type of definition they favored. Some of these themes are examined in the second part of the chapter. The final section looks in more detail at definitions of religion and at attempts to categorize religion – both of which are less straightforward than someone with a tidy mind might wish!

In looking at and trying to understand the “other” we do so as in a mirror, seeing our own interests and assumptions reflected in the questions we ask and the answers we receive. Anthropologists have for many years been engaged in an analysis of their own practice. The discussions therefore include an account of some attempts to overcome the distorting effects that result from imbalances of power between the anthropological author and the subject, and efforts to “decenter” the authority of the ethnographic text, with its explicit or implicit claims to “tell it like it is.”

Issues in the Study of Religion

Medieval Europe may have been a turbulent place at times, with different political and religious interests vying with one another for dominance, but there was a certain unity of belief in the existence of God and the just claims of secular authority.² With the Enlightenment these basic assumptions were challenged. The Scottish historian and philosopher David Hume (1711–76), for example, argued that empirical observation (based on what one can know from experience) should form the basis of the “moral sciences,” while the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1742–1804) insisted that all knowledge is constructed and that we cannot know “the world in itself.” For Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72) Christianity was an illusion, and the proper

object of theology and philosophy the study of human beings, rather than metaphysical speculation concerning the nature of God.

The Enlightenment: a movement in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European philosophy concerned with the role of reason and the progress of human civilization. Enlightenment philosophers were prepared to reject tradition and to question existing sources of authority. A leading Enlightenment figure was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), famous for his depiction of “the noble savage.” Unlike Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who held that human life in its natural state is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,” Rousseau believed that so-called civilization, with its increased inequalities, actually represented degeneration from an original harmonious collective social life. Education and the reimposition of the *social contract* – the collective will of the people – were necessary in order to assume an orderly progress. Rousseau’s ideas of social collectivity were later to influence Émile Durkheim.

While these brave new ideas were debated in intellectual circles, and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) proclaimed the “death of God,” the majority of the population of Europe continued to hold traditional Christian (or Jewish) beliefs and values. Seminal ideas regarding the nature of religion put forward by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholars (and, indeed, many anthropologists today) can only be understood against the background of formal religion, which provided both the vocabulary and template for thinking about the religions of others, and a model to reject. Evans-Pritchard, a convert to Catholicism, pointed out in his lectures on “primitive religion” that many of the founding fathers of European social science had been raised within the Christian or Jewish faiths, but had reacted against their religious upbringing:

Tylor had been brought up a Quaker, Frazer a Presbyterian, Marett in the Church of England, Malinowski a Catholic, while Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl, and Freud had a Jewish background; but with one or two exceptions, whatever the background may have been, the persons whose writings have been most influential have been at the time they wrote agnostics or atheists. Primitive religion was with regard to its validity no different from any other religious faith, an illusion. (Evans-Pritchard, 1972, pp. 14–15)

I will return briefly to some of these thinkers and their theories of religion later in the chapter,³ but first we will look at what for many has become the

standard approach to the study of religion in both religious studies and the social sciences, the *phenomenological method*.

Phenomenology and methodological agnosticism

Phenomenology: from the Greek *phainomenon*, "that which shows itself." The term was used by Kant to describe what one can know from experience, and by Husserl to refer to a description of the world (phenomena). The term "*phenomenology of religion*" was coined by the Dutch scholar P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye in 1887 to refer to a systematic description of religious phenomena.⁴

Whether or not they subscribe to a religion or consider themselves to be "spiritual" people, most social scientists and historians of religion would regard Evans-Pritchard's evaluation of the role of the anthropologist as valid:

What I have said does not imply that the anthropologist *has* to have a religion of his own, and I think we should be clear on this point at the outset. He is not concerned *qua* anthropologist, with the truth or falsity of religious thought. As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of his *knowing* whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration. The beliefs are for him sociological facts, not theological facts, and his sole concern is with their relation to each other and to other social facts. His problems are scientific, not metaphysical or ontological. The method he employs is that now often called the phenomenological one – a comparative study of beliefs and rites, such as god, sacrament, and sacrifice, to determine their meaning and social significance. (Evans-Pritchard, 1972, p. 17)

This methodological neutrality or agnosticism⁵ allows, in theory at least, anthropologists of any or no religious persuasion to examine the religious beliefs and practices of others without bias. Any cosmological statement or ritual practice is of interest not because it might or might not be true, but for what it reveals of a coherent body of thought that constitutes a culture and its social structure. As we will see, there are both ethical and methodological problems with this assumption, even if it is the "rule of thumb" by which most anthropologists today operate.

Within religious studies and the history of religions the phenomenological method has served the function of separating the discipline from its elder brother, theology. While there are those who argue that the teaching of theology is a "teaching about" rather than a catechesis (a "how to"), nevertheless, there is often a presumption that a religion will be taught, or a book

written, from within a particular faith position – probably (but not necessarily) shared by teacher and pupil or author and reader. From a theological perspective, the study of religions other than one's own may consist of a search for points of comparison, probably, even if unintentionally, to the detriment of the other religion (after all, to accept that all are equally true or valid would undermine the logic of most religious positions). Almost certainly, other religions will not be studied on their own merit without presumption as to what to look for. Roman Catholic missiologists and theologians involved in "inculturation," for example, may examine African religions in order to discover the "seeds of the gospel" (i.e. elements of culture compatible with Christianity), and use these as an aid to conversion or with the intention of strengthening the faith of converts.⁶ In reaction to this approach, religious studies has embraced the phenomenological method, which in practice usually means describing other people's customs and doctrinal beliefs and translating their sacred texts with as little comment and judgment as possible.⁷

The philosopher **Edmund Husserl** (1859–1938) is recognized as the founder of the *phenomenological movement*. Husserl was born into a Jewish family in Moravia in the modern Czech Republic. He is best known within the social sciences and religious studies for developing the methodological practice of *epochē* (a Greek word meaning to "check" or "cease"). In effect what Husserl suggested was that instead of concerning ourselves with the question of whether or not something is true or actually exists, we should "bracket out" or "put in parentheses" what cannot be demonstrated or proved. This allowed attention to be paid to the "appearances" that can be observed without prior assumptions, and further allowed the intuition of the essence or *eidos* (from the Greek, meaning "form," "idea," or "essence"). This method opened the door to the creation of typologies by phenomenologists of religion such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950).⁸ The emphasis in Husserl's thought was on the *cogito* or conscious observer, but he avoided questions concerning the identity of this conscious mind, its authority, and its relation to language. These weaknesses are characteristic of much scholarship that identifies its approach as phenomenological. There is a failure to address questions of subjectivity, reflexivity, and textuality – treating the scholar as a "fly on the wall" rather than as a thinking, relating individual who is implicated in the phenomenon he or she describes.⁹

Rationality and religion

One anthropological critique of the phenomenological method comes from those who hold that anthropology should regard itself as a science, based on empiricism and rationality. If something is demonstrably false, the anthro-

pologist should say so. James Lett is one of the more vociferous exponents of this approach, arguing in a recent handbook on the anthropology of religion that, "anthropologists have an intellectual and ethical obligation to investigate the truth or falsity of religious beliefs" (Lett, 1997a, p. 105). For Lett, "scientific knowledge" is defined as objective propositional knowledge that can be publicly verified and tested – which does not of itself rule out the possibility of incorporating non-empirical knowledge. Religion, on the other hand, is defined by its non-empirical nature. It lies in the realm of faith rather than fact and is therefore by definition unverifiable. If it cannot be falsified, it cannot be proved. Religion is *ipso facto* irrational. While many people, including anthropologists, are content to leave a space for the existence of the unprovable, and even the improbable, to "bracket it out" or simply to examine its social dimensions, not so James Lett, who feels that it is incumbent on anthropologists to take a stand on the side of rationality:

It seems to me that the obligation to expose religious beliefs as nonsensical is an ethical one incumbent upon every anthropological scientist for the simple reason that the essential ethos of science lies in an unwavering dedication to truth.... In science there is no room for compromise in the commitment to candor. Scientists cannot allow themselves to be propagandists or apologists touting convenient or comforting myths.... When anthropologists fail to publicly proclaim the falsity of religious beliefs, they fail to live up to their ethical responsibilities in this regard. (Lett, 1997a, pp. 111–12)

Such explicitly materialist zeal is unusual in anthropology, even if the underlying skepticism is not. In the same volume, for instance, Stewart Guthrie sets out to "prove" that all religion is a result of anthropomorphism, and therefore illusory. Guthrie argues that people "bet high" – that is, there is less to be lost by attributing human characteristics to other creatures and phenomena than by getting it wrong. "In consequence, our practice in the face of uncertainty is to guess at animacy over inanimacy and humanlikeness over its absence. Betting on these possibilities and often erring, we chronically animate and anthropomorphize the world" (Guthrie, 1997, p. 495).

At the other end of the spectrum we have those who have approached the study of religion from within a particular faith. The Swedish Lutheran missionary Bengt Sundkler, for instance, was well aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of his own position. In his celebrated account of Bantu prophets in South African Independent churches, Sundkler reflected that:

Prior to undertaking this study, I had certain forebodings that in my capacity as a missionary of one particular church I should be handicapped in establishing friendly contacts with Independent church leaders – contacts without which

they would not give information about themselves, their work, ambitions and aspirations. But my fear on this point was unnecessary. In an overwhelming number of cases I found that the very fact that I was known as a missionary, genuinely interested in their church life as well as in their personal life-histories and activities was a help when trying to elicit the information I wanted.... Experience of related problems in the work of one's own mission church opened up new avenues of inquiry and research. (Sundkler, 1961, pp. 15–16)

Sundkler goes on to reflect on the inevitable bias in all anthropological investigations, whether the fieldworker is a Christian believer or an atheist, noting that: "Obviously the writer's valuations and ideals enter into the investigation – from the collecting of the material itself, which is the fundamental stage, to the final presentation with its balancing of one viewpoint against another" (Sundkler, 1961, p. 16). The notion of disinterested social science is a myth.

Value premises do enter into our arguments. So they should not be hidden, as tacit assumptions, but explicitly stated. A subjective emphasis is bound to affect the valuations of any missionary dealing with a problem of this nature, implying a definite criticism of his own ideals and life-work. No doubt, I am myself, both as a Protestant missionary and as an investigator, a part of the problem, and I affect its future development by my missionary activity or inactivity. (Sundkler, 1961, p. 16)

Most anthropologists would endorse such sentiments, which were unusually perceptive, honest, and reflexive for a book originally published in 1948.

Increasingly common are anthropological accounts in which the fieldworker may approach other cultures secure within a Western positivist framework, with the intention of "bracketing out" the truth or falsity of others' beliefs, but who then finds that an alien view of the world can indeed "work" much as its advocates describe. Evans-Pritchard, in his study *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, stated baldly that "Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist" (1976, p. 18), but he nevertheless discovered that living as if they did exist was no better or worse a manner of organizing his affairs than any other. Merete Jakobsen (1999), taking part in New Age shamanic workshops, was happy to record soul journeys in which she encountered guardian animal spirits, without necessarily "believing" in them, or in the explanations given by the workshop leaders. Tanya Luhmann (1989) joined a witch's coven and cast spells without actually sharing the worldview of her co-witches. In each instance the fieldworker had a personal philosophy that could account for new or strange experiences, thus avoiding any great rupture or challenge to his or her understanding of the world and sense of self.

Where, on the other hand, the fieldworker, originally skeptical, finds himself or herself subject to a series of misfortunes for which they have no rational explanation, faith in a Western scientific worldview may be profoundly shaken. One such ethnographic account is Jeanne Favret-Saada's study of witchcraft in northern France (1980). While Favret-Saada does develop a series of logical explanations for witchcraft beliefs in rural Normandy, she also, having been "caught" in the discourse of witchcraft through falling victim to a series of unfortunate events, takes magic forces extremely seriously (if only at a psychological and linguistic level, and as a form of explanation).

Michael Kearney was drawn to his fieldwork in southern Mexico by a fascination with the differences between the Indians' cosmological system and his own. The people of Ixtepejano lived in a world "saturated with harmful, even lethal immaterial forces," which included "bad airs" that could be sent into a victim by witches (Kearney, 1992, p. 48). Kearney attributed the unscientific and irrational views of the people to the insecurity and poverty of their lives, until he became unwittingly involved in supernatural dispute between neighbors. On discovering that he had been afflicted by sores, one of the weapons in the witches' armoury, Kearney panicked:

My mind began to race like a motor with its throttle stuck while I witnessed the disintegration of my own rational, scientific, materialist world view. The unsuppressable assertion rose into my mind that it was all false, that the people among whom I had been living with what I had assumed were quaint backward customs and superstitions were aware of and in touch with knowledge of forces with which I was in no way prepared to deal. I feared for my life as I never had before. (Kearney, 1992, pp. 53-4)

Suspended between the world of rural Mexican Indians and the safety of abstract intellectual life in Berkeley, Kearney gained a new understanding of the terrors of witchcraft and its reality in people's lives – even if he eventually succeeded in rationalizing the experience.

In my final example, the transformation from Western skeptic to "believer" is more complete and permanent. Paul Stoller became a sorcerer's apprentice during his fieldwork in the Songhay region of West Africa. In his first account of Songhay, Stoller edited out the personal accounts that he felt contravened the conventions of the ethnographic text. This included the abrupt end to his fieldwork in 1984, when he fled from an attack of spirits sent by a priestess who intended to harm him. For Stoller, however, fieldwork is both a science and "a profoundly human experience," and he did not shrink from entering as fully as possible into the cosmological understandings of the Songhay.

As anthropologists we must respect the people among whom we work. ... For me, respect means accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of

knowledge often holds preposterous. I took my teachers seriously. They *knew* that I used divination in my personal life. They *knew* that I had eaten powders to protect myself. They *knew* I wore objects to demonstrate my respect for the spirits. They *knew* I had an altar in my house over which I recited incantations. They liked the way I carried my knowledge and power and taught me more and more. (Stoller, 1989, p. 229)

Eventually, however, Stoller overstepped the mark between participant-observation and active sorcery and was forced to flee. Although Stoller remains a Western-trained anthropologist, he did not slough off the insights he had gained in Songhay, even when he finally managed to rid himself of the magically induced illness that had precipitated his departure:

The Songhay world challenged the basic premises of my scientific training. Living in Songhay forced me to confront the limitations of the Western philosophical tradition. My seventeen-year association with Songhay reflects the slow evolution of my thought, a thought profoundly influenced by Songhay categories and Songhay wisdom. (Stoller, 1989, p. 227)¹⁰

The politics of representation

We have moved a long way from the methodological agnosticism propounded by proponents of the phenomenological method. Or have we? It is certainly possible to remain open to another culture and its beliefs, and perhaps be profoundly affected by them, without feeling it necessary to enter into discussions of truth or falsity. One of the key differences between anthropological participant observation and the data gathering of earlier "armchair anthropologists" or survey ethnographers is the potential for physical, emotional, and spiritual involvement in the lives of others. Ethnographers who submit themselves to periods of immersion in another culture inevitably take the risk that their own way of looking at the world will be challenged, transformed, and perhaps destroyed. The degree of dissonance the anthropologist can tolerate between one worldview and another will be largely an individual affair, and a combination of respect, skepticism, and agnosticism toward the "reality" of other people's explanations of the world is not uncommon.¹¹ Anthropologists do tend to bracket out questions of truth and rationality, and may write themselves out of the fieldwork altogether, with the result that ethnographic texts often appear rather dry and lifeless beside the intensity of the original experience. The gap between the vivid retelling of fieldwork tales to friends and colleagues and the published monograph in academic anthropology is for this reason probably greater than the gap between research and text in most other disciplines.¹²

An emphasis on methodological agnosticism can encourage scholars, whether anthropologists, sociologists, or historians of religion, to assume that they are somehow neutral in their observations. We may wish to believe that sensitivity and empathy with our hosts is sufficient to produce a balanced monograph, or delude ourselves into believing that including verbatim accounts of conversations, or discussing the final text of a book with informants, somehow leads to a shared authorship. Those who duck questions of language, power and translatability merely leave the authority of the authorial voice implicit and unchallenged.¹³ Rijk van Dijk and Peter Pels (1996, p. 245) point out that "Ethnographic dialogue is always contextualised by a dialectics of power relationships that conditions and inhibits it." The authority of the fieldworker to ask questions and edit the answers is part of the process of anthropological production. Even in an "experience near" text, perhaps consisting of transcribed conversations, film, photographs, first-hand accounts of informants, and the reflexive journals of the fieldworker, the final production is crafted by the interests, skill, and aesthetic judgments of the anthropologist in relation not to the fieldwork subjects, but to an imagined and intended audience.¹⁴ This is not in itself "bad," but it should be made explicit. The anthropologist is a translator of culture, and the translation should not be mistaken for the original.

Van Dijk and Pels go a step further than most anthropologists, and certainly beyond the practice of *epoché* as commonly understood and practiced by scholars of religion, in suggesting "a 'democratising' of the capacity to deconstruct authoritative statements in the study of religion" (1996, p. 246). When encountering religious specialists in the cultures they study, anthropologists commonly attempt to "explain away" their claims by situating them in terms of social structure, history, psychology, and so on. They are seldom taken at face value in the way Paul Stoller accepted the "truth" of Songhay sorcery. The reflexivity recommended by most contemporary authors merely involves focusing attention on the anthropologist rather than the host community, through a process of reflexivity, and carries no guarantee of a shared ability to set the terms of the debate. Van Dijk and Pels make the claim, with rather uncomfortable and perhaps unacceptable implications for most scholars, that:

it is necessary to democratise deconstruction in this way, if not to unsettle anthropological claims to authority, then at least to restore agency to those whom these claims commonly reduce to "objectivity" (or a "voice"). We think that such a step is necessary for the reorientation of research into religion in a postcolonial world. (van Dijk and Pels, 1996, p. 246)

Van Dijk and Pels give an example, taken from van Dijk's fieldwork among young Born Again Christian preachers in Blantyre, Malawi, of the

implications of such an approach. After gaining their trust, van Dijk published an article on the preachers in a national monthly magazine. The article included the following description, which makes clear the author's distanced and authoritative stand:

With the "infilling" of the Holy Spirit, as many youngsters have been explaining, one suddenly feels as having stepped into the world of light. Every meeting, therefore, is filled with ecstatic prayers, shouting and speaking in tongues to create the exact state of mind wherein the baptism by the Holy Spirit can take place. (van Dijk and Pels, 1996, p. 258)

Most anthropologists would probably regard van Dijk's style as appropriate and "normal," yet the young preachers took grave exception to the article, above all to the manner in which it was written, summoning van Dijk to a private meeting to explain himself. The use of inverted commas around the word "infilling," for instance, was seen to lessen the authority of the preachers by reducing what was for them a reality to a position of relativity. By his acceptance of their hospitality and participation in their meetings, the young men had assumed that van Dijk also accepted their status as inspired prophets. By appearing to deny, or at least to distance himself from, the truth of their message by using "outsider" language, van Dijk had jeopardized his position within the community. Was he a spy of the Pope, they demanded? In order to restore the goodwill that had been forfeited by this pretence of authorial neutrality, van Dijk was obliged to acknowledge the power of inspiration by the Holy Spirit at a public meeting. In a country in which challenge to political authority was dangerous, the poorly educated young preachers needed to stress the orthodoxy of their message, as well as the source of its inspiration. Theirs was an oral, tactile culture and the written word was suspect, associated with an older, corrupt generation that had hung onto power for too long.¹⁵ What appeared fair, balanced, and innocuous to the academic anthropologist constituted a threat to the community he was studying.

Despite their valuable role in challenging anthropological ethnocentrism, Van Dijk and Pels's recommendations do not really point a way forward. In describing his experiences, for instance, van Dijk adopts the authorial tone appropriate to an academic readership, but dismissed by his informants. The logic of van Dijk's position would be that the anthropologist becomes a mouthpiece or apologist for the views of interlocutors in the field but nothing more. Even if this were appropriate, it would not solve the problem of whose views one is to represent. The perspective of women may be different from that of men, members of one church may disagree with the interpretation of their views given by members of another, and so on. The task for the ethnographer remains to interpret the views of others in as honest

and responsible a manner as possible and to place these views and practices within a broader theoretical framework. To make a difficult job even harder, the anthropologist is also trying to address simultaneously a number of different audiences, including academic colleagues and students, people from the fieldwork area, and perhaps non-governmental organizations, commercial sponsors, and the media.

We will now return to some older debates and examine attempts to understand the nature of religion by reference to its origins; debates that once more took shape in the nineteenth century, but continue to reverberate in academic circles today.

The Origins of Religion

When Charles Darwin (1809–82) published his controversial account of human evolution, *The Descent of Man*, in 1871, the Church was outraged. Darwin appeared to claim that human beings were descended from apes, and to leave no room for God in his account of natural selection and species adaptation. Where was the order in creation if a random interaction between the natural environment and biological organisms led to the variety of living creatures now in existence? While Darwin's ideas appeared as an affront, the notion of *social evolution* (later known as social Darwinism) was well established by the 1870s, and much less objectionable. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), a prominent British social and political thinker, propounded the theory that all things, animate and inanimate, move from simpler to more differentiated complex forms, from homogeneity to heterogeneity. In *The Principles of Sociology* (1876), Spencer developed his thesis of universal evolution – which included his notion of the “survival of the fittest.” This view of human society was more flattering to the Victorian mind. After all, human beings represented the grand climax of evolution, and Great Britain, leader of the Industrial Revolution, was arguably the most complex society in the world and therefore at the very peak of the evolutionary pyramid.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, who could see little kinship with “rude and savage peoples,” Spencer firmly believed that all human beings, however simple their technology, were equally rational. According to Spencer, religion arose from the observation that in dreams the self can leave the body. The human person therefore has a dual aspect, and after death the spirit or soul continues to appear to living descendants in dreams. The ghosts of remote ancestors or prominent figures eventually acquired the status of gods (an idea known as *euhemerism* after the Sicilian writer Euhemerus, c.315 BCE). The widespread practice of pouring libations on the graves of ancestors

and offering them food developed into sacrifices for the gods. Ancestor worship was therefore at the root of every religion.

British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, who gave the anthropology of religion some of its key terminology, agreed with Spencer's social evolutionary views and his notion of the dream origin of religion. Tylor, however, preferred to emphasize the role of the soul (Latin *anima*) in his account of religious origins, giving rise to the term *animism* to describe the belief that animate and inanimate objects, as well as human beings, can have a soul (or life force and personality). The term is still used with different nuances as a general descriptive term for “primitive,” “indigenous” or “tribal” religions.

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) was from a London Quaker family (which, due to the religious tests still in operation, prevented him from attending a university) and came to anthropology by chance. He traveled to Mexico and the United States for the sake of his health, and became fascinated by the lives of the indigenous inhabitants. On the basis of his observations, Tylor formulated his theories of ancient and simple societies, which were published in numerous works, including *Primitive Culture* (1871) in the year in which he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. In 1884 he became a Reader in Anthropology at Oxford University, the first recognized university position in anthropology in the English-speaking world. In *Primitive Culture* Tylor developed the notion of three stages of social evolution, from:

animism → polytheism → monotheism

Tylor also formulated a concept of culture (which was to become influential in the USA) and the notion of *diffusion*, the transmission across time and space of cultural elements or *traits*. Where these elements commonly coincided they were referred to as *adhesions*. Supposedly primitive traits found in a more “advanced” society were thought to be *survivals* from an earlier evolutionary stage.

Sir James Frazer (1854–1941), a Scottish classicist with a passion for amassing information on other cultures, is one of Britain's best-known scholars of religion. Drawing on classical sources and the tales of missionaries and explorers, Frazer compiled a two-volume compendium in which he attempted to construct a universal theory of magic, religion, and society, published under the title *The Golden Bough* (1890). Despite its erudition, Frazer's work has had less theoretical impact than that of Tylor. The “butterfly collecting” methodology, which juxtaposes information, often of very dubious provenance, totally out of context, allows the author to “prove” almost any point he cares to make. This has not prevented *The Golden Bough* in its abridged edition from remaining almost constantly in print.

Frazer believed that magic preceded religion. As magic was perceived to be fallacious, people looked for other means of psychological support, and had the illusion that spiritual beings could help them. When people see that religion does not work either, they turn to science. Both science and magic are based on faith in the manipulation of natural laws (although only the former is true), whereas religion is based on a belief in spirits. The scientist and magician can perform their rites with confidence, whereas the priest makes offerings with fear and trembling.

There was considerable debate in the nineteenth century between those who saw all or most human culture resulting from the *diffusion* of ideas via population movement and contact, and those who believed that cultures evolved independently from one another. Because all human beings have a similar psychological make-up it was held that they tend to come up with the same solutions to cultural problems independently. Tylor argued for a social evolutionary perspective, whereas Franz Boas in the United States adapted Tylor's methodology and vocabulary to argue a predominantly diffusionist position.

Evans-Pritchard (1972) eloquently described the intellectualist positions of scholars such as Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer as the "if I were a horse" fallacy, and their tales on the origins of religion as "just so" stories, analogous to Rudyard Kipling's "How the leopard got its spots." Lacking any real evidence, Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer (and others) resorted to asking themselves what they would have done had they been a "primitive," how they would have rationalized the world. As Evans-Pritchard points out, if these scholars were correct, as civilization progressed such rational but fallacious reasoning would die out, whereas instead animistic and magical views of the world, ancestral cults, and beliefs in a Supreme Being all continue to exist, and often to coexist, even in industrialized settings.

A less intellectualist and more *emotionalist* view of religion characterizes the work of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), one of the founders of the *functionalist* school of anthropology. Functionalism emphasized the interrelations between the various elements of a social system, and therefore paid less attention to evolutionary origins and the notion of "survivals" – the continuation of primitive elements in a culture. Society was seen as a self-regulating system in which religion, economic organization, and kinship formed parts of an organic whole. The realm of the sacred is defined by the attitude people have toward it – rituals are sacred if they are performed with reverence and awe. Malinowski, like Frazer, distinguished magic from religion. A religious act aims at something beyond itself. Its object is not

performance of the rite. A mortuary ritual, for instance, is intended to release the soul and prevent it from returning to haunt the living. In magic the end is the efficacious action itself.¹⁶ Both magic and religion, however, serve the same psychological function, the alleviation of anxiety in the face of life's uncertainties. As with the intellectualist arguments, the emotionalist theories of Malinowski (and Freud) are simply guesswork. Evans-Pritchard (1972, pp. 43–7) observes that while emotions, desires, and impulses undoubtedly play a part in religion, it is not the case that the performance of a religious or magical act automatically produces the psychological effects Malinowski supposes. We have another example of the "if I were a horse" arguments: "If we were to perform rites such as primitives do, we suppose that we would be in a state of emotional turmoil, for otherwise our reason would tell us that the rites are objectively useless" (Evans-Pritchard, 1972, p. 43).

A very different approach to religion was taken by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Religion was not seen as an explanation of the world, but as a means of making symbolic statements about society. Durkheim was less interested in finding the origins of religion than in describing its function. Unlike Malinowski (and Freud), however, his emphasis was not on the individual psyche but the social group. The *collective representations* of a society exist within and beyond an individual. Religion, for Durkheim, is a projection of the social values of society. It is real because its effects are real, even if its social origins are disguised, and the explanations and beliefs for a religion false.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) was a pupil of Fustel de Coulanges at the elite *École Normale* in Paris, and is thought of as one of the founding fathers of both modern sociology and anthropology. Drawing on data primarily from Australian Aboriginal peoples (in the belief that they represented the simplest form of society and could therefore tell us something about the origins of more complex societies), Durkheim developed his ideas on the social nature of religion. These are most fully developed in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915). One of Durkheim's key distinctions was between the *sacred* and the *profane*. The collective life of society gives rise to both the profane world of everyday activities and the sacred world of ethical and moral values – the ideals by which societies seek to live.

Anthropology in North America followed a rather different course, drawing on elements of both continental European and British scholarship, but with a specific emphasis on the notion of culture. A key figure, who influenced several generations of later anthropologists, was Franz Boas.

Franz Boas (1858–1942) carried out fieldwork among the Inuit of Canada, and developed a school of anthropology that stressed cultural differences, eschewing attempts to fit data from different societies into some grand scheme. This *historical particularism*, as it is sometimes known, combined Durkheim's emphasis on the social with Malinowski's stress on individual psychology. Both material culture and personality define a characteristic cultural style unique to each society. Boas was not particularly interested in the social functioning of institutions, which developed into a major theme of British social anthropology under Radcliffe-Brown in the United Kingdom. Like Durkheim, Boas had an interest in *totemic* systems, and the way in which symbols linked religious activities with other aspects of social life.

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) was one of the first British social anthropologists to engage in fieldwork. At Cambridge University Radcliffe-Brown studied psychology under W. H. R. Rivers (1864–1922) who had taken part in the *Torres Straits Expedition* of 1898 with another founding figure of Cambridge anthropology, Alfred C. Haddon. From 1906 to 1908 Radcliffe-Brown carried out research in the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal.¹⁷ The resulting monograph, *The Andaman Islanders* (1922), is primarily an account of Andamanese religious beliefs and ceremonies, and therefore represents one of the first fieldwork monographs in the anthropology of religion. Radcliffe-Brown held academic posts in many parts of the world, including Australia, South Africa, Egypt, Brazil, the United States (Chicago), and England (Manchester and Oxford). He was a gifted teacher and influential in propagating what is sometimes described as the British school of functionalist anthropology.

The Andamanese were "tribal" hunter-gatherers (that is, they were neither Hindus or Muslims, nor part of the Hindu caste system), who had been relatively isolated until a penal settlement was established on South Andaman Island in 1858 (Tomas, 1991, p. 77). They were therefore held up as representatives of "racial purity," and their society as a kind of living fossil that could reveal something about the origins of religion and of human culture. Radcliffe-Brown asserted that the Andaman Islanders' main supernatural beings were spirits of the dead, associated with the sky, forest, and sea, and nature spirits, which were thought of as personifications of natural phenomena. He applied a Durkheimian analysis to his Andaman material, looking for correlations between Andamanese religion and social structure. Although he is usually referred to as a functionalist (because of his interest in the ways in which institutions presented an organic picture of society),

Radcliffe-Brown's method also anticipated the type of structural analysis pioneered by Lévi-Strauss. He divided Andamanese cosmology into a tripartite schema – sea/water, forest/land, and sky/trees – with spiritual agencies, dietary restrictions, ceremonies, subsistence activities, flora, and fauna all corresponding to one of these three categories.

Arthur Maurice Hocart (1883–1939) was an Oxford-educated anthropologist who carried out extensive fieldwork in the South Seas. He adopted Boas's detailed fieldwork methods, while continuing to hold a basically evolutionary perspective. He was not interested in finding the origin of religion, as he regarded it as an impossibility, although he did concern himself with the origins of monotheism. Hocart also rejected Malinowski's individual psychological approach, favoring a more Durkheimian social view of religion. According to Hocart (1973, p. 67), "the facts are that our earliest records show us man worshipping gods, and their earthly representatives – namely kings." This led him to a rather contemporary conclusion (developed by Maurice Bloch, for instance, in his work on Madagascar), namely that:

religion and politics are inseparable, and it is vain to try to divorce them. . . . Monarchists must necessarily uphold the Church and ardent believers in one God will help build up large nations. The belief in a Supreme God or a Single God is no mere philosophical speculation; it is a great practical idea. (Hocart, 1973, p. 76)

The solution to the origins of religion and society proposed by Lévi-Strauss is of a totally different nature. Lévi-Strauss has been unswerving in his search for the universal structures of human thought and social life. Taking his cue from structural linguistics, in particular the work of Noam Chomsky and Ferdinand Saussure, together with the Russian formalists, such as Vladimir Propp, who collected fairy tale motifs, Lévi-Strauss has sought to reveal a grammar of the mind, a kind of universal psychology with a genetic base, which gives rise to social structures. Just as there are limits to linguistic variation, so there are certain basic innate patterns of culture based on a series of binary oppositions. Thus, all societies distinguish between the raw and the cooked, the raw standing for nature (and women) and the cooked for culture (and men). Myths reveal common story lines that can be used to understand the limited number of ways in which human beings interpret the world.¹⁸

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–) was born in Belgium, but has spent most of his working life in France. He is one of the founders of *structuralism*, an intellectual movement derived from linguistic theory that focuses on the structures of societies, texts, languages, and cultural life. The interrelations between elements

in the present are stressed, at the expense of historical change. Apart from a couple of brief excursions in the Amazonian regions of Brazil, Lévi-Strauss has not been a fieldwork anthropologist. Lévi-Strauss's interest in and knowledge of South America is, however, considerable, and his four-volume series *Mythologiques*, in English translation *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (1970–81), draws on this material. His other major works include a personal account of his journeys in Amazonia, *Triste Tropiques* (originally published in 1955), *Totemism*, a discussion of human symbolic thought (originally published in 1962), and a series of influential essays, *The Savage Mind* (originally published in 1962).

While structural theory was popular in Britain for a period in the 1960s and 1970s, its influence within anglophone social and cultural anthropology has been less marked than the Durkheimian symbolist approach. As with the earlier search for universals, the innate structures proposed by Lévi-Strauss remain speculative and (like Frazer's *Golden Bough*) there is a danger of simply amassing data that repeat an argument without actually strengthening it. For Lévi-Strauss, individual experience and emotions such as love, hate, fear, and desire are subsidiary to the basic underlying structures that give rise to society, which have a biological basis. Many critics have in the end found that such an approach leaves too many important questions unanswered.¹⁹ We may unravel the structures of the mind and of society, but do we know what it is to live and feel as a human being? If history and agency take a back seat, can we see ourselves as self-determining individuals and can we understand the complexity of interactions between humans and their physical and social environment?

We have surveyed a number of approaches to the study of religion without thus far attempting to define "religion" itself. In the next part of the chapter we will therefore look at some of the most widely quoted definitions of religion, although the reader may conclude that they are so vague or contradictory that the attempt has limited utility.

Defining Religion

Whatever religion may or may not be, there was no shortage of Victorian explorers, traders, and missionaries who could declare with confidence that "savages" did not have it. A famous explorer, Sir Samuel Baker, addressed the Ethnological Society of London in 1866 on the topic of the Northern Nilotic peoples of Africa, stating that: "Without any exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry;

nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world."²⁰

Henry Drummond, a widely traveled Evangelical Christian, attempted to combine evolutionary theory with more charitable and romanticized sentiments in his view of "primitives." In Rousseauesque terms, Drummond (1894) states that "here in his virgin simplicity dwells primeval man, without clothes, without civilization, without learning, without religion – the genuine child of nature, thoughtless, careless and contented. This man is apparently quite happy; he has practically no wants."²¹ Such gross and obvious mistakes depended on an ignorance of the lives and languages of the peoples under discussion. European observers (as with all travelers) looked for points of contact with their own culture, and often failed to recognize what we might wish to term "religion" when it presented itself in unfamiliar guises.²² Even when Europeans and Africans, or other "natives," spoke the same language (such as a Pidgin English), this was no guarantee that the meanings attached to words corresponded. As Evans-Pritchard (1972, p. 7) observed:

Statements about a people's religious beliefs must always be treated with the greatest caution, for we are then dealing with what neither European nor native can directly observe, with conceptions, images, words, which require for understanding a thorough knowledge of a people's language and also an awareness of the entire system of ideas of which any particular belief is part, for it may be meaningless when divorced from the set of beliefs and practices to which it belongs.

Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), a German philologist, who spent most of his academic life in Oxford, is regarded as one of the founding fathers of comparative religion. Müller, in his *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873), argued that belief in a divine being was universal, and that however childish or primitive a religion might appear, it still served to place the human soul in the presence of God. Müller predicted that the truths present in all religions would one day give rise to a new form of religion, which might still be called Christianity, that would preserve the best of each revelation of the divine.

Definitions

When we come to look at various definitions of religion, we need to remember that we are constructing a category ("religion") based upon European languages and cultures, and that the term has no necessary equivalent in other parts of the world. At best we are therefore looking at a clumsy process of translation – translation of other peoples' languages and cultures into

categories that Westerners can understand and interpret in terms of their own experience.²³

The word "religion" in Western European languages probably derives from the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible from Hebrew and Greek attributed to Saint Jerome (c. 345–420). The Greek term *threskeia* was translated with the Latin *religio*. Latin-speaking church fathers, unlike their Greek counterparts, spoke of "true" versus "false" religion (Pieris, 1988).

Tylor (1958, p. 8) argued that a minimum definition of religion was "the belief in Spiritual Beings." In one form or another this definition, with various embellishments, has proved remarkably durable, despite the fact that it begs the question, "what are Spiritual Beings?" For Tylor, religion is an attempt by human beings to *make sense of their experiences* and of the world in which they live (sometimes called an *intellectualist* approach to religion).

A rather different but equally influential definition of religion is given by contemporary American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who is often seen as a representative of the *symbolist* approach to religion, with its focus on *what religions represent*. Symbolists look at the ways in which symbols and rituals act as metaphors for social life, rather than at what religions seek to explain.

For Clifford Geertz 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. (Geertz, 1973, p. 4)

Also in the symbolist camp is Melford Spiro, who, in a long article on problems of definition, defined religion as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (Spiro, 1973, p. 96).

One of the most vociferous critics of symbolist definitions of religion is Robin Horton, who claims that:

defining religion as structural symbolism comes to much the same thing as defining the substance of "linen" in terms of its occasional use as a flag: the

symbolic function is as incidental to the nature of the first as it is to the second. (Horton, 1994, p. 23)

Horton's own definition of religion is "an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society," in which human beings see themselves as being in a dependent relationship vis-à-vis their "non-human alters." The qualification is necessary to exclude relationships with domestic animals from the definition – after all, every time someone feeds the cat or walks the dog he or she is involved in social relationships "beyond the confines of purely human society" (Horton, 1994, pp. 31–2). While Horton identifies himself with the intellectualist position associated with Tylor, his definition also contains Durkheimian elements in its view of religion as an extension of social relationships, i.e. its approach is *inductive* rather than *deductive*, starting from human beings and their experience, rather than looking down from the position of God. For Horton, who has spent most of his academic life living and working in Africa, symbolist interpretations betray the ethos of Western universities: "The reality of spirits is apt to fade, to be replaced by visions of people engaging in elaborately veiled power-plays, composing secular poetry, or participating in complicated semiological parlour games" (Horton, 1994, p. 386).

Leaving aside for the present the intellectualist/symbolist debate, Arthur Lehmann and James Myers have proposed an extended version of Tylor's and Spiro's definitions that in practice covers most of what anthropologists might wish to include in a book such as this on the anthropology of religion:

Expanding the definition of religion beyond spiritual and superhuman beings to include the extraordinary, the mysterious, and unexplainable allows a more comprehensive view of religious behaviors among the peoples of the world and permits the anthropological investigation of phenomena such as magic, sorcery, curses, and other practices that hold meaning for both preliterate and literate societies. (Lehmann and Myers, 1997, p. 3)

An influential definitional approach to religion from within religious studies is Ninian Smart's analysis of religion according to various "dimensions." These too are intended to apply to all religions, and can be seen as a reminder to theologians and historians of religion not to forget the practical, aesthetic, and emotional aspects of religion in their concentration on scriptures and doctrinal formulae. Too often what are taken as authentic or correct forms of religion are the representations of priestly elites, interested in what their religion *ought* to be, rather than how it is actually lived by the majority of its adherents. Smart's dimensions have gone through several

incarnations over the years, and have reached their most developed form to date in *Dimensions of the Sacred*. To his most widely cited "seven dimensions" Smart has added an eighth, the political and economic, giving us the following list (Smart, 1996, pp. 10–11):

- 1 Ritual or practical.
- 2 Doctrinal or philosophical.
- 3 Mythic or narrative.
- 4 Experiential or emotional.
- 5 Ethical or legal.
- 6 Organizational or social.
- 7 Material or artistic.
- 8 Political and economic.

Smart's dimensional approach is within the comparative, phenomenological tradition, looking for points of similarity and contact between the world's religions, rather than the more traditional anthropological focus on the social nature of religion within a specific host community or sub-group. Where most anthropologists would agree with Smart is on the utility of regarding religion as a multifaceted phenomenon with overlapping spheres, rather than a single "thing" that can be readily identified and studied in isolation. Religions differ in their emphasis on these dimensions, as do groups within a single religious faith. The doctrinal and legal aspects of Islam and Judaism, for instance, are well developed, whereas societies without written scriptures are more likely to emphasize the role of myths, perhaps enacted in dance or through "shamanic" trancing. Within Christianity some branches of Protestantism place great emphasis on personal experience and emotion, whereas Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism are more focused on liturgy and ritual, and have in many places a highly developed material and artistic dimension (churches, icons, vestments, music, and so on).

Some of these descriptions of religion, such as Smart's, are just that – attempts to categorize and classify religion without really addressing the question as to just what it is we are looking at. Other definitions are dependent on a view as to what function religion serves, or relate to ideas concerning the genesis of religion. In this final sub-section we will look at attempts to categorize various religions, and at some problems with these categories.

Categories

When nineteenth-century scholars turned their attention to the study of religion they not unnaturally used their own experience as a base for comparison. The most enduring division that arose was between the so-called

"world religions" and the others. Whatever a world religion might be, the religion of "primitives" or "savages" must be different, its mirror image. World religions themselves were divided into "higher" and "lower" forms depending on their perceived similarity to or difference from the main three Semitic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The view of each religion was largely based on its elite or doctrinal and scriptural forms, rather than its more popular "folk" manifestations. While the racist and hierarchical overtones of such thinking are no longer considered acceptable, the original classifications have proved remarkably enduring, particularly within the fields of theology and religious studies.

The supposed features of a "world" religion

- 1 It is based on written scriptures.
- 2 It has a notion of salvation, often from outside (a "coming deliverer").
- 3 It is universal, or has universal potential.
- 4 It can subsume or supplant a "primal" religion.
- 5 It often forms a separate sphere of activity.

By way of contrast, "primal" religions are often seen as a mirror image of the world religions.

The supposed features of "primal" religions

- 1 They are oral – if the culture is literate, the religion lacks written scriptures and formal creeds.
- 2 They are "this-worldly" in orientation.
- 3 They are confined to a single language or ethnic group.
- 4 They form the bases from which world religions have developed.
- 5 Religion and social life are inseparable and intertwined, and there is no clear division between the "sacred" and "profane" or natural and supernatural.

These categorizations are not without utility, or they would not have survived so long. They do, however, as numerous scholars have pointed out, beg many questions, and are at best intellectual constructs rather than descriptions of reality. To take the world religions first, to what extent can Taoism or Confucianism be considered to have universal potential? They are both commonly referred to as world religions, but are largely confined to

South East Asia. Confucianism is as inseparable from Chinese notions of social order as the concept of *dharma* ("law") is from the Hindu caste system. The Vedic (scriptural and priestly) elements of Hinduism are indeed only one strand, and most "village" Hinduism would more closely fit the description of a primal religion. To what extent can Judaism, with its notion of membership via descent in the female line, really be seen as a universal religion? Islam places great emphasis on the sanctity and authority of the holy Qur'an, but the scriptures were originally *recited* to Muhammad, and the recitation of the Qur'an from memory in Arabic remains central to Islamic worship. Most fervent practitioners of "religions of the book" claim that religion penetrates all aspects of their lives – there is no experience or part of the day that does not come under its jurisdiction.

What, apart from the rather arbitrary list of elements (which derive mainly from Western Christianity), do these world religions have in common? Is there any descriptive utility in ranging the Semitic and Asian religions on the one hand against the world's "tribal" religions on the other? Many African religious cults, for example, have crossed linguistic and ethnic boundaries.²⁴ There is always a relationship between religion and other aspects of culture, but among both "primal" and "world" religions we find several cultures sharing one religion as well as several religions within one culture.²⁵ David Turner has argued that Aboriginal Australian religions could equally well be classified as world religions in the sense that their method of relating to the world is "applicable to all times and places and all peoples independently of inherited membership in a defined kinship or ethnic group" (Turner, 1996, p. 80).

The past few decades have seen a rapid growth in the number of Americans and Western Europeans calling themselves Pagans – usually drawing on indigenous small-scale societies (particularly Native American), Eastern religions, and pre-Christian European traditions in an eclectic mix. The oral and local are emphasized over the written and the universal (or abstract) – but here we have forms of religious belief and practice defying classification according to the schemes outlined above. Contemporary Western Paganism crosses cultures and languages, but usually emphasizes the importance of locality and of "spirits of place," as in primal religions. Paganism attracts former Jews and Christians, as well as those without foundations in another faith, a characteristic usually associated with world religions. Aloysius Pieris has argued persuasively that:

mass conversions from one soteriology to another [e.g. from Christianity to Islam] are rare, if not impossible, except under military pressure. But a change-over from a tribal religion to a metacosmic [world] soteriology is a spontaneous process in which the former, without sacrificing its own character, provides a popular base for the latter. (Pieris, 1988, p. 99)

With contemporary Western Paganism, however, there is a reverse trend. Perhaps the numbers involved at present hardly qualify for the term "mass conversion," but we do see a process in which substantial numbers of people are rejecting metacosmic religions that offer a notion of final salvation (a soteriology), turning instead, not to materialism and scientific explanations of existence, as both Frazer and Malinowski would have assumed, but to a pantheistic, magical view of the world.

James Mackey, a Christian theologian, complains of the "silliness of anthropology" in seeking at times to "draw clear lines between animism or magic and religion" (Mackey, 1996, p. 9). The implication is that anthropologists should have known better, but whatever position people start from they feel impelled to classify, define, exclude, and label human experience. Mackey quotes Ludwig Feuerbach's dictum that "what today is atheism tomorrow will be called religion,"²⁶ and makes a plea for a much more fluid and less dogmatic approach to definitions of religion, arguing that:

Of course people who have somehow pre-defined the nature of divinity, and more particularly those who treat the notes of immanence and transcendence in relation to a divine dimension as contraries instead of what they always are in fact, namely, coordinates, can also appear to specify with great accuracy what is to count as religion, as a truly religious dimension of life and knowledge, and what is not. It is interesting to note that this alleged ability is so often shared by those who are most dogmatic about religion and those who, allegedly on scientific grounds, are most dismissive of it. (Mackey, 1996, pp. 8–9)

While definitions, categories and theories of origin have all influenced what anthropologists have studied and how they have interpreted what they found, I am not primarily concerned with such questions in the chapters that follow. This is not due to a lack of respect for analytical rigor, but stems from a recognition that religion as a category is fluid and contextual, and that any attempt to define the subject matter too narrowly risks giving a positivist stamp to what in fact is an interpretative process.

Conclusion

Anthropologists do not start their theorizing *de novo*, from scratch, but build on and react to the work of their predecessors. In the following chapters we will see how contemporary anthropologists develop their understanding of religion through a dialogue between earlier anthropological ideas and methods and contemporary culture. The various themes dealt with in each

chapter are chosen for their relevance not just to the anthropology of religion, but also to related disciplines, in particular religious studies. The examples used to illustrate each theme are not exactly chosen at random, but numerous alternative possibilities could equally have been selected. My own Christian upbringing, my anthropological education, and the experience of doing fieldwork in Africa have all no doubt influenced the tenor and subject matter of the book. Equally important, however, have been the interests of students and colleagues, and the availability of material. My hope is that readers will find this introduction to the anthropology of religion sufficiently stimulating to continue their own explorations and reach their own conclusions regarding a fascinating and central area of human experience.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Urry (1993, p. 12).
- 2 Secular and religious authority often merged, as indicated by the title "Holy Roman Emperor" given to the successors of Charlemagne (c.742–814) and the assumption of political power by the papacy.
- 3 There are numerous excellent works available on the history of Victorian anthropology and on the historical development of anthropological theories (see the References and Further Reading list at the end of this chapter), so here I attempt to do no more than give the reader some brief pointers.
- 4 Compare Sharpe (1998, pp. 222–3).
- 5 The term "methodological agnosticism" was coined by the religious studies scholar Ninian Smart in order to distinguish it from sociologist Peter Berger's "methodological atheism." I am indebted to Gavin Flood for drawing my attention to this distinction.
- 6 See Bowie (1999). The debate on inculturation may include a more explicitly nationalist agenda. See, for instance, Paul Gifford's (1998, pp. 259–62) discussion of Bishop Nkuissi in the Cameroonian diocese of Nkongsamba.
- 7 A phenomenological or scientific stance has been challenged by theologians and philosophers as well as by anthropologists. The philosopher of religion Roger Trigg, for example, has argued that a focus on the social dimensions of religion "does violence to important features of religion," as it "appears to ignore the claim that religious beliefs can themselves be held on rational grounds and hence have a right claim to truth" (Trigg, 1998, p. 29).
- 8 Van der Leeuw acknowledged his debt to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, despite the tensions between an evolutionary and phenomenological stance. Van der Leeuw also remained primarily a Christian theologian for whom phenomenology was a tool that could aid theological speculation. For the anthropologist of religion, the main interest in van der Leeuw's work lies in his attempt to combine description with psychological insights, emotion, experience, and the creation

of meaning. He was not a fieldworker, but these issues lie at the heart of ethnographic practice and of debates on how to understand and represent other people's experience. In "Confession Scientifique" (*Numen*, I, 1954, p. 10), for instance, van de Leeuw wrote that the phenomenology of religion "consisted not merely in making an inventory and classification of phenomena as they appear in history, but also a psychological description which necessitated not only a meticulous observation of the religious reality, but also a systematic introspection; not only the description of what is visible from outside, but above all the experience born of what can only become reality after it has been admitted into the life of the observer himself" (cited in Sharpe, 1998, p. 231).

- 9 For a description of the history of the use of phenomenology in religious studies and a critique of it, see Sharpe (1998, pp. 220–50), Erricker (1999), and Flood (1999). James Cox (1992) provides a clear account of the phenomenological method as applied to the study of religion, using Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) to introduce a rather more nuanced notion of the interaction of the observer with the phenomenon observed. An account of several phenomenological thinkers, including Malinowski and Eliade, can be found in Bettis (1969).
- 10 For a critique of Stoller and Olkes see Geschiere (1997, p. 281) and Oliver de Sardin (1988).
- 11 Pierre Bourdieu outlines three stages in the transformation of empirical experience to anthropological theory. First, we have the rules and theories of the people being studied. At the next level there are the rules and theories of the ethnographer, and, third, the rules and methods governing the discipline as a whole (even if these do not form a single pattern of ideas) (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 3–9). While many anthropologists may succeed in keeping these three levels conceptually distinct, others may find the boundaries becoming confused, which can lead to a sense of disorientation. At one extreme the anthropologist may "go native" and abandon any attempt to maintain his or her previous assumptions and values, while at the other extreme the fieldworker may withdraw, physically or psychologically, or erect barriers around each discourse to maintain his or her separateness. Most, however, accept the uneasy challenge of moving between the worlds of informants, the academy, and the self, perhaps consciously using the self as an ethnographic tool.
- 12 Those who attempt to bridge this gap often write under a pseudonym, such as Laura Bohannan, who adopted the *nom de plume* Eleanor Smith Bowen in her personal account of life with the Tiv in northern Nigeria (1954). Those who do stick their head above the parapet risk having it knocked off, being dismissed as popularists, a fate that befell Nigel Barley's immensely successful (outside academia) stories of fieldwork among the Dwayo of Cameroon (1983, 1986).
- 13 Compare Parkin (1982), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Bowie (1998), and Flood (1999) on reflexive trends in anthropology and religious studies.
- 14 The anthropological subjects may be one intended audience of the academic monograph, but no commercial publisher would accept a manuscript written primarily for a limited, specialist group of readers (except an academic one – with guaranteed library sales).

- 15 Women and others in a structurally weak position commonly resort to claims of divine inspiration in order to pass on their message without directly challenging those in authority (which is not to deny the truths of these claims). A classic example of this is the German medieval abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, who, although extraordinarily talented and influential, nevertheless insisted that she was but a "feather on the breath of God" and that her writing came from the "living light" rather than her own creative mind (see Bowie and Davies, 1990).
- 16 The distinction between religion and magic is often less clear-cut in practice than Malinowski's distinction would suggest. Is a rain dance an efficacious magical act, or implication of a deity to act on behalf of those making the request? Most magical acts involve the action of an intermediary power between the performer of the rite and its intended result. The words of consecration used by a Roman Catholic priest during the Mass can be seen as an end in themselves – making Christ present in the Eucharistic bread and wine.
- 17 David Tomas (1991) gives an interesting account of the colonial background to the administration of the Andaman Islands prior to and during Radcliffe-Brown's fieldwork, and of attempts by the British to "tame" the "primitive and savage" tribal peoples in this remote corner of the Empire.
- 18 According to Lévi-Strauss motifs in myths or folk tales recur and the elements within them are transformed in a limited number of fairly predictable ways. A myth is not defined by a single, original, or correct version, but by the sum of its many variations and transformations.
- 19 In *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas* (1994), Pascal Boyer argues that there are cognitive (genetic) constraints on the cultural acquisition and transformation of religion. This accounts for the recurrence of universal themes in religious beliefs and practices (in a way similar to Chomsky's innate grammar and Lévi-Strauss's universal mythic themes). For Boyer, "culture" as a concept is too vague and relativistic to account for religious transmission. We are predisposed to accept certain concepts and to ignore others. Mimesis (imitation) alone cannot account for the continuity of religious practices. Boyer admits that his cognitive approach ignores most features of religion that human subjects actually find interesting or important (such as emotions and experience, power and the operation of political relations, and aesthetics). Maurice Bloch (1998) also argues that culture and cognition need to be separated, and that because anthropologists tend to focus on the explicit and the unusual, cultural variation is often exaggerated. For Bloch, everyday knowledge is implicit or "inexplicit," and therefore anthropology cannot afford to ignore the work of cognitive psychologists when trying to give an account of human societies. Boyer and Bloch, in their views on religion and cognition, represent the experience-far or etic end of the spectrum, although Bloch also argues passionately for the value of participant observation.
- 20 Baker (1867), quoted in Evans-Pritchard (1972, p. 7). This statement is particularly ironic, as the subsequent fieldwork of Evans-Pritchard (1974) among the Nuer and Godfrey Lienhardt (1978) among the Dinka – both Sudanese Nilotic

- peoples – depict rather pious peoples whose devotions center on a Supreme Being (known as *kwoth* and *nhialic* respectively).
- 21 Cited in Jahoda (1999, p. 142), who is in turn citing Cairns (1965, p. 94).
- 22 Tylor was responsible for the questions on religion in the 1874 edition of *Notes and Queries* – which became a standard manual for aspiring fieldworkers. He urged detailed and careful observation, with prefaces that were "clearly intended to counteract the effects of monotheistic ethnocentrism – to enable observers reared in the Christian tradition to recognize animistic religion where otherwise they might simply have reported some form of degenerate 'devil worship,' or even that their particular 'savage' group had no religion at all" (Stocking 1996, p. 15). Jahoda (1999, p. 227) points out that some Victorian descriptions of the Irish and Highland Scots as primitive savages resembled accounts of African and other non-Western "primitive" peoples. Although color and race were (and remain) important elements in defining the "other," poverty, the use of a minority language, remoteness from urban centers, and a lack of English manners were sufficient to earn the appellation "savage." See Smith (1999) for a perspective from "colonized" peoples.
- 23 Pieris (1988, p. 90) claims that "None of the Asian soteriologies [from the Greek *soter*, 'savior']... has offered us a comprehensive word for, or a clear concept of, religion in the current Western sense."
- 24 See Shaw (1990) and Cox (1996).
- 25 See Pieris (1988, p. 97). This really just begs the same definitional questions. What is a religion? What is a culture? Who has the power to classify a religion? There has been considerable debate in Africa, for instance, as to whether African Independent Churches and various African new religious movements should be considered Christian or not. As religions always change and develop, drawing on different elements at different times, we are left with a shifting field of contested definitions.
- 26 Feuerbach (1957, p. 32), cited in Mackey (1996, p. 9).

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