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Introduction to the Study of Religion

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Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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What is anthropology?

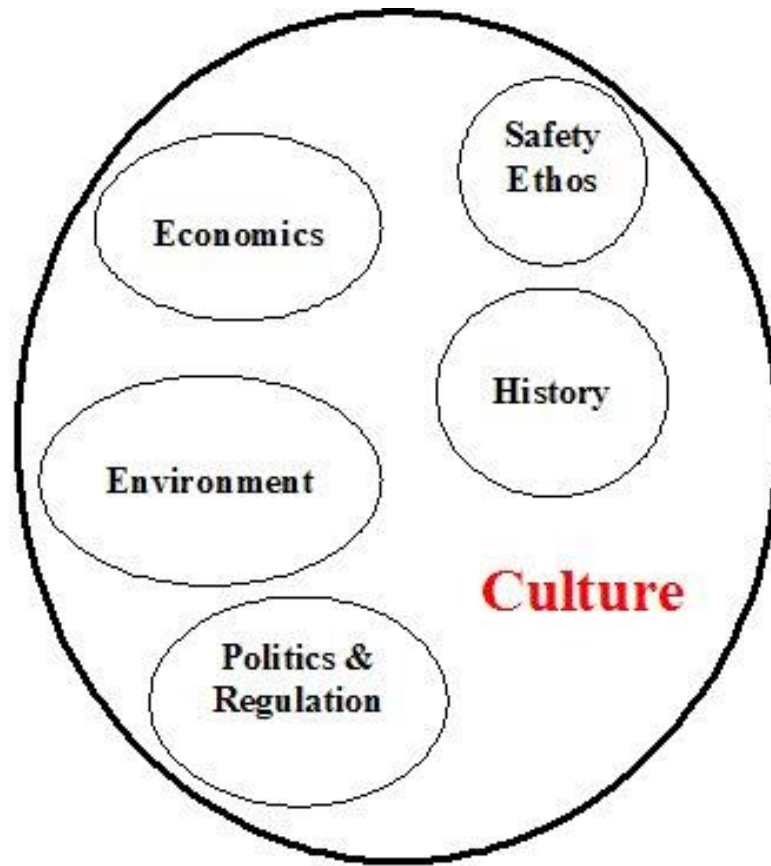
- The study of humankind in all different aspects, from evolution to social and cognitive behaviour
 - from Greek *anthropos* = human/humankind



- Often sub-divided in different areas
 - e.g., physical/biological anthropology, material anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural and social anthropology
 - -> holistic approach to cultures

Anthropology of Religion

- Anthropologists look at religion as part of a wider system, in connection with other areas of the culture such as social structure
- => Religion is regarded as part of culture and society and not as an autonomous entity



And
religion
is in the
middle
of all!

Dominant research method

- Participant observation
 - Emerging in the other cultures and trying to understand them
 - Without judging them
- Cultural Relativism
- Focus traditionally on small-scale societies
 - But this has changed in the last years

Examples of famous anthropologists

- Sir Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917)
- Sir Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973)
- Clifford Geertz (1926-2006)

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917)

- professor of anthropology at Oxford
- challenged the common attitude of his time by applying Darwinism to human cultures



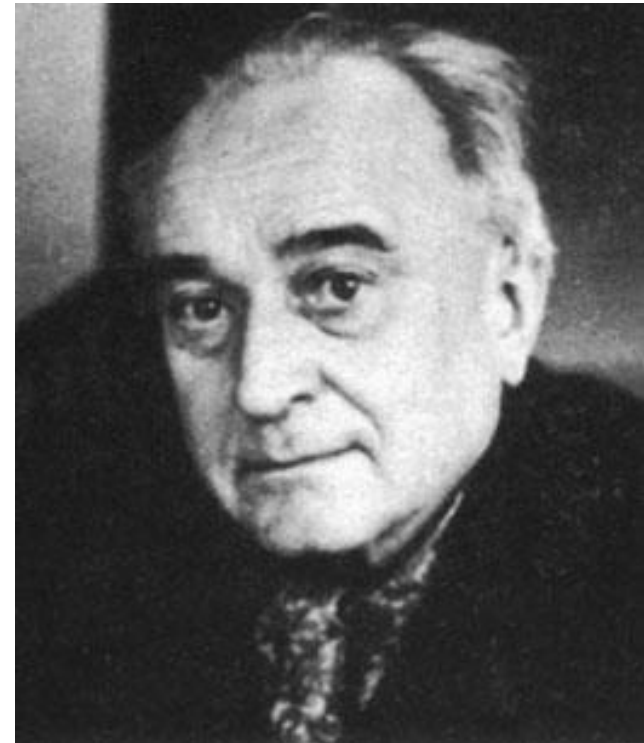
Tylor's evolutionist scheme of religion

- Animism [=belief that everything and everyone has a soul] on lowest level
- → Polytheism [belief in many gods]
- → Monotheism [belief in one god]
- and in the end (highest level) → Science
[=>religion is no longer necessary]

- “Scientific progress is at times most furthered by working along a distinct intellectual line, without being tempted to diverge from the main object to what lies beyond, in however intimate connexion. (...) My task has been here not to discuss Religion in all its bearings, but to portray in outline the great doctrine of Animism, as found in what I conceive to be its earliest stages among the lower races of mankind, and to show its transmission along the lines of religious thought.” (Tylor 1871, vol. II, p. 445)

Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973)

- Professor for anthropology at Oxford University
- Fieldwork in East Africa
- *Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles among the Azande* (1937)



Witchcraft, Magic and Oracles among the Azande (1937)

- In this book Evans-Pritchard explained the internal logic of the Azande way of thinking
- in particular their understanding of witchcraft

Evan-Pritchard's approach

- “In my own culture, in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and reject, Zande notions of witchcraft. In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them ... If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts.” (cited in Bowie, p. 17)

Evans-Pritchard

- “there is no possibility of [the anthropologist] ... *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.” (Bowie in Segal, 2006 p. 6)

Translation as key task for anthropology

- entering the mental world of an unfamiliar culture
- And making that world understandable to others, to members of the own culture

Clifford Geertz (1926-2006)

- US-American anthropologist
- Fieldwork e.g. in Southeast Asia and North Africa



Geertz argues that

- ... the religious perspective differs from common sense, "it reaches out beyond the realities of everyday life, and its 'defining concern' is with the acceptance of wider realities, with faith in them, rather than with acting upon them" (Saler, 2000, p. 94)

Anthropology of Religion

- ...is according to Geertz "a two-stage operation: first, an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social-structure and psychological processes." (Geertz, p. 125)

Geertz's definition of religion

- 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)

Islam Observed (1968)

- “The heart of ... the religious perspective ... is the conviction that the values one holds are grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things really are there is an unbreakable inner connection. What sacred symbols do for those to whom they are sacred is to formulate an image of the world’s construction and a program for human conduct that are mere reflexes of one another.”
(Geertz 1968, p. 97)