

To my teachers, colleagues, and students, with grateful thanks to them all.

The Anthropology of Religion

An Introduction

Second Edition

Fiona Bowie

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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 flap 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 Nkuisi 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* Elcanor 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 Dowayo 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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