

Anthropology of Religion

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Paul G. Hiebert

The anthropological study of religion is related to sociological, psychological and comparative studies of religions. Its unique contribution lies in its data--mainly the study of non-Western tribal and folk religions--and its use of thick ethnographic descriptions and cross-cultural comparisons. Anthropological studies of religion fall broadly into four periods, each characterized by particular questions and theories.

Evolutionary Theories of Religion.

Like medieval Christian theologians, nineteenth and early twentieth-century anthropologists sought to account for religions in a single comprehensive history, but unlike theologians they did so in naturalistic terms. They postulated the evolution of religion from simple animistic beliefs and practices to the complex religions of the present. They attributed this to the growth of human rationality, and divided it into three stages--animistic, metaphysical/theological, and scientific. Central to their debate were two questions: what were the origins of religion, and what role did it play in the evolution of human thought.

E. B. Tylor (1871) attributed the origins to an early belief in spirit beings that arose when primitive humans, reflecting on the nature of dreams and death, concluded that humans have invisible souls which leave the body and wander to distant places. Later they extended this notion of spirit or soul to animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. From a belief in spirits, Tylor argued, it is only a small step to belief in the "continuance" of these spirits beyond death in an after-world, their "embodiment" in objects, their "possession" of living persons, and the existence

of powerful “high gods.” Robert Marett argued that belief in spirits was preceded by a stage in which humans experienced a sense of awe at the great forces of nature, and came to believe in a mysterious impersonal power or *mana*. Sir James Frazer (1911-15) posited that religious beliefs are rooted in prelogical beliefs in magic based on two mistaken notions of causality, namely that of similarity (pouring water produces rain), and contagion (acts performed on one part of a person’s body, such as hair clippings, affects that person). Cultural evolutionists took religious beliefs serious, but discounted these as prelogical and metaphysical attempts to understand the universe, which, in time, would be displaced by rational, empirical science.

Opposition to evolutionary theories of religion came from two quarters. In Vienna, Father Wilhelm Schmidt of the Kulturkreis School of Anthropology showed from missionary reports that most simple societies believe in an all-powerful creator God, a belief evolutionists attributed only to advanced universalistic religions. In the U.S. Franz Boas and his students called for empirically based history to replace the “armchair speculation” that had characterized evolutionary theories.

The theory of cultural evolution influenced the modern mission movement in several ways. First, many missionaries assumed the superiority of western civilization and peoples. Members of other races might share in their goodness and wisdom, but westerners were the leaders and would remain so for a very long time. Missionaries saw it their task to Civilize and Christianize the people they served. They built schools and hospitals alongside churches, and saw science as essential a part of the curriculum as the Gospel. This equation of the gospel with western culture made the Gospel unnecessarily foreign in other cultures.

Second, many missionaries saw traditional religions, with their fear of spirits, witchcraft and magical powers, as animistic superstitions, and assumed that these would die out as people

accepted Christianity and science. They saw little need to study these religions. Consequently, many of the old beliefs went underground because the missionaries had not dealt with them or provided Christian answers to the problems these addressed. Today these underground beliefs are resurfacing around the world and creating havoc in young churches.

Social Functional Approaches to Religion

During the period between the world wars, anthropologists were heavily influenced by sociology which held that social phenomena, like natural phenomena, obey laws discoverable by empirical observation and human reason. Emile Durkheim (1915) argued that religion plays a vital role in maintaining cohesion and moral order in a society. He saw religion as a set of symbols that refer not to supernatural beings, but to the society itself. Gods, spirits and other religious symbols represent segments of a society, or its whole. By ordering these symbols in rituals, the social order is affirmed; and by declaring these symbols sacred, the authority of the society is validated, and the egocentric impulses of individuals that threaten to destroy it are suppressed. As individuals participate in religious rituals, they affirm their place in and subordination to the society. Religions, therefore, serve vital positive functions in maintaining societies, but their explicit beliefs cannot be taken as true statements about the nature of reality, or even of how the people view reality.

The central question social anthropologists asked was what functions do religions serve in a society? In England A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who studied tribal religion in Sri Lanka, R. F. Fortune, who studied sorcery among the Dobu, and Raymond Firth, who investigated the ritual cycle of the Tikopia, believed that religions help maintain social cohesion and order by declared sacred those things that were directly or indirectly essential for their survival.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1935) went a step further. He refused to treat people as anonymous individuals trapped in social webs and their ideas as merely social projections, and recognized the importance of religious beliefs *qua* beliefs. All people, he said, have folk sciences by which they seek to meet their human needs through understandings of how the world works. Religion and magic, he noted, are rational responses to the universally experienced emotions of stress that arise when these sciences fail. The difference between religion and magic is one of purpose. Magic is utilitarian and instrumental. It is used to influence events such as unforeseen calamities that are beyond normal human control. Religion, on the other hand, is an end unto itself. It provides people with an explanation for suffering, crisis and death, and thereby assures them that the world is indeed orderly and meaningful. Malinowski argued that we must understand the world as the people see it to understand why they act as they do.

Social anthropology has had a deep impact on missions in recent years. Earlier, mission leaders used geography to order their strategies. Missionaries went to India, Africa or other 'countries,' and divided these into 'mission fields.' Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner and the Church Growth movement showed how social dynamics play a major role in the growth and organization of the church. They introduced concepts such as homogeneous groups, people movements and receptivity/resistance. The Unreached People movement shifts mission strategies based on geography to ones based on social organization. Both are in danger, however, of social reductionism, where success is based on understanding and applying social principles and measured largely in quantitative terms.

American Historical Approaches to Religion

A second theoretical challenge to the theory of cultural evolution emerged in North America, and came to be known as American Historicism. It was pioneered by Franz Boas (1858-1942), A. L. Kroeber (1876-1960), and their disciples. They studied the North American Indians whose cultures has been shattered and were now living largely on reservations. Their central questions had to do with religious change, and their chief contributions were a series of historical accounts of nativistic and messianic movements that often emerge where traditional peoples are overrun by modernity. Ralph Linton studied the Ghost Dance of the North American Indians, and Glen Cochrane the Cargo Cults of Melanesia. From such studies A. F. C. Wallace (1956) developed a broad theory explaining these revitalization movements. American anthropologists were also influenced by Sigmund Freud, who saw religion as a projection of authority figures, and William James who examined the personal emotional dimension of religion.

The American school influenced missions through the writings of Allan Tippett, Louis Luzbetak, Jacob Loewen and other missiologists dealing with conversion and religious change, and through the work of Harold Turner and those studying the African Independent Churches and other new emerging religious movements.

Symbolic and Cognitive Anthropology

Before World War II, some anthropologists rejected the reduction of religion to social dynamics, and argued we must take religious beliefs seriously as beliefs because they are what people believe to be the true nature of reality. Their central question was how do religions give humans a sense of meaning.

L. Levy-Bruhl (1926) saw primal religions as reflections of a “primitive mentality” which has its own rationality, one that is radically different from that of modern science. Primitive logic, he argued, is mystical, and governed by emotions, dreams and notions about supernatural entities. John Taylor (1963) captured this approach in his study of African religions. These scholars overestimate the rationality of western thought, and ignore the fact that in much of their lives, all people use natural common sense.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard also moved from “function to meaning” in his study of magic and witchcraft among the Azande (1937) and Nuer (1940) of Africa. He argued that the Azande have sound empirical knowledge of nature which they distinguish from the ‘mystical’ workings of magic and witchcraft, and that the latter are rational systems of thought, given the assumptions the Azande have about the world. He held that cosmological beliefs provide people with their categories of thought, and noted that tribal religions are this-worldly religions concerned with “abundant life and fullness of years.”

Edmund Leach, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner and Claude Lévi-Strauss opened the door further to cognitive structural approaches to the study of religion. Douglas (1966) argues that religions create symbolic systems about purity and pollution, sacred and profane that reflect and reinforce social orders. Victor Turner (1974) analyzed the structure of religious rituals and shows how they serve as boundary markers, setting off various types of social reality and transforming persons from one status to another. Lévi-Strauss (1966) says that behind the empirical diversity of religions, human minds are fundamentally the same everywhere. He contends that religion, like science, provides humans with a sense of meaning by mentally ordering the world in which they live, and that this meaning is generated by the universal unconscious processes of the human mind.

Social and symbolic approaches examine the underlying structures of religions, but do not study the content of their beliefs. Taking a problem-solving approach, Clifford Geertz argues that religion provides answers to three fundamental human experiences that threaten to make life meaningless: the problem of bafflement when human explanation systems fail, the problem of suffering and death, and the problem of injustice or feeling of moral disorder and chaos. It answers these by appealing to higher realities outside of daily experience. Robin Horton (1964) goes further and examines the content of African religious beliefs. He sees them as theoretical models of reality, like those of science, but that transcend the everyday world of common sense. Daryl Forde, Marcel Griaule and others show that religions are philosophical systems that shape peoples' worldviews.

Symbolic and cognitive anthropology have much to contribute to missions, most of it has yet to be mined. These approaches take traditional religions seriously, and help us to provide Christian responses to the questions folk religions ask rather than ignoring them as superstitions. They help us understand the importance of rituals and myths in religious life, and the importance for missionaries influenced by the modern denigrating of these to rediscover their importance in the life of the church. However, while taking the religious beliefs of people seriously, most intellectualists fail to raise the ontological question of the truth of these religious beliefs. It is here that Christian anthropologists must go beyond the current approaches, and lead in new ways of studying religions.

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The anthropological study of religion is allied with sociology, psychology and comparative religions. Its unique contribution lies in its data--mainly the study of non-Western tribal and folk religions--and its method of cross-cultural comparison

Three major sets of questions have occupied the anthropological study of religions: 1) questions about the origins of religion and its place in the broad expanse of human history; 2) questions about the nature and functions of religions within societies; and 3) questions about the meaning of religious ideas and symbols.

1. The Origins of Religion. Like medieval Christian theology, nineteenth and early twentieth-century anthropology sought to explain human affairs in a single comprehensive history; but unlike theology it did so in naturalistic terms. Following the lead of Comte, the early anthropologists postulated an evolution of religious beliefs and practices from a simpler, more uniform past to the complex heterogeneous present. Like Comte, who divided history into three stages of intellectual development--theological, metaphysical or philosophical and scientific--they attributed this evolution to the growth of human rationality.

E. B. Tylor traced the origins of religion to an early belief in spirit beings that arose when primitive humans, reflecting on the nature of dreams and death, came to the conclusion that humans have invisible souls that leave the body and wander to distant places. Later, he said, they extended this notion of a spirit or soul to animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. True religion began when humans began to worship ancestors by offering them food and drink. From a belief in spirits, Tylor argued, it is only a small step to belief in the "continuance" of these spirits

beyond death in an after-world, in their “embodiment” in objects, in “possession” in which they enter living persons, in powerful spirits or “gods,” and in “fetishes” or special objects inhabited by these gods. R. R. Marett argued that belief in spirits was preceded by a stage in which humans experienced a sense of awe at the great forces of nature and came to believe in a mysterious impersonal power or *mana*.

Sir James Frazer traced the origin of religions to magic and postulated the mental process of human from magic to religion to science. Early humans, he argued, were prelogical, and they developed magic on mistaken notions of causality based on similarity (pouring water produces rain) and contagion (acts performed on some part of a person’s body, such as hair clippings, affect that person).

Opposition to evolutionary theories of religion came from two quarters. Andrew Lang and others argued that many simple societies have a belief in an all-powerful creator God, a belief evolutionists attributed only to advanced universalistic religions. In the U.S. Franz Boas and his students, A.L. Kroeber and Leslie Spier, called for empirically based history to replace the “armchair speculation” that had characterized evolutionary theories. Their chief contribution was a series of historical accounts of religious change among the tribes of North America.

Functional Approaches

During the period between the world wars, anthropological theories of religion were heavily influenced by positivist theories formulated in psychology and sociology that held that social phenomena, like natural phenomena, obeyed laws discoverable by empirical observation and human reason. These theories were materialistic, and sought to explain religions in terms of the functions they serve in maintaining the organization of societies.

Sigmund Freud saw religion as an essentially neurotic expression of unconscious psychological conflicts and redirected psychic forces centering around the Oedipus complex and infantile helplessness. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913) he traced the origins of religion to an early case of patricide and primal incest by a band of sons, and to the resulting ambivalence toward the father, who, at first, became the totem, and then, by projection, the god of the band. In later studies Freud elaborated on the nature of religion as a projection of authority figures. For the most part anthropologists rejected as fanciful Freud's story of religion beginning in a case of primal incest. However, a few, such as Geza Roheim and George Devereux, accepted Freud's thesis and sought to show from tribal data that in religion the neurotic mind transfers its suppressed wishes onto external objects, which it makes sacred.

Far more influential was Emile Durkheim's functionalist theory, which held that religion plays a vital role in maintaining order in a society. For Durkheim, religion was a set of symbols that refer not to supernatural beings, but to the society itself. Gods, spirits and other religious symbols represent the society as a whole or some of its parts. By ordering these symbols in rituals, the nature of the social order is affirmed; by declaring these symbols sacred, the egocentric impulses of individuals that threaten to destroy that order are suppressed. As individuals participate in religious rituals, they affirm their place in and subordination to the society. Religions, therefore, serve vital positive functions in maintaining societies. Their explicit beliefs, however, cannot be taken as valid statements about how the people view reality.

The leading anthropologists to adopt functionalist approaches to the study of religion were A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who believed that the objects venerated by a people were those directly or indirectly essential for their survival; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who analyzed the function of witchcraft among the Zande; R. F. Fortune, who studied sorcery among the Doby; and

Raymond Firth, who investigated the ritual cycle of the Tikopia.

Bronislaw Malinowski, although a social functionalist, recognized the importance of religious beliefs *qua* beliefs. He refused to treat people as anonymous individuals trapped in social webs and their ideas as merely social projections. All people, he said, have folk sciences by which they seek to meet their human needs. Religion and magic are rational responses to the universally experienced emotions of stress that arise when these sciences fail. The difference between the two is one of purpose. Magic is utilitarian and instrumental. It is used to influence events such as unforeseen calamities that are beyond normal human control. Religion, on the other hand, is an end unto itself. It provides people with an explanation for suffering, crisis and death, and thereby assures them that the world is indeed orderly and meaningful.

Meaning-oriented Approaches

Before World War II, anthropologists began to look at religions as systems of meaning--as folk theologies about the nature of ultimate reality. One of the first to take this approach was L. Levy-Bruhl, who saw primitive religions as products of prelogical mentalities governed by emotions and mystical analogies. His thesis, however, was largely rejected by anthropologists such as Paul Radin who pointed out that intellectuals in tribal societies do reach high levels of philosophical sophistication.

Daryll Forde, Marcel Griaule and others have shown that religious myths and rituals give expression to the fundamental beliefs people have about reality--in other words, their worldviews. Taking a problem-solving approach, Clifford Geertz holds that religion provides answers to three fundamental human experiences that threaten to make life meaningless: the problem of bafflement when human explanation systems fail, the problem of suffering and death, and the

problem of injustice or feeling of moral disorder and chaos. It answers these by appealing to higher realities outside of daily experience.

Claude Lévi-Strauss and the cognitive structuralists contend that religions are essentially mental systems for organizing and storing abstract information. This is not, as Forde and Geertz would argue, information people have about the real world. Rather it is information about the conceptual categories people create in their minds. In other words, rituals and myths shape the thought worlds of the people. While this approach has produced some elegant interpretations of particular religions, many anthropologists question whether the abstract interpretations do not reflect more the cognitive structures of the anthropologists than those of the people.

Edmund Leach, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner have taken a broader approach to the study of human classification systems. Douglas argues that religion helps maintain fundamental classifications by treating things that fall between the categories as either sacred or polluted. Rituals and taboos, therefore, serve as conceptual boundary markers, setting off various types of social reality. For example, the human life cycle rites--birth, initiation, marriage and death--mark important transitions in the life of an individual, and thereby create a sense of order in life. Turner has applied the same approach to the study of community rituals and pilgrimages.

After a long period in which religion was seen only as a stage (often pathological) in the development of human thought, or as a means of organizing and integrating society, it has now become an object of anthropological research in its own right as a system of human beliefs defining the ultimate character of reality and humankind's role in it.