

Cultural Anthropology of Religion

(encyclopedia article)

<A>CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELI{-}
 GION, DISCIPLINE OF. The anthropological
 study of religion is allied with sociology, psychol{-}
 ogy, and comparative religions. Its unique
 contributions lie in its data--mainly the study of
 non-Western tribal and folk religions--and in its
 method of cross-cultural comparison.{N}

{@M}Three major sets of questions have occupied
 the anthropological study of religion: (1) ques{-}
 tions 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.{N}

1.{@N}The Origins of Religion. Like medieval
 Christian theology, nineteenth and early twen{-}
 tieth-century science sought to explain human
 affairs in terms of a single comprehensive
 history; but unlike theology it did so in
 naturalistic terms. Following the lead of Conte,
 the early anthropologists postulated an evolu{-}
 tion of religious beliefs and practices from a
 simpler, more uniform past to the complex
 heterogeneous present. Like Conte, who divid{-}
 ed history into three stages of intellectual
 (elopment--theological, metaphysical or
 philosophical, and scientific--they attributed
 this evolution to the growth of human rational{-}
 ity.{N}

{@M}E. B. Tylor traced the origins of religion to an
 earlier 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 afterworld, 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. {N}

{@M} Sir James Frazer traced the origin of religion to magic and postulated the mental progress of humans 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). {N}

{@M} 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, while 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. {N}

2. {@N} **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, obey 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. {N}

{@M} 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

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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. {N}

{@M}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. {N}

{@M}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 Dobu; and Raymond Firth who investigated the ritual cycle of the Tikopia. {N}

{@M}Bronislaw Malinowski, although a 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

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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.{N}

3. {N} **Meaning-oriented Approaches.** Before the Second World War, anthropologists began to look at religions as systems of meaning--as folk theologies about the ultimate nature of 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.{N}

{M} 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 world{-} answers. Taking a problem-solving approach, Clifford Geertz holds that religion provides answers to the three fundamental human experiences that threaten to make life meaning{-} less: 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.{N}

{M} Claude Levi-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.{N}

{@M}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 to pilgrimages.{N}

{@M}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 for organizing and integrating a 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 within it.{N}

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ANTHROPOLOGY, CULTURAL. In recent years cultural anthropology has emerged as one of the major paradigms for understanding human beings and the mission of the church. Its particular contribution is deep ethnographic studies of different peoples in order to build bridges of understanding between them, and the use of intercultural comparison to develop broad theories of human organization.

Anthropology in Britain had its origins in the broad Christian humanitarian movement of the 19th century, which was concerned with the welfare of natives in the colonies. In 1843 there was a split over how to protect their rights between those who wanted to grant them immediately the full "privileges" of Western civilization and those who wanted to study them before seeking to "raise and protect them". The latter formed the Anthropological Association in 1863, and eventually found their home in universities.

In the early 20th century, anthropologists such as E.B. Tylor (1832-1917), Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-81) postulated the evolution of societies from savagery to civilization, and attributed this to the growth of human rationality from pre-logical to logical. Influenced by this theory, many missionaries assumed the superiority of Western civilization and saw their task as civilizing as well as Christianizing the people they served.

After 1930 the theory of evolution came under attack and, after a fierce battle, the term "civilization" was replaced by "culture". Cultures were assumed to be *sui generis*, and their preservation an unquestioned good. Introducing change from the outside was condemned.

Two schools of thought emerged after the first world war: social anthropology, pioneered in Britain by A.R. Redcliffe-Brown

(1881-1955) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), and cultural anthropology, emerging in North America under the leadership of Franz Boas (1858-1942), A.L. Kroeber (1876-1960) and their followers. Redcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, who both did anthropological fieldwork, learned to know other peoples personally as fully human beings. Drawing on Durkheim, they argued that systems of relationships are the foundation for human life, and that these obey laws discoverable by empirical observation and human reason.

Social anthropologists studied tribes in Africa and the South Pacific islands which were living, functioning realities. They saw each society as unique, bound in more or less successful adaptation to a particular environment. Each was homogeneous, and could be explained fully in terms of "social facts". Each was made up of parts that "function" to maintain a harmonious, balanced whole. Societies were seen as morally neutral. Religions and other belief systems were seen as social constructs needed to maintain the social order. For people in one society to judge those in another would be ethnocentric and imperialistic, for there are no moral or cognitive universals by which to evaluate cultures. Social anthropology tends towards social reductionism, and a static view of societies that sees change and conflict as pathological. It has a weak view of history and culture and has to wrestle with its own view of cultural relativism.

Social anthropology has had a deep impact on missions. Liberation theology, the church growth movement, and the emphasis on "people groups", "mass movements" and receptivity/resistance show how social dynamics play a major role in the growth and organization of the church.

The pioneers of cultural anthropology studied the North American Indians whose cultures had been scattered. The questions they faced had to do with cultural change and collapse. For these scholars, culture - the beliefs and practices of a people - was the basis for human organization. Cultures were not seen as bounded, tightly integrated units, but as dynamic systems of symbols, rituals, myths, beliefs and world-views. They saw culture as constantly changing, and change as potentially good. This gave rise to the field of applied anthropology which seeks to introduce change with a minimum of cultural dislocation. Christian missions have drawn widely on its insights in developing culturally sensitive outreach and church planting.

Cultural anthropology in turn gave birth to descriptive linguistics, which has enabled scholars to analyze oral languages. In mission, this led to new methods of language learning and dynamic-equivalent Bible translations. Other offspring were the in-depth study of cultures as seen by the people themselves and analysis of cross-cultural communication. In mission this led to a growing rejection of colonial attitudes, to training culturally incarnational missionaries and to working towards partnership in mission. It also led to concern for the contextualization of the gospel not only in worship forms, church polity and evangelistic methods, but also in the development of local theologies.

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