

CHAPTER ONE

The Anthropological Study of Religion

Anthropologists have always been interested in the origins of religion, although the lack of both written records and archaeological evidence has made the subject speculative. It is reasonable to assume, however, that religion, like material culture, has a prehistory. Surely, uncertainty and change have always existed, exposing people in all ages to real and imagined threats and anxieties. The human animal alone senses a pattern behind the facts of existence and worries about life here and in the hereafter. We are born, we live, and we die. And although this is true of other animals, only humans are aware of the precariousness of life and the inevitability of death.

Paleoanthropological evidence shows that Neanderthals buried their dead, often in a flexed position. Such deliberate burials, many feel, indicate the beginnings of religion and the conception of an afterlife. Interpretations of other items at Neanderthal sites, such as flower pollen, bear skulls, and red and black pigments, are more controversial. Such items may tell us something about the origins of religious behavior, but they may also simply be present accidentally.

In contrast, the era of *Homo sapiens sapiens* (modern humans in the biological sense) yields tremendous evidence of religious beliefs—more elaborate burials, carved figurines (“Venuses”), and magnificent cave art. And during the Neolithic period, which began about ten thousand years ago, burials indicate a deep respect for the power of the dead. It is likely that during this period, which is marked by the cultivation of crops and the domestication of animals, cycles of nature became an important feature of magic and religious beliefs. Drought, storms, and other natural perils of the farmer could have created a growing dependence on supernatural powers.

The antiquity of religion indirectly testifies to its utility; however, the usefulness of supernaturalism to contemporary societies is a clearer, more provable demonstration of its functions. The many forms of adversity facing individuals and groups require explanation and action; we are unwilling to let challenges to health, safety, and salvation go unchecked. Just as adversity is universal, so, too, is the use of religion as an explanation for and solution to adversity. Although the form religion takes is as diverse as its practitioners, all religions seek to answer questions that cannot be explained in terms of objective knowledge—to permit people reasonable explanations for often unreasonable events and phenomena by demonstrating a cause-and-effect relationship between the supernatural and the human condition. This may be its most important function.

In his article “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation” (1966: 109–17), Melford E. Spiro distinguished three sets of basic desires (cognitive, substantive, and expressive),

each of which is satisfied by a corresponding function of religion (adjustive, adaptive, and integrative). Spiro's first and second functions are basically those of explanation and solution: the adjustive function of religion, as he defines it, is to satisfy the cognitive desires we experience as we attempt to understand what goes on around us (illness, natural phenomena); the adaptive function seeks to satisfy substantive desires (the desire for rain or for victory in war). In his third category, however, Spiro moves to different territory: the often unconscious, expressive desires made up of what Spiro calls painful drives and painful motives.

According to Spiro, painful drives are anxieties concerning infantile and primitive fears (fears of destruction or of one's own destructiveness). Painful motives are culturally forbidden—for example, types of aggressive or sexual behavior that result in feelings of shame, inadequacy, and moral anxiety. Because of the pain they create in an individual, these drives and motives are usually relegated to the unconscious, where, "in the absence of other, or of more efficient means," religion becomes the vehicle "by which, symbolically, they can be handled and expressed." Thus, in what Spiro calls the integrative function of supernaturalism, "religious belief and ritual provide the content for culturally constituted projective mechanisms by which unconscious fears and anxieties may be reduced and repressed motives may be satisfied" (1966: 115).

Over the years, scholars offered several reasons for the existence of religious behavior. The most prominent of these approaches are psychological, sociological, and anthropological. Spiro's belief that religious behavior reduces unconscious fears typifies the psychological approach, which, briefly stated, sees religion as functioning to reduce anxiety. For example, the famous British social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski held that the proper use of religious rites reduced anxieties brought on by crisis. (Like all theorists who apply the psychological approach, Freud also believed that religion and ritual functioned to reduce anxieties, but, unlike others, he saw religion as a neurotic need that humans would eventually outgrow.) In contrast, the sociological viewpoint stresses the societal origins of religion. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim, for example, viewed religion as a manifestation of social solidarity and collective beliefs. According to Durkheim, members of society create religious objects, rituals, beliefs, and symbols in order to integrate their cultures. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, a British social anthropologist, agreed with Durkheim that participation in annual religious rites functioned to increase social solidarity.

What many refer to simply as the anthropological approach to the study of religion is by its very nature holistic, combining not only sociological and psychological but historical, semantic, and evolutionary perspectives as well. Anthropologists today attempt to go beyond the observable to the analysis of symbolic forms. In order to make generalizations on pan-human religious behavior, symbology, and ideology, however, anthropologists must work from the common basis of a definition of religion. Without an acceptable and accurate definition, anthropologists would be unable to establish a common basis for comparison of religions cross-culturally.

Many definitions of religion have been generated by anthropologists. Edward B. Tylor, the father of modern anthropology, described religion as the belief in spiritual beings, what he called "animism," the most primitive form of religion. At the opposite extreme from Tylor's open-ended definition, which set no limits as to what the study of spiritual beings would embrace, are a majority of contemporary anthropologists who, like Spiro, define religion more narrowly as "an institution consisting of culturally postulated superhuman beings" (1966: 96). At first glance, Tylor's and Spiro's definitions appear similar, but Spiro's use of the term *superhuman*, unlike Tylor's *spiritual beings*, emphasizes an aura

of omnipotence unknown to the living. Further, Spiro's position that religion is an institution places it in the realm of phenomena that can be empirically studied, as any other cultural institution can be. Still, similarities in Tylor's and Spiro's definitions are apparent: both show, for example, that religion is the study of the nature of the unnatural. Spirits are not of this world, nor are superhumans; indeed, both are "supernatural," which has been defined by the anthropologist Edward Norbeck "to include all that is not natural, that which is regarded as extraordinary, not of the ordinary world, mysterious or unexplainable in ordinary terms" (1961: 11). 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 all societies.

Through their comparative research, anthropologists have shown that religious practices and beliefs vary in part as a result of the level of social structure in a given society. Developing typologies to show the possible relationships between religious phenomena and other aspects of society was a particularly strong concern for many anthropologists in the mid-20th century. For example, in *Religion: An Anthropological View* (1966: 84–101), Anthony F. C. Wallace presented a provocative typology of religious behavior based on the concept of the cult institution—"a set of rituals all having the same general goal, all explicitly rationalized by a set of similar or related beliefs, and all supported by the same social group" (p. 75). Ranging from the simplest to the most complex, Wallace describes individualistic, shamanic, communal, and ecclesiastical cult institutions. Each succeeding or more complex level contains all components of those preceding it. The ecclesiastical, for example, contains all the elements of the less complex individualistic, shamanistic, and communal cult institutions.

According to Wallace, in the simplest, *individualistic* cult institution, each person functions as his or her own specialist without need for such intermediaries as shamans or priests. Examples occur in both modern and primitive societies (the dream cult among the Iroquois, sealing magic among the Trobriand Islanders, and various cults among the Americans). The next level, the *shamanic*, also found in cultures around the world, marks the beginning of a religious division of labor. Individual part-time practitioners are designated by experience, birth, or training to help lay clients enlist the aid of the supernatural. The *communal* cult institution is even more complex, with laypeople handling important religious rituals for people in such special categories as secret societies, kinship groups, and age groups. (Examples include the ancestor ceremonies of the Chinese and some African tribal groups, Iroquois agricultural rituals, and Australian puberty rituals.) Although specialists such as shamans, skilled speakers, and dancers may participate, the lay group assumes the primary responsibility for conducting the sacred performance; an extensive religious hierarchy is still not in evidence. It is in the fourth, *ecclesiastical* cult institution that a professional religious clergy is formally elected or appointed and the division of labor is sharply drawn, with the laypeople usually passive participants instead of active performers. Ecclesiastical cult institutions have characteristically worshipped either an Olympian pantheon of gods (as among the ancient Greeks and Romans) or a monotheistic deity (as among the Judeo-Christian and Muslim religions).

While anthropologists in the 19th and much of the 20th century attempted to define and categorize religious phenomena, often in evolutionary or stage-like progressions, such categorizations faded in importance toward the end of the 20th century. When considering religion and related aspects of culture, intensely detailed descriptions of particular examples became more prominent. The study of religion, just like any other aspect of human social

behavior, has been influenced by intellectual developments and trends within anthropology at large. In recent decades, the relationship among religion and gender, identity movements, the environment, and power all became popular foci for anthropological attention. The role of the researcher, or the researcher's positionality—all those aspects of a researcher's identity and background that affect his or her perceptions and privileges—became a crucial ingredient in ethnographic writing. Even the notion of "religion" itself came under scrutiny, like many other concepts at one time accepted, with apparently firm definitions, within the field. The most well-known such critique is offered by Talal Asad, whose 1983 article, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" demonstrates a strongly Western bias in the area we have carved out as "religion." Similar arguments can be made, and have been made, regarding magic, witchcraft, shamanism, and numerous other concepts routinely used in the subject area addressed by this volume. This is not to say that commonly used terms in anthropology are meaningless, but rather that it is wise to be sensitive to the blinders that one's own culture inevitably provides.

The five articles in this chapter have been selected to provide a basic understanding of the anthropological approach to the study of religion and related phenomena.

In the first article, Jack David Eller introduces the key characteristics of anthropology, of religion itself, and even the concept of "study." This article provides a succinct overview of the most basic themes in our subject area and is a useful way to begin study of the anthropology of religion.

Next, Melinda Bollar Wagner describes the process of carrying out ethnographic fieldwork, the distinctive method of research on which cultural anthropology in general relies. This selection includes reflection upon the author's own ethnographic research with religious groups in the United States, including the benefits as well as challenges of conducting research in one's own society.

In the third article, Marvin Harris explores the relationship between religion and such concepts as superstition, luck, charisma, and animism. He also sketches general descriptions of religious beliefs associated with societies having different levels of political organization.

In the fourth article, Dorothy Lee shows how religion is part and parcel of a preliterate people's total way of life. The article, from the 1950s, is an excellent example of the holistic perspective within anthropology.

Finally, in an article written for this book, Pamela Moro considers how anthropological concerns have shaped the study of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The article includes an extended look at the recent popularity of amulets in Thailand, during a time of social unease.

References

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