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Studying Religion Anthropologically

Jack David Eller

What makes the anthropological approach to religion different from that of other fields? Jack Eller begins his answer by considering the field of anthropology itself, emphasizing the discipline's concern with both diversity and commonalities in the phenomena it studies. Eller describes the importance of the concept of culture and introduces key features distinctive to the anthropological perspective: comparative or crosscultural description, holism, and cultural relativism. He considers some of the challenges in understanding the diversity of cultures and human experiences, including the crucial difficulty of using concepts from one culture (ours) to describe concepts in another. Eller also takes up the very difficult task of defining religion and offers a succinct summary of the things that religion "does" for humans, that is, its functions. Finally, the author helps us consider what it means to study something. What are our motivations, and how does what we loosely call "theory" fit in? In the original chapter from which this selection is excerpted, Eller goes on to survey theoretical approaches to religion within anthropology and related fields, especially over the last 150 years.

Jack David Eller is an anthropology professor at Community College of Denver in Colorado. He has authored works on many aspects of anthropology, including Cruel Deeds, Virtuous Violence: Religious Violence Across Culture and History *(Prometheus Books, 2010).*

As humans, we marvel at and ponder our existence, our behavior, and the world around us. Out of this self-reflection, humans have arrived at many different understandings and approaches, but there is one recurring theme in many of their answers: We are not alone. There are other beings and forces in the world and, even more so, other beings and forces significantly like ourselves, with minds and wills and personalities and histories. Such a being or force, as the theologian Martin Buber (1958) expressed it, cannot be treated as an object or "it" but must be treated as a person or "thou." Between such beings/forces and humans there are relations and obligations which can only be called "social"; they are part of our society and our culture. They extend our society and culture far beyond ordinary humans, sometimes as far as society and culture can be extended—to the Ultimate.

Such systems of thought and action we refer to as religions. Observers have always been particularly fascinated with religion; it is uniquely dramatic, colorful, and powerful. This does not mean, however, that humans always particularly understand each other's—or their own—religion. Preoccupation with the drama and color of religion can actually interfere

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with understanding, making it decontextualized or overly exotic. And, of course, not all humans share this benevolent curiosity about other religions.

Since religions allege to speak of the real (even of the Really Real), humans exhibit a strong tendency to condemn religious diversity as religious error. Of course, the same challenge potentially faces us in the investigation of any human activity. We might be enchanted at the complexity and diversity of spoken language or clothing styles or food habits, or we might find other languages or clothing or food silly, disgusting, or obscene and condemn them. One thing that we probably would not do though is to declare another language or clothing style or cuisine "false."

Anthropology does not approach religion to falsify it nor to verify it nor even to judge it. Anthropology is not the seminary, intending to indoctrinate the student into any one particular religion. It is not apologetics, attempting to prove or justify some religion; neither is it an exercise in debunking any or all religion. Anthropology starts out with a different interest and a different agenda and, therefore, with different tools and concepts. What does it mean to study religion anthropologically? The most illuminating thing might be to approach this question backwards, beginning with anthropology, then turning to religion, and ending with study.

Studying Religion "Anthropologically"

Many disciplines explore religion—psychology, sociology, theology, even biology in some instances. Each has its own focus and interest The anthropological study of religion must be distinguished and distinguishable from these other approaches in some meaningful ways; it must do or offer something that the others do not. It must raise its own specific questions, come from its own specific perspective, and practice its own specific method.

Anthropology can best be thought of as the science of the diversity of humans, in their bodies and their behavior. Thus, the anthropology of religion will be the scientific investigation of the diversity of human religions. The questions it might ask include:

- What is the range of diversity of religion? How many different kinds of religions and religious beliefs, practices, institutions, etc., exist?
- What commonalities or even universals are there between religions? Are there any things that all religions do or believe?
- What relationships exist between various parts of any single religion, or between a religion and its social and even natural environment? Are there any regular patterns that we can discern across religions?

Anthropology, like every discipline, starts to address its questions from a unique disciplinary perspective. Studying religion biologically implies a biological perspective (emphasizing physical traits, perhaps most importantly the brain), while studying religion psychologically implies a psychological perspective (focusing on internal "mental" phenomena and processes). Anthropology, as we will see, has been open to and has profited from these and many other approaches. Still, it has developed some distinctive concepts, tools, and emphases. Central to anthropology is the concept of culture, the learned and shared ideas, feelings, behaviors, and products of those behaviors characteristic of any particular society. To study anything anthropologically—language, politics, gender roles, or eating habits—is, therefore, to look at it as learned and shared human behavior. Since it must be observable, anthropology also treats it as *public* behavior, not primarily something that is "private" or "in people's heads"; it is also not *initially* in people's heads but rather, since it is learned and acquired instead of innate, initially "outside" the individual in his or her social environment, In a word, culture is a *set of practices* in which humans engage and, among other things, about which they talk and in terms of which they act. Therefore, anthropology does not limit itself to texts or history (although it certainly considers these) but rather to culture lived by the actual members of the society.

This basic orientation leads to three aspects of the "anthropological perspective." First, anthropology proceeds through *comparative or crosscultural description.* Anthropology does not consider only our own society and culture or others similar to it. It begins from a premise of diversity and attempts to embrace the full range of diversity of whatever is under investigation. It aims to explore and describe each single culture or aspect of culture in rich detail. This tends to manifest in a process and a product. The process is *fieldwork,* traveling to and living among

the subjects of our study for long periods of time, observing and participating in their lives. Hence, the principal activity of anthropology is generally considered to be *participant observation.* The product is the "case study" or *ethnography,* an in-depth and up-close account of the ways of thinking and feeling and behaving of the people we study. Therefore, anthropological writings tend to be "particularistic," to describe the "small" or the "local" intensively. However, and fortunately, anthropology does not emphasize the local for its own sake; as Stanley Tambiah wrote, the point of ethnography is "to use the particular to say something about the general" (1970:1). This is an important and redefining approach because no particular group or culture is typical or representative of humanity—in fact, there is no such thing as "typical" or "representative" language or politics or religion—yet each sheds some light on the general processes by which culture works. Such an insight will be particularly valuable when we turn below to discussions of large-scale and even "world" phenomena, which we often take as typical or consistent across vast expanses of area and numbers of people. Rather, we will find that these phenomena vary widely from place to place—that all religion, like all politics, is local. Not only that, but we find that ideas, practices, and values differ *within* a society, that not all members of even the smallest societies act or think exactly alike. In other words, cultures are internally diverse, and culture (including religion) is more "distributed" than shared.

Second, anthropology adopts a position of *holism.* We start from the presumption that any culture is a (more or less) integrated "whole," with "parts" that operate in specific ways in relation to each other and that contribute to the operation of the whole. From our examinations of cultures, anthropology has identified four such areas of function in all cultures (although not always equally elaborated or formalized in each). These four "domains" of culture are economics, kinship, politics, and religion. Each makes its distinct contribution to society, but each is also "integrated" (although sometimes loosely) with all of the others, such that if we want to understand the religion of a society, we must also inevitably understand its political arrangements, its kinship system, and even its economic practices. These major cultural domains are also connected to, reflected in, and affected by more pervasive matters of language and gender. And, finally, all of these elements are located within some environmental context

Third, anthropology upholds the principle of *cultural relativism.* Cultural relativism grasps that each culture has its own "standards" of understanding and judging. Each occupies its own universe of meaning and value—of what is true, important, good, moral, normal, legal, and so on. It is patently obvious that the same behavior may be normal in one society, abnormal or criminal or nonexistent in another. We know that the same sound, gesture, symbol, or action may have an entirely different meaning (or no meaning) in another society; applying one society's standard of meaning or judgment to another is simply not very informative and may actually be misleading. This does not mean, of course, that we must accept or endorse or even like what other cultures do; however, we must understand them in their terms, or else we do not understand them at all. Maintaining a culturally relative perspective is profoundly important and profoundly difficult. Most of the time we do not think of our language or our political system or our gender roles or religion as "cultural" at all but rather as "what we do" or "what is done." We assume that all people wear clothes and marry monogamously, while in reality other peoples may not. And we tend to assume that all people believe in God (or "believe" at all) and say prayers and do rituals and worry about heaven and hell, while in reality other peoples may not. If we were to act on our taken-for-granted cultural assumptions, we would conclude that all people think and behave as we do and interrogate them for *their* versions of *our* concepts, practices, and values. We would be profoundly and dangerously wrong. A quick example will suffice. Imagine that a Warlpiri (Australian Aboriginal) person were to do nonrelativistic ("ethnocentric" or "culture-bound") research on your society. He or she would come to the task with a battery of culturally specific concepts, like *jukurrpa* (usually translated as Dreaming or Dreamtime). If that researcher were to ask what your notions of *jukurrpa* are, you would say none, since you have never heard that word before. If he or she were to interpret your actions or ideas through the concept of *jukurrpa,* he or she would surely get you wrong. And if he or she were to condemn you for lacking this key concept of theirs, it would surely be an inappropriate conclusion.

Cultural relativism is a consequence of crosscultural and holistic study. If we are to consider extremely diverse cultures and to understand them in relation to their web of ideas and practices, then we must be—indeed we *are* being—relativistic. This is critically important for two reasons. First, it reorients our notion of what anthropology is or does. As Talal Asad has suggested, anthropology is not just its method (fieldwork and participant observation) or its end product (ethnography); if it were, there are many things we could not accomplish, such as studying past cultures. Instead, he posits, the mission of anthropology is "the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time and space [and] the forms of life that articulate them, the power they release or disable" (2003: 17). Our job is precisely, then, to expose and comprehend a culture's embedded concepts, a people's view of reality.

This raises a second and major question about the use of the concepts of one culture (ours) to describe and understand the concepts of another culture. The problem is particularly thorny in the realm of religion. We necessarily approach religions with a vocabulary, a terminology; we must have some words to discuss things. However, the vocabulary we bring to the study is not a neutral, technical language but *the language of a particular religion,* from the Western perspective usually Christianity. Like the imaginary Warlpiri researcher, we may find ourselves imposing concepts on a culture or religion when they do not relate or even exist. We may ask the wrong questions, make the wrong assumptions, and arrive at the wrong conclusions. While we cannot eradicate the problem completely, we must be constantly on guard against it

It is difficult to remain relativistic in any area of human culture; for instance, people often judge other cultures for their marriage practices. When it comes to religion, that relativistic objectivity has been even harder to maintain. For example, James Frazer, the great turn-of-the-century scholar of comparative mythology, distanced himself from the myths he retold in *The Golden Bough* by testifying that "I look upon [them] not merely as false but as preposterous and absurd" (1958: vii). Of magic he concluded that "every single profession and claim put forward by the magician as such is false" (Frazer 1958: 53). The more recent and highly respected anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, writing on witchcraft among the Azande of Africa, asserted: "Witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist" (1937: 63). These men follow a long tradition, back to the Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote: "My duty is to report all that is said, but I am not obliged to believe it all" (Herodotus 1942: 556). Perhaps it is at least good when they are honest enough to admit their struggles with foreign ideas, although declarative statements like "Witches cannot exist" are not part of our anthropological trade. Ultimately, we might be chastened by the fact that an Azande anthropologist might preface his or her ethnography of Western religion with the disclaimer: "God, as the Christians conceive him, cannot exist."

Studying "Religion" Anthropologically

When we are studying religion, what exactly are we talking about? What is "religion" after all? This raises the issue of definition. Let us begin by establishing that definitions are not "real" things; they are human and, therefore, cultural things, not ones that you find in nature or pick off trees. A definition is not "true"; it is only as good as it is inclusive and productive. A narrow definition excludes phenomena that would be included within a wider definition. For instance, if we were to define religion as "belief in one god" we would be disqualifying as religions all of the belief systems that lack a single god, so very few religions would be said to exist. If we define it as "belief in god(s)," we would still be disqualifying the religions that say nothing at all about god(s). By imposing one view of religion on others, we would be defining them into nonreligion (i.e., "if you don't believe in a god, then you don't have a religion"). We are reminded of the character of Parson Thwackum in the Henry Fielding novel *The History of Tom Jones,* who said, "When I mention religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England." That is not an attitude that an anthropologist—or anyone else—can take.

The act of defining is an attempt to get at what is unique and distinct about the subject, the *sine qua non* or "without that, not" that makes it what it is. Probably no single definition of something as diverse

as religion could ever quite capture it. Rather, what we find is that various definitions emphasize certain aspects of the phenomenon or betray the theoretical orientations of their authors. For instance, one of the earliest anthropologists, E. B. Tylor, offered in his 1871 *Primitive Culture* what he considered to be the "minimal" or simplest possible definition of religion: "the belief in spiritual beings." A more compact definition can hardly be imagined, but it faces at least one problem: it introduces another term, "spiritual being," that begs for a definition. Others have subsequently offered more elaborate definitions:

> James Frazer: "a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life" (1958: 58–9).
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> William James: "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (1958: 34).
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> Émile Durkheim: "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (1965: 62).
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> Paul Radin: "it consists of two parts: the first an easily definable, if not precisely specific feeling; and the second certain acts, customs, beliefs, and conceptions associated with this feeling. The belief most inextricably connected with the specific feeling is a belief in spirits outside of man, conceived as more powerful than man and as controlling all those elements in life upon which he lay most stress" (1957:3).
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> Anthony Wallace: "a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations, of state in man and nature" (1966:107).
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> Sherry Ortner: "a metasystem that solves problems of meaning (or Problems of Meaning) generated in large part (though not entirely) by the social order, by grounding that order within a theoretically ultimate reality within which those problems will 'make sense'" (1978:152).

And perhaps Clifford Geertz provided the most commonly quoted definition: "(1) a system of symbols which act 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" (1973: 90). Meanwhile, Otto Rank thought it was the mysterious experience of the "holy"; Karl Marx thought it was false consciousness intended to complete the exploitation of the laborers, "the opiate of the masses"; Freud thought it was a projection of unconscious psychological processes; Lucien Levy-Bruhl thought (at least for a time) that it was a product of a "primitive mentality"; and so on.

Clearly, scholars do not agree precisely how to begin to talk about this thing called religion. They emphasize different aspects of it: Is it fundamentally belief and ideas, or ritual, or feeling, or morality, or community? Further, they introduce other terms in the definition that plunge us into a definitional spiral: What is "spirit," "divine," "belief," "sacred," or "holy"? Finally, does it refer to something real "out there" or merely something "inside us"?

The truth is that religion probably entails all of these things simultaneously, but disparately for different religions. Ritual, for instance, is certainly a key element of religion, although not all religions valorize or elaborate it equally. Ideas and concepts are universal aspects of religion, although not all religions have the same concepts or necessarily very conscious and consistent ones. Language or verbal action, including "myth," is important, as is "morality" or notions of good and bad behavior, and, of course, community. But then rituals and ideas and verbal actions and morals and communities exist apart from religion too; they are not essentially religious issues. What makes religion "religious"?

It would be foolish and unnecessary to attempt to adjudicate between the definitions of religion. Each highlights a piece of the puzzle. Even more, since there is no "true" definition, it would be a waste of time. Instead, we want to mark out an approach to religion that distinguishes it from other human endeavors and thought systems and yet connects it to them. What unifies religion with other social acts and organizations is the physical/ritualistic and verbal behaviors, the concerns with good or correct action, the desire to achieve certain goals or effects, and the establishment and perpetuation of communities. What distinguishes religion is the object or focus of these actions, namely,

nonhuman and typically "super" human being(s) and/or force(s) with which humans are understood to be in relation—a recognizably "social" relation—that is mutually effective. As Robin Horton has expressed it:

> In every situation commonly labeled religious we are dealing with action directed towards objects which are believed to respond in terms of certain categories—in our own culture those of purpose, intelligence, and emotion—which are also the distinctive categories for the description of human action. The application of these categories leads us to say that such objects are "personified." The relationship between human beings and religious objects can be further defined as governed by certain ideas of patterning and obligation such as characterize relationships among human beings. In short, Religion can be looked upon as an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society. And for completeness' sake, we should perhaps add the rider that this extension must be one in which human beings involved see themselves in a dependent position vis-à-vis their nonhuman alters.
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> (1960: 211)

That is to say, religion is an extrapolation of culture—potentially, and often enough actually, culture "to the ultimate."

The key for us is that religious being(s) and/or force(s) are almost universally "social," with the qualities of "persons" or at least "agents" of some sort. If they were not, how would we make sense of them, and what would we do with/about them? In other words, humans see themselves, in a religious context, as occupying a certain kind of relationship with being(s) and/or force(s) which we can rightly and only call a *social relationship.* It is a relationship of communication, intention, reciprocity, respect, avoidance, control, etc. The being(s) and/or force(s) *are like us* in some ways, despite the fact that they are greatly unlike us in others. They may have a language (usually ours), personality or intentionality, desires and interests and likes and dislikes; they may "live" in their own social arrangements; and they can be approached and influenced. This takes us to the real significance of religion as a cultural factor and its real distinction from the other domains of culture. Economics, kinship, politics—these are all about people. The "objects" or players in religion are different, but they are not so different. They are the nonhuman: the dead ancestors, or "spirits" of plants or animals or natural objects (the sun and the moon), or natural forces (the wind and the rain), or "gods," or impersonal supernatural forces like mana or chi. Yet they interact with us. *They are social, because they are part of society.*

In other words, religion is the discourse, the language and practice, or the means by which human society and culture is extended to include the nonhuman. This is not making any truth claims about what being(s) and/or force(s) actually exist or what traits they possess. It simply clarifies that, for the member of the religious community, the being(s) and/or force(s) that they "believe in" are part of their real and social world. A professor of mine once told a story of an informant who, when asked if all rocks and trees are people, answered, "No, but some are." Another professor told a story of going with a Native American spiritual leader to gather stones for a ceremony; asked how he would know which stones to gather, the spiritual leader responded, "The stones will tell me."

The evidence of the "socialization," the "culturization," of the nonhuman is clear when you consider how humans talk about religious beings and forces. In Christianity, God is the father—a kinship term. Australian Aboriginals speak of the kangaroo-grandfather or the moon-mother, in terms very similar to most societies. In fact, for them and many others, their religious beings are ancestors, sometimes even literally part-human and part-animal or part-plant. The kangaroo-grandfather may have been an actual kangaroo-man. Furthermore, religious being(s) and/or force(s) often have temperaments and tastes like people: Again, the Judeo-Christian God, especially in the Torah/Old Testament, enjoys the smell of cooking meat, and he is jealous and angry. The same God in the New Testament experiences love but also justice and vengeance—all human traits. In whatever religious tradition, the beings or forces almost always have personalities—they are friendly, hostile, indifferent deceptive, or what have you. Animals are believed to talk, plants to think, rocks and stars to feel. But they are human-like. Indeed, religion makes part or all (depending on the tradition) of the nonhuman world human—participants in the norms and values and meanings of culture.

Assuming that we have some general and workable idea of what religion is and what we will be studying, perhaps it is more profitable to talk about what religion *does*. So we can ask, what is the function of religion? Why do humans have such a thing, and what does it do for them? Of course, a member might answer that we have religion because it is "true" and because we are the kinds of beings who can perceive or receive the truth. This is not very helpful from an anthropological point of view, especially since different humans have perceived or received such different truths across time and space. No doubt there is something unique about humans that makes it possible (and necessary?) for us to have religious notions, but let us set aside questions of "truth" and concentrate on social and cultural nature and functions of religion, which include:

1. Filling individual needs, especially psychological or emotional needs. Religion provides comfort, hope, perhaps love, definitely a sense of control, and relief from fear and despair.

2. Explanation, especially of origins or causes. Humans wonder why things are as they are. How did the world start? How did humans start? How did society start? Most religions not only explain cosmogony (the creation of the world) but also the origin of specific cultural institutions, like marriage, language, technology, politics, and the like. Religions also explain why things happen in the present: Why do we get sick? Why do bad things happen to us? Why do we die? In some societies, much, if not all, of sickness and misfortune is attributed to "spiritual" rather than natural causes.

3. Source of rules and norms. Continuing with this idea, religion can provide the answer to where the traditions and laws of the society came from. All religions contain some element of "order-establishment" or "culture-founding." This is the *charter* function of religion: It acts as the "charter" or guideline or authority by which we organize ourselves in particular ways and follow particular standards. Why do we practice monogamy? Because a religious being or precedent says to, or because the first humans did, etc. Why do other societies practice polygamy? Perhaps because their religious being or precedent (say, the ancestor or founder) said it or did it.

4. Source of "ultimate sanctions." Religion is, among other things, a means of social control. Even in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a large part of the religion is about what we should do, how we should live. Politics and even kinship provide a measure of this control. However, the limitation of political social control is its scope: Human agents of social control cannot be everywhere and cannot see everything, and the rewards and punishments they can mete out are finite. For instance, they cannot continue to reward or punish you after you die. But religious "sanctions" can be much more extensive, exquisite, and enduring. In other words, religious being(s) and/or force(s) not only make the rules but enforce them too.

5. Solution of immediate problems. If religion is the "cause" of a variety of human ills, then religion can be the solution as well. If we are sick or distressed, are the beings or forces angry with us? What should we do about it? If there is an important social or political decision to make (say, going to war), is there a way to discover the preferences and plans of the beings and forces—to "read their mind"? Can we ask them for favors, give them gifts, or do anything at all to influence their actions and intentions?

6. Fill "needs of society." In some ways, and for some anthropologists, society can be seen as nothing more than an aggregate of individuals; individuals are "real" while society is "conceptual," even imaginary. Therefore, the "needs of society" would only be the cumulative needs of individuals. However, it is also possible to view society as a phenomenon in its own right, with its own higher-level needs. Certainly, not everything that a religion teaches or practices is good for every individual: Human sacrifice is not about fulfilling the needs of sacrificial victims. Nor does religion always soothe individual fears and anxieties; for instance, the belief in a punitive afterlife may cause people to fear more, and concerns about proper conduct of rituals can cause anxiety. However, belief in a punitive afterlife can cause people to obey norms, which is good for society. The primary need of society, beyond the needs of individuals, is integration, cohesion, and perpetuation, and religion can provide an important "glue" toward that end.

"Studying" Religion Anthropologically

Anthropology as a science has carved out for itself a territory to investigate, and that territory includes all of human behavior in its dazzling and bedeviling diversity. Religion falls within that territory. But what precisely does anthropology hope to accomplish? What does it mean to "study" religion, or anything else, from an anthropological or any scientific point of view? The one thing it does not mean is to *acquire* a religion, to *specialize* in one, to become a master or functionary of one. Candidates for the priesthood "study religion," as do theologians, but their interests are to "take up" a religion or to believe more deeply in one or to defend one, which cannot be the interest of anthropology. Anthropology is not apologetics. What anthropology, like any other science, ultimately wants to do with its chosen subject matter is to *explain* it.

To "explain" religion or any other social or physical phenomenon is to construct a model of it, to identify processes or mechanisms at work in it, and/or to give reasons for it. As an example, some people might study dogs: they get to know all the different kinds of dogs and their bodily and behavioral characteristics. That is a worthwhile pursuit but ends up with a mere catalog of dog details; in essence, it allows them to answer the question, "What is a dog?" What are the things that make a dog a dog, and how many different kinds of dogs are there? That is the descriptive agenda. However, if they want to go deeper, they may desire to explain dogs. This would be a matter of asking a very different kind of question—not "What is a dog?" but "Why is a dog?"

The anthropological study of religion, which is a scientific study, is similar. We can describe and catalog religions, but at some point we want to advance to explanation; no longer content with definitions ("What is religion?") or crosscultural descriptions ("How many kinds of religion are there?"), we move on to the question "Why is religion?" One obvious answer is "Because it is true" or "Because God/the gods put it in us." These are answers that anthropology or science in general cannot be content with. Rather, anthropological, or any scientific, explanations of religion or anything else explain it in terms *of something else.* What that "something else" might be varies, but fundamentally the process of explaining anything is giving a reason for it in terms of something other than itself—finding its foundation or its function outside of itself.

The final goal or form of scientific explanation is a theory. A theory orients us to the data in a particular way: What are the most important or irreducible or universal elements to look for, what relationship are they in with each other, and how do they interact to produce the facts under investigation? A theory ought to offer us a model with some specific mechanisms or processes that give rise and shape to the subject of inquiry; it also ought to make some predictions which are testable in some way, allowing us potentially to verify or falsify it. It should, therefore, offer the possibility of using it to acquire further knowledge or understanding. Anthropologists and other scholars of religion have offered a variety of theoretical perspectives, each productive and each limited in its own way. No single theoretical perspective, like no single definition, can probably ever capture the entire essence or nature of religion. Above all, we should avoid reductionism, the attitude that a phenomenon like religion can be explained in terms of ("reduced to") a single nonreligious cause or basis, whether that cause or basis is psychological, biological, or social. At the same time, we cannot help but notice that scientific/anthropological theories of religion find the "reason" or explanation for religion in nonreligion.

Study Question

What makes the anthropological study of religion different from that of other fields?

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www.aaanet.org/sections/sar/index.html

Society for the Anthropology of Religion, a section of the American Anthropological Association.