Studying religion anthropologically

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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 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.

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**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.

Case study 1.1

The problem of religious language

A society’s values and meanings are intimately bound to and expressed in its language, which is much more than a set of names for things; it is, especially in the religious context, a set of concepts and relationships and of judgments and evaluations on them. In a religion like Christianity, the word “god” has a very specific meaning which may or may not be shared by other religions that have a term or name for a high spiritual power. Many religions have a word/concept that we might translate as “god” but which has very different denotations and connotations. And many religions do not have any term like “god” at all—because they do not have any concept like “god” at all. Likewise, familiar concepts of “heaven” or “hell” or “sin” or “soul” may not be found in other societies, or they may have very different meanings in those societies.

In the study of religion, Western scholars have deployed an array of supposedly analytical terms, such as “myth” and “ritual” and “prayer” and “worship” and even “spiritual” and “supernatural” and “belief” and “religion” itself. Despite our presumption that these words are analytically useful terms, we continually find that

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they are not. They are concepts or categories which do not always exist or always exist in the same form in all cultures and religions. For instance, we might call a religion's verbal behavior “prayer” when they call it something else. We might be tempted to attribute some action to “magic” or “fear of Hell” when they lack those concepts completely. In doing so, we may profoundly distort the indigenous ideas and behaviors, forcing the foreign into the familiar or, oppositely, causing us to condemn them for “doing it wrong” or “lacking the idea/term” that we think they ought to have.

So we must be very circumspect about the language that we use to describe another society’s religion. Not only all of the familiar and popular terms, but also our professional categories, must be applied cautiously, if at all. And this goes not only for our own English-language terms but, as the case above showed, terms borrowed from other languages and religions that have entered the professional lexicon. Among these are words and concepts like “shaman” (originally taken from Tungus religion), “totem” (from Ojibwa), and “taboo” (from Polynesia). This is not to say that we cannot use our or any language to talk about remote and exotic things but that we must be ever-vigilant about the appropriateness of doing so. We cannot help, and will to an extent continue in this book, speaking of “myth” and “ritual,” and so on, but we must remain aware that these terms are more or less appropriate in any particular circumstance, and that we may need to remind ourselves of the specific indigenous view of things that is missed or miscast by assuming that our terms and concepts fit all cases.

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).

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).

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).

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).

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).

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 Lévy-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 consistent 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.

(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 so, 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 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.

Pre-scientific approaches/apologetics

With the exception of a few ancient Greek philosophers, the premodern approach to religion tended to involve not explaining religion but explaining why religion is true. This is the realm of apologetics, the systematic argumentative defense of a particular religion. While apologetics is an interesting subject in its own right, it is not “anthropological” in any sense and will not be taken up here; besides, the very point of the apologetic exercise is not to explain one’s religion but rather to prove it. Any religion can, and many religions do, engage in this mutually exclusive effort.

As in all areas of thought, inquiry begins when certainty ends, so it was with the first ancient “doubters” or skeptics that theorizing about religion commenced. Xenophanes in the fifth century BCE was among the first to notice religious diversity and the relation between a religion and its society. He wrote:

Ethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair, Thracians have gods with gray eyes and red hair [. . .] If oxen or lions had hands which enabled them to draw and paint pictures as men do, they would portray their gods as having bodies like their own; horses would portray them as horses, and oxen as oxen.

(quoted in Wheelwright 1966: 33)

Herodotus the historian extended this “comparative method,” suggesting that the various tribal and national gods he encountered were all local names for the same universal deities—his so-called “equivalence of gods” principle. Thus, he concluded, the Egyptian god Horus is the same god as the Greek Apollo, and the Egyptian Osiris is the same as Dionysus. This led him naturally to the notion of cultural borrowing and diffusion to explain the recurrence of the same beliefs in disparate locations. In the later skeptical or Hellenistic era, Euhemerus developed this questioning into a nearly explicit humanistic theory of religion, in which he posited that the gods were merely deified human ancestors or leaders. There is no doubt that this accurately describes at least some premodern (and sometimes even modern) cases, as when pharaohs were deified in their own lifetimes or when deceased Mayan kings were left sitting on their thrones, allegedly still issuing orders. Even today, the “cult of personality” of some living leaders and the reverence they receive after death (e.g., placing Lenin’s corpse in a clear glass sarcophagus in the former Soviet Union for display) suggest a “sacred” attitude toward very powerful humans.
Another premodern, in particular medieval, approach to religion—one that carried over strongly into the modern era—was the comparative or classificatory approach. For instance, the Muslim writer Shahrastani organized religions (not including traditional tribal ones) into four classes: Islam, the literary religions or “religions of the book” (Judaism and Christianity), the quasi-literary religions (e.g., Zoroastrianism and Manichaecism), and the philosophical religions (Buddhism and Hinduism—failing to note, apparently, the expansive literature of these faiths, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and Sutras). Roger Bacon in thirteenth-century Europe also developed a typology, including pagans, idol-worshippers (such as Buddhists and polytheists), Mongols, Muslims, Jews, and, of course, Christians. These systems of classification do not have much, if any, explanatory value, and they tend to be very judgmental and ethnocentric, but at least they were taking other religions seriously after a fashion.

**Historical/evolutionist theories**

Even some of the ancient “theories” of religion had a historical or evolutionist flavor; diffusion is a historical process, and Herodotus reiterated the even older Homeric notion of a series of historical “ages” in culture and religion, from the “golden” age of gods to the “silver” age of heroes to the “iron” age of normal humans, each inferior to its predecessor. The works of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx reinforced the pattern of historical, “progressive” analysis. Early in the nineteenth century, the philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) proposed a comprehensive historical system progressing from the age of religion to the age of philosophy to the final age of science, in which each phase is a clearer step in self-knowledge of the Universal Spirit. The early sociologist Auguste Comte (1798–1857) described the same three-stage history by the names of theology, metaphysics, and science or positivism. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), a proponent of social Darwinism, echoed this idea in a more down-to-earth version but still with science eventually replacing religion and superstition. Early anthropologists like E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) also had a determined evolutionist streak in their work. Finding animism or “nature worship” to be the first phase of religion, Tylor then traced the development to polytheism and finally monotheism (finding, predictably, that his own form of faith is the “highest”).

Another historical approach in anthropology was diffusionism, not without its ancient precedents like Herodotus. Fritz Grabner (1877–1934), Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), and G. Elliot Smith (1871–1937) represented this tradition in various versions. All diffusionists traced the diversity of the world’s religions back to a few—or in Smith’s case, one (ancient Egypt)—sources; the common origin explained the similarities, and the subsequent historical development of each independent spin-off explained the differences.
Psychological theories

Some of the earliest “modern” theories of religion were psychological in nature, that is, appealing or referring in some way to the thought or experience of the individual. However, this appeal could differ profoundly. Some forms of psychological theory of religion include emotionalist, psychoanalytic, intellectualist, “primitive mentality,” Lévi-Straussian structuralist, and neurological.

Emotionalist theories

Many scholars of religion emphasized the emotional quality as its most distinguishing and driving feature. Which particular emotion they emphasized varied. For the seventeenth-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, it was fear; bad things happened to people beyond their understanding or control, so religion was invented to assuage unavoidable fears. Although writing long before anthropology had developed, he made the relativistic observation that out of this universal emotion grew such religious diversity that peoples could hardly recognize let alone accept the religions of others.

Another famous focus for emotionalist theory is the experience of “awe” or “wonder,” advanced by Max Müller (1823–1900) and Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Müller addressed himself to the awareness of “the divine” or “the infinite,” expressed through conventional media like the sun or the moon or the seasons and so on. In his 1856 Comparative Mythology he argued that traditional societies had a feeling of the vastness and power of the cosmos but could only express their feelings in poetic symbolism incorporating natural objects; later, they forgot or confused their poetry with literal fact, resulting in religious belief. In other words, religion starts with overwhelming emotion and ends with linguistic error. This led him to characterize religion as “a disease of language.” For Otto, author of The Idea of the Holy (1917), the religious emotions—both fear and fascination, love and dread—are a response to the “transcendent,” the overwhelming power of that which is outside humans, the Holy which is “wholly other.” The experience is primary, and religious ideas and practices follow to make sense of it and to harness it in some way.

Case study 1.2

The “disease of language”: spirit

To illustrate what Müller meant by religion being a corruption of language, we can consider one of the key religious concepts of Western society. The crucial concept of “spirit” derives etymologically from the Latin word spiritus or “breath.” Breath is present in life and absent in death. Breath is a life force. Breath, therefore, is an apt

continued
metaphor for life or vitality; we see it in many English words, like “inspire” (breathe in life/vitality), “expire” (breathe out or lose life/vitality), and so on. However, the metaphor can be taken literally and reified: Breath becomes a “thing,” not a process of a living body. Breath or spirit comes to be seen as separate and distinct—even detachable—from the body, as a separate source or essence of life, leading in the most extreme case to a Cartesian-type dualism of (dead) body and (living) spirit.

Breath is a powerful and recurring metaphor across cultures. In the Hebrew of the Torah/Old Testament, ruah or breath was used to stand for life or spirit, and Greek pneuma carried some of the same connotations. Other metaphors also occur in various traditions: Blood is a common image, as is its instrument, the heart. Even modern English-speakers talk of someone with passion being “hot-blooded” or someone with courage having “a lot of heart.” Different cultures locate various emotions or qualities in various body parts or organs and sometimes proceed to concretize those emotions or qualities as distinct “things.” The furthest instance would be not only to reify but deify such qualities, as in a “demon of anger” or a “goddess of love.”

In another vein, the “functionalist” theory of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) held that religious beliefs and institutions exist and function to fill the needs of individual humans, primarily psychological needs. Religion, as in his famous account of ritual in the Trobriand Islands, came into play when individuals needed a feeling of reassurance, control, and, of course, relief from fear; in other situations, where there was little threat or a fair chance of practical success, people did not resort to religion but focused their efforts on “practical” concerns.

Psychoanalytic theory

A special type of theory is that of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who related or even reduced religion to a mental process, quite literally a “symptom” or manifestation of our mind. For Freud, all humans shared a common set of unconscious drives and instincts. These drives and instincts, many of them antisocial and most of them asocial in a way, must and will be expressed. However, both physical and social reality force us to curb, control, direct, sublimate, and in some cases completely deny or “repress” our nature—to push or hold things down into the unconscious. In particular, Freud suggested in Totem and Taboo (1913) that a scene had been played out in real history in which men acted on their drive to kill their father and take possession of his women (repeated in the infamous Oedipus complex, which he thought was part of the deep psychology of all males); subsequently, out of guilt, they reified or deified the dead father, making him an object of veneration and authority—perhaps more powerful dead than alive. The dead but divine father was both the first god and the first conscience or “superego.” From that experience
(literal or mythical) flowed a complex of “religious” beliefs and practices like the incest taboo, totemism, sacrifice, propitiation of spirits, and so on.

Even more basically, religion, like all behavior (including the behavior of “high culture” like art and, of course, dreams) is symptom and neurosis in the Freudian view. Our unconscious, instinctive nature must and will come out, but the ways that it can come out are circumscribed by society. So, our unconscious mind often substitutes an (unacceptable) expression with another (more acceptable) one. Very human kinds of psychological and social dramas, like family dynamics, are played out in the “spiritual” realm, being essentially symbols for the “real” processes in our minds and lives. The living flesh-and-blood father is the prototype of the god, with his power to judge and punish. The child, unable to resist or even respond, becomes the model for the believer, putting his or her faith in the all-powerful adult. Religion, in this interpretation, is “an infantile obsessional neurosis” and one that Freud hoped we would grow out of as we understood and gained control over our own lives and drives (as evinced by his 1927 book *The Future of an Illusion*).

**Intellectualist theories**

Other students of comparative religion have downplayed the emotional or “feeling” part and highlighted the explanatory or “thinking” function. In the intellectualist tradition, religion exists as or arises from question-asking or problem-solving. For instance, while Tylor’s framework was evolutionist, his attitude was intellectualist. Primitive humans, he reasoned, had certain experiences that did not make sense to them, such as dreams, visions and hallucinations, and the difference between living and dead beings. To explain these uncanny phenomena, they invented an invisible, nonmortal, detachable part of the self called the soul or spirit. From there, other concepts and behaviors would suggest themselves, such as cults of the dead and propitiation of spirits, etc.

James Frazer (1854–1941) also took an intellectualist if not quite “rationalist” stand in regard to religion. In fact, his contribution was that religion is an answer to a question or problem, just not a rational answer. He too holds a “developmental” or “historical” opinion about religion, except that religion is not, in his view, the first step in the process. Before there was religion, he says, there was magic, which is a kind of faulty reasoning, a brand of pseudoscience. People want to know what causes what, or what they can do to cause or prevent what. Primitive humans had the right general idea—cause and effect—but they got the causes all wrong, indulging in magic instead of effective causal behavior. But still, magic is *technique*, a kind of “technology.” When magic failed, humans then attributed events to intelligent, willful sources, namely spiritual beings. Thus the age of genuine religion begins.

Malinowski also noted the “prescientific” but rational nature of magic, making the distinction between magic and religion. Both magic and religion he linked to emotional needs, as we saw. However, magic is more purely goal-oriented or “instrumental,” whereas religion has no specific “goal” but is more social or moral in nature. Furthermore, no human, even a “primitive” human, is so backward as to rely...
exclusively on magic (or religion) to get a job done; while they may pray or perform rituals over their crops, they also plant seeds. So magic is like one tool in the individual’s practical toolkit rather than a comprehensive way of life.

**Primitive mentality versus psychic unity**

These contrary notions fall within the intellectualist school, but they are unique enough to deserve a separate comment. One of the very first, foundational thoughts in modern anthropology was Adolf Bastian’s (1826–1905) concept of *elementargedanken* or “elementary ideas.” All humans, he suggested, share a certain set of basic, fundamental ideas or experiences (what Carl Gustav Jung would later call “archetypes”). All humans are thus mentally the same; there is no profound and unbridgeable difference between “primitive” and “modern” or “religious” and “scientific” humans. There is, in other words, a common “psychic unity” of humanity. What does differ is the local expression or formulation of these elementary ideas, which he called *volkergedanken* or folk ideas or ethnic ideas. Thus, while all humans may have some idea of a transcendent power or a survival after death, the particular forms that these ideas take may and will vary from place to place and from time to time. Religious diversity then was to be examined not for the “surface variation” but for the deeper and more universal patterns and truths that were expressed in them.

The exact opposite position was formulated by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), who stated that the thoughts and beliefs of “primitive” people came from a completely different way of thinking than that of modern people. We moderns, he argued, are logical, especially when it comes to the “law of exclusion”: Something cannot be itself and something else at the same time. Primitives, however, know nothing of this. Instead, they are “prelogical,” operating on the “law of participation,” which allows different or even contradictory things to coexist or coalesce simultaneously. For instance, a statue could be a statue and a god all at once, or a being could be a human and an animal at the same time. If this analysis is true, then there is a deep gulf between them and us; however, even he himself disavowed it in his lifetime, and it is easy to see that “primitives” are not always prelogical (they may perform hunting rituals, but they sharpen their spears too) and that “moderns” are not always logical (they may use jet planes and cell phones but still believe that a wafer is simultaneously a human body—the well-known doctrine of the transubstantiation, that the Catholic communion wafer literally “becomes” flesh). We will return to the discussion of mental dualism in Chapter 3.

**Lévi-Straussian structuralism**

Structuralism generally refers to the view that the meaning or the functioning of a phenomenon depends less on the nature of its individual “bits” than the relationships between those bits. Language is perhaps the paradigm of a structural system, in which the meaning of a word is determined by its place in an array of words, and the meaning of a sentence is determined by its place in an array of sentences. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) revolutionized linguistics with this structuralist approach,
emphasizing the “grammar” or transformational rules which allowed people who have mastered the general rules of language (langue in his terminology) to produce specific acts of speech (parole).

Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908) was hugely influential in applying this grammatical approach to religion, especially mythology. Providing anthropology with a “method” to analyze and interpret myths, he suggests that the symbols and events in myth can only be understood as utterances within a grammar or pattern of transformations; as he writes in The Savage Mind, religious facts such as myths or totems “are codes suitable for conveying messages which can be transposed into other codes, and for expressing messages received by means of different codes in terms of their own system” (1966: 75–6). Thus, the analysis of myths and other religious facts involves the discovery of the underlying relationships between the units or details of the whole.

While all versions of structuralism claim something similar, Lévi-Strauss’s version goes further, which is why it is included in our discussion of psychological theories. He asserts that at the foundation of mythical transformations is the nature of the human mind itself, which operates on binary grounds. The human mind classifies things into pairs, such as nature/culture, male/female, alive/dead, raw/cooked, and so forth. The mind also seeks to resolve and unify these binary contradictions, but since such resolution is not permanent if even possible, humans generate repeated, different, yet recognizably similar attempts to do so. Thus, any myth, for instance, will appear to be struggling with the same issues over and over. Add to this Lévi-Strauss’s suggestion that the mind is a bricoleur (1966: 20–1) or playful creator of meaning and manifestation, and we see the religious results: an ongoing attempt to examine basic existential themes in multiple ways through “analogies and comparisons,” metaphors and poetry. We will return to this theory in our discussion of myth in Chapter 4.

Neurological theories

Where psychology meets neuroscience, there is an assortment of approaches to religion that emphasize the physical substrate that makes belief possible if not necessary. This has sometimes taken the form of talk about a “god spot” in the brain, an area or structure that is “tuned” or “designed” for religious functioning. Whether the brain makes the religion or the religion makes the brain (that is, supernatural beings or forces arranged our brain as a “receiver” for spiritual “transmissions”) is one dispute.

A popular study by Newberg, d’Aquili, and Rause (2002) examined mystics in the midst of their practices and identified measurable differences in their brains in and out of mystical states, with differing levels of activity in the left temporal lobe during meditation. Their conclusion was that, since ostensibly brains react to the external world, the brain-activity of adepts was evidence of their experience of some real external phenomenon or power. Others, such as Michael Persinger (1987), have used medical technology to assert quite the opposite: by stimulating certain areas of the brain with an electrical device, Persinger has been able to generate “religious
experience” in subjects, leading him to conclude that religion is a result of the brain’s own activity rather than of some reality outside of the brain. It has also been clinically observed that patients who suffer from left-hemisphere epileptic seizures often develop obsessive interest in religious matters, which lasts long after the actual brain events.

Finally, Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988) have proposed another neurological basis of religious notions and motifs in what they refer to as “entoptic” images. These are the kinds of patterns that are produced spontaneously by the nature of the human eye and nervous system, consisting of geometric forms like dots, lines, zigzags, and so on. These patterns and shapes are commonly reported by people in trance and other altered mental states and represented in the art of traditional societies, such as rock paintings. These physiological experiences, then, would have been interpreted as “supernatural” in origin and meaning and attributed with significance and power beyond their organic sources.

Social theories

Not all scholars of religion did or do turn to the individual or the inner workings of the mind to interpret it. They note that, while religion may have some root or origin in the brain/mind, it is a public or social phenomenon which cannot be explained in psychological and subjective terms alone; further, many individuals never have a “religious experience” at all. Such scholars, anthropologists among them, turn to an “external” and more social style of explanation. As a school of thought, social theories emphasize the role of groups and institutions, of community, and/or morality, which were often conspicuously lacking in the previous theories.

Functionalism

Much of the pioneering work on the sociology of religion was done not by anthropologists but by classicists studying ancient Greek, Roman, and Hebrew sources. (This was not unproblematic work, as it was not popular to treat the Christian Bible as just another document to be analyzed scientifically.) One brave soul was W. Robertson Smith (1846–94), who lost a teaching job for searching for the origins of Old Testament/Torah rituals and beliefs. His discovery was that ancient peoples had gods and religions as peoples, that is, that religious beliefs and practices had “national” or “tribal” or “ethnic” sources. Each group had its own god(s), which, as Xenophanes noticed 2,500 years earlier, resembled the people of the group and legimated the ways of the group. In fact, the essence of religion, Smith decided, was the communal ritual, a social act by definition. Explicit “doctrine” or creed came later as an explanation for the rituals, but the bedrock of religion was social behavior and, even more so, the social group that engages in the behavior.

The most influential early sociologist, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), took this idea and developed it extensively, particularly in his groundbreaking 1915 book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. He asked the question, What is most basic in
religion? If we take away every other layer and accouterment, what is left? His answer, as we saw in the definitions above, was an irreducible dichotomy between the “sacred” and the “profane.” The sacred is the special, powerful, set-apart realm—the one that we dare not touch or approach carelessly, if at all. The profane is the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday realm—the one that we dwell in most of the time but that would disrespect or corrupt the sacred by contact. But where could such a notion as “the sacred” come from? Other analysts would point to the psychology of awe and wonder, but Durkheim pointed to the sociology of the group—literally. What is it that is more powerful than the individual, that exists before the individual, that survives past the individual, and upon which the individual depends? It is the social group: “this power exists, it is society” (Durkheim 1965: 257). The group is a “social fact” and an important one. There is the society as a whole, and within it the family and the clan and the village and other concrete social aggregates. These social realities are symbolized, with a name or a banner or a “totem.” They have their stories, their songs, their designs, their dances. They have their god(s). As he reasoned, “The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can therefore be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem” (Durkheim 1965: 236). In other words, when the group celebrates or worships its spirits or gods, it is really symbolizing or representing its society to itself.

But tribal, social religion does more than celebrate; it creates. The main issue is social integration and cohesion—the creation and perpetuation of the group as a group. This is accomplished in two ways. The first is the establishment of a moral community—a group of people who share common norms, values, and morals. Religion not only tells you what to worship and how to make it rain but what kind of person to be and what the correct behaviors are in your group. By recognizing common rules and authorities, individuals become a community, with shared identity and shared interests. The second means of achieving group cohesion is through the effectiveness of ritual. This communal activity not only gives members ideas and beliefs in common, but it operates at a lower and more instinctive level as well through a psychological power he called “effervescence.”

When they are together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. The initial impulse thus proceeds, growing as it goes, as an avalanche grows in its advance. And as such active passions so free from all control could not fail to burst out, on every side one sees nothing but violent gestures, cries, veritable howls, and deafening noises of every sort, which aid in intensifying still more the state of mind which they manifest [. . .] So it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born.

(Durkheim 1965: 247)
Whether or not this is an accurate portrayal of traditional ritual (and in many ways it is not), it does show a keen awareness of the power of collective action. It is well established that human beings are more excitable and suggestible in groups than individually, and the more active the group the greater the effect.

**Historical materialism**

One of the dominant perspectives on religion over the past century and a half has been that of Karl Marx (1818–83). His theory, identified most closely with political economy and the ideology of communism, is actually a theory of social structure and social change. Basically, his argument is that the driving force, the motor, of society and culture is not ideas but activity or practice. He is talking about the way that humans relate to the world through their work or labor—the ways that we express and “objectify” ourselves in our productions—and through the social relationships in which they organize themselves to perform that work.

The central concepts in historical materialism are “mode of production” and “relations of production.” However, Marx also recognizes that a society is not a simple, homogeneous thing but is composed of various subgroups with different positions in the relations of production—different roles to play, different perspectives on the system, different interests, and different power. He calls these subgroups “classes.” In class-differentiated societies, ordinarily one class has more control over the mode and relations of production than the other(s). The “upper class” is not only richer and more powerful, but it is also dominant in ideas and values. As he concludes, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of the dominant group of the society, not least because that group controls not only the “economy” but also the educational system, whatever forms of “media” exist, and the institutions of society, including the religion.

Thus, religion, he opines, reflects the on-the-ground realities of social life. If the economy and the politics are very centralized, then religion will be centralized too, with one or at most a few gods that rule everything. However, religion is more than reflection; it is also legitimation. That is, people in the society—especially those who are not in the upper class—may ask why they should participate in it. What is the benefit to them? Religion provides the answer, by setting up and enforcing a view of the world that explains and authorizes the current social arrangement. Perhaps the purest version of this idea is the “divine right of kings” conception from European history, which “proved” that the contemporary political system was correct; the traditional Chinese “mandate of heaven” accomplished the same purpose. In all societies, in the “charter” function mentioned above, religion helps to account for why things are the way they are and why we should go along with it. However, religion does not always accurately represent society; it can misrepresent and even mystify social relations. Leaders may intentionally foster religious views that prop up their power and prevent challenges. This is why Marx called religion an “opiate of the masses” and the “heart of a heartless world.” This is also why Marx, like Freud, hoped and expected that religion would go away.
A variation on the materialist perspective can be found in the work of Marvin Harris. In such books as *Cow, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* (1974), he argues that religious practices like cow worship in India or pig aversion in Judaism can be based on immediate material—namely, economic and environmental—causes. In India, cows are worth more alive than dead, so religion created an aura of supernatural significance around them to encourage people to preserve them. In the desert of Israel, pigs were economically unviable, so the same supernatural aura castigated them. In whatever case, a practical, nonspiritual reason for the belief or behavior can be found, which is then wrapped in a shroud of religious meaning as a form of legitimation and compulsion.

**Structural functionalism**

Within professional anthropology, functionalism under the influence of Malinowski was the first significant theory of culture and of religion. However, Malinowski’s version of functionalism as usually perceived is not a very social theory; each individual could theoretically invent his or her own unique language, religion, or eating utensils to get the practical job done (we will see in Chapter 4 that this is hardly the whole of Malinowski’s approach to religion). But individuals do not (mostly) invent their own solutions to life’s problems; they learn and inherit the solutions of their ancestors and peers.

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) was the main rival for anthropological theory in the first part of the twentieth century. He agreed that function was a central issue but not the function that Malinowski and the “individualists” promoted. Rather, Radcliffe-Brown emphasized the needs of the group or of society. But what needs could society have other than the cumulative needs of its constituent members? The answer is, as Durkheim pointed out, integration and cohesion. It is entirely possible for every individual to be well fed and relieved from fear but for society to collapse or atomize. Radcliffe-Brown, on the other hand, saw society and its groups and institutions as having their own needs and, therefore, perceived the function of any item of culture or society to be “the contribution that they make to the formation and maintenance of a social order” (1965: 154).

Structural functionalism insists that religion plays its most important role in the creation and maintenance of the group and society, not the comfort of the individual. One argument for this perspective is that without social maintenance society can come to an end, endangering the lives of all the individual members. So, as Durkheim stated, religion gives members of society a common identity, activity, interest, and destiny. It makes one out of many. Even more so, there are moments in the “life” of a society when its existence is threatened—say, times of death, war, or other crisis. Ordinary ritual and belief may get society through the ordinary times, but extraordinary rituals and beliefs may be necessary for these extraordinary times. Thus, funeral rituals, for instance, might be viewed as giving comfort to the grieving survivors, or they might be viewed as holding them together as a society at a time when fights or other conflicts could rip it apart. Some rituals have a purely social
function; Fourth of July festivities are fun for American individuals, but, more importantly, they remind and refresh the solidarity that binds them together as Americans.

A second argument for social functions of religion follows from this one. Individual functionalism depends on religion relieving fear and stress and other negative emotions. Radcliffe-Brown astutely realized that religious beliefs and actions sometimes actually increase fear and stress; after all, if one does not believe in hell, one has no fear of it. There is the additional fear of the powerful and often capricious or malicious spirits. There is the fear of performing a ritual wrong and suffering the effects. There is the fear of the shaman or witch or sorcerer who can use spiritual power for good or ill. So, a simple “religion makes life better” view is simplistic and inaccurate. Sometimes, the individual may have to be worse off for the group to be better off. Even “scapegoating” and sacrifice mean pain and loss for the victim but (hopefully) gain for the group.

Symbolic/interpretive anthropology

All of the above theorists (with the exception of Malinowski, as we will see in Chapter 4) have relied heavily on the concept of “symbol.” It seems self-evident to us that humans use symbols and that religion in particular is a system of symbols, although we will have the opportunity to critique this assumption in Chapter 3 and beyond. Nevertheless, a school of anthropology developed in the 1960s, at least partly influenced by the “revolution in philosophy” occasioned by the emphasis on symbols as conveyors and enablers of thought. Suzanne Langer in 1942 had announced that all human thought was symbolic in the sense of condensing meaning into some sound, gesture, image, etc.; symbols were thus “vehicles for conceptions,” and conceptual thought would be impossible without them.

Anthropologists like Mary Douglas (b. 1921), Victor Turner (1920–83), and Clifford Geertz (b. 1926) pioneered a symbolic or interpretive approach to religion or, in the case of Geertz, of culture in general. As noted above, religion in Geertz’s definition is a system of symbols, and culture itself is a yet more extensive and complete system of symbols, a “web of significance” of our own making upon which we are consequently suspended (Geertz 1973: 5). So symbols play a decisive role in Geertz’s understanding: they “are tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs” (1973: 91). Even more, they are effective; Geertz regards them as extrasomatic control mechanisms for organizing experience and governing behavior. Thus, symbols are not mental but social, observable in the “flow of behavior” and the “pattern of life” (Geertz 1973: 17)—and shaping both.

Victor Turner develops the symbolic approach even more explicitly in the direction of “performance,” eventually (e.g., 1974) offering a theatrical model in which religion, especially ritual, is a drama unfolding over time, through various acts and stages. Elsewhere and earlier, he regards ritual as a “process” (Turner 1969). For both Turner and Geertz, religion and its rituals and symbols are not static but alive,
embedded in and constitutive of social order and individual experience. The “effectiveness” of symbols, therefore, resides not only or mainly in human minds but also in political systems (Geertz 1980) and the very human body (Douglas 1970).

“Modular” theories

Recently, but not only recently, some scholars within and outside of anthropology appear to be converging on an approach to religion that emphasizes the modular or composite quality of religion. The idea of modularity is not new or unique to religion. We know that the brain is a modular organ, not a single homogeneous one, composed of various specialized functional areas which combine to give us our human mental experience. Similarly, the modular view of religion is grounded on the notion that religion is not a single homogeneous thing and perhaps not a “thing” at all. Rather, it is a combination and, therefore, a particular cumulative expression of elements—elements that may not be specifically “religious.” As William James (1842–1910) noted over a century ago, for instance, in regard to “religious emotions”:

There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man’s natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations; and similarly of all the various sentiments which may be called into play in the lives of religious persons. [. . .]

As there thus seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw, so there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object, and no one specific and essential kind of religious act.

(James 1958: 40)

If this is correct, then our quest for “religion” may be a misguided one and more of a product of the Western historical and cultural perspective than of religion as such.

The “building block” approach: Wallace

Anthony Wallace (b. 1923), in his influential discussion of religion, suggested that religion may ultimately be “a summative notion and cannot be taken uncritically to imply [. . .] one single unifying, internally coherent, carefully programmed set of rituals and beliefs” (1966: 78). His view was that religion starts from a single premise, the “supernatural premise” that “souls, supernatural beings, and supernatural forces exist” (Wallace 1966: 52). This premise must be given shape, and he suggested that there are thirteen “elementary particles” or categories of religious
action that serve as building blocks for religion, including (1) prayer; (2) music and dancing and singing; (3) physiological exercises, including substance use and physical hardships and trials; (4) exhortation or orders, encouragements, and threats; (5) myth; (6) simulation/imitation such as magic, witchcraft, and ritual; (7) mana or the power one gets from contact with powerful objects; (8) taboo or the prohibition from contact with certain things; (9) feasts; (10) sacrifice; (11) congregation or group activity; (12) inspiration, such as hallucination and mysticism, and (13) symbols. Notice that most if not all of these, as James indicates, have their secular variation as well.

These elementary particles can be aggregated into bundles or sequences of behavior, resulting in “ritual complexes,” along with the “rationalization” of such behaviors in the form of beliefs (for him, beliefs were quite secondary). Any particular ritual complex may incorporate any set and order of elements and exclude others; in fact, any religion may prioritize one or more elements over others, for instance, elaborating myth or sacrifice while overlooking magic or witchcraft. Next, ritual complexes and their associated beliefs and social roles are combined into higher-level “cult institutions,” which he defined as “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” (Wallace 1966: 75). Finally, when “a loosely related group of cult institutions and other, even less well-organized special practices and beliefs” (Wallace 1966: 78) are agglomerated, the result is “a religion.” Thus, any particular religion may differ from any other particular religion in the selection and organization of its constituent pieces, and the pieces may not even be essentially “religious,” but in specific combinations and arrangements, the product is specific “religions.”

The evolutionary and agency approach: Guthrie, Boyer, and Atran

Observers have noted since the time of Xenophanes that religious entities tend to have human-like traits, a phenomenon called anthropomorphism. In 1993, Stewart Guthrie offered his “new theory” of religion based on a serious appropriation of the anthropomorphic idea. However, from his perspective, anthropomorphism in regard to the supernatural (and the natural) world is not a mistake but rather a “good bet”: “It is a bet because the world is uncertain, ambiguous, and in need of interpretation. It is a good bet because the most valuable interpretations usually are those that disclose the presence of whatever is most important to us. That usually is other humans” (Guthrie 1993: 3). Of course, supernatural entities are not exactly like humans: they are often larger or more powerful or invisible or immortal, but still these are extensions or negations of human qualities (humans mortal, supernatural beings immortal). The key to humanness is not, ultimately, in our bodies or our mortality but in our intentionality, our minds and wills.

Pascal Boyer’s project to “explain religion” begins with the now-familiar premise that human thought is not a unitary and homogeneous thing but the result of operating thought modules, a “confederacy” of explanatory devices which he calls
“inference systems.” Among these systems are three with particular significance—
concept formation, attention to exception, and agency. Thought proceeds via the
creation of concepts and even more abstract “templates”; templates are like blank
forms with certain fields to be filled, and concepts are the specific way that the form
is filled. For example, the template “tool” has certain options, and the concept
“hammer” fills those options in a particular way. Likewise, the template “animal” or
“person” has certain qualities with a set of possible variables. One of these qualities
of persons is agency—the ability to engage in intelligent, deliberate, and more or
less “free” action.

As interested as humans are in our concepts, we are drawn to exceptions and
violations of them. Humans are mortal animals with two arms; a three-armed human
would be interesting, but an immortal human would be even more so. Some ideas,
Boyer claims, have the potential to “stick” in our minds better because they are just
exceptional enough: As he offers, a being that is immortal has sticking power, but
a being that only exists on Tuesdays does not. Not surprisingly, “religious concepts
violate certain expectations from ontological categories [but] they preserve other
expectations” (Boyer 2001: 62). Among the most critical ones that religion preserves
are agency and reciprocity/exchange. Supernatural entities “are not represented
as having human features in general but as having minds which is much more specific”
(Boyer 2001: 144), which is not such a stretch for human thinking, since even animals
manifest some agency. Furthermore, it is advantageous, as Guthrie opined, to
attribute mind to nature and supernature, since (to paraphrase Pascal’s famous
wager), if we are correct it could be critically important, but if we are wrong no harm
is done.

As Boyer concludes, religion is constructed out of “mental systems and capacities
that are there anyway [therefore] the notion of religion as a special domain is
not just unfounded but in fact rather ethnocentric” (2001: 311). In this view, religion
does not require a separate explanation at all, but is rather a product or by-product
of how mind in society functions in all, including nonreligious, contexts. In particular,
he points to the evolved mental predispositions of humans, the nature of social
living, processes of information exchange, and the processes of deriving inferences.
If nonhuman agents exist, and they can be engaged as social beings—as “social
exchange partners”—this is clearly worth thinking about and acting on.

Scott Atran has elaborated this view further and in his own direction. He asserts
too that religion involves “the very same cognitive and affective structures as
nonreligious beliefs and practices—and no others—but in (more or less) system-
atically distinct ways” (2002: ix). Since “there is no such entity as ‘religion,’” there
is no need to “explain” it in a specific way. Religion is once again a by-product
and epiphenomenon of other, generally human processes or modules, of which he
identifies several: perceptual modules, primary emotional modules (for “unmediated”
physiological responses like fear and surprise and anger and disgust), secondary
affective modules (for reactions likes anxiety and guilt and love), and conceptual
modules. Agency is also high on his list of human priorities, and we have elaborate
and essential processes for detecting and interpreting it, especially because we
can be fooled and faked by others. Supernatural agents are a mere and fairly reasonable extrapolation of human and natural agency, “by-products of a naturally selected cognitive mechanism for detecting agents—such as predators, protectors, and prey—and for dealing rapidly and economically with stimulus situations involving people and animals” (Atran 2002: 15). No wonder, he concludes, that “supernatural agency is the most culturally recurrent, cognitively relevant, and evolutionarily compelling concept in religion” (Atran 2002: 57).

Conclusion

Many sciences (and nonsciences) take an interest in religion, each with its own purposes and methods. Anthropology takes its lead from the dazzling diversity of religion, not judging whether any or all religions are true but treating them all as influential personal and social forces. This means, among other things, examining each in its social context and in its own terms. This further means attending to how religions are actually practiced and used by real people in their real socially structured lives. Religion is part of lived human existence. How we define and conceptualize religion will affect what we accept as religion, along with what aspects of it we particularly attend to. No definition may capture all of the depth of religion, but each contributes a portion to our final understanding. As we move from definition and description to analysis and explanation, we find various possible approaches and emphases, each again contributing to our complete understanding. What we find in the end is that religion is a profoundly human and social phenomenon—arising from and addressing intellectual, emotional, and social sources—in which the nonhuman and “supernatural” are seen as profoundly human and social.