Religion and the Anthropologists
1960 - 1976

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article passe en revue des manuels récents d'anthropologie de manière à faire ressortir la façon de voir la religion chez les anthropologues contemporains. Cette première partie présente une analyse sommaire des problèmes qu'ils rencontrent dans leurs tentatives de définir la religion et conclut que le concept de "surnaturel" est un élément central de la plupart des définitions offertes. La religion, la magie et la science sont encore contrastées les unes aux autres, même si leurs relations ne sont pas présentées de la manière dont elles l'étaient chez les anthropologues du XIXᵉ siècle. Quelques anthropologues retiennent la distinction entre le sacré et le profane. Les mythes et les rites, qu'on retrouve dans toutes les religions, constituent un domaine problématique pour les anthropologues contemporains; plusieurs d'entre eux soulignent l'importance du symbolisme pour la compréhension des croyances et des pratiques religieuses.

Part I

THE DEFINITION AND NATURE OF RELIGION

In 1959 the late professor E. E. Evans-Pritchard, in an essay unique in anthropological literature, complained that anthropologists in general have been somewhat negative in their attitudes towards, and in their evaluation of, religious beliefs and practices. Their attitude, he wrote, "has been for the most part bleakly hostile." (1964:153) The early scholars who influenced anthro-

pological thought on religion for over a century were often motivated by a desire to discredit the claim to revealed religion and to show, by numerous comparisons, how relative were all beliefs. In the background of 19th century evolutionary theory, the founders of the discipline of anthropology tended to regard religion as both "untrue and useless," thus liable to be supplanted, or at least to have its influence reduced and its prestige diminished, by scientific progress (p. 159). Confronted by the universal presence of religion in human history, they tried to explain what they considered to be an illusion by some theory of psychological or sociological causation. Evans-Pritchard further asserted that most of the prominent anthropologists of our era have adhered to no religious faith since all belief was deemed to be fallacious (pp. 161-162). In a more recent publication, the same scholar stated that much of the early anthropological views regarding religious beliefs and practices are "still trotted out in colleges and universities," even though most of the same opinions have been shown to be erroneous or at least doubtful (1965:4). It is certainly not surprising that many scholars of religion have refused to consider anthropological theory and method and to apply it to their study of religion because of the reductionistic tendencies often manifested in anthropological literature (Eliade 1969:66-67).

Since Evans-Pritchard published his reflections on religion and the anthropologists, the educational market has been flooded with anthropological textbooks,[1] all of which contain one or more chapters on religious beliefs and rites. It is the aim of this study to examine these texts in some detail and to arrive at some conclusions about anthropological views of, and attitudes towards, religion.[2] The main concern, therefore, is not to evaluate anthropological literature itself,[3] but rather to deduce the anthropologists' way of handling a subject to which they have paid great attention ever since anthropology became an established academic discipline in the latter part of last century. This study will restrict itself to

[1] We refer here to introductory texts on social and/or cultural anthropology.
[2] Anthropological monographs on particular religions and the many articles on specific religious beliefs and rituals are, therefore, not included in our considerations.
[3] This has sometimes been done by anthropologists themselves. See, for instance, Bharati, 1971.

those texts published in English between 1960 and 1976.[4] It will
direct itself to four major areas of inquiry. 1) How have anthro-
pologists defined and described religion? 2) What are the main
constituents or elements of religion which receive prominence in
anthropological literature, and how are these features distinct from
other aspects of human behavior? 3) What do contemporary anthro-
pologists say about the origin and functions of religious beliefs and
practices? And 4) What theory and method do they follow in the
study of religion? It is hoped that such an examination will lead to
conclusions about anthropological attitudes towards religion as
well as to the contribution which social and cultural anthropology
can make to the academic study of religion.

THE DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Anthropological definitions of religion are legion. As Collins
(1975:418) has aptly put it, there are as many definitions as
scholars. It is evident, even to a superficial reader of anthropological
textbooks, that there has been no explicit agreement among anthro-
pologists on a precise definition of religion, and that, till recently
at least, a widely acceptable one had not emerged in anthropological
literature (Harris 1975:546; Schwartz and Ewald 1968:347). Several
anthropologists note that religion is one of the most difficult
aspects of human activity to demarcate or categorize in orderly
statements (Wells 1971:118; Taylor 1973:389; Ember and Ember
1973:417-418; Pelto and Pelto 1976:367-368). While this initial
problem is not always specifically discussed,[5] a number of anthro-
pologists wisely alert their readers from the very start to the fact
that the area of investigation is beset with definitional hazards
which bring into question the whole treatment of what have been
called "religious beliefs and practices." Murray Wax (1968:228;

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[4] Research note: The following sources have been used to trace the
textbooks: *Library of Congress Catalogue* (1960-1975); *Cumulative Book Index*
(1960-1975); and *The British National Bibliography* (1960-1974). Some of the
major anthropological journals, including *American Anthropologist* and *Man,*
were consulted for the reviews they carried of several of the textbooks con-
sulted for this paper. Thanks are due to the many publishers for the com-
plimentary copies received, expecially of those textbooks published in early
1976.
[5] Thus, Schusky, 1975, does not even make his reader aware of the issue.

Mair 1965:202-205), for instance, observes that "religion" is a folk category on the Western Judaeo-Christian tradition. The issue which students have to face is how to transform it into a scientific and universal category suitable for research. He suggests that Redfield's distinction (1956:67-104) between "Great Tradition" and "Little Tradition" may be a better terminology. Jacobs (1964:253-254) takes the approach that one should not start with a definition or even with a list of minimal features or characteristics which are supposed to have cross-cultural import. He advises his students to begin with the Western view that religions are concerned with powerful beings and then to test that position by intensive empirical research. Some anthropologists, equally weary of the words "religion" and "religious" have applied terms like "ideology," "worldview" and "systems of beliefs" which, being less encumbered, at least in appearance, with Western connotation, may be more suitable for cross-cultural research.[6]

In spite of all these cautious overtones, no anthropologist can proceed and summarize anthropological approaches to religion without first having determined what general features and elements of human belief and activity deserve inclusion under that heading. The vast majority of anthropological texts, with some notable exceptions, use the words "religion" and "religious" in their chapter titles and subtitles (Lienhardt 1966; Crump 1973; Hammond 1971; Bock 1974; Black 1973). It is, therefore, legitimate to ask whether, even when an anthropologist eschews defining "religion,"[7] there is a common anthropological assumption on what religion is, an assumption which determines, explicitly or implicitly, the content and mode of anthropological deliberations on the subject.

Richards has rightly observed that one of the more common anthropological interpretations of religion is that religious beliefs and activities are colored by the assumption that a whole world of the supernatural exists separate from the rest of the visible, empirical world (1972:260; Brown 1963:121; Schwartz and Ewald

[6] See the section on "World View" in the second part of this study (forthcoming).
[7] Some anthropologists are careful not to be very definite about defining religion. Harris omits in the second edition of his textbook (1975) a section entitled "A Maximum Definition of Religion" which had appeared in the first edition of his work (1971).

1968:347). Many recent anthropological definitions of religion attest to the prominence of the "supernatural." The following definitions are typical of anthropological textbooks:

> Religion is the cultural knowledge of the supernatural that people use to cope with the ultimate problems of human existence (Spradley and McCurdy 1975:424).

> Religion is simply a belief in the supernatural, together with the mental attitudes and patterns of behavior that follow from it (Wells 1971:118).

> Religion we can define as beliefs in the existence of supernatural beings and practices associated with relating to them (Collins 1975:418).

> Religion is a system of transcendental beliefs and practices through which people establish relationships with the supernatural (Hunter and Whitten 1976:304).

> Religion. A system of beliefs relating to supernatural beings or forces, and the ritual or other behavior accompanying such belief (Stewart 1973:472).

> We will define religion as any set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices pertaining to *supernatural power,* whether it be forces, gods, spirits, ghosts, demons, or any other imagined power (Ember and Ember 1973: 417).

The supernatural dimension is thus judged to be the deciding factor marking off religious from non-religious belief and behavior (Plog and Bates 1976:228). Several anthropologists rely heavily on Wallace's (1966:107) and/or Norbeck's (1961:11)[8] definitions, both of which place supernaturalism as the key element in defining and distinguishing religion from other human values, beliefs and actions (Anderson 1976:295-296; Kottack 1974:183; Holmes 1971:310-311; Gropper 1969:82). Such a definition, however, has not escaped criticism from several anthropologists who argue that words like "supernatural" and "supernaturalism" require some very precise analysis and meaning before they can be used cross-culturally in a universal definition of religion (Richards 1973:260-261; Birket-Smith 1965:338-339). Some anthropologists use the word "supernatural" as synonymous with "spiritual" (Swartz and Jordan 1976:650). In this case we are close to Tylor's famous definition of religion as "belief in spiritual beings" (1958:8), a

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[8] In a more recent publication, Norbeck (1974:6) refers to the current definitions of religion which avoid the word "supernatural." While he takes note of the objections to its use, he still opts for it.

definition which, according to Ashely Montagu (1964:123; Middleton 1970:501), "is as sound as it ever was." It would seem, however, that most anthropologists use the term "supernatural" to refer to both personal and impersonal forces and not just to spiritual powers (Haviland 1975:310). Supernaturalism in contemporary anthropology seems to refer to Marett's "animatism" rather than to Tylor's "animism." Most, if not all, of those anthropologists who define religion in terms of the supernatural fail to analyze this concept which is so central to their whole treatment of the subject under investigation. The reader is, therefore, at times bewildered by the way in which different concepts, like magic, witchcraft, fetishism, spirits and gods, are lumped together under the label "supernaturalism" without any attempt to clarify the issue.

Anthropological dissatisfaction with the way in which religion has been, and still is, defined and treated, is reflected in some of the more recent textbooks. Plog and Bates (1976:228) acknowledge this malaise and state that "recently some anthropologists have defined religion as any system of beliefs, symbols and rituals that makes life meaningful and intelligible." Definitions which assume that religion is basically an ideology, or a value system, or a worldview, tend to avoid some of the pitfalls which the word "supernatural" brings with it. Thus, for example, Friedl (1976:310) defines religion "as a belief system which includes myths that explain the social and spiritual order, and rituals through which the members of the religious community carry their beliefs and act out the myths." Religion can thus be considered as "a symbolic expression of human life that interprets the universe and provides motives for human action" (CRM Books 1971:292). One of the more popular definitions of this nature is that of Clifford Geertz. His insightful, though somewhat complex, definition is endorsed by a number of contemporary anthropologists (Schusky 1975:208; Hoebel 1971:56ff.; Keesing and Keesing 1971:303; Hunter and Whitten 1976:305).[9] Geertz (1966:4), in a major article discussing the definition of religion, writes:

> Religion is a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and longlasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence, and by clothing these

[9] Most of these authors quote Geertz's definition in full.

conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (1966:4).

The major, and sole, critique of Geertz's position comes from Marvin Harris (1975:546-547) who objects that it is too inclusive, incorporating science within it as well. While it has to be admitted, as Hockett (1973:546-547) warns us, that definitions should neither be too restrictive, nor too narrow, Geertz's approach contains more advantages than disadvantages. It provides a "comprehensive understanding of religious behavior" (Schusky 1975:208) not just in terms of the outside scholar but also, to some degree, in language acceptable to believers themselves.

Of all the textbooks published in the last fifteen years or so there are a few which stand out as trying a different approach to the definitional quandary. They concentrate on describing systems of beliefs and values and avoid as much as possible the word "religion" and its derivatives. Peter Hammond (1971:255) starts by defining ideology as "the several component aspects of every people's system of beliefs about themselves and the reasons for their being...". His efforts, however, fall short of expectation because he then goes on to distinguish two kinds of ideology, namely, one which is "supernaturally based" and one which is secular in mentality. Philip Bock (1974:306) is more successful than his peer. He broadly defines ideology as "any set of more or less systematized beliefs and values shared by the members of a social group". He probably stands alone in anthropological literature to refrain from dedicating a chapter of his *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* to religious beliefs and practices. He forcefully explains his position:

> The topic of religion has not been treated in any one place in this book. Religious roles, techniques, and beliefs have been discussed, respectively, in relation to the social, technological, and ideological systems of which they are a part. This is somewhat unconventional, but it has been done to stress the point that, in most societies, religion is not a separate category of experience or action. There is, rather, a *religious dimension* to every part of life, and the Western contrast between 'natural' and "supernatural' is simply not relevant to the understanding of such societies (1974:319).

While there is the obvious advantage in his approach that the mentality of primitive peoples is more faithfully reproduced,

one is still left with some serious misgivings. His approach seems to exclude some of the world great religions, Christianity in particular, from consideration. Besides, he does not specify clearly what the "religious dimension to every part of life" is.

The ethnoscientific bent of Bock is presented in fairly complete outline by Mary Black (1973) in her excellent summary of the ways in which anthropologists have for decades approached belief systems. Like all anthropologists who concentrate on belief systems, she brings out the philosophical aspects of religious beliefs, practically identifying belief systems with systems of knowledge. It is unfortunate that this line of approach is difficult, testing the logical perspicacity of the reader to its fullest. Because it forms one of the major theoretical frameworks in contemporary anthropology, we will have to return to it further down.

Black takes the position, with many anthropologists, that it is practically impossible to treat religion as a universal category because its forms and manifestations are too many and too varied — a stance expressed in a few of the surveyed textbooks (Holmes 1971:310; Keesing and Keesing 1971:302). The concept "religion" is thus too narrow to serve as a universal category. Any definition of religion may thus end up by being too arbitrary and subjective (Holmes 1971:310; Titiev 1963:505; Richards 1972:261). Whether this broader approach adds to, or minimizes, the confusion as to what religion means is not very clear (Wax 1968:226-227). It does, however, raise the question of whether religion is something *sui generis,* consisting of attitudes, beliefs, and practices which are uniquely different and above the rest of human life, or whether it is just one dimension of life, engulfed in and inseparable from, the rest of culture.

THE NATURE OF RELIGION

Even when anthropologists have avoided giving a precise definition of religion, they have not succeeded in staying clear of discussing its nature and of describing some of its main features. The constitutive elements of religion have frequently been seen in terms of opposites. Anthropological literature tends to dichoto-

mize between magic and religion, religion and science, supernatural and natural, and sacred and profane.

Magic and Religion

Most of what anthropologists have to say on magic, religion and science is a rehash of the views of Frazer, Malinowski and Durkheim. It is necessary to recapitulate briefly their respective views because the reader of anthropological textbooks is likely to be baffled by the material presented. Some writers do not always make it clear as to whose particular view they are propounding or endorsing.[10] Others repeat the pioneer attempts to distinguish religion from magic without reference to their sources (Collins 1975:419-420; Taylor 1973:393-394). While a few criticise and reject these old views (Beattie 1964:206-207; Kottack 1974:187), the majority of anthropologists leave the reader with the impression that, with some slight modification, Frazer's and Malinowski's positions are still acceptable in current anthropology.[11]

James Frazer, in his classical work, *The Golden Bough,* dedicates a whole chapter on the relationship between magic and religion (1922:56-69). His position was that magic is a form of control, albeit mistaken, of nature, while religion implied a supplication or propitiation to gods or spirits, and hence an indirect admittance that the belief in man's power to control nature had been heavily shaken. He insists that between magic and religion there is a "radical conflict of principle" (1922:60). He further admits that this antagonism was late in the history of religion and that a confusion of magic and religion has survived in primitive societies and among the uneducated classes in modern Europe. He then goes on to propound his historical theory that magic preceded religion, and to explain how primitive man lost his confidence in his own manipulative powers and started propitiating the gods.

Malinowski amplified Frazer's views and explained that magic was a practical art consisting of acts which are only a means to

[10] Thus, for instance, Pearson (1974:256) gives a short outline of Frazer's view and ascribes it to Tylor.

[11] Haviland (1975:312-313) and Ember and Ember (1973:433) seem to accept Frazer's view without reservation, while Stewart (1973:347-348) opts for Malinowski's.

a definite end expected to follow later on. Magic indicated man's power to bring about results by spells and rites; religion, on the other hand, was "a body of self-contained acts being themselves the fulfillment of their purpose" (1954:88). Religion did not, unlike magic, deal with direct quantitative events but rather with fateful happenings and supernatural forces and beings. Malinowski disagreed with Frazer in the latter's historical reconstruction and concentrated on the functions of magic and religion in the lives of the people he studied.

Finally, Durkheim (1965:58-60) insisted that there is a repugnance of religion for magic and a hostility of magic for religion. Religion, for him, was basically a group affair; it united people into a church, sharing common beliefs. In magic, the church dimension was absent. Unlike the priest, the magician functioned on his own with an individual clientele.

As a rule, anthropologists have followed Malinowski and Frazer in distinguishing magic from religion, adopting the theory that magic refers to control and religion to the persuasion, by prayer and sacrifices, of the supernaturals (Lienhardt 1966:127; Richards 1972:260; Pelto and Pelto 1976:370; CRM Books 1971:294-295; Cone and Pelto 1969:92). Very few of the texts surveyed give Durkheim's view on the subject. Anderson (1976:295) is, therefore, indulging in wishing thinking when he states that "Anthropologists generally avoid the issue (i.e. of the distinction between magic and religion) by speaking of the magico-religious." While it is true that several anthropologists have preferred to use the phrase "magico-religious" (Wells 1971:119; Montagu 1964:131; Beattie 1964:212; Anderson 1976:294-296), one can hardly deny the fact that contemporary textbooks exhibit the same "compulsion," which their forerunners manifested, to distinguish between magic and religion.

Most anthropological textbooks, with a few noteworthy exceptions,[12] start with Frazer's distinction and then cautiously soften it by stressing that in practice a sharp distinction or

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[12] Hunter and Whitten (1976), Bock (1974) and Schusky (1975) are among the best examples.

dichotomy between them is either very difficult or impossible to draw (Beals and Hoijer 1971:457; Downs 1973:303; Aceves 1974:219; Schusky and Culbert 1973:147; Barnouw and Hermanson 1972:52; Wells 1971:119; Brown 1963:122; Pelto and Pelto 1976:369-370; Swartz and Jordan 1976:669).[13] Magic and science, it is often stated, do not exist in isolation (Mair 1965:264; Anderson 1976:294-296; Montagu 1964:131; Fuchs 1964:220); both are found side by side in the same rituals. Magic is also a technique of religion, an aspect or subsidiary element of it (Spradley and McCurdy 1975:424-440; Schwartz and Ewald 1968:364; Montagu 1964:131). Religion and magic blend into one another and form a kind of continuum (Cone and Pelto 1969:92; Brown 1963:122; Hoebel 1972:574). How two opposite and contradictory principles form such a continuum is not explained. Besides, it is asserted, magic and religion share similar metaphysical principles (Aceves 1974:219; Mair 1965:203). Both are based on the concept of the supernatural and have the function of alleviating stress and crises when empirical means fail (Hammond 1971:284). No anthropologist suggests that such a distinction has ever been found in primitive societies. "No primitive man," writes Stewart (1973:349; Hoebel 1972:580), "would analyse the difference between magic and religion." If this is the case, one wonders why anthropologists have reaffirmed the need or usefulness of sticking to Frazer's analytical distinction (Hammond 1971:284; Montagu 1964:131; Beals and Hoijer 1971:457-458).

It is difficult to understand why anthropologists have not studied in depth the relation between religion and magic in Western culture before applying the concepts to primitive society and suggesting that they have some kind of cross-cultural validity. With the recent revival of witchcraft as a religion in Western Culture (Ellwood 1973; Tiryakian 1974), the problem may require analysis with different analytical tools than those of 19th century Victorian England. Anthropologists have shown little originality in this matter. It is indeed doubtful whether our understanding of religion has improved by continuing to distinguish it from magic in almost the identical terms of Frazer or Malinowski.

[13] Pearson (1947:255) states that magic and religion are clearly separate phenomena.

Religion and Science

There seems to be more agreement in anthropological literature on the rejection of Frazer's view that magic is akin to science and of the former's precedence in time. Most anthropologists today are more likely to oppose both religion and magic to science. Science implies the possibility of verification. Religious beliefs are beyond testing and revision; they rest on faith rather than, as in the case of scientific theories, on systematic observation, prediction and empirical experimentation (Lienhardt 1966:141; Holmes 1971:327; Friedl 1976:265; Pelto and Pelto 1976:368-369). Thus Hockett writes:

> The soul doctrine is not a theory in the scientific sense, not because it is false (it may be true) but because there is no socially shared way of disproving it. In contrast, a scientific theory is supposed to contain within itself specification of the conditions under which it must be rejected or modified (1973:250).

Some anthropologists have observed that magic, science and religion exist today in all societies (Friedl 1976:266), while others have noted that scientific and religious behavior are at times quite indistinguishable (Holmes 1971:327). Harris (1975:547; Aceves 1974:232-233) has acutely remarked that "many scientific beliefs are held religiously."

The most common anthropological distinction between religion and science is expressed in terms of belief and knowledge. Religion comes in when scientific knowledge is lacking; it explains what technology does not (Brown 1963:134-135; CRM Books 1971:292; Friedl 1976:266; Titiev 1963:517). Religion is an explanatory device for things and events for which there are no commonly known answers (Beattie 1964:227; Bohannan 1963:344; Mair 1965:187; Wells 1971:120; Crump 1973:119). This suggests that the advances in scientific knowledge are bound to limit and diminish the value and applicability of religious tenets. "Man's everyday knowledge," we are told, "is inversely proportional to the level of technological development of his society" (CRM Books 1971:217; Hammond 1971:265; Pelto and Pelto 1976:367; Ember and Ember 1973:426). And again: "Rational explanation and science replaces myths, legends and beliefs" (Kessler 1974:152). The Frazerian view that the Age of Science can take over the Age of Religion is still

in different forms well entrenched in anthropology, even though not a single anthropologist propounds the three-age scheme of Frazer (Taylor 1973:397).

Several anthropologists, however, are not so sure of this rather simplistic view that makes religion useless in a scientific era. Religion still persists even in an age noted for scientific knowledge, and may not be easily or totally dislodged. Beattie (1964:239), for one, admits that there are areas "beyond science". Though religion has in the past explained events and experiences for which there is no scientific answer, it is quite possible that religion accounts for some areas of human life which science cannot and never will. The human person is concerned with the meaning of his experiences and, as Collins suggests (1975:420-422),[14] this area of knowledge is of a different level than that subsumed by science. "Religious and magical practices," notes Lienhardt (1966:142), "are often concerned with the searching out of truths which... go beyond common knowledge or purely rational deduction." Haviland (1975:308-309) goes as far as to assert that science has brought with it a religious boom. New problems and new anxieties, he states, have come in the wake of the scientific and technological explosions — problems and anxieties for which only religion might be able to offer some explanation and alleviation. It is doubtful, therefore, whether the contrast between religion and science can lead to a satisfactory answer to the nature of religious belief.

The Natural and the Supernatural

Another dichotomy employed by anthropologists in their pursuit of the nature of religion is that between the supernatural and the natural. Many textbooks,[15] with few exceptions (Lienhardt 1966, Bohannan 1963; Barnouw 1975), actually base their whole chapter on religion on this distinction. The supernatural is taken to be the main element of religion or the key word in its definition

[14] The same position seems to be held by Cone and Pelto (1969:91), Beals and Hoijer, (1971:434), and Downs (1973:306).
[15] The works of Titiev (1963), Schwartz and Ewald (1968), Ember and Ember (1973), Jacobs (1964), Pearson (1974), Schusky and Culbert (1973) and Beals and Hoijer (1971) are all typical examples.

(Kottack 1974; and Taylor 1973). It refers to "the belief in the existence of gods and spirits who have greater powers than human beings" (Collins 1975:418). It has also to be equated with what is non-natural, what is strange, mysterious and inexplicable. It is a realm outside the natural, ordinary, everyday world (Collins 1975:420-221; Kottack 1974:183). It might also connote the non-empirical, the spiritual, or the transcendantal (Swartz and Jordan 1976:650; Hunter and Whitten 1976:302).

In spite of this common use of the term supernatural and its frequent explicit or implicit opposition to the natural, anthropologists are almost unanimous in stating that such a distinction is a definite product of the West and cannot be universally applied to primitive societies (Otterbein 1972:95; Aceves 1974:229; Downs 1973:308; Beattie 1964:203; Schwartz and Ewald 1968:348-349; Ember and Ember 1973:417; Gropper 1969:82; Harris 1975:518; Hockett 1973:133-134; Crump 1973:116; Richards 1972:260-261).

But if the majority of peoples do not make such a dichotomy and if many religious and magical acts are considered to be quite 'natural' by those who practice them, then one wonders why anthropologists have continued to use the rather ethnocentric word "supernatural" at all. If the contrast is "simply not relevant" (Bock 1974:319), or if it "begs the ethnographic question" (Bohannan 1963:328), then it would be more advisable to drop the terms and search for more meaningful and realistic ones.

A number of anthropologists have tried to justify the use of the term "supernatural." Harris (1975:514) points out that religious beliefs in many cultures are analogous to what is meant in the West by supernatural. Since he fails to specify where exactly lies the analogy, the reader is not enlightened by his assertion. Mair (1965:187) states that the most commonly used distinction between the natural and the supernatural "has certainly never been a cause of misunderstanding." But if the majority of primitive societies do not know of such a distinction, how can its use not lead to misunderstanding? Would not the use of such words by Western scholars tend to mislead those who want to grasp the conceptual framework of an alien people? Plog and Bates (1976:228) assure us, in their recent textbook, that "it is accurate to say that a supernatural dimension of one sort or another is common to all

religions." Maybe if the authors had listed and expounded the different sorts of supernatural dimensions, then the reader would have been led to some cross-culturally valid terminology. But Plog and Bates offer no solution to the impasse.

What is really surprising from an anthropological viewpoint is that anthropologists have shown little or no concern to analyze the concepts of "supernatural" and "natural" in Western culture where their meanings are embedded. Few, if any, anthropologists seem aware that the distinction has not been consistent even in those societies which make it (Richards 1972:260-261).

The Sacred and the Profane

A somewhat similar confusion exists in the anthropological treatment of the sacred/profane distinction. For Durkheim (1965:52), whose position is still endorsed by several anthropologists (Maranda 1972:263; Friedl 1976:268-269; Mair 1965:201; Hoebel 1972:561-562; Schusky and Culbert 1973:142; Downs 1973:309-310; Keesing and Keesing 1971:306; Beals and Hoijer 1971:437), the division of the world into two heterogeneous and frequently antagonistic domains, the sacred and the profane, is "the distinctive trait of religious thought." Some anthropologists equate the profane with the natural, the sacred with the supernatural (Hoebel 1972:561-562), others look at the profane as being the instrumental feature, while the sacred as the transcendental feature of religion (Hunter and Whitten 1976:311); still others equate the profane with the normal, the sacred with abnormal (Crump 1973:117); and finally there are some who assert that the profane is the common and the mundane, while the sacred is the special, the mysterious and the awesome (Downs 1973:309). Several anthropologists criticize and reject Durkheim's theory (Plog and Bates 1976:228; Wax 1968:229-231; Bohannan 1963:328; Beattie 1964:203; Jacobs 1964:279ff.); many others seem to ignore it.[16] Plog and Bates point out that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is characteristic of stratified societies (1976:234-235). The dichotomy

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[16] Thus Kottack (1974), Taylor (1973), Pearson (1974), CRM Books (1971), Pelto and Pelto (1976) and Spradley and McCurdy (1975) give practically no acknowledgement to Durkheim's contribution to the study of religion.

is certainly present in some of the universalistic religions, Islam being an excellent example (Harris 1975:520), and perhaps also in several primitive societies.[17]

Such blatant disagreement among anthropologists highlights the problem of understanding alien religious thought. It is indeed doubtful whether Western concepts formulated by the pioneers of anthropology can contribute to such understanding. The fact that they have failed to do so after decades of use by anthropologists is not a healthy recommendation for their continued usage in anthropological manuals.

THE MAIN FEATURES OF RELIGION

There is agreement in anthropology on the fact that religious customs are found in all cultures and that, therefore, religious beliefs and practices are a universal human characteristic (Taylor 1973:389; Kottack 1974:183; Downs 1973:310; Barnouw and Hermanson 1972:51; Maranda 1972:264; Hockett 1973:130; Hammond 1971:223; Pelto and Pelto 1976:388). Though some early anthropologists thought that pritimive societies lacked religion, ethnographic evidence gathered over the course of the last hundred years suggests quite the contrary. Religious beliefs and behavior can often be quite complex and profound, even in societies which are simple in their social organization and economic structure. Many anthropologists would also assert that myth, ritual and symbolism are probably the three more common religious features found in all religious systems. Magic tends to be more often than not incorporated into the religious system. Not all anthropologists give equal importance to these characteristics; in fact one or more of them has been frequently left out of, or relegated to secondary place in, textbook surveys. Taken as a whole, however, anthropological textbooks suggest that the student would be led to understand a religion by looking into its myths, rituals and symbols.[18]

[17] Hoebel (1972:546) states that the world view of the Navaho Indians contains this opposition.
[18] Some of the textbooks surveyed do not include "myth" in their chapters on religion, but rather under "The Arts." Cf., for example, Haviland (1975:337-340) and Beals and Hoijer (1971:531-532).

Myth

A traditional anthropological discussion has centered around the relation of myth to ritual (Malefijt 1968:187-189). Many 19th century anthropologists, influenced by the intellectualist approach of Frazer and Taylor, thought that myths came first; ritual were a kind of dramatic enactment of the stories related in the myths. The position was later reversed and the so-called ritual view of myth become popular. This maintained that myths came later in history as an explanation of rituals which were already part of a people's cultural heritage. There is virtual agreement by anthropologists that both these views are somewhat naive and both are quite untenable (Jacobs 1964:284). While a few anthropologists (Mair 1965:228) still tend to give mythology a secondary role, if not historically at least ideologically speaking, the majority of anthropologists would agree with Collins (1975:435) that historical questions about the precedence of myth over ritual or vice-versa are not open to testing and are thus insoluble. What is indeed important is that myth and ritual are inter-dependent and that both form an integral part of any religion.

Another discussion which is often mentioned in anthropological literature is the issue of a myth's validity. A number of anthropologists insist that myths are accepted as historically true by those people who relate them as part of their belief system (Stewart 1973:470; Montagu 1969:197). Consequently, Lucy Mair (1965:227) can state quite categorically that the statements that anthropologists call myths are certainly untrue. There seems to be a lot on anthropological confusion on the matter. It has to be admitted that in Western tradition, which has a strong sense of history, many myths were, and still are, held to be literally and historically true. The rise of the Biblical Criticism especially in the second half of the 19th century led to the abandonment of many Bible stories as historical events (De Vries 1962). Whether the same process occurred in all societies is not clear at all; because we are not sure what kind of concept of history, if any, primitive peoples possessed before they felt the impact of Western civilization. And whether primitive peoples ever asked the question about the relationship between myth and history remains, therefore, an enigma. It might be more plausible to examine what is happening

in the changing world of non-literate societies today and to find out whether concepts like myth and history have become part of their ideology. Anthropology textbooks give no indication that this has been done.

The common definition of myth equates it with falsehood or with some ill-founded belief held uncritically.[19] Such a definition is not the anthropologist's (Anderson 1976:282; Dundes 1968:117). Surely, the mythical story can be partly or wholly false. But this is hardly the main question to ask; on the contrary it is possible that the question of a myth's truth or falsehood is simply irrelevant (Pelto and Pelto 1976:400; Middleton 1970:504). Myths may lie beyond historical truth or falsehood. Their importance and validity are not based on their historical accuracy or verification. A myth can have a validity and truth of itself — a truth which is not of the historical order (Maranda 1972:266; Friedl 1976:275; Bohannan 1963:329).

Anthropological definitions of myth, when given, are some-what vague. "Myths," we are told, "are stories about the past that are intended to justify some features of the present life of a people" (Pelto and Pelto 1976:400). Such a description, though sometimes found in anthropological literature, is practically useless. More revealing are those definitions which emphasize the element of the sacred, or of the supernatural, as the distinguishing feature of the mythical story. Thus, according to Swartz and Jordan, myth is "a story that embodies values of a culture and that has an aura of sanctity" (1976:671; Taylor 1973:397; Spradley and McCurdy 1975:443-444; Hoebel 1972:563; Collins 1975:435; Beals and Hoijer 1971:531; Mair 1965:228-229; Dundes 1968:117). In contrast, folklore is characterized by its secular dimension (Dundes 1968:118; Taylor 1973:431-432; Titiev 1963:546).

Anthropological interest in mythology has clearly shifted from the issue of its historical validity to that of its functions, structure and symbolism. The influence of Malinowski's functional analysis of myth is still strong in anthropological literature. Malinowski (1954:97) had insisted that myth cannot be an idle, aimless

[19] See *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Meriam Co., 1974).

cultural accretion; nor could it be symbolic or explanatory, for such an interpretation would ascribe to primitive peoples qualities they have not yet developed. Myth had rather a practical function. As Malinowski himself expressed it in his persuasive style:

> Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom (1954:101).

Without necessarily denying some explanatory and symbolic dimension to myth, many anthropologists have accepted with little question Malinowski's view that myth is a social charter (Swartz and Jordan 1976:671; Friedl 1976:268; Schusky and Culbert 1973:151; Maranda 1972:266; Mair 1965:227; Brown 1963:126; Gropper 1969:86; Collins 1975:439; Schusky 1975:186; Wells 1971:125-127; Montagu 1964:132).

Anthropologists in fact ascribe both sociological and psychological functions to myth. Myths cater for all kinds of human needs. They give security in the face of the discomfort and problems of life by justifying actions and by giving meaning to unexplainable phenomena. Hardships are met with courageous action because of the mythological assurance of the outcome. In many ways myths can lessen anxieties, thus contributing to the psychological well-being of the individual (Pelto and Pelto 1976:400; Jacobs 1964:274; Montagu 1969:198; Collins 1975:435). Another function is that some myths provide an institutional outlet for social norms. The mythical stories reveal human frustrations and attempts to escape the regulations and restrictions of society by retreating into a world of fantasy (Dundes 1968:126; Collins 1975:440).

Many sociological functions are performed by mythical accounts. Myths reinforce social norms and communal ways of behavior. They safeguard and add weight to the particular moral code of a people. Often myths have an instructive and educative function of task. Children are taught their cultural norms, values and customs by the narration of mythical stories (Hoebel 1972:562; Hunter and Whitten 1976:314; Schusky 1975:185; Collins 1975:

435 and 440). Most anthropologists seem to agree that several, if not all, of the functions of myth can exist side by side and it has become common to give psychological and sociological functions equal validity in the anthropological assessment of myth.

There is still mention in anthropological literature of the explanatory function of mythology. Myths sometimes explain the origins of the universe and of a people's way of life. They show how important social institutions and mores came into being and they give answers to the riddles of life (Bock 1974:311-312; Wells 1971:125; Holmes 1971:312; Gropper 1975:86). Not many anthropologists, however, would subscribe to Montagu's view that the main function of myth is explanatory (1969:198). When they mention this function the insistence is on the human effort to understand and bring order and value into the natural world (Bock 1974:320). Myths of origin, therefore, give meaning to the universe at large and to a man's place in it. Lienhardt (1966:136) insists that the social function of myth is to create a "coherent pattern of meaning, in terms of which the worshippers understand the order of the world and their relation to it".

Contemporary anthropologists have made two basic advances which go beyond the functional analysis of myth. They have investigated 1) the symbolic or expressive character of myths and 2) the structural make-up of mythological accounts. Those anthropologists who have followed the recent emphasis on symbolic studies (Firth 1973) have noted that myths are vehicles through which "a society expresses its beliefs about things it holds sacred" (Friedl 1976:274). The mythical stories embody and symbolize the morality and the basic value system of society (Swartz and Jordan 1976:671; Holmes 1971:332-333; Brown 1963:126; Gropper 1969:86; Hunter and Whitten 1976:68; Schusky and Culbert 1973:151; Dundes 1968:117). Thus the study of myth can be pursued because the mythical stories "reveal cognitive and ideological assumptions" (Maranda 1972:266). In such an investigation the anthropologist must go beyond what the myth says at face value and must try and unearth the implicit values about life itself. This stress tends to minimize the relation of the myth to the social order and draws attention to the philosophical and theological assumptions about reality which the myths portray in dramatic form (Keesing and

Keesing 1971:310). While a few anthropologists point out the Freudian interpretation of myth that it expresses unconscious desires or wish-fulfillments (Wells 1971:125-126; Stewart 1973:373; Montagu 1969:197), the majority tend to eschew such psychological explanations.

Another symbolic approach to mythology is to relate myths to symbolic transformations in society. This is Victor's Turner view. He observes that "Myths are *liminal* phenomena: they are frequently told at a time or in a site that is betwixt and between" (1968:576). In other words, the transition stages in social and religious being are highlighted by the teaching and recitation of mythological accounts. Turner's position stresses this fact and then concludes that the symbolic nature of myth refers to the process of change. Many myths can, therefore, be only understood within the framework of the cultural, social and religious transformation. Hoebel (1972:562), who endorses Turner's view, states that anthropologists today "relate myths more to symbolic transformations in which change and establishment of a new order of things is of more interest than origins." This is obviously an overstatement. There are only a handful of textbooks which even allude to Victor Turner's studies. And those which give prominence to initiation rites and to other rites of passage very rarely draw the reader's attention to the symbolic transformatory nature of the myths recited or enacted in this context.

Finally, the anthropology student is bound to come across Lévi-Strauss structural analysis of myth. In spite of the influence of Lévi-Strauss on contemporary anthropological thought, only a handful of textbooks dwell on his structural analysis of myth. His approach to mythology focuses on the general problems of human existence that cannot be resolved. His view holds that myths unconsciously express in binary opposition the contradictions which man experiences in his ordinary life. Much of his work is judged to be somewhat vague and untestable, requiring further research before it can be universally applied.[20] His explanation of myth at

[20] The following textbooks offer some critique of Lévi-Strauss: Plog and Bates (1976:230), Swartz and Jordan (1976:680-681), Ember and Ember (1973:211 & 463), Schusky and Culbert (1973:151-152), and Keesing and Keesing (1971:311-312).

times appears to be so far removed from what the believers hold that one wonders how subjective it is. The anthropological reaction to Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth is very cautious. Few textbooks propound it with much enthusiasm.

Ritual

Ritual is, like myth, an essential constituent of every religion. The study of ritual may appear less fraught with difficulties because it can be easily observed and described. Gestures, postures and actions performed within a religious framework are open to a kind of observation which no myth is. The understanding of ritual behavior, however, is not rendered easier that the analysis of myth. This becomes clear when one studies the various ways anthropologists have attempted to define ritual behavior and to specify more directly what ritual may be considered religious. The assumption in practically all anthropological works is that ritual, that is, patterned, repetitive behavior, need not always be religious. Some anthropologists have distinguished between ritual and ceremony, ascribing religious connotation to the former but not to the latter. Ritual would thus be "a form of stereotyped sequence of acts performed in a religious or magical context" (Mair 1965:200). This approach seems common among British social anthropologists. Beattie (1964:205), for instance, gives prominence to ritual in his analysis of both magic and religion and explains that ritual deals with human problems expressively and symbolically rather than scientifically and experimentally. Mair (1965:200-201) denies that rites (and ceremonies) have any practical and technological effects and endorses the view of Leach that ritual refers to the sacred (religious) rather than to the profane aspects of human life. Ritual is, like religion, opposed to science and technology. It has symbolic value with effects in the psychological and sociological realms and any practical results are incidental.

Such a clear-cut, apparently simple, theory is not a reflection of what most anthropological textbooks have to say on the matter. The distinction between ritual and ceremony is very rarely brought into the picture. Several anthropologists (Hammond 1971:258-259; Collins 1975:425; Hoebel 1972:456) identify ritual with ceremony, others look on ceremony as "a given complex of rituals associated

with a specific occasion" (Tylor 1973:377; Anderson 1976:283; Middleton 1970:502). Most anthropologists do, however, describe ritual in religious terms. Thus Friedl states that ritual is a prescribed way of carrying out religious activity, such as prayer, an act of worship, or a sacrifice (1976:278; Beals and Hoijer 1971:462; Gropper 1969:90). Ritual refers, in the words of Collins, to "supernatural practices" (1975:425). It is a means through which persons are related to the sacred (Haviland 1975:317).

Ritual has also been defined in much broader terms. Thus Hunter and Whitten (1976:302) assert that it "consists of culturally prescribed, periodically repeated, patterned sequences of behavior." Many anthropologists,[21] perhaps wisely, steer clear of any definition; and still others[22] avoid any explicit treatment of ritual behavior. A partial solution to the problem is to talk of ritual behavior in a religious context and to treat ritual and belief as one unit, very much as Marvin Harris has done. The student would, therefore, limit his investigation to that kind of behavior which is performed in the context of shared belief. There is anthropological agreement that the kind of behavior, called ritual, has a certain number of features or characteristics, namely it has to be repetitive, stereotyped, formal, standardized and patterned (Anderson 1976:283).

Anthropological studies on ritual have drawn attention to the functions ritual performs in the total life of a culture. These functions could be religious, psychological or sociological, or a combination of these various dimensions. Ritual reinforces and strengthens belief (Friedl 1976:278; Hammond 1971:259; Brown 1963:129); it paves the way for a better understanding of the supernatural and for an improved relationship with the spiritual world (Swartz and Jordan 1976:649; Haviland 1975:317; Hammond 1971:259; Beals and Hoijer 1971:461-462). It brings a sense of personal transcendence. It may also be a way of controlling supernatural power. Several anthropologists endorse Victor Turner's view that ritual is a means of transformation from one status, religious and/or social, to another (Taylor 1973:380; Hunter and

[21] Thus Swartz and Jordan (1976), Haviland (1975), Ember and Ember (1973) and Harris (1975) are the most obvious examples.
[22] Pelto and Pelto (1976), Spradley and McCurdy (1975) and Downs (1973) are surprisingly reticent on the subject of ritual.

Whitten 1976:306; Plog and Bates 1976:230). Ritual leaves also many psychological benefits on those who participate in it. It relieves or reduces psychological tension, stress, and frustration (Haviland 1975:317; Cone and Pelto 1969:92; Taylor 1973:379). It has the therapeutic value of reducing anxiety and thus calming the practioner (CRM Books 1971:298; Barnouw 1975:266; Gropper 1969:90; Beattie 1964:208). Ritual can also be looked upon as a safe outlet for emotion, giving reassurance and feelings of security (Bohannan 1973:330; Taylor 1973:379; Jacobs 1964:283; Haviland 1975:317). Most anthropologists seem to agree that, among the sociological functions of ritual, social integration, solidarity and control have a leading place (Cone and Pelto 1969:92; CRM Books 1971:298; Anderson 1976:290; Honigmann 1963:168). By engaging in ritual the participants acquire and reenforce their sense of belonging to the group; they also channel and control conflicts between individuals and between groups (Jacobs 1964:283; Plog and Bates 1976:238). These social effects have their repercussion especially on human values. Ritual behavior upholds and validates the acceptable system of values of a society. Collective sentiments are enhanced and stressed (Brown 1963:129; Beattie 1964:210; Taylor 1976:380; Gropper 1969:90). Ritual may also have the social function of educating and entertaining people (Barnouw 1975:266).

The tendency among anthropologists is to ascribe to ritual most of these functions, stressing at times the sociological or the psychological aspects. Generally speaking, there is almost unanimous agreement that these functions are positive and beneficial both to the individual and to the group. A few anthropologists mention some negative functions, such as creating anxiety, causing tension and strain, and inhibiting the creation of better practical techniques to handle human problems.[23] Hockett (1973:252) points out that ritual sharply reduces unpredictability and thus it relieves people of the emotional burden of making decisions. But even those anthropologists who alert their students to some dysfunctional effects of ritual behavior, list also the many beneficial results of the same rituals. No matter how bizarre the ritual may be, the beneficial results of its practice seem to outweigh its negative effects.

[23] Examples are Beattie (1964:208); Taylor (1973:380), CRM Books (1971:298). Barnouw (1975:266) refers vaguely to some dysfunctions of ritual.

The emphasis on the functions of ritual is based on the works of Durkheim, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. This approach to ritual has the advantage of interpreting and explaining human behavior from the point of view of its usefulness. While such an investigation may be satisfactory to the outside, it may, however, not receive much attention from the genuine, believing participant who accepts rites as part of his heritage. To the participant the content of the rite is more important than its sociological and psychological functions. The functional view tends either to ignore the content or to regard it as a secondary element in the study of ritual. A number of anthropologists, notably Turner (1969), Douglas (1966), and Beidelman (1966), have thrown into relief the importance of examining the content of the rite, that is the actual gestures performed and the ritual objects used. They are working with the underlying assumption that the meaning of the rite can only be grasped if one understands the content, which is a set of symbolic representations of beliefs, meanings and values. Hence the nature of ritual symbols can become a major focus of one's research (Keesing and Keesing 1971:312-313). While several anthropologists have held that rituals are expressive and symbolic, they have been inclined to notice mainly the social and/or psychological values manifested in ritual behavior. Beattie (1964:239) thus writes that "ritual is a language for saying things which are felt to be true and important but which are not susceptible of statement in scientific terms." But he does not go much beyond the social symbolism of Durkheim and Radcliff-Brown. More recently, Taylor points out that ritual is an economical means of expressing feelings about things that are difficult to communicate succinctly in words, or almost impossible to express more directly and less symbolically. He is one of the few anthropologists who gives ritual a symbolic definition. "Ritual," he writes (1973:377), "is defined here as the symbolic affirmation of values by means of culturally standardized utterances and actions." Such a definition is not restricted to the sociological and psychological functions, nor does it include the contrast between the scientific and the non-scientific. It directs one's attention to the very content of the rite, implying that ritual utterances, gestures and actions may themselves contain a meaning.

This new direction in ritual studies is in part influenced by the ethnoscientific method and the developments in linguistics. Nancy Munn, summarizing much of the work done on ritual in the last 15 years or so, shows how this trend is based on the initial work of Radcliffe-Brown and others and then points out that ritual can be seen from the "inside out" rather than from the "outside in," the latter being the typical functional approach. "Ritual," she writes (1973:579) "can be seen as a symbolic intercom between the level of cultural thought and complex cultural meanings, on the one hand, and that of social action and immediate event, on the other." Ritual thus becomes not just an action having conscious and unconscious results on its participants, but also, and perhaps mainly, a system of communication. The analysis of ritual on a linguistic model becomes rather complex, as Munn's essay shows; and this may explain why it has received little attention in most contemporary textbooks.

Symbolism

Anthropologists have reacted with mixed feelings to the recent stress on symbolism. Most contemporary textbooks give no indication that the study of symbols is an important factor in understanding a religion.[24] Some anthropologists, however, are adamant in their assertion that "in all cases beliefs about the supernatural are embodied in symbols" (Plogs and Bates 1976:229). As a matter of fact one way of communicating with the supernatural involves the use of symbols (Ember and Ember 1973:433; Aceves 1974:219-220), and therefore an analysis of these symbols seems necessary to understand what is being said and done.

The study of symbolism in anthropology textbooks is often mentioned briefly. Not many of these texts, however, make a serious attempt to enlighten the reader on what symbols are. Beattie (1964:69-71) is probably the best example of an anthropologist who clarifies the term "symbol" and then relates it to religious belief. He admits that the word "symbol" is often used

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[24] Among the best examples of textbooks who apparently ignore the recent advances in symbolic studies are Hunter and Whitten (1976), Harris (1975), and Pelto and Pelto (1976).

too widely to be applied to a special field of inquiry. He starts by defining "signs" as objects, things, etc. that stand for something else. Signs are then distinguished into signals and symbols. The former give information about the state of affairs, past, present, or future; they convey a specific message. Traffic lights are quoted as a typical example of signals. Symbols differ from signals in three important ways: i) signals may be quite conventional; but symbols have an underlying rationale which explains their appropriateness; ii) symbols commonly stand for or imply some abstract notion; signals, on the other hand, refer to some event or concrete reality; and iii) symbols always refer to what is valuable and as such are always charged with some emotion. Signs need have no emotional significance and are often accepted as a matter of fact convenience. With this distinction in mind, one can understand the insistence that while both humans and animals use signals, only humans are capable of symbolic expression. Beattie then goes on to suggest that symbolism can be studied on at least two levels: i) on the level of meaning and ii) on the level of functional analysis. In other words, the social anthropologist has to find the meaning which symbols convey to the native people and their values expressed in symbolic forms. The second level, that of functional analysis, is the anthropologist's endeavor to grasp the symbols in a wider, more general, frame of reference.

Spradley and McCurdy (1975:516-521) also deal at some length with signs and symbols in their chapter on language and speech. They examine the relationship between signs and symbols with the same care that Beattie does, but arrive at different conclusions. A sign is defined as "any object that represents or refers to something else." Three kinds of sign are then mentioned, namely i) an index, that is, a sign which is naturally associated with its referent ii) an icon, that is, a sign that has a formal resemblance to its referent; and finally iii) a symbol, which is a sign having an arbitrary relationship to its referent. Unlike Beattie, they note only one characteristic distinction between sign and symbol, namely that of arbitrariness. Consequently they can state, in opposition to Beattie, that some of the higher non-human primates can use symbols. In similar fashion, Swartz and Jordan, state that symbols differ from signs in their arbitrary nature. They describe symbols,

or "extrinsic symbols" as "representations that depend upon convention for their reference" (1976:244-245; Downs 1973:199-200). Signs, on the other hand, are "extrinsic symbols" which operate through direct representation. Swartz and Jordan also ascribe some symbolic ability to animals.

What is of interest in these authors is that, unlike Beattie who describes signs and symbols in his chapter on belief and values, they fail to show their readers how a study of symbolism can enhance our understanding of belief systems. The way most textbooks handle the concept and practice of "sacrifice" is a clear illustration of this weakness. In spite of the fact that sacrifice is almost a world-wide institution (Beattie 1964:234), and that it occupies an important place in the ritual practices of many religions, few textbooks give it much consideration. Those who do are concerned mainly with listing the beneficial, material and spiritual results sacrifice is supposed to bring with it. Thus sacrifice is said to be a rite performed to insure good hunting and crops, to ward off evil, disease and all kinds of injury, to acquire victory in war, to honor ancestors and to please, influence or persuade a god (Hunter and Whitten 1976:295; Ember and Ember 1973:187 and 229; Harris 1975:543-544; Pearson 1974:258-261; Hammond 1971:259). Beattie is the only example of a lenghty treatment of the symbolic aspect of sacrifice. He rightly points out that the symbolic aspect of sacrifice is intrinsic; that is, there is no way one can understand this ritual without examining the various symbolic meanings it depicts. He insists that symbolic behavior is not to be understood as a means of achieving something (1964:235; Haviland 1975:319). We can only understand sacrifice, he writes, "if we ask not only what the people who practice it are trying to do, but also what they are trying to say, and in what language they are trying to say it" (1964:237). Nancy Munn, who summarizes some of the important studies on symbolic ritual, draws attention to this same point. She starts from the work of Hubert and Mauss who saw sacrifice as a means of communication between the two worlds of the sacred and the profane. She then describes the "interstitial" properties of the sacrificial ritual as shown in Evans-Pritchard's study of Nuer religion. Applying Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis, she concludes that "the sacrificial action synthesizes the specific disturbance referable to particular events and individual

biographies with non-specific, pervasive contradictions inherent in Nuer life situations, encapsulated in the sacrificial symbolism" (1973:601-602). The sacrifice, thus, not only brings into the open, in symbolic form, the problems and contradictions of life, but also communicates to those involved in it some kind of religious solution. A sacrifice for rain, for example, will convey to the anthropologist not just the possible fact that the sacrifice is believed to bring about the necessary downpour. Rather it tells the place and importance of rain in the total life of the people, how they conceive it as a problem, and in what way they can go about solving it. The solutions may be there even if rain does not come after the sacrifice has been offered.

It has to be admitted that symbolic representation is found not only in the religious sphere but in most aspects of cultures. In order to understand symbolism it is not enough to look at it mainly as a form of arbitrary representation, omitting or deemphasizing the elements of communication, meaning and value. By neglecting these features many scholars end up by minimizing symbolic activity in religion. In so doing they become limited in their studies and observations to repetitive functional statements. They close up several avenues to the many interesting questions which the study of symbolism brings with it (Keesing and Keesing 1971:313-314), and often end up with a narrow understanding of religious belief and practice.

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