Religion and the Anthropologists
1960 - 1976

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RÉSUMÉ

L'anthropologie consacre maintenant beaucoup moins d'attention à établir les diverses étapes de l'évolution religieuse. Son centre d'intérêt se situe très souvent au niveau des fonctions psychologiques, sociales ou économiques de la religion. Un autre domaine d'intérêt se trouve au niveau des relations entre religion et société. On ne s'entend pas sur ce que seraient les concepts les plus appropriés pour l'étude de la religion. La principale méthode d'investigation anthropologique, l'observation par participation, est analysée et les difficultés qu'elle présente sont soulignées. On conclut que, même si l'attitude des anthropologues vis-à-vis la religion est parfois négative, les chercheurs dans beaucoup de domaines peuvent bénéficier des travaux anthropologiques sur la religion.

*Part II**

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGION

In tune with the spirit of the time, the 19th century anthropologists were interested in the origin and development of religious beliefs and practices. It was assumed that discovering the process whereby humans became religious and tracing the stages through which religious beliefs and practices went through, would lead to a better understanding of the nature of religion. Such an assumption might well be true. But by the first quarter of the 20th century the conflicting theories of origin were being seriously challenged. Today there is agreement in anthropology that none of these

theories can be maintained; they have indeed "become curiosities, survivals from anthropology's early history" (Honigmann 1963: 181; Downs 1973: 296; Schusky 1975: 202; Barnouw 1975: 242; Wax 1968: 226). The large majority of anthropologists,[25] however, have not only abandoned the 19th century theories of religious origins; they have discredited and rejected the validity of the quest itself. Any theory about the origin of religion is bound to be very conjectural and speculative; it would be by nature unverifiable (Montagu 1964: 126; Wells 1971: 119; Kottack 1974: 194; CRM Books 1971: 296). The search for origins is therefore a futile one. It is thus not surprising to find that anthropologists have simply lost interest in origins (Harris 1975: 520; Schusky and Culbert 1973: 153; Haviland 1975: 310). In fact several anthropology text-books do not discuss these theories at all,[26] and others hardly care to allude to them.[27]

In spite of the critique levelled against the early theories of origin, some anthropologists still maintain that a few vague generalizations on the origin and evolution of religion can be made from the data collected from various types of contemporary cultures (Plog and Bates 1976: 234). Thus, for example, Pelto and Pelto (1976: 388) remark that religion arises from the practical adaptation of the people to their environments. They fail, however, to specify the process. The concept of monotheism is taken by some to be a relatively late development in human history.[28] Ancestor worship, we are assured, gave rise to ethnic religions (Pearson 1974: 269). According to Hunter and Whitten (1976: 296-297), the cultural remains of our ancestors point to the evolu-tionary trend from simple belief systems to the complex theologies of today's religions. They postulate that "instrumental belief systems" (the religion of 'home erectus') preceded "transcendental belief systems" (the religion of 'homo sapiens'). Their presentation

[25] There are, of course, several exceptions. See Schusky (1975: 203), and Hoebel (1972: 592 ff.).
[26] Among the more typical examples are Mair (1965), Schwartz and Ewald (1968), Keesing and Keesing (1971), Beattie (1964), and Beals and Hoijer (1971).
[27] Such are the quoted works of Friedl (1976), Pelto and Pelto (1976), Holmes (1971), and Anderson (1976).
[28] See Brown (1963: 126) who seems to take this for granted. Fuchs (1964: 221) seems to be the only author of a modern textbook who subscribes to Wilhelm Schmidt's views on the origin of religion.

of this scheme is confusing and contradictory, to say the least.[29] It is probably less convincing than the theories of Frazer and Tylor.

This limited revival in anthropological interest in the origin and development of religion is due largely to the work of two sociologists, namely Guy Swanson and Robert Bellah. Their theories are described in several textbooks (Stewart 1973: 370; Plog and Bates 1976: 235-236; Ember and Ember 1973: 422-426; Kottack 1974: 193-194; Hunter and Whitten 1976: 297-298; Barnouw 1975: 268-269). Swanson (1960) accept, in spirit if not in detail, Durkheim's position that religion is a symbolic expression of society and then goes on to outline the different religions and societies which go together. Accepting Durkheim's idea that humans create their gods in the image of their own society, Swanson tries to put it to the test by studying fifty religions, chosen as representative of many different cultures. He concludes that a number of clear correlations between religion and society emerge from his work. Briefly, he concludes that a belief in ancestral spirits is likely to be found where kin groups are important decision making groups; that animism is related to societies where the nuclear family is the largest kin group; that polytheism is found with social classes and occupational specialization; and that monotheism is associated with political complexity; that is, a belief in a high god is likely to flourish where the political system has three or more levels of decision making groups. He also observes that his analysis points to a correlation between the intervention of the gods in the moral behavior of people and the varying degrees of wealth found within the society. Thus, for example, where private ownership is present, the gods are linked with social sanctions. Swanson has thus four main stages of evolution: ancestor worship, animism, polytheism, and monotheism. Each stage is paralleled with a social condition. There is a genuine evolutionary relationship between social and religious forms. Durkheim's theory that religion is but a reflection, an epiphenomenon, of the prevalent social system is taken for granted and no attempt is made to show more specifically how religious beliefs and practices come into being. To what degree

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[29] The sacred in their scheme is identified with the transcendental, the profane with the instrumental. Hence it follows that pre-neanderthal man had a profane belief system, while Neanderthal man had a sacred one.

Swanson relied on selected examples which tend to support his hypothesis is not easy to determine. None of the universalistic religions, like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, are considered in his treatment.

Robert Bellah's outline (1970) of the stages of religious evolution is, in certain aspects, more ambitious than Swanson's, because Bellah concentrates not on specific religions, but rather on broad religious trends. He deals with religion rather than with religions. Further he incorporates some of the great religions into his scheme. Unlike Swanson, he does not restrict his interest to the relation of religion to society. In the five stages he draws up he considers four main features: a) the symbol system; b) the kind of action it generates; c) the form of social organization in which particular religious stages are embedded; and d) the implications for social action that religious action contains. The five stages are labelled 1) primitive, 2) archaic, 3) historic, 4) early modern, and 5) modern. Bellah, like Swanson, sees a growing complexity of forms, as well as growth of freedom, individualism and objectification from the earliest stage to the most recent one. Unlike Swanson he does not overemphasize the Durkheimian position that religion is but a reflection of the social system. Probably the most noteworthy contribution of Bellah's scheme is his inclusion of some of the great religions, especially Christianity. His last two stages in particular are open to historical verification.

Both Swanson's and Bellah's schemes reflect a general anthropological trend which insists that religion did not come into being out of attempts to explain the world through individual introspection and intellectual reflection as Tylor and Frazer maintained (Haviland 1975: 313). One must note, however, that there has been a slight revival of late in the explanatory side of religion which has created some debate on Neo-Tylorianism in contemporary anthropology (Horton 1968; Ross 1971).

It is also of interest to note that Swanson's and Bellah's works are mainly attempts to delineate the evolution of religion from the earliest times and not theories purporting to explain how religion came into being. There is, however, the underlying assumption that religion is man-made, directly or indirectly. The views of both scholars are open to the same critique which so

many anthropologists have levelled at the 19th century theories. The evolution of religion is a matter of speculation and curious deduction (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 297). While their theories may be plausible, they stand beyond verification, subject to being displaced by other unprovable hypotheses. Because of this uncertainty, it is legitimate to ask whether the search for origins and for the early stages and development of religion will help towards understanding the many religions of mankind (Brown 1963: 119).

THE FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION

Anthropologists have, to a large extent, given up efforts to find out how religion came into being and how it developed in early human times; they have directed their efforts instead to understanding its functions (Taylor 1973: 397). The influence of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in this respect is still overwhelming. Malinowski's concern was with the needs which religion, consciously or not, satisfies, while Radcliffe-Brown's concentration was on the relation between religion and the rest of culture. Generally speaking, anthropologists see five major functions, or needs, which religion serves, namely, explanatory, emotional, social, validating, and adaptive.[30]

Explanatory functions

Religion offers explanations, interpretations, and rationalizations of the many facets of human existence. It satisfies the cognitive and intellectual needs of human beings by giving sure and definite answers (Keesing and Keesing 1971: 303; Swartz and Jordan 1976: 670; Richards 1972: 249; Schusky and Culbert 1973: 151; Bohannan 1963: 331; Taylor 1973: 397). It accounts for the inexplicable and provides solutions to those matters which humans do not quite have within their grasp (Beattie 1964: 205; Holmes 1971: 312). Religion acts as a problem solver — it unravels those issues which are not, or cannot be, elucidated by any other means. Illness, death, accidents, disasters, and all kinds of evil are explained

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[30] Since the functional approach has been applied also to the study of myth and ritual, anthropologists tend to be repetitive when outlining the functions of religion in general.

by religious beliefs (Maranda 1972: 264; Schwartz and Ewald 1968: 367; Aceves 1974: 223-224; Plog and Bates 1976: 237; Downs 1973: 306; Brown 1963: 133; Crump 1973: 121; Honigmann 1963: 45-46; Spradley and McCurdy 1975: 424). Religion furnishes an organized picture of the universe and man's relation to it.[31] Religious beliefs provide value systems and give meaning and coherence to human experiences (Hammond 1971: 258; Hunter and Whitten 1976: 295; Haviland 1975: 308; Spradley and McCurdy 1975: 426; Plog and Bates 1976: 237). "A religion," writes Lienhardt (1966: 134), "provides a distinctive pattern of experience, a map of the psyche and the world which, for believers, is held to represent the situation of man in true proportion and scale."

Emotional functions

The most common psychological functions assigned to religion are emotional. Many anthropologists affirm that religion, by giving the person identity, security and courage, reduces, relieves and allays anxiety, fear, tension and stress (Richards 1972: 274; Gropper 1969: 82; Harris 1975: 524; Kottack 1974: 194; Keesing and Keesing 1971: 303; Honigmann 1963: 49; Pearson 1974: 279; Beals and Hoijer 1971: 465; Beattie 1964: 205; Bohannan 1963: 331). Besides, religious beliefs and practices help the individual cope with life, especially with the unknown and uncontrollable aspects of human living (Friedl 1976: 270; Aceves 1974: 223-224). Because religious beliefs dispel the uncertainties and incongruities of life, especially those relating to death and the unknown, humans have comfort and confidence when facing the difficulties they encounter (Swartz and Jordan 1976: 670; Wells 1971: 119-120; Stewart 1973: 344; Crump 1973: 127; CRM Books 1971: 292). Religion has thus been allotted the positive psychological function of emotional integration (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 304-305).

Social functions

Following Durkheim, a majority of contemporary anthropologists concur that religious beliefs and practices are instrumental

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[31] Beals and Hoijer (1971, p. 465) think that this is the primary function of religion. Cf. also Gropper (1969, p. 82) and Hoebel (1972: 563 ff.).

in maintaining, if not creating, social solidarity (Swartz and Jordan 1976: 675; Kottack 1974: 194; Beals and Hoijer 1971: 468; Plog and Bates 1976: 238). Religion is a force of integration, a unifying bond, binding and cementing together the members of a particular group (Gropper 1969: 82; Kessler 1974: 144; Wells 1971: 119; Hunter and Whitten 1976: 304-305; Taylor 1973: 398; Richards 1972: 274; Aceves 1974: 223-224; Titiev 1963: 535). Social stability is often sustained by religious beliefs and rituals, which tend to minimize conflict and promote social control (Plog and Bates 1976: 238; Crump 1971: 127; Titiev 1963: 524; Haviland 1975: 308; Schwartz and Ewald 1968: 373). Religion also plays a part in the socialization process. It is an instrument for accepting attitudes and activities which are not necessarily learned from experience, and a device for preserving knowledge (Plog and Bates 1976: 238; Beals and Hoijer 1971: 468).

Validating functions

Another function of religion, closely linked with the social functions, is that of validating cultural values. Religious beliefs and practices support, at times with sanctions, the basic institutions, values, and aspirations of a society (Keesing and Keesing 1971: 303-304; Taylor 1973: 398; Holmes 1971: 317). More precisely, religion inculcates social and ethical values; it justifies, enforces and implements a people's ideological assumptions and the way of life of a group (Richards 1972: 274; Gropper 1969: 82; Schusky and Culbert 1973: 151; Beals and Hoijer 1971: 468).

Adaptive functions

More recently, several anthropologists have emphasized the adaptive functions of religious beliefs and rituals. That religion is related to the environment does not require much proof; expressions of belief systems are made in materials locally available (Kessler 1974: 145). But the relation between religion and the environment is more instrumental. Through religious beliefs and practices humans have been able to adjust and utilize the environment for their needs. Such beliefs and activities have "real effects in the extraction of energies and materials or defence of a culture" (Anderson 1976: 290). In other words, they are not merely sym-

bolic; they can also bring about or create concrete effects on the way of life of a particular people. Religious rituals may thus have ecologically relevant results (Kottack 1974: 199). Some anthropologists have called religion "a tool for survival" (CRM Books 1971: 297). One of the leading proponents of this view is Marvin Harris (1975: 548) who points out that "even beliefs and rituals that appear to be irrational, whimsical, and maladaptive often possess important positive functions and are explicable in terms of recurrent adaptive processes." Probably the best example of such adaptation is the case of India's sacred cow. Harris (1966) argues that the taboo against cow slaughter in Hindu India is beneficial to the Indian ecosystem. The religious doctrine of ahimsa, therefore, has contributed to the basic agricultural and other economic needs of the Indian subcontinent.[32]

Another instance of religion's adaptive function is provided by Rappaport in his study of the Tsembago of New Guinea (1967). The main focus of his work is the ecological significance of their ceremonial slaughter of pigs. He concludes that such rituals, though apparently wasteful, are means of regulating the relationships of people to their habitat and to groups with which they are in contact (Anderson 1976: 292-293; Kottack 1974: 201-203).

Divination, the ritual waste of yams, and revitalization movements have all been examined for their adaptive functions (Anderson 1976: 290-291; Plog and Bates 1976: 240; Kottack 1974: 198). Kottack has suggested that Australian totemism, which has usually been seen as a way of maintaining social solidarity, might have aided the Australian aborigine population in adapting to their material environment. Taboos against killing certain animals might have protected some species which would have otherwise died out, while ceremonial rituals controlled their increase (1974: 196).

As a rule, therefore, anthropological works stress the positive fulfillment of human needs achieved by religious beliefs and rituals. A few dissident voices point out that concepts of the super-

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[32] Harris's view is accepted by Kottack (1974: 196-198); Kessler (1974: 151); Ember and Ember (1973: 436-437); Schusky (1975: 140-141); and Plog and Bates (1976: 242). None of the surveyed books explicitly reject his view which is still a subject of debate in anthropological circles.

natural have increased human anxieties rather than alleviated them. Religion, some note, can also create conflicts; it can cause disintegration, especially in pluralistic societies (Pearson 1974: 279; Stewart 1973: 344; Richards 1972: 276-278; Harris 1975: 514).

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Following the lead of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, anthropologists have studied in depth the relations between religion and the rest of culture. Known as the structural/functional approach, this method is still common in anthropological studies of religion (Malefijt 1968: 290-328). Radcliffe-Brown had opposed Malinowski's functionalism because the latter argued that rituals tended to allay anxiety. Radcliffe-Brown insisted that the explanation of religious rites shoud be found on the sociological level. Negative and positive rituals existed side by side because they are part of the mechanism which maintains society in existence. Today most anthropologists see the views of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown as compatible, and textbooks describe with approval both the functions which religion fulfills and its relations with social life in general (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 312-313).

In general terms it is stated that religion reflects the unique culture and experience of each society (CRM Books 1971: 292). Particularly in primitive cultures, religion and society are so intertwined that they cannot be easily separated. Hence to distinguish religion, say, from politics and economics, would be somewhat artificial (Kessler 1974: 145; Bock 1974: 326; Titiev 1963: 502).

Many of Swanson's correlations between religion and society referred to above, find acceptance in current anthropological thought (Plog and Bates 1976: 235-236). Religious beliefs and practices are associated with particular kinds and levels of social structure. Anthony Wallace has outlined a fourfold classification of religious systems, namely, individualistic cults, shamanistic cults, communal cults, and ecclesiastical cults. They are found existing in uniformity with certain types of social organization (1966: 86-88).[33] Thus the supernatural order is to some extent modelled on

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[33] Wallace's scheme is adopted by Harris (1975: 522-523).

human social relationships (Keesing and Keesing 1971: 308). There is remarkable correspondence between the government of the universe and that of human society, between the structure of the world of the gods and the world of man (Bock 1974: 315 and 343; Ember and Ember 1973: 425-425). Religious beliefs and values can be deeply embedded in the social structure, as the caste system in Indian would seem to indicate (Collins 1975: 351-352; Friedl 1976: 275-276; Hunter and Whitten 1976: 343-344; Mair 1965: 55-56). Even beliefs in an afterlife may be patterned on the way society is constructed and conceived (Schwartz and Ewald 1968: 349 ff.). Harris (1975: 554-556) goes as far as to interpret revitalistic movements as a dramatic example of how closely related are religion and social conditions.

There is also a close relation between religion, politics, and economics. Belief in a high god is associated with social and political complexity. The nature of the deity may reflect the economic level of a culture (Otterbein 1972: 96; Holmes 1971: 317-318; Montagu 1964: 123).[34] Thus, in those societies where a chief has priestly functions, sacred and political power are usually equated (Titiev 1963: 510). The rise of specialized religious practioners is linked with the increase in economic and political specialization (Schwartz and Ewald 1968: 364). Economic surplus led the way to all kinds of specialists who now no longer need to work directly for food production and/or distribution (Pearson 1974: 261; Beals and Hoijer 1971: 450).

The most common distinction between the various types of religious practitioners is that between shamans and priests. The activities and statuses of both these religious specialists fit into different social structures. Priests, who are qualified to act in a religious capacity by the office they hold after a period of training, are found in relatively advanced agricultural societies. The organization of the priesthood, often consisting of a bureaucratized hierarchy, is common in highly structured and socially stratified societies. Shamans are more individualistic religious specialists who receive their power and ability directly from the supernatural. They belong to no organized religious group, propagate no

[34] The only dissenting view seems to be that of Fuchs (1964) who still follows Wilhelm Schmidt's theory.

explicit, party-line theology, and usually practice their healing skills as individuals and not as representatives of a priestly authority. They flourish in hunting, fishing and gathering societies. They represent the simplest expression of social differentiation. While the notions of priest and shaman depicted here are ideal concepts, leaving room open for some overlapping in both role and function, there seems to be little debate in anthropology about the basic relationships between these two religious specialists and the societies of which they are members (Wells 1971: 123-125; Taylor 1973: 395-397; Collins 1975: 422-426; Gropper 1969: 84; Kessler 1974: 146-147; Schusky and Culbert 1973: 147; Downs 1973: 303-306; Jacobs 1964: 280-282; Beals and Hoijer 1971: 450-457).

It is, however, still a debated issue in anthropology to what degree do social conditions determine the belief system. The tendency to accept Durkheim's view, that religion is but a symbol of society, is sometimes mitigated by the observation that religion itself leaves an impact on all other aspects of a culture. Religion is therefore not a mere passive reflection of the rest of culture. On the contrary, religious beliefs and rites can often play a leading role in social change, dictating the course of cultural evolution and revolution. Religious movements in particular can be a driving force of change (Kottack 1974: 195; Harris 1975: 548; Schwartz and Ewald 1968: 347), or a process of cultural revitalization.[35] Keesing and Keesing (1971: 310) reflect that even after having observed all the parallels and resemblances between religion and the rest of culture, one cannot legitimately argue that religion is nothing more than a projection of social life. Religion is not simply an epiphenomenon of social life (Bohannan 1963: 338).

Though it is still well entrenched in anthropology, the functional approach is not immune from critique. It tends to be very repetitive and is frequently too far removed from the every-day attitudes and values of the believers themselves. Brown (1963: 133) is, therefore, somewhat optimistic when she asserts that "the religion of any people is best understood in terms of its functions,

[35] This is Wallace's view (1966). Several anthropologists, in particular Hunter and Whitten (1976: 304-305); Friedl (1976: 386); Ember and Ember (1973: 437-439), and Plog and Bates (1976: 239-240) have made use of it.

i.e., what it means to and does for its adherents, and the part it plays in the total life of the community. The statement that the function explain why people believe, why they prefer to adhere to some religious meanings and practices rather than to others, is not a self-evident proposition (Swartz and Jordan 1976: 670). Believers do not, as a rule, conceive of their religion in terms of the psychological and sociological needs it helps them satisfy, nor in terms of the relations their beliefs have to their own society. In fact the functional/structural approach which regards religion simply as a device for interpreting a social system has one serious disadvantage; namely, it would all but empty religion of the meaning it has for the participants (Wax 1968: 235). Aceves's remark on the functional approach is incisive and to the point. "This approach," he writes (1974: 223), "is somewhat simplistic and outmoded, but it does provide a framework upon which we can build a discussion of what religious beliefs do."

THE STUDY OF RELIGION

The abandonment of the evolutionary approach to religion and the partial bankruptcy of the functional method have decelerated the progress in anthropological studies of religion. Many students of religion seem to realize that there are many more questions to ask about religion besides the needs it satisfies and the relations it has with the rest of culture (Mair 1965: 198). The interest in religion as a symbolic and intellectual system has thus been increasing over the last two decades. Such studies, however, as Schusky has rightly observed (1975: 182), have been hampered by the fact that anthropological theory about religion is probably the least developed. His complaint (p. 202) that little attention has been given to the study of religion by 20th century anthropologists may not be subscribed to by all his peers, but it certainly contains a grain of truth. Even in the recent development of the structural method, myth and ritual have been the subject of intensive research, but religion itself has almost been passed by unnoticed. The textbooks of the last fifteen years give ample evidence that the functional interpretation is, by and large, still the dominant theory in the anthropological understanding of religion.

Difficulties in studying and understanding religion

Some anthropologists have been able to specify the area a student seeks to study when he approaches religious data. Lienhardt (1962: 128), for one, thinks that the main interest lies "in the nature of belief and knowledge, and of the symbolic action and expression in specific social contexts." Swartz and Jordan (1976: 646), emphasizing the fact that religion is part of culture and can only be understood as such, maintain that an anthropologist "wants to know how shared understandings about religion are related to other shared understandings and how religious statuses are related to other understandings and statuses." There is a further interest in the relation between personality and religious beliefs. Many anthropologists stand squarely and solely within the functional framework. Others suggest that the first area of study should be how people view the world and organize their experience (Wax 1968: 235).[36]

From these somewhat divergent opinions on what is the area of religious study one can perhaps understand why anthropological theory of religion has lagged behind most other areas of culture. Schusky (1975: 182) thinks that this is so because much of religious behavior is based on emotions and hence is not constant and regular as are other forms of behavior. His reasoning seems erroneous on two counts. First of all, religion is not the only area of human life where the emotions play an important role; kinship and politics being typical examples. Secondly, even emotions can be, and often are, standardized and institutionalized. That religion offers unique problems to the student is admitted by several anthropologists. Normative beliefs are not easily expressed and far from readily grasped by outsiders (Gropper 1969: 86). The religious beliefs of an alien culture are always the most difficult aspect of their lives (Swartz and Jordan 1976: 646; Hunter and Whitten 1976: 302; Birket-Smith 1965: 337). Misunderstandings are, therefore, more likely and more frequently to abound in religious matters than in any other aspect of a culture (Bohannan 1963: 339). It is

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[36] Crump (1973: 117), in a rather muddled paragraph, might have had the same idea in mind.

hard for a student, as Ember and Ember point out (1973: 417; Middleton 1970: 500), to agree whether a particular custom in our own society is religious or not; it may even be harder to do so with many customs of primitive societies where religious institutions are more closely related to the rest of culture than they are in Western civilization (Friedl 1976: 264). Ethnocentricity is also an obstacle to any scholar who is limited by his own beliefs or preconceptions about religion (Friedl 1976: 268). People may also find it hard to confide their innermost beliefs and experiences to outsiders. Further, unlike most areas of culture, religious beliefs and rites are directed to non-empirical realities which cannot themselves be studied directly (Titiev 1963: 506; Mair 1965: 186).

Granted this awareness of specific difficulties in the understanding of religion, it is strange that anthropologists have not yet developed a theory and method which are more appropriate to the understanding of religious beliefs and practices. It is even more perplexing to note that several anthropologists assume that the same or similar theory and/or method can be applied to all areas of anthropological research including religion (Schusky 1975: 202 ff.; Schwartz and Ewald 1968: 346; Bohannan 1963: 330-331 & 338).

ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

Anthropologists have in the past created many conceptual tools for analyzing, classifying and interpreting religious phenomena. The early anthropologists made up a whole list of terms under which religious beliefs and rituals were neatly labeled. Animatism, animism, mana and totemism are among the more well-known terms found explained in most current textbooks. In the past anthropologists vied with one another as to what "religion," animatism, etc., was the most primitive, that is, the most simple and ancient, in the evolution of mankind. These terms and the ideas they conveyed became part and parcel of anthropological jargon. Few of the contemporary anthropological textbooks have overcome this early influence and shed the use of these concepts with the erroneous meaning they so often convey. Animatism, the preanimistic stage concocted by Marett (1909) denotes "an im-

personal, supernatural power of force that can be associated with animate or inanimate objects or persons or places" (Stewart 1973: 463). Or it could be looked at as the "doctrine that certain objects or natural phenomena that we consider inanimate are themselves capable of sentiment action and movement" (Beals and Hoijer 1971: 442). Animatism is always linked with the supernatural (Ember and Ember 1973: 421; Wells 1971: 121). Pearson (1974: 244) does not throw much light on its meaning when he affirms that the concept "is quite close in many ways to modern science." The term, as Richards (1972: 257) observes, is so similar to animism that it has plagued generations of students.

Marett had based his formulation of animatism as the earliest stage of religious consciousness on the concept of mana which Codrington (1891)[37] had described in his work on the Melanesians and which Marett and Durkheim made popular. Mana has, since then, become a household word in anthropology textbooks. It is usually described as a kind of force, an impersonal, undifferentiated, supernatural power (Friedl 1976: 309; Swartz and Jordan 1976: 663). It is really amazing how many textbooks have accepted Marett's idea that mana is similar or analogous to electricity (CRM Books 1971: 293; Brown 1963: 123; Taylor 1973: 391; Barnouw 1975: 244; Spradley and McCurdy 1975: 435-436; Plog and Bates 1976: 228-229; Downs 1973: 298; Richards 1972: 258; Pearson 1974: 245; Barnouw and Hermanson 1972: 51; Kottack 1974: 185; Schusky and Culbert 1973: 142). Harris's (1975: 518) interpretation goes even farther. He maintains that certain attitudes in Western society towards electricity, gravity and atomic energy "may be considered as manifestations of a belief in mana." Mana, however, as Codrington himself realized, is always linked with some person who controls and directs it and it seems to be more related to "virtue, prestige, authority, good fortune, influence, sanctity and luck" (Haviland 1975: 312).[38] Hammond (1971: 282) is probably close to its meaning when he relates the concept to "baraka" or

[37] The word "mana" was not brought into the English language by Malinowski after his studies in the Trobriand Islands as Stewart confidently asserts (1973: 346).
[38] See Codrington's own description of the word (1891: 119 ff.). Some change has undergone in the usage of the word "mana" as several textbooks seem to indicate; cf. Wax 1968: 236-237; Pearson 1974: 245-246; Montagu 1964: 126-127.

holiness among the North African Muslims and to the Christian veneration of saints. Some light may be shed on the notion if it is compared to the Christian idea of "grace" (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 110).

Tylor's influence on the anthropology of religion lingers most decisively in the anthropological usage of the term animism.[39] Animism is described as "the belief that objects, (including people), in the concretely perceivable world have a nonconcrete spiritual element" (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 302). Or more simply, in Tylor's words, as "the belief in Spiritual Beings" (1958, vol. 2, 8-9).[40] Some anthropologists still look favorably on his theory that animism is the simplest and most ancient religion of mankind and consider it to be "highly plausible" or to enjoy "a high degree of probability" (Stewart 1973: 345; Hoebel 1972: 576; Schusky and Culbert 1973: 152).

Most of these terms are described in anthropological textbooks with little or no critical evaluation. The reader is likely to conclude that they are still viable and useful concepts for understanding religious beliefs and practices. The plain fact, however, is that they are not. The textbook material tends to be somewhat contradictory here. For while accepting the above mentioned concepts as religious, they seem to reject the religious meaning once ascribed to "totemism." Totemism, in fact, receives mention either in relation to social groups (Harris 1975: 534-535; Mair 1965: 192; Schwartz and Ewald 1968: 392-394; Lienhardt 1966: 145; Richards 1972: 276-277), or to its symbolic features (Beals and Hoijer 1971: 467; Schusky 1975: 76; Hoebel 1972: 629-630; Plog and Bates 1976: 239). One hastens to agree with Crump (1973: 110) tha the history of totemism in anthropological studies is very confusing. No wonder so many anthropologists refrain to include it in their chapter on religion. One might also add that this confusion overflows to all other categories, like animism and animatism, which early anthropologists invented to classify religions and to determine their stage in the grand evolutionary scheme. Anthropologists appear, under

[39] The word itself was not invented by Tylor, as he himself admits; cf. 1958, vol. 1: 9 (footnote 1).
[40] The dependence of contemporary anthropologists on Tylor's definition is still fairly obvious; cf. Anderson 1976: 294; Beals and Hoijer 1971: 442; Swartz and Jordan 1976: 664.

the influence of Lévi-Strauss (1966: 15-32) to have abandoned the "totemic illusion," but they still suffer from the "animistic illusion" and the like. About fifty years ago Robert Lowie (1952: 172) referred to such concepts as "animism," "animatism," and the like, as "meaningless catchwords." Contemporary anthropologists have, in their textbooks, not yet been able to break loose from these slogans and consequently from the misunderstandings they lead us into.

World View

Many anthropologists have been aware that the early anthropological concepts of religion are at best imperfect and unsatisfactory tools to study religious beliefs and rituals. Probably the most successful notion used to replace them is the idea of world view. Developed originally by Robert Redfield, several anthropological texts have used it effectively to describe the beliefs and values of primitive societies. World view or ideology is a concept which includes what is normally labelled under "religion," but is much broader in content. Several textbooks have chapters both on "religion," and "world view" (Spradley and McCurdy 1975; Hoebel 1972), but the two concepts overlap.

World view refers to the basic outlook towards life which most people in a particular society hold in common (Friedl 1976: 138 & 153). In includes the native's point of view, the values, attitudes, and moral principles which are implicitly or explicitly adhered to. Under world view are listed cosmology, the relations man has towards the rest of the universe, and ideas or assumptions about the human personality and human relations. In other words a people's world view will contain statements about the nature of the world, the nature of man and the place he has in the universe (Taylor 1973: 421; Jacobs 1964: 366). "The cognitive view of life and the total environment which an individual holds or which is characteristic of the members of a society is the world view or ideology" (Hoebel 1972: 542). By the concept of world view the anthropologist attempts to discover and describe the way "a people characteristically look upon the universe" (Spradley and McCurdy 1976: 465). The concept of world view, though an obvious Western idea, depicts expressively the component elements of the indigenous

approach to life and its problems. It conveys a kind of native philosophy of life. The world view of a people can be presented as the organizing principle of the "bewildering chaos of experience" (Hoebel 1972: 541) — a position based on Lévi-Strauss's view of myth as a resolver of contradictions.

The anthropologist who uses the concept of world view assumes that the native's view of life is structured; that all the attitudes, values and beliefs form an organized whole, or an integrated system (Hoebel 1972: 542; Keesing and Keesing 1971: 315). Religion is thus studied as a belief system (Bock 1974: 344-346). In other words it is assumed that religious phenomena have an underlying pattern or structure (Middleton 1970: 500). This is a basic assumption of cognitive anthropology. While the individual components of a world view may be the native way of looking at reality, the assembling of these components, the drawing up of the structure, is the anthropologist's work. Spradley and McCurdy (1975: 465; Anderson 1976: 280; Bock 1974: 309) assure us that "a particular world view cannot usually be stated or formulated with precision by the people." This may be correct, but one must also bear in mind that anthropologists themselves have had difficulty expressing primitive world views accurately.

By studying religious beliefs and practices under the category of world view the scholar should be able to see religion as a system in itself; that is, as a unified structure which can make sense on its own without constant reference to social institutions and without analysis of the functions religious statements and rites might satisfy (Middleton 1970: 507). Since the concepts of ideology, world view and system include both supernatural and natural elements, the student can describe a world view without necessarily making the distinction himself. He could thus rely more on the distinctions, categories and classificatory notions the indigenous people use. The student has in this way a better chance of achieving an objective perspective of the society he is studying.

METHOD AND TECHNIQUE

One of the greatest contributions of anthropology to the study of mankind has been the fieldwork approach. This procedure

implies that the scholar is trained to make his or her abode among the people under study, to assimilate part of their culture and life-style, and to elicit direct information about their culture. Two general problems face the fieldworker: i) one must determine what exactly are the goals of the study. The researcher must decide whether the end result is to be a description of the native's point of view, or a scientific analysis in pre-established concepts commonly accepted in the Western academic world. This problem has been articulated in terms of the emic and the etic viewpoints; ii) one must apply the method of participant-observation in the study of religious beliefs and practices which are foreign to one's way of thinking, believing and acting.

Etic and Emic

One of the contemporary debates regarding method has centered around the issue whether the anthropologist should look at his data from an etic or an emic viewpoint. Briefly, the etic approach analyses a culture with notions developed and tested within the Western tradition. Terms like animism and the like are a good illustration of this methodology, for these categories are an obvious importation from the academic background of the anthropologist and have no direct basis in the way many non-literate people conceive of their beliefs. Functional studies typify the etic standpoint since the concepts used to understand and explain religious beliefs and practices are, more often than not, foreign to the native's world view. The anthropologist who adopts the etic outlook is interested in interpreting the data with little regard to the understanding which people have about what they are doing and thinking (Swartz and Jordan 1976: 618). This method has also been labeled the analytical perspective, that is, the scientific viewpoint of the outside observer (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 20).

The emic position, employed by ethnoscientists and cognitive anthropologists, attempts to understand a culture or a religion from the native's own point of view (Plog and Bates 1976: 30). In studying other peoples, therefore, the anthropologists endeavor to sketch the way they envisage the world they live in. The very categories of the indigeneous people are chosen as the principles

for organizing the data (Swartz and Jordan 1976: 618). Hence the emic approach represents the folk perspective, the viewpoint of the observed rather than that of the observer (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 20). Ethnoscientists claim that to describe the structure of a people's own conceptual world by using Western labels like politics, economics and religion can be worse than misleading (Keesing and Keesing 1971: 320).[41]

Both the etic and the emic views may have their uses (Plog and Bates 1976: 30), but it is doubtful whether the analytic, etic outlook can make much headway by itself. Friedl (1976: 138) has remarked that the world view can only be perceived correctly from the insider's perspective. This would imply that religious concepts and ideas can be understood more faithfully in the framework of a particular people's categories of thought. This is a difficult task. Hunter and Whitten (1976: 306) are right on the mark when they observe that one of the difficulties in applying the emic approach to religion is "lack of shared perceptions or perspectives among the people we are studying." This raises the issue whether an anthropologist without any religious belief of his own will be hampered in his study of religion.[42]

This problem is further aggravated by the technique which anthropologists have developed from their field experiences, namely, the method of participant observation. The importance of such an approach is now being recognized by scholars in other fields. Ninian Smart (1976: 614), a historian of religions, writes:

> The matter of coming to understand the inner side of a religion involves a dialectic between participant observation and dialogical (interpersonal) relationship with the adherents of the other faith. Consequently, the study of religion has strong similarities to, and indeed overlaps with, anthropology.

Participation in religious beliefs and rituals is certainly not easy and may not come naturally to a researcher. It may require no special effort on the part of the student to attend religious rites and to conform outwardly to the behavior of the believers. But this is outward, superficial participation. It lacks the essential

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[41] Bock (1974) avoids even labeling chapters with such titles as "Politics," "Kinship," etc.

[42] I have discussed this problem elsewhere; cf. Saliba, 1976: 144 ff.

quality which the adherents of a particular religion have. The feelings and rationale often associated with attendance at public rites are unique to the believer, and no unbeliever can possibly share them. The same can be said about sharing religious beliefs. Sympathetic understanding, though necessary, is no substitute for actual sharing. The anthropologist who has no beliefs of his own would not even be able to find common grounds of belief with the people whose religion he is studying. Not many anthropological textbooks give any indication that anthropologists are aware of the problem. Hunter and Whitten (1976: 301) again touch on the core of the problem when they expound on the difficulty inherent in participant observation. They write:

> For that matter, anthropologists, as a specialized subgroup of our society, have their own specific beliefs that they learn as part of their training. One of them is that they should enter fully into the lives of the people they study, using the technique of participant observation. It is thought that this task should be accomplished to the point where anthropologists come to see and understand the world in the manner of the people they are studying. However, very few (if any) anthropologists claim to have achieved this perspective, and the goal remains the ideal rather than an accomplished fact. Precisely because cultures are such complex systems of belief and behavior, it is doubtful that any anthropologist will ever be able to enter into every aspect of another society's way of life. Thus anthropologists usually settle for partial understanding of fragments of the belief systems of the people they are studying.

Participant observation seems to imply some involvement, that is, a recognition that there is an element of truth or reality in the religion under study, no matter how bizarre and incredulous the rites and beliefs might be. Middleton (1970: 502), however, asserts than an involved person would have difficulty recognizing that a belief which one holds to be true may have a social function quite apart from its religious one. This may be the case, but understanding a social function of a religious belief or ritual does not necessarily imply understanding the religion itself. The participant observer whose main interest in a religion is its social functions may do an admirable job at observation, but could hardly be called a participant. For real participation in religious matters by believers either ignores the sociological functions or places them secondary in importance. Middleton would have clarified the issue had he explained how a scholar could assent

to a faith without believing it. His further statement that the
fieldworker can accept the "as if" attitude or criterion is equally
taken for granted (Aceves 1974: 218). What does attending and
participating in a religious rite with the mental outlook of one
who acts as if one believes mean? The genuine participant perceives
his own religion with a set of inner feelings, attitudes and
convictions which are not a mask for the occasion. The method
of participant observation implies that the scholar has to adopt
some of the inner experience of the believing participant. The only
way out of this impasse is to state, as Middleton does, that religious
phenomena are, from an anthropological viewpoint, symbolic
representations of social relations. In other words, social relations
are symbolized in ritual or religious terms. This position, however,
would in no way be close to the participant's point of view. Besides
it seems to deny that the core of religious beliefs and rituals is
some kind of experience which is *sui generis*. The anthropological
tendency to see in religion nothing else but a symbolization of
social behavior leads directly to the charge of reductionism.

Religious Experience

The above discussion may show why anthropologists have been
rather reluctant to study and discuss religious experience. In fact
textbooks either omit mentioning such an experience,[43] or else
indirectly deny it (Plog and Bates 1976: 238; Downs 1973: 293-294;
Bock 1974: 319; Harris 1975: 525). Those who refer to religious
experience identify it with the experience of the supernatural, or
with the feeling of awe or of the sacred, or with the emotional
state of the participant that goes beyond ordinary experience
(Jacobs 1964: 288; Holmes 1971: 316; Schusky and Culbert 1973:
147; Pearson 1974: 257; Harris 1975: 514-520; Downs 1973: 309;
Hunter and Whitten 1976: 311; Spradley and McCurdy 1975: 426).
Visions, especially those of shamans, are frequently taken as
examples of religious experience. Anthropologists differ in their
interpretations of the shaman's experience, but most seem to prefer
a rather negative explanation: the shaman's experience is indicative
of suggestibility, or of emotional instability, or of hallucinatory

[43] Examples of such neglect are Anderson (1976), Titiev (1963) and Beals
and Hoijer (1971).

conditions (Harris 1975: 527; Hoebel 1973: 585; Barnouw 1975: 247-249). Others give a more positive explanation and see it as an experience of cognitive and emotional reintegration (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 310). No anthropologist seems to have tried to analyze the experience at any depth.[44] The reader of anthropological textbooks could easily be left with the impression that anthropologists are not at home with the concept and are not aware of the state of consciousness the experience implies.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ATTITUDES

The anthropologist who prepares for his field experience in an alien culture requires some intellectual and emotional training in order to be able to understand and interpret the phenomena he is studying. The difficulties encountered on the field are not easily overcome. For many beliefs will appear foolish and impractical; religious rites may at times appear ludicrous; and magical attitudes often leave an aura of irrationality (Swartz and Jordan 1976: 646; Downs 1973: 297; Otterbein 1972: 105). The average anthropologist does not believe that the supernatural powers are at work in shamanistic curing rites (Swartz and Jordan, 1976: 659). Sometimes one wonders whether the average anthropologist believes in anything at all.

Such attitudes may so affect the scholar's frame of mind that objectivity and impartiality may be seriously hampered. Consequently, the anthropologist must develop a mental attitude which will enable him to observe, study and interpret all religious phenomena without letting his own position on religion influence the outcome of his work and distort his conclusions. The anthropologist is first trained to accept human belief as a matter of fact. The ability to believe is a trait of human nature and one can approach all religious behavior as an expression of what humans can do (Downs 1973: 297). Besides the anthropologist is aware

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[44] Most anthropologists are not interested in the varieties of religious experience in the same way than pioneers like William James were. In general, psychological works related to religious experience are neglected and the reader of most anthropological textbooks is left with the impression that this area of investigation is not an anthropological concern.

that religious beliefs and rituals are important and meaningful to the believers and they may also have some practical uses (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 295; Otterbein 1972: 105). Consequently, the anthropologist is trained to respect the sincerity of the believers (Downs 1973: 294). He maintains his objective stance as a scholar by remembering that his task is not to search for truth or false-hood in the religious beliefs and practices of the world (Downs 1973: 310). In other words, the issue of the metaphysical reality of supernatural beings is a problem for philosophers and theologians and not for anthropologists. For the latter scholars, whether gods, for instance, really exist outside the human consciousness or not, is finally irrelevant (Aceves 1974: 218; Lienhardt 1966: 147). The anthropologist's objectivity consists in trying to understand the function of religious phenomena irrespective of their philosophical truth and theological validity (Middleton 1970: 502).

Swartz and Jordan (1976: 646), elaborating on the anthro-pological perspective to this problem, state:

> As a private individual, the anthropologist may be interested in philosophical truths. He may also be motivated to bring about a change in what he sees. As an anthropologist, however, his concern is not with whether what people believe is or is not philosophically valid or whether their beliefs would or should be exchanged for the beliefs he holds. As an anthropologist, he wants to know how shared understandings about religion are related to other shared understandings and how religious statuses are related to other understandings and statuses. He is interested in the interplay between religious beliefs and personality variables. None of these questions depend on any particular view of the validity of one or another religious system.

Abstaining from making statements on the truth or false-hood of religious phenomena implies some kind of relativism. Anthropologists have stated openly that "reality" is a culturally relative phenomenon (Hunter and Whitten 1976: 301-302). "Cultural relativism," writes Aceves (1974: 218), "is a must for the student of religion." The anthropologist is not concerned with establishing which is the best religion. He is, however, interested in finding out why religion is found in all cultures (Ember and Ember 1973: 418). Since he can only explore the human manifestations of religion, he takes it for granted that all religions are on an equal plane or footing and can thus be studied in the same way (An-derson 1976: 272; Hunter and Whitten 1976: 298-302). By

adhering to cultural relativism, the anthropologist is not making the philosophical statement that everything is relative and nothing is absolute. He is rather stressing the fact that in order to understand the diversity of human cultures and religions, the scholar should not start with a definite position absolutizing one particular culture or religion at the expense of all others.

Not all anthropologists, however, have refrained from making explicit or implicit judgments on the existence of supernatural beings. Men, we are told, invented the spirits and the gods (Ember and Ember 1976: 420; Pelto and Pelto 1976: 391). Supernatural beings or spirits are considered unreal; they exist only in the minds of the believers (Aceves 1974: 222). They are projections of the human mind or symbolical ways of coping with human problems (Beattie 1964: 227; Pelto and Pelto 1976: 391). Such affirmations contradict the previous statements about objectivity and impartiality. They seem to indicate that anthropologists are still trying to explain more systematically and plausibly phenomena they have already evaluated as illusory. This attitude would explain, at least partially, the neglect or denial of genuine religious experiences, which may have some other source besides the prevalent social conditions or the psychological state of the individual. Thus in spite of the endeavor to achieve some objectivity in summarizing anthropological views of religion, contemporary textbooks still exhibit some judgment on what religion is — and this judgment is not always positive.

CONCLUSION

The anthropological study of religion may not have made great strides since the days of Tylor and Frazer. It would, however, be unfair to state that no progress has been made over the last hundred years. Fieldwork studies have produced a wealth of reliable descriptive records about religious beliefs and rituals which early anthropologists never matched. Several textbooks have included examples of these studies, thus enhancing their work and demonstrating how interesting the study of religion can be (Hoebel 1972: 566-573; Swartz and Jordan 1976: 640-645). The functional approach, in spite of its flaws, does broaden our view of the uses

of religion. While a complete understanding of religious beliefs and actions is not attainable through functional analysis, few would doubt that it contributes to our apprehension and inter- pretation of religious data. Structural functional studies have raised serious questions on the nature of religion and its relation to social life in general — questions which are of interest also to normative disciplines, like philosophy and theology. Besides anthropological concern with the many primitive religions and emphasis on comparative studies have prepared the way for an understanding of religion as a universal phenomenon persisting in time and in space.

The anthropological insistence on the human creative element in the formation of religions is probably one of the most debatable tenets, especially from the point of view of the believer. Yet drawing attention to this human component has the advantage of providing a plausible, albeit incomplete, explanation of the variety of religious manifestations. Such human intervention may also be at play, unconsciously, in the process of religious change. The anthropological interest in religious change which can be substantiated by historical research is also important because it could point to contemporary evolutionary trends which might throw light on the nature of religion and its place in human life. In fact there is room for a new sub-discipline of anthropology, namely, "Applied Anthropology of Religion," which many social and religious reformers, among others, might find interesting and useful.[45]

In short, anthropological studies of religion, in spite of their shortcomings, contradictions and disagreements, open up new perspectives, leading the student to raise issues and try solutions which have so far been neglected. The limitations of anthropology of religion are twofold. Firstly, some aspects of religious phenomena are not open to the kind of empirical investigation which other aspects of human life might be. Secondly, anthropologists have, by their method and theory, restricted themselves to very speci- fically defined areas of research. Anthropology, therefore, cannot give a completely satisfactory interpretation and explanation of

[45] Many textbooks contain chapters on "Applied Anthropology," but such an application does not, as a rule, cover religion.

religious phenomena. Taking the above mentioned confines into consideration, it is still legitimate to conclude that anthropologists are responsible for a more valuable contribution to the study of religion than scholars in other fields are inclined to acknowledge.

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