

CHAPTER 1

Anthropology of Religion

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The study of religion has been central to anthropology since its inception. As an inclusive, comparative study of human societies, from their prehistoric origins to the present, anthropology has sought to describe, classify, and explain religious beliefs and practices. At the same time the term “religion” is elusive and problematic. While some early missionaries denied that the “savage” peoples they encountered had any religion at all, others saw religion everywhere. There has also been a tendency to label anything we do not understand in other cultures, past or present, as religious. The term often lacks even an approximate translation in non-Western languages, and scholars often fall back on the “I know it when I see it” line of argument.

Descriptions of the history of anthropology of religion commonly follow a chronological scheme that divides scholars and their views into broad theoretical categories, or “isms”: evolutionism, functionalism, structural-functionalism, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism, feminism, postmodernism, and so on. More recently we have been treated to a series of “turns,” such as the “ontological turn” and “material turn,” or simply “humanistic anthropology,” “paranthropology,” and “cognitive anthropology.” Each new development describes not the field as a whole but a sub-set of ideas associated with scholars who, often in collaboration with colleagues in other disciplines, seek to extend and explore new ideas and their application to anthropology.

When it comes to religion, I am persuaded that we are often describing different parts of the same elephant. When the psychologically oriented theory of Bronisław Malinowski (1884–1942), who believed that religion enables people to cope with life’s vicissitudes, is contrasted to that of his rigidly sociological contemporary Alfred

Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), who saw religion as part of the structure of society, helping to keep it in some kind of equilibrium, one scholar is examining the elephant's leg and the other its ear. The contention that religion has both a psychological and a social aspect, that it can both unsettle and stabilize, can be both illogical and rational, both formalistic and spontaneous, both devoid of personal significance and deeply meaningful, does not necessarily denote confusion or fundamental disagreement among scholars. Rather, it may reflect the complexity of the phenomenon "religion."

My approach is to move around the elephant, pointing out some of its features on the way, with the aid of some of the scholars whose works have helped us understand particular features of this creature we choose to call "religion." I begin with a survey of definitions and the context in which they originate, and then consider some of those features of religion that stir interest in a slightly different guise in each generation: the origin of religious thinking, the nature of religious experience, and the existence of different "mentalities," or forms of thought.

Definitions and Perspectives

Attempts to define religion inevitably reflect the theoretical orientation of the writer. An early and influential attempt at definition was Edward Burnett Tylor's "belief in spiritual beings." Tylor (1832–1917) held the first professorship in anthropology in the world at the University of Oxford, created for him in 1896. Although raised as a Quaker, Tylor saw himself as a scientific rationalist. All religious ideas had developed, in his view, out of a primitive belief in the animate nature of physical phenomena ("animism"). Traces of earlier beliefs and practices could be seen in contemporary religions through a process of "survivals." For Tylor, all religion is a mistaken attempt to make sense of the physical world in which we live, as rational as science but simply erroneous.

Bronislaw Malinowski, sometimes considered the founding father of fieldwork in anthropology through his pioneering work in the Trobriand Islands off Papua New Guinea in the early years of the twentieth century, focused on the individual, psychological function of religion. For Malinowski (1948), religion arose as a response to emotional stress. When technical knowledge proves insufficient, human beings turn to magic and religion in order to achieve their ends, and as a form of catharsis. By mimicking or anticipating the desired goal, rituals assert order in an unpredictable universe.

A third approach to religion is associated with scholars who take what is referred to as a symbolist view of society. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), drawing on data from Australian aboriginal societies, saw the group rather than the individual as the source of both profane, everyday norms and the sacred. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) Durkheim describes religion not as an individual response to life crises but as the embodiment of society's highest goals and ideals. Religion acts as a cohesive social force and adds up to more than the sum of its parts. It is real, in that it exists in people's minds and impels them to heed societal dictates, but what is perceived as external to society—God—is in fact a projection of God onto society and a reflection of society.

The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) has offered a definition of religion that combines Durkheim’s symbolic functionalism—religion as a collective social act—with Max Weber’s (1864–1920) concern for meaning—religion as a system for ordering the world. Unlike Tylor, Geertz does not define religion in terms of belief in God but rather as a symbolic system, the meaning of which can be decoded. Religion for Geertz is: “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973, 4).

Geertz’s definition has been extensively criticized by the Saudi Arabian-born, American anthropologist Talal Asad (b. 1932), who sees Geertz’s emphasis on the symbolic as too abstract, too far removed from the social, historical, and political context that gives a symbol its meaning. Asad challenges the assumption that religion can even be studied as a cross-cultural category. He concludes that “there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (Asad 1993, 29).

The English anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921–2007), particularly in her *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970), has focused on the relationship between social form and religious expression. Her approach is more systematic than that of Clifford Geertz. She looks for predictive patterns that link social structure (grid) and group pressures (group)—or lack of these features—to a social cosmology that justifies the pattern of that society. For example, a society with clearly defined social boundaries and strong social pressures (high grid and high group) is likely to be formalistic, pietistic, and pro-active in policing its boundaries, and to have a category of rejects. Douglas’s grid and group scheme has been applied to many different kinds of society, well beyond the religious sphere.

While many, if not most, anthropological approaches to religion are either agnostic or atheistic—wishing to study the beliefs and practices of others in emic, or indigenous, terms but without deeming them true—there are some scholars who adopt a more explicitly anti-religious position in the name of science. Here the errors inherent in a religious mindset appear so egregious that to give them any credence at all in any society is seen as dangerously unscientific. James Lett, an American anthropologist of religion, for instance, rejects the “bracketing out” of questions of belief characteristic of a phenomenological approach, as exemplified in E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1902–1973) oft-quoted dictum that “there is no possibility of [the anthropologist] . . . knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration” (cited in Lett 1997, 17). For Lett, “[c]onsiderations of disciplinary integrity, public welfare, and human dignity demand that religious claims be subjected to anthropological evaluation. . . . [A]nthropologists have an intellectual and ethical obligation to investigate the truth or falsity of religious beliefs” (Lett 1997, 104–105). Lett’s scientific approach to the study of religion leads him to conclude that “we know that no religious belief is true because we know that all religious beliefs are either nonfalsifiable or falsified” (Lett 1997,

116). According to Lett, scholars of religion have a duty to proclaim that fact. While Lett's sense of obligation to separate the study of religion from science represents a marginal position within the anthropology of religion, a generally materialist view of the universe and a non-transcendental, non-revelatory view of religion is nevertheless common. The interpretive difficulties this view can pose for the ethnographer who has participated in the religion being depicted are discussed in the penultimate section of this chapter.

The Origins of Religion

When Charles Darwin (1809–1882) published *The Descent of Man* in 1871, the Church of England was outraged. Darwin appeared to be claiming that human beings are descended from apes, leaving no room for God's direct creation of humans. Where was the order in creation, if a random interaction between the natural environment and biological organisms had led to the present variety of living creatures? Darwin was an agnostic, brought up in the Church of England, and no militant atheist. While his ideas appeared as an affront to religious belief, the notion of social evolution, later known as Social Darwinism, was well established by the 1870s, and proved much less objectionable (despite the use of Darwin's name, he never espoused Social Darwinism). The leading Social Darwinian was the English social and political thinker Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). He argued that all things, animate and inanimate alike, move from simpler to more differentiated complex forms, from homogeneity to heterogeneity. In *The Principles of Sociology* (1876) he developed his thesis of universal evolution, which included his notion of the "survival of the fittest." This view of human society was more flattering to the Victorian mind. After all, human beings represented the grand climax of evolution, and Great Britain, leader of the Industrial Revolution, was considered the most complex society in the world and therefore stood at the peak of the evolutionary pyramid. Unlike some of his contemporaries, who could see little kinship between themselves and "rude and savage peoples," Spencer believed that all human beings, however simple their beliefs and technology, are rational.

According to Spencer, religion arose from the observation that in dreams the self can leave the body. The human person therefore has a dual aspect, and after death the spirit or soul continues to appear to living descendants in dreams. The ghosts of remote ancestors or prominent figures eventually acquired the status of gods (an idea known as Euhemerism, after the Sicilian writer Euhemerus, c. 315 BCE). The widespread practice of pouring libations on the graves of ancestors and offering them food developed into sacrifices for the gods. Ancestor worship was therefore at the root of religion. This post-mortem elevation of ancestors and other prominent members of society into gods retains an important place in contemporary Chinese folk religion.

Tylor agreed with Spencer's social evolutionary views and in part with his notion of the dream origin of religion but preferred to emphasize the role of the soul in his account of religious origins. Hence "animism," from the Latin *anima*, or "soul." According to Tylor, our earliest ancestors believed that animate and inanimate objects as well as

human beings have a soul, life force, or personality. The term “animism,” while used by Tylor as synonymous with religion per se, is still used, but with different nuances for “primitive,” “indigenous,” or “tribal” religions.

Tylor formulated a concept of culture, still influential in anthropology, which defined it as a complex whole, including knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other acquired social habit, not least religion. Some cultural elements or traits were transmitted across time and space in a process known as diffusion. Where these traits commonly coincided, they were referred to as adhesions. Supposedly primitive traits found in a more “advanced” society were mere fossil-like “survivals” from an earlier evolutionary stage, and indeed provided proof of social evolution. Among such survivals Tylor listed many regional folk customs such as Midsummer bonfires and the Breton peasants’ All Souls supper for the spirits of the dead. The oldest survivals were to be seen in language. The myths, stories, and sayings of today betray half-forgotten beliefs in phenomena such as the augury of birds, still visible in the saying “a little birdie told me.”

There was considerable debate in the nineteenth century between those who saw all or most human culture as resulting from the diffusion of ideas through population movement and those who believed that cultures evolved independently of one another. Those who espoused “independent invention” maintained that because all human beings have a similar psychological make-up, they tend to come up on their own with the same solutions to cultural problems. Today independent invention is by far the dominant explanation of similarities across cultures.

James George Frazer (1854–1941), a Scottish classicist who became an anthropologist, was one of Britain’s best-known scholars of religion. Drawing on classical sources and the reports of missionaries and explorers, Frazer compiled a multi-volume compendium in which he attempted to construct a universal theory of magic, religion, and society, published under the title *The Golden Bough* (1890; 1911–1915). Frazer believed that magic preceded religion. As magic was gradually perceived to be fallacious, people looked for other means of psychological support and concocted the illusion that spiritual beings could help them. When in turn people eventually realized that religion does not work, they turned to science. Both science and magic are based on the manipulation of natural laws, whereas religion is based on the belief in personalities, or gods.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard eloquently described the intellectualist positions of scholars like Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer as the “if I were a horse” fallacy and described their tales on the origins of religion as “Just So” stories analogous to Rudyard Kipling’s “How the Leopard Got Its Spots.” Lacking any real evidence, Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer resorted to asking themselves what they would have done had they been “primitives.” As Evans-Pritchard points out, if these scholars were correct, as civilization progressed, fallacious reasoning would die out, yet instead animistic and magical views of the world, ancestral cults, and beliefs in a Supreme Being all continue to exist, even in otherwise secular, scientific industrialized settings.

The Polish-born Bronisław Malinowski, as one of the founders of the functionalist school of anthropology, paid less attention to evolutionary origins and the notion of

survivals. Society was seen by him as a self-regulating system in which religion, economic organization, and kinship formed parts of an organic whole. For Malinowski, whatever exists today does so because it continues to serve a function. Were it a mere "survival," it would die out. Like Frazer, Malinowski (1948) distinguished magic from religion, but Malinowski, in contrast to Frazer, does not postulate stages. Magic, religion, and science are to be found concurrently, and they are not incompatible. A religious act aims at something beyond itself. Its object is not the performance of the rite. The rite is an act of worship, or propitiation, directed at a higher being, whose response to the rite cannot be wholly assumed or anticipated. Magic is a more technical procedure and is an end in itself. It is believed to be effective if performed correctly. A curse will strike its victim if the right words are uttered and the right actions performed.

In actuality, it is difficult to distinguish religious ritual from magical actions. While the division between religion and magic proposed by Malinowski may still hold in some circumstances, religious and magical elements often appear intertwined and the motivations of the participants mixed. A mortuary ritual, for instance, is intended to release the soul and to prevent its return to haunt the living. By performing the banishing ritual correctly, survivors ensure that the soul will continue its journey to the other life. The same ritual can be taken either as a magical act, as an efficacious action in itself, or as a religious ceremony in which a higher being is invoked to spur or receive the departing spirit and to comfort the living.

According to Malinowski, religion and magic serve the same psychological function: the alleviation of anxiety in the face of life's uncertainties. But as Evans-Pritchard observed, while emotions, desires, and impulses undoubtedly play a part in religion, it is not the case that the performance of a religious or magical act automatically produces the psychological effects that Malinowski supposes. We really have here another example of the "if I were a horse" argument: "If we were to perform rites such as primitives do, we suppose that we would be in a state of emotional turmoil, for otherwise our reason would tell us that the rites are objectively useless" (Evans-Pritchard 1965, 43).

Anthropology in North America followed a rather different course from that in Europe, drawing on elements of both continental and British scholarship, but with a specific emphasis on the notion of culture. A key figure was the German-born Franz Boas (1858–1942), who emigrated to the US and there developed a school of anthropology that stressed cultural differences. His historical particularism, as it is sometimes known, combined Durkheim's emphasis on the social with Malinowski's stress on individual psychology. Both material culture and personality define a characteristic cultural style unique to each society. Boas was not particularly interested in the social functioning of institutions, which developed into a major theme of British social anthropology under Radcliffe-Brown. Like Durkheim, Boas was interested in totemic systems and in the way in which symbols linked religious activities with other aspects of social life.

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown was one of the first British social anthropologists to engage in fieldwork. At Cambridge University, Radcliffe-Brown studied psychology under W. H. R. Rivers (1864–1922), who had taken part in the Torres Straits Expedition of 1898 with another founding figure of Cambridge anthropology, Alfred Haddon (1855–1940). From 1906 to 1908 Radcliffe-Brown carried out research in the

Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. The resulting monograph, *The Andaman Islanders* (1922), is primarily an account of Andamanese religious beliefs and ceremonies. It represents one of the first fieldwork monographs in the anthropology of religion. The Andamanese were “tribal” hunter-gatherers who had remained relatively isolated until a penal settlement was established on South Andaman Island in 1858. They were therefore held up as representatives of “racial purity,” and their society was seen as a kind of living fossil that could reveal something about the origins of religion. Radcliffe-Brown asserted that the Andaman Islanders’ main super-natural beings were both spirits of the dead, which were associated with the sky, forest, and sea, and nature spirits, which were personifications of natural phenomena. He applied a Durkheimian analysis to his Andaman material, looking for correlations between Andamanese religion and social structure. Although usually referred to as a functionalist because of his interest in the ways in which institutions present an organic picture of society, Radcliffe-Brown also anticipated the kind of structural analysis pioneered by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009). He divided Andamanese cosmology into a tripartite schema: sea/water; forest/land; and sky/trees.

Arthur Maurice Hocart (1883–1939), educated at Oxford, carried out extensive fieldwork in the South Seas. He adopted Boas’ detailed fieldwork methods, while continuing to hold a basically evolutionary perspective. He was not interested in finding the origin of religion, which he held to be an impossible task, although he did concern himself with the origins of monotheism. He rejected Malinowski’s individual psychological approach, favoring Durkheim’s sociological view of religion. According to Hocart, “[t]he facts are that our earliest records show us man worshipping gods, and their earthly representatives—namely kings” (1952, 67). This view led him to a rather contemporary conclusion, one developed by Maurice Bloch in his work on Madagascar, that “religion and politics are inseparable, and it is vain to try to divorce them. Monarchists must necessarily uphold the Church and ardent believers in one God will help build up large nations. The belief in a Supreme God or a Single God is no mere philosophical speculation; it is a great practical idea” (Hocart 1952, 76).

Claude Lévi-Strauss was born in Belgium but spent most of his working life in France. He was one of the founders of structuralism, an intellectual movement derived from linguistic theory that focuses on the structures of societies, texts, languages, and cultural life. The relations among elements in the present are stressed, at the expense of historical change. Lévi-Strauss was unswerving in his search for the universal structures of human thought and social life. Taking his cue from structural linguistics, in particular the work of Noam Chomsky and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), together with the Russian formalists such as Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), Lévi-Strauss sought to decipher a grammar of the mind. He proposed a kind of universal psychology with a genetic base that gives rise to social structures. Just as there are limits to linguistic variation, so there are certain basic innate patterns of culture based on a series of binary oppositions. Thus all societies distinguish between the raw and the cooked, the raw standing for nature and women and the cooked standing for culture and men. Myths reveal common story lines that can be used to understand the limited number of ways in which human beings interpret the world.

While structural theory was popular in Britain and America for a period in the 1960s and 1970s, its influence within English-speaking social and cultural anthropology has been less significant than Durkheim's symbolist approach. As with the earlier search for universals, the innate structures proposed by Lévi-Strauss remain speculative. As with Frazer, there is a danger of simply amassing data that repeat an argument without actually strengthening it. For Lévi-Strauss, individual experience and emotions such as love, hate, fear, and desire are subsidiary to the basic, innate underlying structures that give rise to society. Many critics have in the end found that this approach leaves too many important questions unanswered. We may unravel the structures of the mind and of society, but do we know what it is to live and feel as a human being? If history and agency take a back seat, can we still see ourselves as self-determining individuals, and can we grasp the complexity of interactions between humans and their world?

The search for the evolutionary origins of religion has largely fallen out of favor in anthropology, which in its social and cultural forms has become increasingly the study of human beings in their local context. There are, however, scholars who, like Malinowski, are interested in the psychological origins of religion. In *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (2001) Pascal Boyer combines both evolution and cognitive processes to account for the existence of religion, which is seen to derive from mental templates that are in turn the result of an evolutionary process which favors certain forms of cultural transmission over others:

Some concepts happen to connect with inference systems in the brain in a way that makes recall and communication very easy. Some concepts happen to trigger our emotional programs in particular ways. Some concepts happen to connect to our social mind. Some of them are represented in such a way that they soon become plausible and direct behaviour. The ones that do *all* this are the religious ones we actually observe in human societies. They are most successful because they combine features relevant to a variety of mental systems. (Boyer 2001, 50)

In approaching the question of origins ontologically rather than temporally, Boyer can be seen as a successor of Chomsky, with his search for a universal grammar in the structure of the human mind. For Boyer, it is our biology that holds the answer to the question of the origin of religion. Religion is hard-wired in our brains and is reproduced in newborns as they are socialized into language and culture.

Thomas Csordas (2004) presents an argument that shares certain features with that of Boyer. It too eschews lengthy discussion of what we mean by religion or a focus on its particular manifestations, in order to ask more fundamental questions. Both the phenomenological, existential approach favored by Csordas and the psychological one proposed by Boyer reject historical explanations of religion. For them, religion can never be replaced by science, as Marx or Malinowski might have imagined, or explained away as an epiphenomenon of power and privilege, *pace* Michel Foucault. Csordas' elegant and simple explanation for the origin of religion is that it is based on a fundamental embodied alterity—the “phenomenological kernel of religion” (Csordas 2004, 3) and that “insofar as alterity is part of the structure of being-in-the-world—an elementary structure of

existence—religion is inevitable, perhaps even necessary” (Csordas 2004, 3). The self, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), is both subject and object. It contains “presences” that are both hidden from us and part of us. The asymptote of the essay title—the lines that never quite meet—represent this alterity. The desire for oneness or unity can never be consciously achieved. As we approach others or ourselves, we become strangers. For Csordas, embodied otherness replaces Roy Rappaport’s (1995) formulation of the origin of religion in the “fall from grace” that accompanied the emergence of language, creating “an originary rupture, a profound alterity” (cited in Csordas 2004, 5), and a profound alienation of parts of the psyche from one another.

While espousing what is today a minority voice within anthropology, with their interest in a search for the origins of religion, Csordas, Rappaport, and Boyer represent at the same time a conventional materialism within the anthropological study of religion. There is a “policing” of the boundaries between religion and theology and of the kind of religion deemed to be a suitable object of anthropological attention. Simon Coleman found that he had to justify his decision to study evangelical Christians in Sweden to colleagues, who assumed that he, “must be a sympathiser of the group when [he] didn’t condemn it,” which rather suggests that “some cultures and belief systems are . . . more acceptable to the anthropological community than others” (Bowie 2003, 140). The gibe or fear that one’s colleagues might “go native” and thereby lose the critical outsider’s perspective, which is deemed identical with a social scientific approach to religion, is something with which all field-working ethnographers are familiar.

Interest in the biological and neurological origins of religion continues to dominate cognitive anthropology, which draws on both psychology and neuroscience. By combining fieldwork methods with laboratory testing and fieldwork psychological tests, cognitive anthropologists hope to show how culture and neurology combine to produce religious concepts. Harvey Whitehouse (1995, 2000) used his fieldwork experience of initiation ceremonies in Papua New Guinea to develop a general theory of religion based on two kinds of learning or “modes of religiosity,” which he termed “liturgical” and “imagistic.” The one depends on repetition and is generally linguistic; the other depends on fear, surprise, and pain to induce bodily learning using symbols rather than language. Whitehouse has widened the scope of these categories and given them more general applicability. Each kind of learning produces social groups of a different type and scale. Infrequent but highly arousing rituals, typical of initiations, produce high levels of bonding or, to use Victor Turner’s (1920–1983) term, “communitas.” Groups which share this experience tend to be small but cohesive. More frequent and less intense rituals, such as weekly attendance at a synagogue, mosque, or church service, produce larger, more anonymous communities.

Another form of cognitive anthropology takes a more expansive view of psychology and neuroscience, and of the interaction between the individual psyche and cultural patterns. Susan Greenwood, an anthropologist, and Eric Goodwyn, a neurobiologist, have collaborated on an ethnographic account of Greenwood’s “magical consciousness” (2012). They cite anthropologist Charles Laughlin and biogenetic structuralist Walter Freeman, who look at the human nervous system not as a passive recorder of objective and veridical information about the environment but as a community of cells that

adapts to the world (see Laughlin 1990). In their integrated model of mental, cultural, and physiological processes, Greenwood and Goodwyn argue that “the magical frame of mind that accompanies intense rituals involves not mere abstract ideas floating in space, but flesh-and-bones neurobiological and physiological ‘top-down’ effects” (Greenwood and Goodwyn 2016, 55). They contrast an analytical mode of thinking, which continues to dominate most cognitive anthropology, to a magical mode of thinking, which blurs the lines between subjective and objective thought, the individual and world, and self and other. Greenwood and Goodwyn do not follow the usual route of looking for parallels between creative, symbolic magical thought processes and the activity of the brain, but produce an ethnography of the mind in order to ask different questions about the nature of the mind and of the world. Anticipating the discussion of modes of thought (below) Greenwood and Goodwyn claim that both analytical and magical thinking contain truth, but each within its own perspective.

A rather different approach to the origins of religion can be seen in the ontological anthropology that, since the late 1990s, has questioned the methodological and epistemological assumptions of post-modern relativism. While promising to de-center the grand narrative, the postmodern “it is true for them” stance can end up subtly reinforcing a hegemonic Western, rationalist approach to religion. Ontological anthropology allows for the possibility that what people say about their beliefs and practices, their view of the world, their experience with spirits or deities, might in fact be true. The exponents of ontological anthropology suggest that ethnographers should at least suspend judgment and accept that we actually know very little about the way the world works.

Beliefs, practices, and cultural cosmologies can be developed in response to first-hand experiences, which are then shared and interpreted by others. American folklorist and medical anthropologist David Hufford (1982, 1995, 2008, 2013) uses the term “experiential core hypothesis” to describe a range of seemingly universal experiences that are candidates for the origin of some foundational religious concepts. These experiences include sleep paralysis, near-death experiences, encounters with the deceased, various Psi phenomena such as telepathy and clairvoyance, and out-of-body travel. Hufford does not seek to predetermine the source of these phenomena, and interpretations of very similar experiences are at least in part culturally determined. They do, however, mark a return to notions such as Spencer’s—that dreams of the dead give rise to belief in an afterlife—but without then dismissing such conclusions as erroneous.

There are many different forms of ontological anthropology (see Heyward 2018; Holbraad and Pederson 2019), some with a political as well as an academic agenda. Most take as a starting point the idea that rather than looking for a single “true” version of events or of things, we should pay attention to language and experience. Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro uses the term “perspectivism” to describe this idea (1998; 2004). Viveiros de Castro realized that for the Amerindians he studied there are many different ways of perceiving an object. A jaguar sees and experiences a different world to a human being, or a discarnate spirit, or a tree. For the Western-trained ethnographer there is one nature or world with different cultures

("multi-culturalism"). For the Amerindians, there is one culture but different natures ("multi-naturalism"). A deceased human being might, for example, take the form of a jaguar. The spirit is the same, but the experience of living as a human being or a jaguar is very different. The boundary between human and animal is also changed. There is no way of knowing that if you seemingly kill an animal, you have in fact killed a human spirit. The combination of respecting different standpoints or perspectives with a willingness to be open to the experience of others, and to be changed in the process, underlies much of what is broadly glossed as the "ontological turn" in anthropology.

Religious Experience

E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Professor of Anthropology at Oxford from 1946 to 1970, is rightly remembered for his studies of the Azande peoples of Central Africa, with whom he lived between 1926 and 1930. Throughout his work he presents Zande oracles, magic, and witchcraft as a logical, coherent set of beliefs and practices. Evans-Pritchard came to regard the consulting of an oracle before undertaking an action as a sensible way of ordering one's affairs—no better or worse than any other. He was happy to enter into discussions of rationality with his Zande informants, and he never patronized them by assuming that they were incapable of making sound judgments or defending their beliefs and practices. An example was his encounter with witchcraft. According to the Azande, moving lights emanate from the body of the sleeping witch as the activated witchcraft substance stalks its prey. Evans-Pritchard writes:

I have only once seen witchcraft on its path. I had been sitting late in my hut writing notes. About midnight, before retiring, I took a spear and went for my usual nocturnal stroll. I was walking in the garden at the back of my hut, amongst banana trees, when I noticed a bright light passing at the back of my servants' huts towards the homestead of a man called Tupoi. As this seemed worth investigation I followed its passage until a grass screen obscured the view. I ran quickly through my hut to the other side in order to see where the light was going to but did not regain sight of it. I know that only one man, a member of my household, had a lamp that might have given off so bright a light, but next morning he told me that what I had seen was witchcraft. Shortly afterwards, on the same morning, an old relative of Tupoi and an inmate of his homestead died. This event fully explained the light I had seen. I never discovered its real origin, which was possibly a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate, but the coincidence of the direction along which the light moved and the subsequent death accorded well with Zande ideas. (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937], 11)

In reflecting afterwards on the event, Evans-Pritchard sought to reassert his own Western, scientific outlook. The alternative would have been to accept an Azande view of the world based on the belief that human beings can be witches and can project a visible witchcraft substance which has to the power to kill other human beings. While not wishing to go this far, Evans-Pritchard did not simply dismiss the world view of his Zande informants as primitive or inferior. He allowed himself to be drawn into its logic and to reason from within Zande categories of thought.

This movement from skepticism to shared experience with those in the culture studied, and then back to some external point of reference, is common among anthropologists working on religious themes. Tanya Luhrmann (1989), studying urban witchcraft in London in the 1980s, was similarly drawn into the worlds of her informants, yet without ultimately accepting their underlying cosmology. Luhrmann describes humor and play as attitudes basic to witchcraft. In an evocative description of a “maypole” ritual performed by her coven in an urban room, she shows how humor and play can awaken a sense of wonder in those participating. A cord attached to the ceiling served as a maypole, and the participants used strings of colored yarn instead of ribbons. The dancers’ intention was to weave into the “maypole” those things that they wished to weave into their lives. Apparently, an even number of participants are needed to wind a maypole successfully, but as there were eleven persons present, the coven chose to disregard this requirement rather than to leave anybody out:

The result, to begin with, was chaos and confusion. Everyone was laughing as we dodged in and out, creating a tangled knot of yarn. It was scarcely a scene of mystical power; a ritual magician would have blanched pale and turned in his wand on the spot. But an odd thing began to happen as we continued. The laughter began to build a strange atmosphere, as if ordinary reality was fading away. Nothing existed but the interplay of colored cords and moving bodies. The smiles on faces that flashed in and out of sight began to resemble the secret smiles of archaic Greek statues, hinting at the highest and most humorous of Mysteries. We began to sing; we moved in rhythm and a pattern evolved in the dance—nothing that could ever be mapped or plotted rationally; it was a pattern with an extra element that always and inevitably would defy explanation. The snarl of yarn resolved itself into an intricately woven cord. The song became a chant; the room glowed, and the cord pulsed with power like a live thing, an umbilicus linking us to all that is within and beyond. At last the chant peaked and died; we dropped into trance. When we awoke, all together, at the same moment, we faced each other with wonder. (Luhrmann 1989, 334–335)

Some anthropologists have gone further, not only participating in the rituals of others and sharing the emotions that arise but outrightly accepting the cosmological stance of informants. Paul Stoller studied as a “sorcerer’s apprentice” among the Songhay of Niger in West Africa and recorded that “The Songhay world challenged the basic premises of my scientific training. Living in Songhay forced me to confront the limitations of the Western philosophical tradition. My seventeen-year association with Songhay reflects the slow evolution of my thought, a thought profoundly influenced by Songhay categories and Songhay wisdom” (Stoller and Olkes 1989, 227). Stoller, unlike so many others who have studied religion or ritual in cultures other than their own, did not manage, or perhaps wish, to shrug off a Songhay world view on his return to the familiarity of the United States. Perhaps fear had fundamentally reshaped his understanding of reality, for he fled Niger when he believed himself under attack by another sorcerer.

For the anthropologist Edith Turner (1921–2016), participation in a healing ritual among the Ndembu of Zambia, in which she had been invited by a healer called

Singleton to act as one of the “doctors,” was equally an experience of transformation, although an altogether happier one. The ritual, known as Ihamba, involved the removal of a deceased hunter’s tooth from the back of a sick woman. Turner had witnessed the Ihamba before, on the same visit in 1985, and also with her husband, Victor, when they had lived with the Ndembu in the 1950s. But she had not previously been a central participant in the ritual. The saying of “words” to clear the air was an important prelude to what happens in this kind of healing, in which the participation of relatives and significant community members is key. Having brought various grievances, including her own, into the open, Turner writes:

I felt the spiritual motion, a tangible feeling of breakthrough going through the whole group. Suddenly Meru [the patient] raised her arm, stretched it in liberation, and I saw with my own eyes a giant thing emerging out of the flesh on her back. This thing was a large gray blob about six inches across, a deep gray opaque thing emerging as a sphere. I was amazed—delighted. I still laugh with the realization of having seen it, the ihamba, and so big! We were all just one in triumph. The gray thing was actually out there, visible, and you could see Singleton’s hands working and scrabbling on the back—and then the thing was there no more. Singleton had it in his pouch, pressing it in with his other hand as well. The receiving hand was ready; he transferred whatever it was into the can and capped the castor oil leaf and bark lid over it. It was done. (Turner 1992, 149)

There are skeptics and believers within all societies, whatever the nature of their experience, with different interpretations of events, related to some extent to personality, so why not among anthropologists, too? Even Tibet’s Dalai Lama is able to leave open doubt concerning his own reincarnated status, however central this belief may be to his own identity and to the faith of the Tibetan people. Anthropology is distinguished by its method, and since the days of Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen’s participation in aboriginal ceremonies in Queensland at the end of the nineteenth century, and of Malinowski’s espousal of participant observation in the Trobriands a few decades later, ethnographers have understood that surveys, statistics, interviews, and the collection of material objects cannot yield the same interpretive depth as that which comes from sharing in the lives of those being observed.

Michael Jackson, a New Zealand-born anthropologist and creative writer, currently Distinguished Visiting Professor of World Religions at Harvard University, is interested in the interconnections and boundaries between the Self and Other, and the role of everyday lived religion that does not depend primarily, if at all, on religious texts and doctrines. He has called for a radically empiricist, experiential anthropology that “tries to avoid fixed viewpoints, by dispersing authorship, working through all five senses, and reflecting inwardly, as well as observing outwardly” (Jackson 1989, 8). Jackson reached this conclusion after finding his initial fieldwork training wanting. When he arrived in Sierra Leone in 1969 to conduct his first piece of fieldwork among the Kuranko, Jackson climbed a hill to take panoramic photographs of his fieldwork site, “believing that my superior position would help me gain insights into the organization of the village” (Jackson 1989, 8). Instead, he realized that what this distancing actually achieved was to make him lose touch with the village instead. Judith Okely (2012) has explored the

“work” involved in using the body as a fieldwork tool that both unlearns one way of being and doing and relearns that of another culture—what Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) and Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) referred to as *habitus*, the largely unconscious habits, skills, and “techniques of the body” that we acquire through living in a culture. Okely gives the example of Barbara Myerhoff’s use of peyote on a sacred journey and her encounters with a Trickster as an example of an anthropologist combining her cultural knowledge of a ritual event with bodily knowledge, which both informed and was informed by participation in a Huichol Indian mystic “peyote pilgrimage.” The body not only learns another way of thinking, doing, and being through immersion in another culture but also acts as a mnemonic for translating the ethnography into text. The body aids recall of events, moods, feelings, and thoughts that formed part of the ethnographic encounter.

Edith Turner was no less concerned than any other Western-trained observer with the status of the tooth that Singleton later produced from the can in which the *ihamba* spirit was imprisoned. But like the Kwakiutl shaman Quesalid, who started off as a skeptic set on disclosing the trickery involved in shamanic healing but ended up becoming a great healer, she came to understand the difference between the outer appearance of objects and their essence, material or immaterial. There is a Buddhist story concerning a pilgrim who promised to bring his elderly Tibetan mother a relic of the Buddha. On his return from India, he realized that he had not fulfilled his promise. He picked up a dog’s tooth from beside the road and presented it to his mother as a tooth of the Buddha. The old woman made a shrine and prayed in front of the “relic” with great devotion. After a while the pilgrim was amazed to see a yellow glow emanating from the shrine. The tooth had taken on an aura of sacrality. Similarly, Quesalid found that while he might have concealed objects in his mouth to “suck out” of patients, his healing was still effective. Having seen the gray blob come out of Meru, Edith Turner was convinced of the reality of the *ihamba* spirit, and she was able to appreciate the distinction made by many peoples the world over between the inner spirit form and the house or casing which represents and contains it. Concealing an object in the mouth or producing a tooth is thus not “trickery” but the giving of outward, visible expression to the action of spirits. Missionaries and anthropologists who used to assert that Africans mistook their “fetishes” for animate objects failed to understand that a consecrated statue becomes a powerful object not because it is worshiped as a god (or devil) but because it has the power to attract and contain spiritual forces. According to Christian Eucharistic theology, the elements of bread and wine are ritually transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ in a “hypostatic union,” while retaining their outward appearance. The so-called fetishes and sacred objects of African peoples are more akin to the tabernacle that contains the god than to the god itself. Christian missionary attitudes to non-Western peoples and their sacred objects were influenced by St. Augustine’s (354–430 CE) theory that pagan statues contained “latency,” meaning that they were present but that their physical matter needed to be activated. The statues attracted the gaze of pagan devotees, which in turn attracted demons, turning the material object into an idol.

The gap between Western and non-Western conceptions of the material world is much narrower than many early anthropologists assumed. Devotees who gather around weeping or moving plaster statues of the Virgin Mary in contemporary Irish Catholicism, continue to attest to beliefs in the embodied immanence of the supernatural. As Christian images are similarly thought to work through latency, there has been a history of ambivalence within the Church toward such phenomena, with numerous instances of iconoclasm. Peter Brown (1974) traced the relationship within Christianity between holy things and holy people, noting the inability of the Church to persuade its followers to abandon physical objects of devotion. While holy people appear to pass away, objects are always present and to hand. Stories of “excess” in sacred objects that could display liveliness and respond to circumstances, appeared to confirm their true nature. As Sarah Salih (2005, 15) observed, “[t]he idol is so unsettling because one does not know which response to expect: it is in the nature of an idol to be an object poised between life and death, mobility and stasis.” Ordinary people as well as objects, both human-made and natural, can also become ambivalent signs of divine presence. Christian stigmatists, for example, who display physical wounds that imitate those of Jesus Christ on the cross, use their bodies as inscriptions and containers of divine presence. These examples serve to remind us that religion is concerned with the body and material world as much as it is with abstract theology, texts, and doctrines.

Modes of Thought

Anthropologists of religion have frequently returned to the question of modes of thought. When discussing religious experience, for instance, an anthropologist is often asking implicitly whether “the other” is fundamentally like “us.” Is there a conceptual dividing line between pre-scientific and scientific thinking? If there are different mentalities, or ways of thinking, are they present in each one of us or in different measure in different societies? When asked whether he accepted Zande ideas of witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard gave the kind of “yes and no” answer that must be familiar to many field anthropologists:

In my own culture, in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and reject, Zande notions of witchcraft. In their culture, in the set of ideas I then lived in, I accepted them; in a kind of way I believed them. [. . .] If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts. (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937], 244)

One scholar who spent his life pondering the question of mentalities was the philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). Like his French contemporary Émile Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl thought that religion was socially based, but he increasingly distanced himself from the Durkheimian school. He stressed the need to see each culture as a whole in order to uncover the relationships and assumptions that govern it. He put forward, but later modified, the notion that primitive and modern cultures exhibit distinct kinds of mentalities, one “mystical” and pre-logical, the other objective and logical.

Nineteenth-century evolutionary theorists such as Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer shared three assumptions: (1) the idea of progress; (2) an unquestioned faith in the efficacy of the comparative method; and (3) the notion of a “psychic unity” among all peoples. If left on their own, all societies would pass through the same stages of social evolution. Eventually, all societies would reach the same peak of rational, civilized thought and behavior that characterized Victorian Britain.

Lévy-Bruhl challenged the third of these assumptions. He concluded that the formal rules of logic that governed rational thought do not actually apply in many simpler societies. According to Lévy-Bruhl, the West has an intellectual tradition based on the rigorous testing and analysis of hypotheses, so that Westerners are logically oriented and tend to look for natural explanations of events. But the “collective representations” of “primitive” peoples tend to be “mystical,” or “prelogical.” In *How Natives Think* (1910) Lévy-Bruhl stated that “the reality surrounding the primitives is itself mystical. Not a single being or object or natural phenomenon in their collective representations is what it appears to be to our minds” (Lévy-Bruhl 1985 [1926], 38). He concluded that differences in ways of thought preclude the existence of a psychic unity of human beings and that in simple societies Aristotelian logic, above all the law of noncontradiction, simply does not apply.

Lévy-Bruhl’s ideas were subjected to a storm of criticism. He was a philosopher with a background in psychology rather than a fieldwork anthropologist, and many of his data were shown to be inadequate. He was also understood to be saying that “primitive” peoples are not able to make objective causal connections between events. His critics maintained that the rigid line drawn between “primitives” and “us” is indefensible. In fact, Lévy-Bruhl never denied that all people everywhere use logical thought in relation to practical and technical matters. He claimed only that the pre-logical interpretation of an event will always predominate in a “primitive mentality.” Against Lévy-Bruhl, it was argued that the notion of faith in a Western context similarly depends upon believing something that cannot be proved and similarly invokes the language of paradox and mystery.

In his search for a comparative understanding of “mentalities,” Lévy-Bruhl sought to challenge both the intellectualist school of Tylor and Frazer, who assumed that mental processes are everywhere the same, and the cultural relativists like Franz Boas, who rejected any attempt to make premature generalizations about peoples. Lévy-Bruhl rejected Malinowski’s search for individual, psychological explanations of human behavior, preferring the collectivist approach of Durkheim. For Lévy-Bruhl, “primitives” perceive and conceive the world as they do because their perceptions and in turn conceptions are shaped by their “collective representations”—a concept that he took from Durkheim.

Lévy-Bruhl came to accept that the division he had sought to make between different kinds of thinking in different kinds of societies was too rigid, and by the 1930s no longer sought to defend this position. In his *Carnets*, or *Notebooks*, he proposed that we

give up explaining participation by something peculiar to the human mind, either constitutional (in its structure and function) or acquired (mental customs). In other words,

let us expressly rectify what I believed correct in 1910: there is not a primitive mentality distinguishable from the other by two characteristics which are peculiar to it (mystical and prelogical). There is a mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among primitive peoples than in our own societies, but it is present in every human mind. (Lévy-Bruhl 1975 [1949], 100–101)

Lévy-Bruhl's conclusion that there are different kinds of thinking, "logical" and "mystical," in all societies, even if found in different degrees, has continued to engage the attention of anthropologists interested in cognition.

Byron Good (1994), an American medical anthropologist, is among those who have revisited the "mentalities debate." For Lévy-Bruhl, religion belongs to pre-logical thinking, characterized as it is by the experience of non-material realities, whereas medicine would be classified as part of logical thinking, as a response to the empirical world. For Good, by contrast, there is a close relationship between science, including medicine, and religious fundamentalism. He seeks to collapse the distinction between the realm of the sacred (religion) and the realm of the profane (science). The relationship between them turns in part on our concept of "belief":

For fundamentalist Christians, salvation is often seen to follow from belief, and mission work is conceived as an effort to convince the natives to give up false beliefs and take on a set of beliefs that will produce a new life and ultimate salvation. Ironically, quite a-religious scientists and policy makers see a similar benefit from correct belief. . . . Educate the patient, medical journals advise clinicians, and solve the problems of noncompliance that plague the treatment of chronic disease. . . . Salvation from drugs and from preventable illness will follow from correct belief. (Good 1994, 7)

Evans-Pritchard distinguished between what Azande "believe," as in "Azande believe that some Azande are witches," and what they "know," or their medical knowledge of diseases and healing. Thus Evans-Pritchard organized his monograph on Zande witchcraft "around a distinction between those ideas that accord with objective reality and those that do not; the language of knowledge is used to describe the former, the language of belief the latter" (Good 1994, 13). Good turns to the Canadian scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith in order to explore the etymology of the term "belief," concluding that our understanding of the term is relatively recent. In Old English, "to believe" meant to "hold dear." For Chaucer, it was "to pledge loyalty." Belief in God was not therefore a claim to hold to something that could not be proved but a promise to live one's life in the service of God, like a bondsman to his lord.

Only by the end of the seventeenth century did "belief" indicate a choice between possible explanations or propositions, so that "I believe in God" implied a choice between believing that God exists and claiming that God is merely a human creation. As Evans-Pritchard indicated, for the Azande to "believe" in witchcraft was a very different proposition than it was for him. As in pre-Enlightenment Europe, so for the Azande, there was a single, hegemonic world view. The possibility that witches might not exist was not part of Zande "collective representations," to use Lévy-Bruhl's phrase, which itself comes from Durkheim. Both medical scientists and fundamentalist Christians,

according to Good, use “belief” in this contemporary sense of choosing between options, one true and one false. The notion of “correct belief” is central, implying as it does the choice between a right and a wrong way of seeing the world. Good refers to Clifford Geertz’s description of the Western “salvational belief in the powers of science” (Geertz 1988, 146). However untried, untested, or illogical a medical procedure or scientific hypothesis may be, there is considerable investment in believing that it is rational and wholly different from the claims of religion of “primitive” peoples.

The concept of belief as currently understood and used in English may be difficult or impossible to translate into other languages. Mary Steedly (1993), an American anthropologist who has worked among the Karobatak in Sumatra, reported that her hosts kept posing a question that she interpreted as “Do you believe in spirits?” Steedly did not want to say “no,” to avoid damaging her relations with the people, but felt unable to lie by answering “yes.” Only after some months did she realize the Karobatak were not asking her “Do you believe spirits exist?” but “Do you trust the spirits?” They wanted to know whether she maintained a relationship with them. Medieval Christians who asserted belief in God did not proclaim God’s existence, which was presupposed, but their loyalty to God. The key difference between both Evans-Pritchard and Mary Steedly as moderns on the one hand and the Azande, Karobatak, and medieval European Christians on the other is the presence of alternative views of the world. In his influential Gifford Lectures, published as *A Secular Age* (2007), the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, made a similar point. Belief in angels, demons, witches, the sacraments or sacred places still exists in the contemporary West, but there is a choice whether or not to believe in them. Believing in God has become one option among many. This is increasingly true of all societies in a globalized world, but one should also not underestimate the role of socialization and attempts to preclude alternative views of the world among sections of the population within Western and non-Western societies. The cost of breaking the rules of right thought or right belief are very much greater for some people than for others.

Tanya Luhmann (2012) and Joel Robbins use the term “never-secular” to describe societies in which (un)belief is not an option, although what constitutes correct belief and practice can still be an object of considerable concern, as Robbins describes in his (2004) study of Urapmin Pentecostal Christians in Melanesia. The pre-Christian Urapmin view of the mind was that all private thoughts were unknowable and only public utterances mattered. They were thrown into torment by a model of mind in which all thoughts, however “willful,” are known by God, initiating a cycle of intense ritual activity to counteract this dangerous unveiling of the Self.

Mary Douglas was a strong advocate of the view that there is a psychic unity to human beings. For her, both primitive rituals and secular rites serve as focusing mechanisms or mnemonics. Obsessively packing and repacking a suitcase before a holiday will not make the weekend come any sooner but can help the traveler focus on the pending departure. In the same way a Dinka herdsman who knots a bundle of grass at the wayside as he hurries home to supper does not expect the action alone to get him home in time. The knotted grass helps focus his mind, and he redoubles his efforts to be home on time (see Douglas 1966, 63–64). In both of these examples what might seem to

be irrational activities in fact have a practical, rational effect—once that effect is correctly identified. To draw too tight a distinction between modes of thought is to misunderstand human behavior. For Douglas, as for Good, “[t]he right basis for comparison is to insist on the unity of human experience and at the same time to insist on its variety, on the differences which make comparison worth-while” (Douglas 1966, 77).

There are other ways of distinguishing modes of thought besides Lévy-Bruhl’s. According to Douglas, there is a difference between personalized and impersonal thinking. Some cosmologies, including those of China and as of Sub-Saharan Africa, relate the universe directly to human behavior. Geomancy and *feng shwe*, for instance, work on the assumption that the earth and human fortune are intimately related to each other. We should not forget the impact of the Enlightenment on Western thought, including European Christianity. As the New Zealand anthropologist Paul Gifford states,

Reality [in Western churches] is generally not experienced in terms of witches, demons and personalised spiritual powers, and Christianity has changed to take account of this. In Africa most Christians operate from a background little affected by the European Enlightenment; for most Africans, witchcraft, spirits and ancestors, spells and charms are primary and immediate and natural categories of interpretation. Most Africans have an “enchanted” worldview. (Gifford 1998, 327–328)

The English anthropologist Robin Horton (1994) has contrasted the “closed” nature of African traditional thought, in which there was only one belief system available, to the “open” world view of modern Europe and America, where there are alternative belief systems. We have already seen that Tylor, Malinowski, and others were wrong to assume that science would eventually put paid to both magic and religion. In actuality, science merely provides one more element, albeit an immensely powerful and significant one, in the cosmological choices available. Tanya Luhrmann, in her widely acclaimed ethnography of an Evangelical Vineyard Church in the United States, *When God Talks Back* (2012), argues that the people she interviewed did not reject modernity. On the contrary, their playful, doubting, highly personalized, and experiential form of Christianity is an expression of it. Members of the church are taught to examine their thoughts and to question events in order to recognize the hand of God in their lives. This is a demanding form of Christianity that requires vigilance, but it does not banish doubt. According to Luhrmann, the way American evangelical Christians learn to experience God as real despite their doubts “tells us something about the experience of the mind in our complex modern world. It tells us that evangelicals reach out to use these ancient prayer practices to experience God, but that they do so with a very modern epistemology” (Luhrmann 2012, 301).

It is clear that not everyone can cope with alternatives, which erode certainties and absolute values. According to Horton,

These people still retain the old sense of the absolute validity of their belief-systems, with all the attendant anxieties about threats to them. For these people, the confrontation is still a threat of chaos of the most horrific kind—a threat which demands the most dramatic measures. They respond in one of two ways: either by trying to blot out those responsible

for the confrontation, often down to the last unborn child; or by trying to convert them to their own beliefs through fanatical missionary activity. Some adjust their fears by developing an inordinate faith in progress towards a future in which “the Truth” will be finally known. But others long nostalgically for the fixed, unquestionable beliefs of the “closed” culture. They call for authoritarian establishment and control of dogma, and for the persecution of those who have managed to be at ease in a world of ever-shifting ideas. Clearly, the “open” predicament is a precarious, fragile thing. (Horton 1994, 256–257)

We can probably all think of examples of both kinds of reactions, from blind faith in science and progress to the restrictive Islam of the Taliban or ISIS/Daesh, or Christian fundamentalists convinced that they alone are “saved.” The competing marketplace of ideas that constitutes modernity is not so much the home of rational, scientific thought as a jumble of assorted ideas, some of them compatible but others contradictory. For the field-working ethnographer, the issue of experience and the interpretation of that experience cannot be ignored.

What almost all the varied contributions of anthropologists to the study of religion share is a depth and complexity that arise from embodied knowledge and a dialogical relationship with the subject of study. Religion is not just “out there” but simultaneously observed and experienced from within. It addresses key questions of ethical behavior, meaning, and ultimacy. Whether religion is hard-wired in human beings through our evolutionary history and biology, or is a reaction to experience, it retains its central role in human life.

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