

Anthropology of religion

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Anthropology of religion is the study of religion in relation to other social institutions, and the comparison of religious beliefs and practices across cultures.^[1]

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History

In the early 11th century, Abū Rayhān Bīrūnī (973-1048), wrote detailed comparative studies on the anthropology of religions and cultures across the Middle East, Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent.^[2] He discussed the peoples, customs, and religions of the Indian subcontinent.

Anthropology circa 1940 assumed that religion is in complete continuity with magical thinking,^[3] and that it is a cultural product.^[4] The complete continuity between magic and religion has been a postulate of modern anthropology at least since early 1930s.^{[3][5]} The perspective of modern anthropology towards religion is the *projection idea*, a methodological approach which assumes that every religion is created by the human community that worships it, that "creative activity ascribed to God is projected from man."^{[6][7][8]} In 1841, Ludwig Feuerbach was the first to employ this concept as the basis for a systematic critique of religion.^{[9][10][11][12]} A prominent precursor in the formulation of this projection principle was Giambattista Vico,^{[9][13]} and an early formulation of it is found in ancient Greek writer Xenophanes, which observed that "the gods of Ethiopians were inevitably black with flat noses while those of the Thracians were blond with blue eyes."^[9]

In 1912 Émile Durkheim, building on Feuerbach, considered religion "a projection of the social values of society," "a means of making symbolic statements about society," "a symbolic language that makes statements about the social order";^{[14][15]} in short, "religion is society worshipping itself".^{[12][16]}

In the 19th century, cultural anthropology was dominated by an interest in cultural evolution; most anthropologists assumed that there was a simple distinction between “primitive” and “modern” religion and tried to provide accounts of how the former evolved into the latter. In the 20th century most anthropologists rejected this approach. Today the anthropology of religion reflects the influence of, or an engagement with, such theorists as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber.^[17] They are especially concerned with how religious beliefs and practices may reflect political or economic forces; or the social functions of religious beliefs and practices.

Definition of religion

One major problem in the anthropology of religion is the definition of religion itself. At one time anthropologists believed that certain religious practices and beliefs were more or less universal to all cultures at some point in their development, such as a belief in spirits or ghosts, the use of magic as a means of controlling the supernatural, the use of divination as a means of discovering occult knowledge, and the performance of rituals such as prayer and sacrifice as a means of influencing the outcome of various events through a supernatural agency, sometimes taking the form of shamanism or ancestor worship. According to Geertz, religion 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 1966).^[18] Today, religious Anthropologists debate, and reject, the cross-cultural validity of these categories (often viewing them as examples of European primitivism). Anthropologists have considered various criteria for defining religion – such as a belief in the supernatural or the reliance on ritual – but few claim that these criteria are universally valid.

Anthony F.C. Wallace proposes four categories of religion, each subsequent category subsuming the previous. These are, however, synthetic categories and do not necessarily encompass all religions.^[19]

1. Individualistic: most basic; simplest. Example: vision quest.
2. Shamanistic: part-time religious practitioner, uses religion to heal, to divine, usually on the behalf of a client. The Tillamook have four categories of shaman. Examples of shamans: spiritualists, faith healers, palm readers. Religious authority acquired through one's own means.
3. Communal: elaborate set of beliefs and practices; group of people arranged in clans by lineage, age group, or some religious societies; people take on roles based on knowledge, and ancestral worship.
4. Ecclesiastical: dominant in agricultural societies and states; are centrally organized and hierarchical in structure, paralleling the organization of states. Typically deprecates competing individualistic and shamanistic cults.

Specific religious practices and beliefs

- Apotheosis
- Apotropaic magic
- Amulet
- Animism
- Cult (religious practice)
- Deity
- Demon
- Divination
- Esotericism
- Exorcism
- Evil
- Fertility rite
- Fetishism
- Genius (mythology)
- God
- Ghost
- Greco-Roman mysteries
- Heresy
- Icon
- Immortality
- Intercession
- Kachina
- Magic and religion
- Mana
- Mask
- Miracle
- Medicine
- Modern paganism
- Monotheism
- Mother goddess
- Mythology
- Necromancy
- New Age
- Occult
- Omen
- Poles in mythology
- Polytheism
- Prayer
- Principle of contagion
- Prophecy
- Reincarnation
- Religious ecstasy
- Ritual
- Sacred food as offering
- Sacrifice
- Shamanism
- Spell (paranormal)
- Supernatural
- Supplication
- Sympathetic magic
- Theism
- Totemism
- Veneration of the dead
- Western esotericism

See also

- Anthropological Perspectives on Religion (journal)
- Archaeology of religion and ritual
- Cognitive science of religion
- Cultural anthropology
- Evolutionary origin of religions
- Magic and religion
- Religious symbolism
- Sacred-profane dichotomy
- Sociology of religion
- Symbolic anthropology

Notes

1. <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/497215/classification-of-religions>

2. J. T. Walbridge (1998). "Explaining Away the Greek Gods in Islam", *Journal of the History of Ideas* **59** (3): 389-403
3. Cassirer, Ernst (1944) *An Essay On Man* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=pe9fWSv-iLsC&pg=PA102>), pt.II, ch.7 *Myth and Religion*, pp.122-3. Quotation:

It seems to be one of the postulates of modern anthropology that there is complete continuity between magic and religion. [note 35: See, for instance, RR Marett, Faith, Hope, and Charity in Primitive Religion, the Gifford Lectures (Macmillan, 1932), Lecture II, pp. 21 ff.] ... We have no empirical evidence at all that there ever was an age of magic that has been followed and superseded by an age of religion.

4. Manickam, T. M. (1977) *Dharma according to Manu and Moses* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=GC6fAAAAAAAJ>) p.6 Quotation:

Religious anthropology suggests that every religion is a product of the cultural evolution, more or less coherent, of one race or people; and this cultural product is further enriched by its interaction and cross-fertilization with other peoples and their cultures, in whose vicinity the former originated and evolved.

5. Robert Ranulph Marett (1932) *Faith, Hope and Charity in Primitive Religion* (<http://www.giffordlectures.org/Browse.asp?PubID=TPFHCR&Volume=0&Issue=0&TOC=True>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20111119025854/http://www.giffordlectures.org/Browse.asp?PubID=TPFHCR&Volume=0&Issue=0&TOC=True>) November 19, 2011, at the Wayback Machine., in Gifford Lectures. Lecture II *Hope* (<http://www.giffordlectures.org/Browse.asp?PubID=TPFHCR&Volume=0&Issue=0&ArticleID=3>). Quotation:

In conclusion, a word must be said on a rather trite subject. Many leading anthropologists, including the author of *The Golden Bough*, would wholly or in the main refuse the title of religion to these almost inarticulate ceremonies of very humble folk. I am afraid, however, that I cannot follow them. Nay, I would not leave out a whole continent from a survey of the religions of mankind in order to humour the most distinguished of my friends. Now clearly if these observances are not to be regarded as religious, like a wedding in church, so neither can they be classed as civil, like its drab equivalent at a registry office. They are mysteries, and are therefore at least generically akin to religion. Moreover, they are held in the highest public esteem as of infinite worth whether in themselves or for their effects. To label them, then, with the opprobrious name of magic as if they were on a par with the mummeries that enable certain knaves to batten on the nerves of fools is quite unscientific; for it mixes up two things which the student of human culture must keep rigidly apart, namely, a normal development of the social life and one of its morbid by-products. Hence for me they belong to religion, but of course to rudimentary religion—to an early phase of the same world-wide institution that we know by that name among ourselves. I am bound to postulate the strictest continuity between these stages of what I have here undertaken to interpret as a natural growth.

6. Guthrie (2000) pp.225-6 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=wINJQoZIGC4C&pg=PA225>)
7. Pandian, Jacob (1997) *The sacred integration of the cultural self: An anthropological approach to the study of religion*, p.507 in S. Glazier (Ed.) *The anthropology of religion*
8. Harvey, Van A. (1996) *Projection: a metaphor in search of a theory?* p.67 in D.Z. Philips (ed.) *Can religion be explained away?*
9. Harvey, Van A. (1997) *Feuerbach and the interpretation of religion* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=KdsKpZ6eJWMC&pg=PA4>) p.4
10. Feuerbach, Ludwig (1841) *The Essence of Christianity*
11. Mackey, James Patrick (2000) *The Critique of Theological Reason*, Cambridge University Press. pp.41-2
12. John K. Nelson (1990) A Field Statement on the Anthropology of Religion (<http://inic.utexas.edu/asnic/subject/essayonreli.html>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070302100725/http://inic.utexas.edu/asnic/subject/essayonreli.html>) March 2, 2007, at the Wayback Machine.
13. Cotrupi, Caterina Nella *Northrop Frye and the poetics of process* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=rh8gcNF9YXkC&pg=PA21>) p.21
14. Émile Durkheim (1912) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*
15. Bowie, Fiona (1999) *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell. p.15, 143
16. Durkheim, p.266 in the 1963 edition
17. Max Weber; Peter R. Baehr; Gordon C. Wells (2002). *The Protestant ethic and the "spirit" of capitalism and other writings*. Penguin. ISBN 978-0-14-043921-2. Retrieved 21 August 2011.
18. C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966): 1-46
19. Anthony Wallace (http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information/biography/uvwxyz/wallace_anthony.html) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20071018172405/http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information/biography/uvwxyz/wallace_anthony.html) October 18, 2007, at the Wayback Machine.

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- Guthrie, Stewart Elliott (2000) *Projection* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=w1NJQoZIGC4C&pg=PA225>), in Braun, Willi and McCutcheon, Russell T. (eds.) (2000) *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London & New York: Cassell)

External links

- Homepage of The Society for the Anthropology of Religion (https://web.archive.org/web/20101110074102/http://www.aaanet.org:80/sections/sar/sar_newsite/) within American Anthropological Association
- Anthropology of Religion Page (<http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/419/419www.htm>) M.D. Murphy, University of Alabama
- Andrew Lang, Anthropology and Religion (<http://www.psychanalyse-paris.com/831-Anthropology-and-Religion.html>), *The Making of Religion*, (Chapter II), Longmans, Green, and C°, London, New York and Bombay, 1900, pp. 39–64.

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