

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-33991-9 - Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text

Brian Morris

Excerpt

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Introduction

“All mankind, Greeks and non-Greeks alike, believe in the existence of gods.” So said Plato more than two thousand years ago. Few would deny that some form of religion is universal among mankind. We have yet to discover any society that does not articulate some notions about the sacred and about spiritual beings. Apologists for religion, in advocating a religious or theistic view of the world, have naturally tended to stress the universality of religion, but it is well to remember that skeptical attitudes toward religious beliefs have probably been expressed in all cultures and that a naturalistic conception of the world also has a long history. Indeed Radcliffe-Brown went so far as to assert that

in every human society there inevitably exist two different and in a certain sense conflicting conceptions of nature. One of them, the *naturalistic*, is implicit everywhere in technology, and, in our 20th century European culture, has become explicit and dominant in our thoughts. The other, which might be called mythological, or *spiritualistic* conception, is implicit in myth and in religion, and often becomes explicit in philosophy. (1952: 130)

Mary Douglas, who in *Purity and Danger* was concerned to portray the “primitive world view” as essentially religious and symbolic, was later to question this notion of “primitive piety” and to suggest that there may be many tribal cultures that have a secular bias. She cites Barth’s study of the Basseri nomads of Persia (1964), who, though Moslems, take their religion about as seriously as members of a typical London suburb, and she suggests that anthropologists should “ditch the myth of the pious primitive” (1975: 81). This seems to me preferable to the approach that assumes that all preliterate people are totally enmeshed in conceptual categories that are essentially religious. We have only to look back to Greek thought, which many have seen as the fountainhead of the Western intellectual tradition, to see the coexistence of several distinct conceptions of nature, society, and the world.

The anthropological study of religious beliefs and institutions, which

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it will be my purpose to explore in the following chapters, has suffered unduly from the effects of the unnecessary schisms and specialisms that have developed within academia. The founders of social science – Spencer, Durkheim, and Weber, in particular – all of whom had an abiding interest in religious institutions and ideologies, had, it can be safely asserted, a world-historical outlook. These scholars were interested in social institutions both from a comparative perspective and in terms of historical change and development, so that in their studies we find not only incisive analyses and theories relating to the rise of industrial capitalism but also reflections on preliterate cultures. Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* is crammed with data drawn from a wide range of cultures; Weber's *Sociology of Religion* has volumes on all major religious systems; and even the studies of Marx, devoted as they are almost exclusively to a critical analysis of capitalism, nonetheless contain ample comparative material relating to the social life of preliterate and "ancient" communities.

The rise of sociology and anthropology as independent academic disciplines has, I think, had unfortunate consequences for it has led to rather parochial perspectives. A cursory examination of the basic textbooks in both subjects will prove my point, especially if consideration is given to religious beliefs and organization. On the whole, sociological texts deal almost exclusively with Christianity and secularism and treat religion as a rather peripheral issue, notwithstanding the fact that in a world context religious ideologies have played a fundamental role in human affairs. Anthropological texts, on the other hand, largely focus on the religion of tribal cultures and seem to place an undue emphasis on its more exotic aspects. There is invariably a chapter on magic or witchcraft. Thus, between them, a good deal of data on historical religions is left out of account, although recent scholars in both disciplines have made important theoretical contributions in subject areas that are normally neglected by the introductory texts. But, more important, an unnecessary conceptual division has arisen between tribal religion (as studied by anthropologists) and historical religion (as studied by sociologists and area specialists), and they have been accorded differential theoretical treatment. That the advent of literacy and state systems has had important implications with respect to the nature and organization of religious systems no one would deny; that it merits a different theoretical approach is questionable. But this is what has occurred.

Two instances are worth noting. First, in general discussions of religion, theories concerning the origins and functions of religion are invariably addressed to the religious systems of preliterate cultures. Freud, in *Totem and Taboo*, significantly links psychoanalytic theory to tribal

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religion, and Evans-Pritchard's important text is entitled *Theories of Primitive Religion*, though he suggests that the dichotomy between "natural and revealed religion is false and makes for obscurity" and argues that the data derived from tribal cultures is essential for a comparative analysis aimed at determining the earlier characteristics of religion generally (1965: 2). Similarly, discussions of the "savage mind" or of so-called primitive thought and its contrast with scientific understanding equate the former mode of thought not with religious thought generally but only with the traditional thought of preliterate cultures. Durkheim's suggestions as to the "generality" of primitive or symbolic classifications and the metaphorical nature of Christian concepts are significantly ignored. A seemingly sharp and unnecessary line of demarcation is maintained between folk and historical religion.

Second, whereas historical world religions are treated as conceptual entities by students of comparative religion, the religion of tribal cultures is dismembered and treated piecemeal. Thus most general texts on comparative religion devote a chapter respectively to Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, which are treated both as belief systems and as solid historical phenomena, whereas "primitive" religion is discussed under a series of headings: mana, taboo, totemism, magic, shamanism, myth, and the sacred. The conceptual ideas that these terms embody are, of course, by no means restricted to tribal cultures but may be an aspect of any religious system. Surprisingly, some anthropologists have tended to follow this approach, for although there have been a number of excellent monographs on tribal religion, the general tendency has been to concentrate on one aspect of the ideological system. Symbolism, spirit possession, myth, and witchcraft, for example, are often treated as an autonomous set of beliefs and activities, almost independent of other aspects of the culture, and theoretical perspectives are directed specifically to one facet of religious life. Such studies may be ethnographic, as in Evans-Pritchard's classic account of Azande witchcraft, or they may be of a general nature, as exemplified in the works of Lévi-Strauss on totemism and Lewis on spirit-possession cults.

The essential Marxist premise, Lévi-Strauss remarked, is that "the way people live conditions the way they think." This issue is perhaps the only guiding thread of the present study, which is designed as an introduction to the writings of a number of scholars who have made theoretical efforts to understand or explain religious phenomena. It is written, I hope, from the standpoint of critical sympathy, and thus does not present any thesis of my own. I have interpreted both anthropology and religion in the broadest sense. Anyone who studies the human condition is, for me, an anthropologist, whereas the rubric "religion," to me, covers all phe-

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nomena that are seen as having a sacred or supraempirical quality: totemism, myth, witchcraft, ritual, spirit beliefs, symbolism, and the rest. In discussing each scholar I first outline in broad terms the nature of his or her social theory and then go on to describe and critically examine the theory of "religion." The organization of the work is roughly chronological and attempts to broadly situate scholars within currents of thought, reflecting the various approaches to the critical understanding of religion. The first two chapters deal essentially with the German historical tradition and examine the work of Hegel, Marx, Engels, and Weber. Chapter 3 outlines the work of those writers who have had an important influence on academic anthropology: Müller, Spencer, Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, and Radcliffe-Brown. In the fourth chapter the work of those writing from a psychological standpoint is explored: Malinowski, Freud, Jung, and Eliade; and in the following one I examine the work of those writers who have developed the implications of Durkheim's thought: Lévy-Bruhl, Evans-Pritchard, Douglas, and Turner. The final chapter looks at the recent work of Lévi-Strauss, Geertz, and Godelier.

A final word needs to be said about my approach to the subject. Some years ago Alasdair MacIntyre (1964) posed the question as to whether understanding religion is compatible with believing it. He came to the conclusion that a skeptic has to explain the meaning of religion in order to reject it, whereas in order to maintain that understanding a religion is dependent on believing it one has to ignore the social context, which, given the widespread diffusion of naturalistic explanations, is rather difficult to do. Such philosophical issues I leave aside and can only plead, as an atheist, that I have tried to follow in my studies the approach that Bertrand Russell advocated with respect to philosophy, namely that the right attitude is neither one of reverence nor contempt, but rather an attitude of critical sympathy. In my own approach to religion and to the many scholars whose writings I review in this study, I have tried to reflect this attitude. Needless to say, this leads me to question whether Evans-Pritchard's belief that religion "can be firmly grasped only from within" is a valid one.

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Hegelian metaphysics

“All the great philosophical ideas of the past century – the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis – had their beginnings in Hegel; it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason, which remains the task of our century.” So wrote Merleau-Ponty (1964: 63). Only two decades later, as Descombes observes (1980: 12), opinion seems to have shifted among French philosophers, and Foucault was to note that “whether through logic or epistemology, whether Marx or Nietzsche, our entire epoch struggles to disengage itself from Hegel.” In truth these statements reflect not simply the changing fashions of French intellectual life, but the paradoxical and ambiguous influence that Hegel has had on modern thought. On the one hand he heralded the attempt to go beyond the mechanistic paradigm of the Enlightenment. He articulated a mode of thought that attempted to transcend the dualisms that he had inherited from this tradition, while remaining faithful to its insights, particularly Kant’s stress on the radical freedom of human subjectivity. Hegel thus conceived of the world as a kind of organismic process and attempted to unify the various dualisms of positivistic science: spirit and nature, freedom and necessity, subjectivity and objectivity. In this sense his influence has been important, indeed profound, and Capra’s recent (1982) plea for a “new” paradigm – a “holistic conception of reality” – simply expresses ideas that Hegel had mooted more than a century ago. On the other hand, Western scientific tradition has largely developed in reaction, or even in opposition, to Hegelian metaphysics and has thus sustained and developed the thought and premises of the Enlightenment (cf. Popper’s critique of Hegel, 1945: 1–80). Such a philosophy, as Charles Taylor noted, was “utilitarian in its ethical outlook, atomistic in its social philosophy, analytic in its science of man, and . . . looked to a scientific social engineering to reorganize

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man and society and bring men happiness through perfect mutual adjustment" (1979: 1). This positivistic vision, with its mechanistic and dualistic world view, is still in fact the dominant paradigm, and, as Capra has suggested, it permeates the human sciences, particularly economics and psychology. Foucault's suggestion that contemporary thought is struggling to disengage itself from Hegel's philosophy is misplaced; social science has been evading the implications of Hegel's thought since its inception, as Marcuse suggested in examining the theories of Auguste Comte, whom many have regarded as the founder of sociology (1941: 340–60). Both anthropology and sociology have largely followed the positivist tradition of the Enlightenment, and Hegel's influence has been a diffuse or muted one, largely communicated through the German idealist tradition rather than through Marx. Indeed Gillian Rose (1981) has recently argued that both Weber and Durkheim follow a neo-Kantian paradigm, and even those Marxist theorists who appear to be critical of empirical sociology – Lukacs, Adorno, Habermas, and Althusser – also tend, she suggests, to follow the positivist tradition. Likewise Bottomore and Nisbet have stressed the neo-Kantian trend in the general development of Lévi-Strauss's thought (1979: 581–4). The only tradition that has explicitly acknowledged the importance of Hegelian philosophy has been Marxism, although, as we shall see, Marx and Engels radically revised the tenor of Hegel's thought.

Hegel's writings have had an enormous impact on the modern world, yet almost everyone has acknowledged that they are obscure and difficult to understand. Hector Hawton admitted that he found them "almost completely incomprehensible" and went on to suggest that Hegel was a scholar who was clearly struggling "with the limitations of language in an agonizing attempt to communicate his vision" (1956: 94). And in an important sense Hegel is a visionary. He was a romantic, and was strongly influenced by the writings of Goethe and Schiller, but he would not renounce reason nor did he venerate the medieval age. He had a vision of a universal harmony, but he sought to convey this unity through the rational understanding of a cosmic process that he, like Aristotle, clearly believed was moving toward perfection. He had an abhorrence of mystical intuitions and sensed that this harmony would be achieved only through the creative activity of human beings. Because his writings are complex and obscure, Hegel is easily misunderstood, and I cannot pretend to have fully understood the subtlety of his thought. But my purpose here is only to outline some of Hegel's basic premises and his interpretation of religious culture. And I can do this best, I think, by quoting from his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the introduction to which presents, in summary fashion, some of his basic ideas.

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Hegel was born in 1770 in Stuttgart, the son of a minor civil servant, and for most of his life worked as a private tutor or university teacher. Though an “exuberant genius” and visionary, he was, as Copleston put it, “very much the honest bourgeois university professor” (1963: 197). The date of his birth is important, for it meant that Hegel came to maturity at a crucial period: The end of the eighteenth century was a period of social and intellectual turmoil. In 1781 Immanuel Kant had published his masterpiece, *The Critique of Pure Reason*; in 1789 the French Revolution had broken out, and in Germany the writings of Schelling, Goethe, and Schiller had ushered in the Age of the Imagination, which was to crystallize as the Romantic Movement. The Age of Reason was coming to an end, and many of the essential premises of the Enlightenment – and even reason itself – were increasingly being challenged. At this time, too, there was a revival of interest in the philosophy of Spinoza, a rationalist scholar and recluse who had been neglected for the past century. The essence of Hegel was that he absorbed, and attempted to unite, all of these conflicting trends. As Gray writes,

Hegel's deepest longing – amounting to a passion – was for a reconciliation of all the conflicting forces which in his age the Enlightenment and subsequent Romanticism had set in motion. His passion for a synoptic view that would reconcile reason and reality, the real and the ideal, or mind and nature could be satisfied only by a comprehensive system in which every legitimate source of conflict and division was incorporated as an organic part of the whole. All his life he struggled against alienation – giving first currency to this term and its psychological and philosophical origins. (1970:1)

All the dualisms that mechanistic science and Kantian philosophy had generated, and that for Hegel were essential and necessary for the progress of human thought – spirit (mind) and nature, knowledge and passion, reason and morality, freedom and necessity, ideal and reality, human subjectivity and sociality – Hegel sought both to encompass and transcend. And he aimed to do this by reason alone. In doing so he tried to combine in one comprehensive system the following: Kant's critical philosophy and his stress on freedom and human subjectivity; the Enlightenment emphasis on empirical knowledge and reason; the view expressed by the Romantics (the poet Hölderlin was a close friend of Hegel's) that nature was an organic totality; the philosophical monism of Spinoza; and the holistic, cosmological world view of the Greek philosophers, for whom he had a lasting admiration (particularly Heraclitus and Aristotle). What a vision – and what a task. (For general accounts of Hegel's life and philosophy, see Stace 1955, Kaufmann 1965, P. Singer 1983.)

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The first thing to be said about Hegel is that he is, in a fundamental sense, a historical thinker. All his basic notions – *Geist* (spirit), reason, freedom – have meaning and significance only within a historical context, or rather within a cosmic process. If we cast a glance over the world's history, he wrote, we “see a vast picture of changes and transactions; of infinitely manifold forms of peoples, states, individuals, in unresting succession . . . The general thought – the category which first presents itself in this restless mutation of individuals and peoples, existing for a time and then vanishing – is that of *change* at large” (1956: 72). Hegel praises the oriental view of the universe (the Hindu concept of karma), with its recognition of endless cycles of change. But in making, like Plato and Heraclitus, a distinction between the phenomenal world of change and the infinity of spirit or the “eternal repose” of Buddhism, Hegel felt that such doctrines had presented a limited viewpoint. For Hegel all reality – spirit and nature – was ever-changing. “The abstract conception of mere change,” he wrote, “gives place to the thought of spirit manifesting, developing and perfecting its powers in every direction which its manifold nature can follow” (73). The nature of the spirit, however, can only be learned from its products and formations – human culture – not from mystical insights. Moreover, the spirit fulfills its destiny or aim only in relation to its “entanglement” with nature. Thus Hegel saw history in general as a process, the development of the spirit, and this process was rational, necessary, and dialectical. As he put it,

It is only an inference from the history of the world that its development has been a rational process; that the history in question has constituted the rational, necessary cause of the world spirit – that spirit whose nature is always one and the same, but which unfolds this its one nature in the phenomena of the world's existence. This must, as before stated, present itself as the ultimate *result* of history. But we have to take the latter as it is. We must proceed historically – empirically. (1956: 10)

Truth, for Hegel, unfolds itself through the course of history, and to obtain knowledge of the world as a cosmic process one can neither begin with axiomatic truths nor can one assume that there were, at one time, primeval people who had been taught by god and were thus “endowed with perfect insight and wisdom, possessing a thorough knowledge of all natural laws and spiritual truth” (10). Rather, to understand the nature of the spirit, which, Hegel suggests, manifests itself in ever-changing historical phenomena, one must study culture empirically – or at least one must begin understanding with empirical knowledge.

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* Hegel attempted to indicate the various “grades of development” of the spirit, seeing the principles

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underlying different cultures as simply “steps in the development of the one universal spirit, which through them elevates and completes itself to a self-comprehending totality” (1956: 78). Taking a world-historical perspective, Hegel outlines four major cultural epochs: the oriental (Egyptian and the Asiatic civilizations), the Greek, the Roman, and the German (the latter encompassing essentially western European culture). There is no doubt that Hegel was influenced by the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, particularly Adam Ferguson (Cullen 1979), and like his contemporaries Hegel had a rather Eurocentric bias. Tribal and African cultures are thus seen as outside history, as “unhistorical, undeveloped spirit,” a viewpoint still implied by some historians (e.g., Toynbee 1976). Hegel has some disparaging things to say about African peoples, echoing missionary reports that they live in a “completely wild and untamed state,” without any conceptions of god, law, or subjectivity (93). Hegel also held the belief that certain key people – “world-historical individuals,” as he describes them – unconsciously embody the world spirit. It is of interest that they are all military heroes: Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon.

Hegel therefore made a distinction between historiography, which could be either descriptive or reflective, and the philosophy of history. Only practitioners of the latter were concerned, in studying the empirical data, to delineate a universal history – that is, the process by which the spirit comes to have a knowledge of itself. And like Aristotle, Hegel conceives of a world spirit developing itself “actually to what it was always potentially.” As in growth of an organism, the “principle of development involves also the existence of a latent germ of being – a capacity or potentiality striving to realize itself.” But whereas the development of natural organisms, Hegel suggests, is direct and unhindered, the development of the spirit is mediated by human consciousness and will (55). And this means that whereas the sphere of natural growth is “peaceful,” in the development of the spirit it is dialectic and involves a “mighty conflict with itself” (55). Several important points emerge from this conception of “spirit” divided against itself.

The first is that Hegel draws a distinction between natural and cultural processes. Nature, he felt, exhibited only a “perpetually self-repeating cycle,” whereas the realm of the spirit (culture) has an “altogether different destiny,” creatively giving rise to all things new. Spirit has “a real capacity for change, and that for the better – an impulse of perfectability” (54). But this destiny is a germ, an idea pointing to something that is destined to become actual. Hegel therefore makes the famous distinction, taken up by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, between matter and spirit, between being *an-sich* (in itself) and *für-sich* (for itself). It is difficult,

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therefore, to argue that Hegel was an evolutionary thinker. But it is important to realize that since “spirit is the consciousness of an objective real world” (1977: 295), it (as human culture) continually strives to achieve a unity of being-in-itself and being-for-itself, the unity of freedom and necessity, mind and nature. Unlike religious mystics such as Sankara, Hegel sees this unity in relation to nature, not as some transcendental realm of being.

Second, and linked with this, Hegel saw world history as “none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.” He summed up this progressive development in this way: “The Eastern nations knew only that one is free (the theocratic ruler); the Greek and Roman world only that some are free (the aristocracy); while *we* know that all men . . . are free” (1956: 19). But the destiny of the world, he sensed, was not only the consciousness of its own freedom on the part of the spirit (in the abstract) but the realization of that freedom in the world (as a concrete reality). Hegel was, however, quite aware that the history of the world had not been a “theatre of happiness” – in fact he implies that history has been a “slaughter bench” on which the happiness of individuals and the wisdom of communities has endlessly been victimized. Nonetheless, like the Buddha, he pleads that “gloomy emotions” lead nowhere and stresses that there is a “reason” unfolding itself in history.

Third, and significantly, Hegel conceived of the idea, or destiny, of the spirit as a potentiality that was abstract: It was a hidden, undeveloped essence. For its realization another element, he felt, was needed, and that element was human activity in its widest sense. The “motive power” that gives spirit or reason its actuality that “puts them in operation, and gives them determinate existence, is the need, instinct, inclination, and passion of man” (22). In a way that is difficult to comprehend, Hegel sees human activity (a blend of reason and passion) as the “middle term” or “medium” whereby the Idea or universal essence (spirit or freedom) is translated into the domain of objectivity (nature or necessity) (27). But this is seen as a kind of historical process in which the “world at large,” through spirit (in the form of culture), becomes conscious of itself and realizes, makes concrete, its own freedom in nature.

Finally, as is well known, Hegel appears to suggest that the modern state is the condition through which freedom is realized. As he put it, “The state is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth” (39). Hegel has therefore been severely criticized both for being an apologist for Prussian absolutism and for glorifying the state; indeed Popper asserts that he is the founder of totalitarian thought. The formula for the fascist brew, wrote Popper, is “Hegel plus a dash of 19th-century materialism” (1945: 61). Bertrand Russell is equally unsympathetic toward Hegel, suggesting