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0521617790 - Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction

Brian Morris

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RELIGION AND ANTHROPOLOGY

This important study provides a critical introduction to the social anthropology of religion, focusing on more recent classical ethnographies. Comprehensive, free of scholastic jargon, engaging, and comparative in approach, it covers all the major religious traditions that have been studied concretely by anthropologists – Shamanism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and its relation to African and Melanesian religions, and contemporary Neo-Paganism. Eschewing a thematic approach and treating religion as a social institution and not simply as an ideology or symbolic system, the book follows the dual heritage of social anthropology in combining an interpretative understanding and sociological analysis. The book will appeal to all students of anthropology, whether established scholars or initiates to the discipline, as well as to students of the social sciences and religious studies, and to all those interested in comparative religion.

Brian Morris is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Goldsmiths College, at the University of London. His many publications include *Chewa Medical Botany* (1996), *Animals and Ancestors* (2000), *Kropotkin: The Politics of Community* (2004), *Insects and Human Life* (2004), and *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text* (Cambridge, 1987).

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*To James Woodburn
Who guided my first
steps in Social Anthropology*



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Advance Praise:

“Brian Morris’ *Religion and Anthropology* is at once remarkably comprehensive and situated. He manages to include most of the religious endeavors of the world and of world history while situating each in social context, elucidated by anthropological fieldwork. The resulting volume is an excellent resource for thinking and teaching about religion in a specifically anthropological perspective. I plan to assign the book for my own course on the topic.”

– James L. Peacock, *University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

“As a sequel and complement to Morris’s previous reader on theoretical approaches to religion, this book of impressive scholarship is an admirable success and a thoroughly enjoyable read. The book is characterized by a refreshing, common-sense approach to religion that is eminently accessible due to the consistent avoidance of unnecessary jargon, psychobabble or lyrical prose. The sympathetic and nonjudgmental ethnographic descriptions, the dynamism of the theoretical polemic, the clear use of English, and the elegance of the narrative structure made this book difficult to put down. A rare experience when reading much modern anthropological writing.”

– Jerome Lewis, *London School of Economics and Political Science*

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Preface

I have been teaching a course on the Anthropology of Religion at Goldsmiths' College, off and on, for almost thirty years. My writing of *Anthropological Studies of Religion* was in fact motivated by a felt need for an introductory text on the subject, even though I knew that some elitist Oxbridge scholars held such texts in general disdain. Indeed, one well-known anthropologist severely rebuked me for even teaching anthropology as a subsidiary subject at Goldsmiths, insisting that anthropology could be taught adequately only at a postgraduate level. Having failed my eleven-plus, I left school at the age of fifteen to work in an iron foundry, and, failing to get into a university because I lacked any 'A' levels, I have always found such elitist attitudes quite deplorable. When, along with Jane Hoy of the University of London Extra-Mural Department, I initiated a Certificate of Anthropology, supported by my colleagues at Goldsmiths' College, I found great difficulty in convincing my anthropological colleagues at other universities that the certificate had any value as an access course. Typically, more than a decade later, when academics had discovered that anthropology was being widely taught outside of universities, a resource guide was published, *Discovering Anthropology*, that completely ignored these earlier initiatives. It is worth noting also that, because of these elitist attitudes, anthropology is the only university discipline that is not a part of the school curriculum, even though Britain is a multicultural society! Unlike some pretentious academics, ensconced in some elite university, I have always found introductory texts extremely useful as teaching aids, in the same way as travel guides are useful in exploring the landscape, and true scholars, like Ernst Mayr (for example), do not feel that the writing and the use of introductory texts is in the least demeaning. In fact, some introductory texts offer more critical insights into the subject matter than many articles in academic journals where obscurantist, neo-Baroque jargon is often a cover for sociological platitudes. I thus make no apology for offering a sequel and an update of my earlier text, and it has the same purpose, namely, to be a helpful guide to anthropological studies of religion – comprehensive, stimulating I hope, critical, sympathetic, and above all, readable, that is, free of obscurantist jargon. It will, I trust, appeal to all students of anthropology, whether established scholars or initiates on access courses, as well as to the students of the social sciences generally, and to all those interested in comparative religion.

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Over the years I have been very appreciative of many friends and colleagues in anthropology who have given me encouragement and intellectual support, and I would especially like to thank the following: Tony Atcherly, Barbara Bender, Alan Barnard, Maurice Bloch, Peter Baynes, Pat Caplan, Roy Ellen, Simeren and the late Alfred Gell, Victoria Goddard, Susan Greenwood, Olivia Harris, Signe Howell, Tim Ingold, Jean La Fontaine, Ioan Lewis, Murray Last, Josep Llobera, Nici Nelson, Stephen Nugent, Judith Okely, David Parkin, Johnny Parry, the late Madan Sarup, Laura Rival, Mary Searle-Chatterjee, Cris Shore, Shelagh Weir, Roy Willis, James Woodburn, and Justin Woodman.

In addition I should like to thank the many students who have sat in my seminars – around 2,000 too many to mention by name! – for all their insights, feedback, and often warm friendships.

Finally, I should like to thank my family and colleagues at Goldsmiths' College for their continuing support, and Sheila Robinson and Emma Svanberg for kindly typing my manuscript.

Brian Morris
August 7, 2004