Introduction

This book is in a real sense an update and a sequel to my text *Anthropological Studies of Religion* (1987). It thus offers a critical introduction or guide to the extensive anthropological literature on religion that has been produced over the past forty years or so – with a specific focus on the more well-known and substantive ethnographic studies. My earlier text gave a broad, historical but critical survey of the many different theoretical approaches to religion that had emerged since the end of the nineteenth century – a path that has since been well trod by several other scholars (e.g., Hamilton 1995, Pals 1996, Cunningham 1999, and D. Gellner 1999).

With regard to the present text, I adopt a very different strategy; I take a more geographical approach, for in an important sense the major religious systems – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, African, Melanesian – are regional phenomena, even though they may have universalizing tendencies. It must be emphasized at the outset, however, that not only is religion a complex and variable phenomenon, but also it is essentially a *social* phenomenon. Religion is a social institution, a socio-cultural system; and it is thus ill understood when viewed simply as an ideology, or as a system of beliefs, still less as merely a 'symbolic system' (Geertz), an 'awareness of the transcendent' (Tambiah), or a 'feeling of the numinous' (Otto).

There has, of course, been a plethora of books and articles that have attempted to define 'religion', which is (in case you haven't heard!) a 'Western' category. Thus – like economy, culture, realism, and reason – it has a historical trajectory and in different contexts diverse meanings. But, as a general working definition, we can follow Melford Spiro in defining religion as 'an *institution* consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' (1987, 197) – although one can easily suggest other terms that refer to a person's involvement with a meta-empirical realm – the sacred, spiritual beings, divinity, supernaturals, numinals, or occult powers.

A distinction is often made between substantive and functional definitions of religion, but the latter tend to be quite vague, as in J. Milton Yinger's well-known definition of religion as a 'system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life' – problems relating to human mortality, suffering, and injustice; to the need to infuse human life with meaning and intellectual coherence; and the crucial importance of upholding moral precepts and patterns of social life. (1970, 5–7; see also Nadel 1954, 259–73, on the

"competences" of religion.) But, of course, such human problems can equally well be addressed by secular ideologies – historical materialism, dialectical or evolutionary naturalism, or secular humanism. Indeed, given such a wide definition, Dewey's empirical naturalism and secular humanism have, in the United States at least, both been declared a 'religion' (Kurtz 1983; Rosenbaum 2003; for useful discussions on the definition of religion, see Geertz 1975, 87–125; Asad 1993, 27–54; Horton 1993, 19–49; Saler 1993).

As a social institution, religion is thus neither a static nor a unitary phenomenon; but as a widespread institution, it is characterized by a number of 'dimensions', or what Southwold, in his polythetic approach to religion, describes as 'attributes'. These include the following: ritual practices; an ethical code; a body of doctrines, beliefs, scriptures, or oral traditions; patterns of social relations focussed around a ritual congregation, church, or moral community; a hierarchy of ritual specialists; a tendency to create a dichotomy between the sacred and profane; and, finally, an ethos that gives scope for emotional or mystical experience (Southwold 1978, 370–1; Smart 1996, 10–11).

Anthropology, despite its diversity, has a certain unity of purpose and vision. It is unique among the human sciences in both putting an emphasis and value on cultural difference, thus offering a cultural critique of western capitalism and its culture, and in emphasizing people's shared humanity, thus enlarging our sense of moral community and placing humans squarely 'within nature'. As a discipline, anthropology has therefore always placed itself – as a comparative social science – at the 'interface' between the natural sciences and the humanities. Sadly, in recent years, given the increasingly arrogant and intolerant rhetoric of postmodern anthropologists who seem to repudiate empirical science entirely, and the equally dismissive attitude some positivist anthropologists have towards hermeneutics (Tyler 1986; E. Gellner 1995), a 'wide chasm' seems to have emerged between these various traditions (Burofsky 1994, 3). I have elsewhere offered my own reflections on this sad state of affairs and have emphasized that an understanding of human social life should entail both hermeneutic understanding (humanism) as well as explanations in terms of causal mechanisms and historical understanding (naturalism) (Morris 1997). Anthropology has historically always tended to combine both approaches – hermeneutics and naturalism, interpretive understanding and scientific explanations – and has thus tended to avoid either a one-sided emphasis on hermeneutics, which in its extreme form, 'textualism', denies any empirical science, or the equally one-sided emphasis on naturalism, which in its extreme form, as crude positivism, oblates or downplays cultural meanings and human values (Morris 1997). As Jackson writes, 'people cannot be reduced to texts any more than they can be reduced to objects' (1989, 184). The notion that anthropology is simply a 'romantic rebellion against the enlightenment' (Shweder 1984) is thus completely misleading, for anthropology has always drawn equally on the insights of both the romantic (humanist) and the enlightenment (empirical science) traditions.

Emphasizing the 'dual heritage' of anthropology, Maurice Bloch has also bewailed the spirit of 'fundamentalism' that has entered anthropology in recent years. Thus one type of fundamentalism, associated with hermeneutic and postmodernist scholars, conceives of anthropology as purely a 'literary enterprise' and repudiates social science entirely, while the other type of fundamentalism, embraced by anthropologists who take their bearings from socio-biology and cognitive psychology, is aggressively naturalistic and wishes to 'purify' anthropology of the other orientation. Bloch himself affirms the 'hybrid character' of anthropology (1998, 39–41). In this study, I avoid both these forms of 'fundamentalism' and focus on those scholars – the majority – who have remained true to the dual heritage of anthropology.

My earlier text focussed specifically on exploring the many different theoretical approaches to the study of religion; and, although described as a *tour de force*, it was never designed to herald a 'Hegelian renaissance', as one reviewer bizarrely suggested. These approaches may be briefly summarized here under the following seven headings.

1. INTELLECTUALIST APPROACHES

This approach, derived from the classical studies of Edward Tylor and James Frazer, suggests that religion can best be understood as a way of explaining events in the world. As Robin Horton puts it, religious beliefs are 'theoretical systems intended for the explanation, prediction and control of space–time events' (1971, 94). Thus Horton considered African religious thought as akin to science. Evans-Pritchard's classic study of Azande witchcraft is seen as exemplifying this style of analysis. The problem with this approach to religion is that it is extremely partial, and religious explanations of events hardly seem plausible when contrasted with those of science (on this approach, see Morris 1987, 91–106, 304–9; Horton 1993).

2. EMOTIONALIST APPROACHES

Psychological theories of religion have a long history going back to Hume and Spinoza. This approach suggests that religion is a response to emotional stress and thus serves to alleviate fears and anxieties. Malinowski's biological functionalism and Freud's psychoanalytic theory are classical examples of this approach to religions and magic. Although Wittgenstein considered that any attempt to explain social life was 'mistaken', he also thought, as did other logical positivists, that religious rituals had primarily a cathartic function (Tambiah 1990, 56–7). In recent years psychoanalytic and emotionalist theories of religion have gone out of fashion, although they form an important dimension to the work of Melford Spiro and Gananath Obeyesekere, which is discussed in Chapter 2 (on religion and the emotions, see Morris 1987, 141–63; Cunningham 1999, 23–31).

3. STRUCTURALIST APPROACHES

Invariably identified with the important work of Claude Levi-Strauss, the structuralist approach emphasizes that culture is a form of communication, and, influenced by structural linguistics, especially the theories of Saussure, it seeks to elucidate the 'grammar' of culture. Systems of thought, especially mythology, magic, symbolism, and totemic classifications, are thus analysed in terms of binary oppositions in order to reveal their underlying, and often hidden, 'symbolic logic'. The approach was seen by Levi-Strauss as exemplifying the scientific method, and a focus was placed squarely on what he described as the 'thought-of-orders' – ideological structures. Levi-Strauss was little concerned with religion per se, but for a while structuralism was embraced with enthusiasm by many anthropologists and, in the work of Maurice Godelier, was combined with a Marxist approach. Levi-Strauss' structuralist theory gave rise to a plethora of critical studies and commentary, and the approach was seen as essentially synchronic and ahistorical, as downplaying human agency, and as divorced from social and political realities (Morris 1987, 264–91; Johnson 2003).

4. INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES

This approach, variously described as semantic, symbolic, semiotic, or hermeneutic, represents a development of as well as a reaction against earlier sociological approaches to religion, especially structural–functionalism. Interpretive anthropology puts an emphasis on religion as a cultural or symbolic system, as essentially a system of meanings that both express and shape social reality, as well as people's dispositions and sense of identity. This symbolic or interpretive approach has been closely identified with the work of Clifford Geertz (1975) but is also embraced by many other scholars; among the better known are Mary Douglas, Marshall Sahlins, John Beattie, Victor Turner, and Stanley Tambiah. Although the interpretive approach is an important and integral part of the 'dual heritage' of anthropology, adherents of the symbolic or hermeneutic approach have increasingly tended to repudiate social science and comparative analysis and to embrace a rather idealist metaphysic, one that is antirealist and implies an extreme epistemological relativism (on the interpretive approach to religion, see Geertz 1975; Morris 1987, 203–63; Hamilton 2001, 177–84).

5. COGNITIVE APPROACHES

In recent decades some anthropologists have enthusiastically embraced sociobiology and its offshoot, evolutionary psychology, as a strategy by which to advance a truly 'scientific' study of religion. The basic idea is that religious systems can be explained in terms of 'basic or pan-cultural human psychological characteristics'

(Hinde 1999, 14). The emphasis, however, is specifically on cognitive 'mechanisms' or propensities that have been adaptive in a biological sense, namely, in fostering the survival or reproductive success of humans in the past. Religious beliefs and rituals are described as 'counterintuitive', that is, contrary to commonsense assumptions and experience (hardly news!) but nevertheless as 'natural'; and an explanation for such beliefs and rituals is to be found 'in the way all human minds work' (Boyer 2001, 3). The 'mind', however, according to this approach, is not simply a 'blank slate' on which culture writes its script, but rather it consists of a 'whole variety' of cognitive mechanisms that collectively not only explain the very existence of religious concepts but also their persistence in human cultures, as well as explaining the way in which religion has 'appeared in human history' (Boyer 2001, 342). Even atheism is explained by reference to these same cognitive mechanisms and presumably Boyer's own theory too. Pascal Boyer tends to be dismissive of other approaches to religion – intellectualist, emotionalist, sociological – and makes some rather grandiose claims for the cognitive approach. Essentially this approach is 'atomistic', and there appear to be no mediating factors – such as human agency and human social life – between the units of culture or 'memes' (which seemingly have a life of their own!) and the determining psychological instincts – the various cognitive mechanisms (for critiques of socio-biology and evolutionary psychology, see Morris 1991, 132–42; Rose and Rose 2000).

A further cognitive approach is expressed by Stewart Guthrie (1993), who suggests that all religion is a kind of 'anthropomorphism' – anthropomorphism being the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman things and events. He thus comes to view religion as essentially an 'illusion'. Although anthropomorphism was heralded as a new theory of religion, Max Muller – like Levi-Strauss – had much earlier defined religion in similar terms, as the 'personification' or anthropomorphism of natural phenomena (on the cognitive approach to religion, see also Boyer 1993; McCauley and Lawson 2002).

6. PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACHES

This is the classical approach of religious-studies scholars and essentially derives from the writings of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. It is exemplified particularly in the work of Rudolf Otto, Carl Jung, Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, and Mircea Eliade. Phenomenology essentially implies a philosophical method that attempts to provide a neutral description of human experience. This essentially entails two steps: first, the notion of 'epoche' – the suspension of prior judgements and the 'bracketing' of the 'natural attitude' – commonsense understandings – so that a focus can be put purely on conscious experience, allowing the 'phenomena to speak for themselves'; and second, the notion of 'eidetic intuition', discovering through intuition the 'essence' – the essential meanings – of the phenomena. In recent decades many anthropologists have explicitly embraced phenomenology,

although by this term they do not intend Husserl's 'rigorous science' but rather a repudiation of social science and comparative analysis and a narrow focus on the interpretation of cultural phenomena through either thick description or hermeneutics. In essence it implies making a fetish of culture and the reduction of social life to language or discourses – religious beliefs and ritual practices being reduced in the process to 'texts'.

Ironically, while many postmodern anthropologists have been embracing religious phenomenology and New Age theology, religious-studies scholars, in contrast, have been stressing the importance of developing a more secular and scientific approach to religion. In the process they have offered some cogent criticisms of the phenomenological approach to religion, namely, it treats religion as 'sui generis' and as an autonomous realm independent of social life and human psychology; it posits a divine realm (or spiritual entities) not as a social construct but as having ontological reality; it suggests that the 'origins' of religion are in the private experiences of awe or mystery; and finally, it relies entirely on 'intuitive understanding' and thus ignores the importance of *explaining* religion as a social phenomenon (Jensen and Rothstein 2000).

It is worth noting, of course, that there is a good deal of overlap and common ground among the structuralist, interpretive, and phenomenological approaches to religion, for they all treat religion as essentially a symbolic system, divorced from the wider social world of politics and economics. They differ in what they seek to uncover – a symbolic code or schema, cultural meanings, archetypes, or universal 'essences'. Examples of the latter are the 'sacred' (Eliade) or 'personal faith' (Cantwell Smith) – which is hardly enlightening! (Cox 1992, 38–9). What is significant about phenomenology is that it emphasizes the importance of an empathetic approach towards other cultures and the need to 'walk in the moccasins of the faithful', taking a neutral standpoint, and thus looking at religious phenomena from the viewpoint of the people themselves. Anthropologists like Boas and Malinowski had, of course, adopted this phenomenological approach long before Husserl's philosophical musings on the human everyday 'life-world' [*Lebenswelt*], and it is intrinsic to anthropological scholarship (on the phenomenological approach to religion, see Morris 1987, 174–81; Erricker 1999).

7. SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

This is the approach adopted by the great majority of anthropologists and sociologists over the past half century, and it essentially derives from the seminal writings of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. It thus includes classical structural functionalism, associated with A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Raymond Firth, and John Middleton; the neo-Marxist approach advocated by such anthropologists as W. M. Van Binsbergen, Peter Worsley, and Maurice Godelier; and the historical sociology that was expressed by neo-Weberian scholars such as Gananath

Obeyesekere and Ernest Gellner. The work of many of these anthropologists is discussed later in the study. Central to all sociological approaches is the idea that religion is essentially a social phenomenon, a 'human construct', and thus can be understood only when it is placed within its socio-historical context. Religious beliefs and values, ritual practices, and organizational structures are thus seen as the products of social processes and wider social structures – patterns of social relations. Religion is not therefore an autonomous realm of social life but is intrinsically related to such issues as health, gender, social identity, and the wider political economy, and to such social processes as globalization and intergroup relations. It is recognized, of course, that religion, in turn, influences social life and cultural meanings in various degrees, whether as an ideology legitimating class oppression (Marx), or functioning to maintain enduring patterns of social life (Durkheim), or as an important factor in the rise of capitalism (Weber). Sociological approaches to religion have therefore always combined interpretive understanding with sociological analysis. As Weber famously put it, sociology is defined as 'a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its causes and effects' (1947, 88).

It thus implies the method of inquiry known as *Verstehen*, the emphathetic understanding of subjective meanings (i.e., phenomenology) as well as being centrally concerned with the explanation of social facts.

Raymond Firth has cogently expressed the aim of the social anthropology of religion as a field of inquiry, in that it not only consists of personal observations but also involves 'actually taking part in the religious practices of the people being studied and [the] systematic discussion of their religious beliefs with them'. But it also involves, he writes, studying religion 'in its social setting and noting the economic and political parameters to religious ideas and operations' (1996, 3). The most succinct statement of the sociological approach to religion was expressed by Beckford in suggesting that it 'studies the processes whereby religion, in all its variety and complexity, is interwoven with other social phenomena' (1986, ix).

The sociological approach to religion has been much criticized by hermeneutic scholars who suggest that such sociological analyses do not fully engage in the drama and intensity of religious ritual and symbolism and involve the imposition of western theories and categories upon the ethnographic data (Fernandez 1978). Although one can acknowledge the insights offered by deeply textured ethnographies of specific rituals within a narrow ethnic context, anthropologists like Van Binsbergen have defended a more synthetic, sociological approach. He points out that his own studies, like those of such scholars as Firth, Horton, and Middleton, arise out of fieldwork that was both experiential and participatory, and that one cannot pursue any kind of anthropology completely outside of the western intellectual tradition (Van Binsbergen 1981, 34–6). Indeed, treating religious ritual as an autonomous realm and focussing exclusively on symbolism, aesthetics, and personal idiosyncratic experiences also reflect the imposition of western values

and intellectual preoccupations upon other cultures. We thus need to combine hermeneutics with sociological analysis.

At this juncture a brief discussion of what has been described as 'postmodernism' (or poststructuralism) may perhaps be of some value. Both of these concepts are, of course, somewhat vague, implying a rather simplistic and unilinear conception of intellectual history, such that until the likes of Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Derrida arrived on the intellectual scene, all social scientists were either modernists (advocates of Cartesian metaphysics) or structuralists. Around twenty years ago, postmodernism became all the rage in anthropology. It was interesting to see scholars who only a decade earlier were making a fetish out of science and Marxism suddenly repudiate them entirely and embrace postmodernism with an uncritical fervour. Difficult to define – as it includes scholars with very contrasting approaches to social life – postmodernism as an intellectual ethos has been described as having the following tenets.

First, as we have no knowledge of the world except through 'descriptions' (to use Rorty's term), the 'real' is conceived as an 'effect' of discourses. Ideas, linguistically encoded, are thus all that there is, or at least, all that one can ever hope to know. There is then, so we are told, no objective reality. Postmodernism thus propounds an idealist and subjectivist metaphysic that denies the reality of the material world. In Mary Douglas' memorable phrase, 'all reality is social reality' (1975, 5).

Second, as there is no immediate relationship between consciousness (or language) and the world – an idea that has been part of the common currency of the social sciences ever since Marx – postmodernists take this premise to extremes and posit no relationship between language and the world, and thus espouse an absolute epistemological (and moral) relativism. Truth is either repudiated entirely (Tyler) or seen simply as an 'effect' of local cultural discourses (Rorty, Geertz, Flax) or is seen as something that will be 'disclosed' or 'revealed' by elite scholars through poetic evocation (Heidegger). Cultural relativism is thus embraced, and all claims to truth are seen as masking power relations or, in fact, constituting that power.

Third, there is a rejection of all 'metanarratives' (Lyotard) (science, Marxism, liberalism, Christianity, Buddhism, for example) and a strident celebration of the postmodern condition. The so-called 'postmodern condition' – with its alienation, fragmentation, nihilism, cultural pastiche, relativistic theory, antirealism, and 'decentred' subjectivity – describes, however, not so much a new epoch but rather the cultural effects of global capitalism. But such a stance leads postmodernists to repudiate objective knowledge and empirical science.

Finally, there has been a growing tendency among postmodern academics – following Heidegger – to express themselves in the most obscure and impenetrable jargon, under the misguided impression that obscurity connotes profundity and that a scholastic, neo-Baroque prose style is the hallmark of radical politics. It isn't! (Morris 1997; Hay 2002, 322).

All these tenets of postmodernism have been severely critiqued by many scholars over the past two decades and from various theoretical persuasions (Gellner 1992, Bunge 1996; Callinicos 1997; Kuznar 1997; Searle 1999; Bricmont 2001). Not only has postmodernist theory been found wanting, but the political radicalism of the postmodernists has also been questioned. Indeed, in their rejection of history, in reducing social reality to discourses, in their epistemic relativism, and in their seeming obsession with consumer capitalism, many have remarked that there seems to be an 'unholy alliance' between postmodernism and the capitalist triumphalism of the neo-liberals.

Postmodernism is, of course, like structural Marxism, now 'history', as Alex Callinicos puts it (2003, 13), and we have entered a period, according to some scholars, of 'after postmodernism'. Nevertheless, postmodernism continues to be extremely fashionable among litterateurs and cultural idealists in many departments of anthropology. For many interpretative and literary anthropologists studying religion tend to follow in its wake and thus continue to disparage and ridicule, or even repudiate entirely, empirical social science. This has entailed a growing obsession with symbolism, rhetoric, ritual, aesthetics, metaphor, and language more generally, and anthropology among some scholars has been reduced to semiotics or hermeneutics, or even to autobiography. As one doyen of postmodern anthropology put it, ethnography should 'break' with the 'trope' of history and social structure and be simply a kind of autobiography (Marcus 1995). Social life, indeed the world, has therefore been seen as a 'text' to be interpreted rather than as something real to be described and explained. Viewing social life as a 'text', or as a collection of discourse, is an 'idealist extravagance' that undervalues the natural world and bypasses economic and political realities (Bunge 1996, 343–6).

Hermeneutics, of course, is a scholarly tradition that goes back to the nineteenth century and is particularly associated with Wilhelm Dilthey, and in recent times with the writings of Ricoeur (both of whom I have discussed at length elsewhere: Morris 1991, 143–52; 1997, 334–5). It has to be recognized, however, that hermeneutics, interpretive understanding, or Verstehen, has always been an intrinsic part of social anthropology, and scholars like Boas, Malinowski, and Evans-Pritchard were engaged in hermeneutics long before it became a fashionable term among postmodernists. As this present text is focussed around ethnographic studies, it is, in a sense, all about hermeneutics. For the sociological approach to religion, as earlier emphasized, has always combined hermeneutics – interpretive understanding – with sociological and historical analysis.

Although the sociological approach to religion does not entail a 'cold, detached, value-free orientation', which, as Marvin Harris suggests, represents a total distortion of an earlier generation of social scientists (1980, 12), it usually implies what has been described as 'methodological agnosticism'. Thus anthropologists adopting a sociological approach are not concerned with the truth status or morality of specific religious concepts or beliefs, nor with the authenticity of the personal

experiences that are often attributed to religious devotees or prophets (Hamilton 1995, 5–12; Beckford 2003, 2–3). This is because, ever since Durkheim, anthropologists have made an implicit distinction between philosophical issues relating to existence (ontology), truth (epistemology), and morality (ethics) – which has not been their main concern – and the role of the anthropologist as a social scientist. In this role they employ what Wright Mills (1959) called the 'sociological imagination' to both understand religion as a system of meanings and to explain religion within its socio-historical context by means of comparative, functional, or causal analysis. Anthropologists as social scientists have thus, following their vocation, been neither for nor against religion, neither engaged in theology, apologetics, or advocacy, nor in explicitly attacking or dismissing religion as meaningless or irrational in the style of the logical positivists. As empirical naturalists, most anthropologists have thus been concerned with knowledge and the understanding of human cultures, not with eternal truths, ultimate meanings, self-enlightenment, or the morality or otherwise of people's religious concepts. Recent discussions of the 'rationality debate' have emphasized, like Firth and Foucault, the importance of a critical rationalism when approaching religion and the need to separate philosophical issues relating to truth and existence from the scientific approach to religion (see Firth 1996 and Jensen and Martin 1997; but cf. Lett 1997, who suggests that anthropologists as empirical scientists should, to maintain their own integrity, fervently and publicly declare that religious beliefs are 'nonsensical' and 'demonstrably untrue' and that religion is a 'thicket of superstition').

Many contemporary postmodern anthropologists, often advocating a kind of New Age theology, have followed religious phenomenologists like Eliade in adopting a very condescending or dismissive attitude towards social science. Sociological analysis is thus repudiated with such negative epithets as 'positivist' or 'detached' or 'reductionist', and social scientists are accused, often in the most oracular fashion, of 'reifying' social phenomena or as treating religion as 'epiphenomena'. Even more perverse is that New Age anthropologists derogate an earlier generation of social scientists for having a 'unitary' conception of the human subject, as if anthropologists were still stuck in the seventeenth century! Such New Age and postmodern anthropologists seem to be discovering for themselves what has been common knowledge among social scientists ever since Marx, namely, that humans in all cultures are intrinsically social beings and that self-identity – personhood – is complex, shifting, composite, relational, and involves multiple identities (see Morris 2000, 41–8). As I shall explore in this study, most of these adverse criticisms of the social scientific approach by postmodern and New Age anthropologists are unwarranted, prejudiced, and verge on caricature (on the sociological approach to religion, see Morris 1987, 23–90, 106–40; Hamilton 2001; Beckford 2003; specifically on the Marxist approach, see Siegel 1986).

There is a common tendency among many scholars of religion to exaggerate or overemphasize the importance of religion in human social life, such that religion