Cultural Anthropology and the many Functions of Religion

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Religion has many interpretations, many facts and a host of functions. In the two preceding papers its main function—even if the interpretation varied—was either a sociological or a structural one: religion gives a group cohesion and orders a universe. Yet human life is not always ordered, neither is respect for or obedience to the group everywhere paramount. The erratic individual often moves from the more or less straight and narrow path his culture has laid out for him, not only causing lots of trouble and strife, but paving the way for religious innovation and cultural change. American anthropology in several of its myriad facets, has given ample attention to this dialectic relation between an individual and his religion. The dialectic is quite clear: just as any individual is the product of his society and vice versa the society stems from individuals, any religion not only is imposed upon its participants, but to a large extent is moulded by these very personalities it has been instrumental in shaping. Of course this sounds like the age old chicken-and-egg problem; so to avoid any insoluble dilemma let me rephrase the question: what kind of function does religion perform for the individual participant?

Let us start with the first question. The experiment in survival called *homo sapiens* does not live just with his brains, but to a large extent with his glands too. Emotions, though heavily underplayed in religious
theory, do form the main motor for most actions. Our general scientific disregard for the ‘lower’ emotions as explanatory factors is more expressive of our own culture and our academic subculture, than of the religion of our fellow men. Of course, the affluent West can afford to look for the elated feelings of religiosity, nicely ordered worldview, and coherent belief systems. But in the great majority of societies studied by anthropologists survival is the key word. Harsh surroundings, a merciless physical environment, droughts and famines all take their toll. Hobbes’s picture of ‘brutish, nasty and short’ is an inappropriate description of tribal life surely not to be invoked. On the other hand, Rousseau’s noble savage is widely off the mark too. Any field anthropologist knows from his own experience the quiet harmony a rural village offers him. Most of us long to go back to the field, if only for that reason. But as visiting scientists we really have the best of two worlds, the security and—medical—technology of the West and the intensive social interaction of the face-to-face community.

Recently an anthropologist, after having broken his leg in remote Nepal, was flown out by helicopter. No doubt his Sherpa friends were better adapted to the mountains, less clumsy on the steep slopes to say the least, and would not slip as easily; still, they must solve their own problems in their own way, by their own means, and would never in their lifetime be able to send for a helicopter. (Oral communication).

What has this to do with his religion? Well, religion is an important facet of the cultural array of problem-solving devices, either for big calamities or for small nuisances. Wallace, one of the main proponents of this view on religion, cites a charming example:

A Cherokee burning himself, blows fresh water in four parts on the burn reciting: Water is cold, ice is cold, snow is cold, rime is cold. “Relief” I will be saying (Wallace 1966: 77).

Another case comes from our own field experience:

A Kapsiki suffering from headache whirls a discarded potsherd three times around his aching head, and throwing the potsherd away sighs: “Well, that is fixed” (Van Beek 1978: 378).
right, even if mental defects should not be disregarded so easily. Kennedy (1973) nearly sums up this discussion. Some anthropologists harbour the view that shamans are superbly endowed individuals who have the valuable capacity to put themselves to trance. Castaneda's Don Juan (Castaneda 1968) would have been a splendid example but for the small detail that this material seems to be a fake (de Mille 1980).

Religion, however, is not reserved for special individuals such as shamans; ordinary individuals, too, meet their needs by religion, so in other aspects of religion the expression of not specifically pathological personality traits should be discernible. As an example Spiro's work on the Ifaluk can serve; any society has to build in safety valves for individuals and the Ifaluk society has a lot of inbuilt stress with which the inhabitants have to cope.

Ifaluk is a small Micronesian Island where a few hundred people live at close quarters. All arable land is under cultivation and no population expansion is possible. Living hemmed in like this, Ifaluk have to have a device to get rid of their frustrations, aggression or any kind of negative feeling. Their solution is a supernatural scapegoat. Aku, spirits are the core of their belief system, and these aku are responsible for anything bad. People hate the spirits, venting aggression on them in a way they could never do on their fellowmen. Thus living in disharmony with their supernatural world they can afford to live in harmony with their living kinsmen (Spiro 1952).

Religion and socialisation

One drawback of this elegant reasoning is that it is just ad hoc reasoning, and anthropology should not content itself with just explaining the status quo. In the 1950s and 1960s a score of researchers and theorists addressed themselves to the problem how an individual is situated in his culture. Most of these researches do not center on religion, as from a theoretical and practical point of view personality development and childhood training are more important. Still, in nearly all studies, religion does play a part. Early stimulus in this direction came from Kardiner and Linton (1945) who developed a scheme of factors influencing personality development, which stimulated some new ap-
had run their course. Anyway, Whiting and Childe’s massive research program clearly showed that their strict developmental approach yielded only limited results. Thus, one of the major conclusions of the famous Six Cultures study (Whiting and Childe 1953) was that the differences in child rearing within one culture surpass the difference between the modal educational ways. So the theory correctly predicts correlations, but those are not overly important. Reliability and validity are high, relevance low. Moreover, other interpretations of the same phenomena are possible.

Religion and social organisation

The covariance of social and religious matters, does not need a personality development scheme as a mediating factor; those correlations can quite easily be explained by the direct dependency of religion on its sociocultural foundation. In fact, this is the leading hypothesis of most of the British anthropological studies of religion, as Jackson shows. The comparative approach, however, is quite feasible too. Young (1962, 1965) showed that the correlation between virilocality and harsh initiation rites can be explained straightforwardly by pointing at the ways in which ‘male solidarity’ is organised and has to perpetuate itself. Cohen (1964) using the same approach pointed at the duties and responsibilities of unilinear groups, which necessitate certain ways of initiating boys and girls. The belief system, another projective part of religion, shows considerable covariation with social organisation regardless of child rearing practices. Swanson (1960) showed in another cross-cultural survey how monotheism, polytheism, witchcraft beliefs, and belief in reincarnation were tied in with social variables like level of state formation, social classes, bride prices, and war.

However, the main tide of anthropology has not been in cross-cultural surveys, however fascinating they may be. Thorough and penetrating analyses of individual cases—always the stronghold of anthropology—yield more insight into religious processes and cultural covariation.

General views of religion

A trend towards a more philosophical but still individualistic way of looking at religion can be spotted in several countries. Tying in with the above mentioned theories La Barre, in a giant volume on prophetic movements (La Barre 1972), tries to unravel the ‘origins of religion.’ For La Barre a religion starts in a prophetic movement, as the source from which all religion springs lies deep within each and every one of us, to be tapped by someone more fully aware of it than most, a prophet, seer, or revelator. Religion, in his view, is essentially part of the deep, non-charted areas in human experience. Religion is the human way to explain our participation in the unknown. A new religion springs from dreams, dramatic individual experiences, which are interpreted by the dreamer and accepted by groups of people.

Van Baal, in a series of major works on the theory of religion, starts from an existential standpoint (Van Baal 1947, 1971, 1981). Man is a strange phenomenon; he has the unique capability of observing not only the external world around him, but also himself, even his own processes of observation. In this he is out-of-this-world, alien and definitely a stranger. However, at the same time he is very much part of this same universe, part and parcel of his world. Man is subject and object, both stranger and friend. He is a subject longing for participation, longing for a partner. Religion, being an ascriptive way of thinking, is a way to partnership with the universe and the expression of the human condition. Symbols are the means of communication with this universe, which in itself is a cultural creation, imposed upon man by his society.

This approach closely resembles Turner’s use of the term communitas (1969). Turner discerns two trends in human culture, the first focussing on organisation, with fixed positions, roles, and slots making up the social persona, and the other viewing society as a homogeneous community of idiosyncratic individuals who, despite external differences, all share a common humanity. This latter he calls communitas: the tendency towards integral humanity. This trend is emphasized in ritual, like in the installation of chiefs, who during the installation ritual are imbued in communitas to impress their duties towards the common people upon them. Thus any religion results from a dialectic between individualism
Religion and conflict

Each society has its own tensions and problems which may show in religion. One favorite—i.e., for anthropologists—expression of problems and conflicts is witchcraft. Rituals of rebellion (Gluckman 1954, Norbeck 1963) are another way of expressing inherent insoluble conflicts. In both cases the reasoning closely follows the psychological tracks indicated above: the ritual, beliefs or accusations serve as a safety valve, and perform a catharsis for the society, which by playing on inherent contradictions makes those tolerable, thus preserving the status quo of society. However, in the long run this kind of catharsis, can have a negative effect too, as Wallace showed in his Iroquois example:

The Iroquois channeled aggressive tendencies by means of the so-called Condolence Ceremony, towards other tribes; the Ceremony eliminated intratribal warfare and thus made intertribal warfare possible. However, the retaliation invoked by the surrounding tribes at the end decimated the Iroquois and nearly obliterated them as a tribal unit (Wallace 1966: 201-286).

Conflict, tension or protests often are invoked whenever anthropologists treat new religious movements. The literature on these is very vast but surveys are available (Wilson 1973, La Barre 1974, Köbben 1959). Most authors relate the new movement to some external influence, which plays hazard with the traditional ways of life. Balandier (1955) considers the colonial situation the main factor, the religious movement being a reaction against it: the only way in which people can regain the initiative, the only vertical social mobility, the only escape out of the system. A protest against social inequality Köbben calls it, and

Van Baal coins the term 'erring acculturation' explaining cargo cults as reaction to a thoroughly misunderstood cultural change. However, not all evaluations are negative; Balandier argues that this kind of movement really does give some 'prise d'initiative,' Redfield sees it as a creative moment in culture (Redfield 1968) and Wallace uses the most positive term of all: cultural revitalisation. When the old structures have crumbled and the old culture is irrevocably lost, a prophetic movement can be a vigorous and positive factor in readjusting people to the new surroundings. Goodenough (1960) even advises development agents to ride the prophetic movement in their community development projects! Not all anthropologists would dare to go that far!

A recent development in these studies is the use of neo-marxist terminology. The main factors of change are conceived in terms of mode of production, productive forces, and the articulation of production. This materialistic approach is counter-balancing the recent trend in anthropology (see Oosten) towards cognitive studies, quite a dichotomy one might say! Materialism states that the societal superstructure reflects the clash of interests in the infrastructure and shields real conflicts from detection. Power structures are hidden by the ideological representation, thus preserving these very powers intact. Works by Werbner (1977), van Binsbergen (1979) and Schoffeleers (1982) exemplify this trend. In a way Burridge's (1969) treatment of millenarian activities fits in too. In his view religion primarily is a set of ideas about power, the ordering and distribution of it: where power structures break down, a millenarian prophet can construct new ways of dealing with power, creating a new power order.

Religion and the ecosystem

The second topic is just as materialistic. Religious rituals have other functions besides therapy, group cohesion, or catharsis; they have an ecosystemic function too. Ritual especially may serve as an ecological instrument. In several ways this can be shown. First ritual can be instrumental in shaping group consensus. Divination as a way of decision making is one example. Decision making is an important part of
any production system: fields have to be sown, gardens cleared, trees cut down. What specific fields, trees, or gardens are to be treated is indicated by divination, the authority of the supernatural world guaranteeing a quick and easy consensus. In many instances the fact of deciding is more important than what decision is taken. If Sheridan's ass could have consulted a diviner, it would never have starved. Vogt (1952) draws attention to this aspect, to explain the persistence of the water witching practice in the USA. Scientific information on water availability is couched in probability terms, the—objectively—slightly less dependable water witching answers in clear terms, thus giving the farmer confidence in his labour intensive well digging. Divination can help in other ways too. Moore (1957) points at the problems of a Naskapi caribou hunter, who has no way of knowing the next caribou migration route as this changes every year. His safest means is, according to Moore, to randomise his hunting sprees in order to avoid over-hunting of an area and scaring the caribou away. Divination does just that. The Naskapi shoulder blade divination precludes patterning; human thinking always repeats itself, the cracks in the shoulder blade form a truly random indication.

In Harris's well known analyses (see Bibliography) ritual plays an even more crucial role. His goal is to disprove the independence of religion, by showing how it is tied in with the general ecology of the group. So he jumps into any case in which the people's life seems to be governed by religion. Starting with the abhinásā (non-violence) rule in India, Harris (1966) shows that the taboo on slaughter of cattle in India does not represent a classic case of protein waste in a poor community, but in fact is a needed protection of the cow, i.e., of agriculture. Cattle are so important for Indian agriculture that the no-slaughter rule is eminently feasible. Besides, cattle do not compete with humans for food; cows are scavengers in India, a useful niche anywhere. A 'naturally selected ecosystem' Harris calls this case, and the same could be said of the other instances in which the independent influence of religion on the economy has been reported. These range from pig-hating Middle Eastern cultures to pig-loving Melanesian tribes, from wife-beating Yanomamó to man-eating Aztec (Harris 1974). In all these cases the seemingly irrelevant taboos, the strange customs and curious practices stem from the ecology and on close inspection fit into the ecosystem. Of course a lively discussion resulted from Harris's somewhat simplistic all-encompassing theory building. Douglas (1973), of course, has a very different opinion on the origin of the pig taboo (see Jackson's paper); on the Indian case Harner gives at least a more balanced interpretation (1967). Whenever Harris draws heavily on one ethnographer, he usually is at odds with him, as with Rappaport (Melanesia, Tsembaga Maring, 1968) and Chagnon (Yanomamó, 1969). Harris's treatment of the classic Aztec material, is heavily disputed by Sahlins (1976). In Harris's view environmental depletion, lack of protein and population regulation are among the crucial factors influencing culture and religion, while the whole complex of warfare serves as an important cultural mechanism to cope with these problems. Sahlins (1976) argues that a culture is a symbolic system of meaning and should be understood in that way. Geertz, in a fascinating series of essays (1973), tries to bridge the two approaches. At the moment the discussions are in full swing. The dichotomy between cognitive and materialistic approaches centers on Harris and will not be resolved easily.

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