6 Anthropology of Religion

6.1 Social Anthropology and Religious Identity

In anthropology religion has always been a central concern to scholars for both fieldwork and theoretical discourse, having been understood to be a “cultural universal.” One problematic element scholars found in discussing religion was defining precisely what was meant by the term, often with Eurocentric distinctions of “religion”/“paganism,” “religion”/“superstition” and “religion”/“magic.” The supernaturalist school defines religion in terms of “belief in Spiritual Beings,” while a sociological approach defined religion as that having to do with the “sacred.” Both of these approaches have come under attack because they simply beg the question, “What is ‘supernatural’ (e.g. ancestors)?” and “What is ‘sacred’ (e.g. a national anthem)?”

3 The supernaturalist view begins with Edward Tylor, Primitive Culture, (New York: 1871); see discussions in Bowie, The Anthropology, 22-24, who claims Tylor’s definition to be “remarkably durable”; and Lambek, “General Introduction,” 19. For a modified supernaturalist definition in terms of “anthropomorphic,” see R.H. Crapo, “More on a Cognitive Theory of Religion,” CA 23 (3 1982): 341-4. The sociological approach traces back to Émile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life [Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totemique en Australie], trans. Karen E. Fields, (New York: The Free Press, [1912]1995), 21-33, who defined religion as “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”; cited in Klass, Ordered Universes, 20; for a good summary and discussion of Durkheim, see David A. Gellner, “Anthropological Approaches,” in Approaches to the Study of Religion, ed. Peter Connolly, (London: Cassell, 1999), 12-5. Edith Turner, “Anthropology, Fieldwork and Belief,” AT 19 (2 2003), 22, examines Durkheim’s implicit value judgment of religion: “After every long and beautiful description – wooing the reader as well as himself – he carefully lifts his readers away from it all, distancing them, as it were, and bids them take another look, wearing those Durkheimian spectacles. The ‘spectacles’ are to cut out the glare, so to speak. Passage by passage Durkheim unbuilds each edifice and shows it to be – nothing, beautifully constructed by society. The power that people felt in religion most certainly did exist, he assured them. That power was society.”
4 Criticizing supernaturalism: Lambek, “Skeptical Rejoinders,” 83, outlines “skeptical ‘deconstruction’” of this view; and see discussions in Bowie, The Anthropology, 22; Eriksen,
Moreover, both Durkheim and Tylor fall victim to the charge that they were seeking the “origins” of religion in humankind, an endeavor which assumed social evolution as a constant and therefore differentiated between “primitive” forms of religion – understood, at best, in the Freudian sense of naïve, coping mechanisms or, at worst, in the Marxist formulation of oppressive, deceptions perpetuated by the powerful – and “complex” religions. An alternate approach came in Geertz, who attempted to “interpret” the emic importance of religion. Geertz defines religion as “(1) a system 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.” The goal of writing a “thick description,” as Geertz phrased it, is classically illustrated by a winking boy. A so-called “thin description” would scientifically note that the boy closed one eyelid. The anthropologists’ aim, however, would be to interpret the meaning of this gesture, an aim even more...
significant for the anthropology of religion. Although Geertz too received criticisms, yet such criticisms are notably fewer and less damning; moreover, a large consensus of anthropologists employ his approach.  

Even since Geertz, however, religion, like kinship, gender, ethnicity and other anthropological categories, has been problematized. Eriksen indicates how some ethnographers attempting to describe an emic understanding of “religion” find that “religion” itself is an etic concept for the society or social group being observed. While some scholars attempt to incorporate Geertz and yet retain the phenomenological approach, many readily accept religion as a destabilized category. Assuming religion to be a fluid category, scholars can understand religious identity to be constructed in varying ways by groups and individuals, such as when religious rituals or the specialists who enact them are used in differentiating insiders from outsiders. The reason ritual is important for religious identity is that anthropologists often speak of ritual as the “social aspect

---

9 e.g. of critics: Klass, *Ordered Universes*, 23, claims that Geertz gives a definition of what a religion is, not a universal “rubric” of religion.  
11 Klass, *Ordered Universes*, 38 is an example of a scholar who explicitly offers a phenomenological accommodation of Geertz. His own definition, described as an incorporation of Geertz to Durkheim, he suggests should be a hypothesis tested by the ethnographer: “Religion in a given society will be that instituted process of interaction among the members of that society – and between them and the universe at large as they conceive it to be constituted – which provides them with meaning, coherence, direction, unity, easement, and whatever degree of control over events they perceive possible.” Although such a definition could apply to the western understanding of science or philosophy, Klass answers (39), “How shall we, for example, set boundaries between religion on one side and, on the other sides, science, philosophy, medicine, psychology, and so on? Do we indeed need boundaries?” cf. D. Gellner, “Anthropological Approaches,” 20, who cites Robin Horton, “African Traditional Thought and Western Science,” *Africa* 37 (1967), 50-71, 155-87, republished in Horton’s essays, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, (CUP, 1993), to argue that despite differences, African religions and Western science both were “systems” that explain, control and predict the world. On religion as a destabilized category, see D. Gellner, “Anthropological Approaches,” 36; Gellner cites the example of M. Southwold, “Buddhism and the Definition of Religion,” *Man* n.s. 13 (1978), 370-1, who lists twelve possible characteristics. Similarly, Bowie, *The Anthropology*, 24, cites Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs*, (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 10-11, who lists seven “dimensions.” Gellner, *Religion*, 142, prefers a “hierarch of (at least) three types of religion.”  
12 “Ritual” is yet another problematic category; see Eriksen, *Small Places*, 216, for examples of anthropologists who have discussed cockfights, modern Olympic games, etc. in terms of ritual. Likewise, “specialist” has been studied in the past with western-biased hierarchies of religious specialists (e.g. priest, shaman, witchdoctor, sorcerer, etc.). Recent scholars focus primarily on any distinction between “lay-persons” and “clerics”; see Klass, *Ordered Universes*, 63-71. Moreover, this is not to say that the specialist/non-specialist is a universal distinction, but when societies attribute higher powers, special access, formal or informal training or some other distinctive feature to one or more of its members the designation is appropriate; see Eriksen, *Small Places*, 215.
of religion” and understand them as “rule-bound public events.” Similarly, when observing religious specialists, ethnographers sometimes note a correlating group, congregation or “church” (in the Durkheimian usage of the term), what some have deemed a “collective consciousness.” While a Durkheimian theory of “church” or religious group may not always be present in religious systems, when it does appear anthropologists find it often occurs in relation to a religious “Other,” which shapes the group’s construction of their own religious identity. This understanding assists a reading of Tertullian, especially when the African theologian invokes ritualistic symbols (such as the sacramental chalice) and congregational distinctions (such as ecclesiastical councils). These elements help to focus a discussion of identity in general into a narrowed scope of religious identity in Tertullian’s writings, which is difficult both because religion permeates all of Tertullian’s writings and because religion seems to pervade all aspects of society.

Since religion is often described as an all encompassing system, anthropological theorists often assume its import in discussing other forms of identities. People’s religion often affects (or is affected), determines (or is determined) and/or correlates (positively or negatively) with aspects of kinship, gender, class, ethnic and innumerable other forms of social identities. On many occasions “politics” serves as a synonym for a totalizing category or system of any given element in any given society, especially when used to indicate the interconnectedness of religion and power. In other words, religion provides anthropologists with a comparative category that often entails the complex web of social and individual identities that accompany religious practice and belief. Religious identity, like other forms of identity discussed above, is often contextually constructed in terms of insiders and outsiders. Before exploring how

15 Lewis, Arguments, xii credits Evans-Pritchard, and those who have followed his approach, with recognizing how religion – and politics – have an “institutional basis of conflict and cohesion” which often constructs meanings and identities in terms of the “Other”; cf. R.L. Stirrat, Power and Religiosity in a Post-Colonial Setting: Sinhala Catholics in Contemporary Sri Lanka, (CUP, 1992). Also helpful is Klass, Ordered Universes, 84, who discusses religious identity in terms of “congregation” member versus “sinner.” See also Albert Doja, “The Politics of Religion in the Reconstruction of Identities,” trans. Angela McLachlan, CRe 20 (4 2000), 423.
Tertullian delineates between religious insiders and outsiders, one should return to the categories of Roman colonizer, indigenous African and new elite to inquire how religion operated and was portrayed in Roman Africa.

6.2 Roman Africa and Religious Identity

While recent studies of Roman religion do not often directly engage with social anthropological discussions on religion, many of the anti-ethnocentric and anti-essentialist insights have contributed to the scholarly understanding of religion in antiquity. Recently, moreover, Roman scholars have recognized the way in which various groups and individuals with varying interests and competing ideologies constructed identities through religion. The following discussion will focus on the way Roman religion shaped the identities of North Africans.

While past approaches to Roman religion focused on its polytheism, current studies tend to explore the various rituals practiced by the Romans. Because of...