

## What defines 'religion' as an anthropological field of study?

Religion as its own distinct aspect of culture has been neglected in anthropology until somewhat recently, and due to that, the anthropological definition of religion is still evolving. A major roadblock in this evolution is both the religious background of many anthropologists and how that influences their interpretation, as many anthropologists come from a Christian, especially western Christian background, which, as a religion, is deeply distinct from most other world religions, and the fact that our definition has evolved backwards, from the most distinct niche and is still working towards the all-encompassing. Despite all that, there is currently enough analysis and case study to create an all-encompassing definition of religion, which, I will argue, should be defined as 'a system of symbols, which can be utilized to build, organize, and influence society and culture'.

The study of religion within anthropology has built itself backwards. The first works to distinguish religion as its own thing that needed to be analyzed as something other than another facet of culture was Geertz, but his definition of religion was steeped in his personal experiences with religion as an American Christian (Geertz, 1966) (Asad, 1993). Geertz defined religion as "(1) a system of symbols 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" (Geertz, 1966, p. 90), the basic idea of which continues to be applied throughout the field through to the present. Where Geertz is considered to have gone wrong is in his emphasis on what purpose religion serves in society, claiming that its main importance is to provide personal comfort on a private individual level, with people relying upon it to make sense of a world whose inherent meaninglessness they are unable to cope with (Geertz, 1966) (Asad, 1993). This makes sense when applied to American Christianity, which, partially in the face of the championed secularism of America and widespread atheism, and partially due to the disconnect between the material world and religion that's common among Abrahamic religions (with American Christianity being the most extreme example for his affect) (Deloria, 2003), but it falls short when used to analyze nigh any other religion (Asad, 1993)(Deloria, 2003). So, while Geertz's analysis of what religion is, at its core, was instrumental in the development of religion as its own distinct sub-genre of anthropological study, his unexamined status as an American Christian lead him to draw misleading conclusions about the function of religion, as he applied what should have been a very niche function of Christianity within America to all religion, throughout history and the world.

One of the major issues with Geertz's understanding of the function of religion in a society is his complete overlooking of its role in government. Religion and government have historically been inseparable entities, with spiritual leaders often having major roles in government, and government leaders often having deep ties to religion (Bloch, 1974) (Asad, 1993). Asad (1993) added two major additions to religious anthropology, going of Geertz's work, that religious anthropologists need to heavily examine and disclaim their own experiences with religion and how that affects their view, as Geertz's failure to do so was what Asad identified as his most significant mistake, and religions actual function in society, as government. Asad, analyzing religion through his own Muslim perspective, with a focus on Christianity as well, as he was addressing Geertz's Christianity based claims, found religion had historically functioned as a government, providing laws, morals, social systems, and individuals to oversee and interpret all these things, similarly to the government. The overlap between government and

religion, in how they present themselves and regulate expression, is also explored by Bloch (1974), when he examined the way movement and speech are used within ritual, and found much similarity to the systems and regulations limiting expression through movement and speech in both religion and secular politics, also making note of how many small indigenous societies spiritual leaders are also political leaders, and the roles of both jobs greatly overlap. So through Asad, the Christian lens religion tended to be analyzed through is examined and widened, but this analysis is still done with an emphasis on Abrahamic monotheism, which, while the majority of the population subscribes to Abrahamic religions, the vast majority of religions, and vast majority of cultures over time and throughout the world, have a history of religion in which monotheism is rare, and therefore, when analyzing religion as a whole, or non-Abrahamic religion, the understandings of Asad and Geertz are, while generally applicable, still lacking.

While the majority of people today follow monotheistic Abrahamic religions, the majority of religions, both across the world and throughout history, have been neither of those things. Deloria (2003) identifies a significant disconnect between Abrahamic religions, with American Christianity being the height of it, and most other religions, though especially indigenous ones. As an indigenous American, his writing focuses on the distinction between indigenous American religion, and American Christianity, though he applies his observations to the field as a whole, often to a less extreme degree. According to Deloria, Abrahamic religions place an emphasis on time, while indigenous religions often emphasize space. By this he means that indigenous religions are more focused on the immediate surroundings of the people, and are tailored to their experiences and life. The religion of a tribe of people living in the middle American plains would differ greatly from a tribe of people living on the northern east coast, and both of these peoples have an understanding of this, and acknowledge that their religion is localized and not applicable or valuable to people living in different situations. He contrasts this with Abrahamic religions, which don't emphasize places or immediate surroundings as much as the theory and interactions, and champion their beliefs as universally applicable and absolute truths. Deloria (2003) calls for anthropology to devote more attention to indigenous religions and develop an understanding of religion that doesn't stem from Abrahamic religion, as, while the most widespread today, are distinct outliers that should be treated as a niche, rather than a basis.

While the pervasive influence of American Christianity can be a source of confusion and misunderstanding when interacting with other religions, it can even be a hindrance when studying various sects of American Christianity, as Cannell (2005) found when studying Mormonism in the US. Contrary to Deloria's (2003) points about American Christianity, Cannell found that Mormonism places and emphasis on their immediate surroundings, as most Mormons she interviewed claimed that heaven would be almost identical to their current life, with a focus on the people around them and the place they lived. This was contradictory to the anthropological understanding of Christianity, as a religion entirely unconcerned with the material world we inhabit, as it disregards it in favor of the grandeur and eternity of heaven. This was not the case with the Mormons Cannell spoke to, as they pictured heaven as very similar to their current lives, living with their family in their home, with the most consistent differences being the addition of extended family that live far away, and the absence of the hardships of their current lives. Cannell (2005) found the same disconnect between religion and the material world that Deloria (2003) found, both times causing misconceptions about how religion, being created through symbols (Geertz, 1966) interacts with the material world, with both tracing it back to Christianity. This struggle to reconcile religion existing through symbols with concrete connections to the material world shows throughout religious anthropology, starting with

Geertz's (1966) explanation of religion presenting its purpose as a personal and private way of interpreting the world in abstraction, in its meaning as a whole. While in Cannells (2005) case, this effect is presented as less insidious, it still helps, with Delorias (2003) book, to point out another major flaw in Geertz's argument, one missed by Asad (1993), which is Geertz's failure to acknowledge the connections between the symbols of religion and the material world, due to the lack of this connection within most sects of American Christianity. Therefore, while Geertz's original work provides a solid premise for an anthropological definition of religion in its emphasis on symbolism, it must take into account the reliance upon religion as a system of government as well as belief, in most cases, and the connections religion often has to the material world.

While the flaws in Geertz's (1966) definition of religion have been corrected and understood to be caused by his perspective as an American Christian, the cause of these factors of American Christianity that set it so far apart from other religions also carries heavy implications. If American Christianity can lack features necessary for religion, how is this lack accounted for? In regard to the disconnection between religious symbols and the material world, this is accounted for, by Deloria (2003), who identified the lack as being compensated for through an emphasis on historical events. But the dissociation from the government that American Christianity suffers, as identified by Asad, is not explained away to the same extent. While most western secular governments still have clear influences of religion, often Christianity, even when religions act as political entities within these countries, the church and state are kept much more separate from each other than they have been for most of history. Deloria (2003) and Asad (1993) identify American secularism to create feelings of a lack of uniform culture across the US, as America lacks either many regional religions to create a feeling of connection to the land and community, or a national government religion that is shared uniformly across the country, as the state has divorced itself from the church, but if they historically have acted as one entity that has not become separated, there is no real loss of any aspect, they are just made separate. The government's origins as an aspect of religion are clear even in secular governments, as Bloch (1974) identified, the rules of motion, speech, and appearance that are apparent in religious ritual, are also made apparent in politics, especially in debates, speeches, and law. While secular governments lack a god, gods are not universal in religion either, a major example of a godless religion being Buddhism. Therefore, in the same way American Christianity is studied as a religion despite its lack of some of the common major aspects of religion, there is value in analyzing even secular governments through a religious lens, and applying terms used to classify religious ideology upon them, especially in the case of America, in which Christianity, as it is the most widespread and culturally impactful religion in America, throughout history till today, should be studied in tandem with the American government as the major religion in America. Secular government would even fit within the definition of religion that's been developed throughout this essay, as a system of symbols utilized to build, organize, and influence society and culture, often with ties to the material world through places or historical events.

Religion in anthropology has many aspects that work to complicate it, the relative recentness of the religion as its own distinct aspect of culture, the heavy influence of western Christianity, and the development how to define religion starting from such a niche type of religion and working from the top down to develop a universally applicable definition. I believe the most fitting definition for religion within anthropology though, would be Geertz's (1966) system of symbols, but would specify those symbols are used to create, organize, and influence

society and culture. Though at first this definition would appear to only loosely apply to religions that are only prominent in states that claim secularism, as Asad (1993) claims, government has historically been a function of religion, and, therefore, even secular governments should be studied within anthropology of religion, especially through what systems they use to replace the aspects of religion they distance themselves from.

### **Bibliography**

- Asad, T. 1993. "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Bloch, M. 1974. "Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is religion an extreme form of traditional authority?" *European Journal of Sociology* 15 (1): 55-81.
- Cannell, F. 2005. "The Christianity of Anthropology." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11(2): 335-356.
- Deloria, V. 2003 "Thinking in Time and Space," in *God is red: A native view of religion*. Fulcrum Publishing, pp. 61–76.
- Geertz, C. 1966. "Religion as a Cultural System." In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* ed. Michael Banton. London: Tavistock.