Anthropology and the Study of Religion

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Introduction: The Anthropological Study of Religion
Western Perspectives on Religion
The Development of Anthropological Approaches to Religion
The Four-Field Approach of Anthropology
Conclusions: The Biocultural Approach to the Study of Religion

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

• Describe the development of several Western approaches to studying religion, and show how these ultimately led to the anthropological perspective.
• Introduce the four-field approach of contemporary American anthropology, and demonstrate how each of these fields can contribute to an understanding of religiosity.
• Introduce several core evolutionary principles, and consider how these can help us to comprehend the emergence of religiosity.
• Describe the biocultural approach to the study of religiosity, and demonstrate how using both humanistic and scientific approaches can enable us to more accurately assess the manifestations of religiosity and the role these manifestations play in human life.

A YOUNG MAN TROUBLED BY DISTURBING DREAMS is led out of the village by an old man, who carries a rattle, a drum, and a blanket. They walk for two days and climb to the top of the “spirit” mountain. After spending a night drumming and chanting over the youth, the old man prepares to leave, taking with him all food and water. As he departs, he tells the youth, “When the spirits come for you, you will die. When you come back to life, then you may come back and live with us again.”

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A monk sits calmly in the street amid the crowds of people and slowly pours a can of gasoline over his head, chanting in a low voice. The crowd parts, leaving a large circle of empty space around him. The monk then takes a box of matches and lights one as he continues his chanting. As the horrified onlookers watch, he bursts into flames.

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The small room is filled with worshippers moving to the music played by the band in the front. Suddenly, a man lifts the lid off a box that has been sitting on the floor and removes a rattlesnake from within. Others come over and take snakes from the box as well. Some drink strychnine. Confident that the Holy Ghost will keep them safe, the worshippers hold the snakes in the air and shout “Hallelujah!”
Introduction: The Anthropological Study of Religion

Although we may have difficulty understanding the behaviors just described, it is not difficult to see them as expressions of religion. While all cultures have religion, the behaviors these religions justify are astonishingly diverse and seem to challenge the notion that there could be any elements common to every religion. Religion has effects on many aspects of our lives, including the personal, the social, the political, the economic, and even the artistic and the culinary. Religions can motivate people to undertake long fasts and to hold feasts, to engage in orgies, and to abstain from ever having sex. Some religions encourage their believers to risk their lives traveling to other countries to preach their religion to nonbelievers. Religions can induce people to lead better lives, and they can also inspire their followers to disobey laws, deny medical care to their own children, and even commit suicide and murder. Religions influence healing practices, define families, and shape political policies. They have provided the rationales for war and have given birth to international peace movements. Some of the greatest art and literature in history have been motivated by religion, and some of the most terrible deeds that humans have ever done have been justified by religion. The effects of religion are so extensive that some scholars regard religion as the very foundation of culture.

How is religion able to exert such a wide range of influences on peoples and cultures? Perhaps the easiest and most obvious answer is that religion deals with essential issues such as right and wrong, life and death. But right and wrong mean different things in different places, and although we all must die, not all religions teach their followers to fear or fret about this fact. We will never understand religion if we regard it as simply a belief system about spirits or issues of ultimate meaning, as just a mechanism of social control, or as a means to allay fear. Religions do indeed serve these purposes, but they also do much more. Religions structure our perceptions of the Universe, linking the present to both the past and the future. Religions inform us about unseen beings and powers that are responsible for the phenomena we perceive in the everyday world, and postulate unseen aspects of our own nature that motivate our behaviors. To even begin to understand these complex aspects of religion, we need a comprehensive framework that views all manifestations of religion as expressions of deeper, more fundamental characteristics of the species we call Homo sapiens. Such a framework should provide a broad and integrative context that accounts for all types of religious beliefs and behaviors and provides a suitable approach for understanding them with the rigor and the objective attitudes of science. But it should also consider the perspectives and experiences of the insider—the believer—and it should do so with respect. The one field that offers this comprehensive and yet respectful approach to religion is anthropology.

Anthropology and the Biocultural Approach

The word “anthropology” is derived from two roots: ἄνθρωπος (the Greek term for “human”) and λόγος (the Greek term for “word,” now used to refer to a field of study). As its very name indicates, anthropology is the scholarly discipline that studies humans. In a very real sense, anything about humans can be studied from an anthropological perspective. Many anthropologists travel to other countries to learn about such aspects of cultural life as family structures, political organizations, economic systems, the settling of disputes, and—not surprisingly—religions. Others carry out excavations to uncover information about ancient societies. Some study languages to understand the information they provide about their beliefs and experiences. This broad approach has enabled anthropology to enhance our awareness of the diversity of cultures and to see more clearly the nature of the features that all humans share, including religion.
and integrative perspective. As we shall see, this broad approach is very useful for considering one of humankind’s most unique traits: religiosity, our capacity for religious thought and spiritual experience.

This religious capacity is central to what it means to be human. Religion represents one of the central divides between Homo sapiens and every other species of animal alive today. The universality of religious beliefs in our species—but not in others—indicates that they arose after our ancestors had already taken their first steps down that unique path that has taken us ever further from the paths taken by other animals. Our beliefs, in other words, are products of something unique about human biology: our ability to develop culture. But if we trace our path back far enough, we can see that at least some of the behaviors associated with religion are present in other species, indicating that those behaviors arose before our ancestors parted ways with their ancestors. Such behaviors are products of our shared biology.

The biocultural approach to explaining religiosity that is the premise of this book is based on the insight that religiosity is a product of both our biological makeup and our socialization into a particular culture. This view is derived from a more far-reaching insight: the idea that humans are biological organisms whose most important means of adapting to the world is culture. The biocultural perspective attempts to explain both why humans have a natural, biologically based propensity for religiosity and how this propensity finds expression in different places and times.

The insight that religiosity is rooted in our biology does not mean that every one of us shares the same interest in religion or tendency to have spiritual experiences. All biological organisms differ from one another, so we can expect that religiosity, too, will be expressed differently from one individual and culture to the next. For example, some people are very susceptible to spontaneous extraordinary experiences that they may interpret as being religious in nature, while others spend their entire lives with their “feet on the ground.” Some people have a tendency to believe whatever it is that the people around them believe, while others are more likely to be skeptical about everything, no matter what anyone else may tell them. In short, the biological perspective of the biocultural approach views religiosity as the product of certain innate characteristics of our species that—like any other biological traits—are manifested in different ways in different people and in different situations.

The cultural perspective of the biocultural approach recognizes that the values, beliefs, and language of each society shape the way that religiosity will be experienced, practiced, and expressed by the members of that society. Culture provides the explanations that people who have extraordinary experiences use to understand their experiences and also tells its members why only some of them have such experiences. Because culture teaches us what to “naturally” believe in, our capacity for religiosity is molded by the same forces that shape the many other aspects of our thoughts and behaviors.

The integrative and holistic perspective provided by the biocultural approach also directs us to consider how biology and culture interact with and influence one another. As a consequence, the biocultural approach provides us with a framework that enables us to consider such questions as why only some people have certain religious experiences, which people are more prone to having such experiences, what functions religion plays in human life, how religions change, and when and why new religions emerge. The biocultural approach moves religiosity from an often marginal position—in which religion is seen as opposing science and is frequently viewed with skepticism—and instead places it at the very foundations of the evolution of human thought and culture.

**Anthropological Approaches and Perspectives: Becoming Aware of Our Biases**

Like anything else, religion can be viewed and interpreted only through some type of conceptual framework. Anthropology is unique because it looks at religion from both the outside and the inside, making it easier to understand the biases introduced by our own framework. Because it examines many different societies, anthropology also affords a cross-cultural perspective that makes it possible to understand the universal features of all humans as well as the ways these are expressed in each individual and in every culture. And finally, because it combines scientific, humanistic, and cross-cultural perspectives, anthropology offers a way past the cultural blinders that has affected many other attempts to understand religion.

Most people regard their own ways of doing things as “better” and “more natural” than the ways that people in other cultures do things. It is easy to understand why. Because the people around us typically tend to think and act much as we do, our interactions with them tend to reinforce our cultural worldview as being the best. Moreover, the things that we already know enable us to expect what will happen next and thus provide us with reassurance in an otherwise uncertain world. Consequently, it is entirely normal for us to interpret things from the perspectives of our own cultural knowledge and personal experiences. Indeed, what else could we do?
This tendency to view the world through the framework of our own culture is called ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism, which is normal for individuals and for cultures, causes us to prefer our own culture over another. Consequently, ethnocentrism is an important force that promotes group cohesion. But it can also cause us to misinterpret what other people think and do. Because religions express many of a society's core values, the ways in which people look at other religions are particularly susceptible to ethnocentrism. Over the course of Western history, feelings of cultural superiority have frequently colored the ways in which people have looked at and evaluated other societies and their religions. This effect has prevented us from achieving a fuller understanding of why people believe and behave the way that they do.

**Western Perspectives on Religion**

During the last 1600 or so years of European history, outside religions have provoked curiosity, disbelief, apprehension, scorn, and even hatred, but only rarely appreciation. An awareness of other religious systems can inspire us to compare these systems with our own and to consider their differences. But not all comparisons have the same purpose. Some people make comparisons in order to demonstrate that one particular religion is superior to all others. Others compare religions to identify their universal features. And others look at different religions to gain a greater comprehension of the diversity of ways that humans live and to uncover the reasons for this diversity. So that we may more clearly recognize the biases that are often brought into any comparison of religious phenomena, we will now briefly consider three perspectives that have played a prominent role in the ways that Westerners have thought about religion. This discussion will also enable us to better understand the emergence of the modern anthropological perspective on religions.

**Early Christian Thinking: “There Is But One Path to God”**

For most of the last 1600 years, Western thinking about religion has been largely shaped by Christianity. Because it regards itself as the fulfillment of a promise that its God made to the Jewish people, Christianity has traditionally considered itself to be the only “true” religion and has often looked down on other beliefs. As a consequence of this exclusivism, Christianity has long regarded Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism as erroneous religions. And it has tended to lump all the other religious systems in the world, including the Gods of the ancient Europeans and of the people encountered in the New World, into the category of “paganism.” This ethnocentric attitude has led to a great deal of violence and has long impeded Westerners’ understanding of other peoples and their religions.

The standard used to evaluate other religions was Christianity itself. Seen from the Christian perspective, Judaism is the religion of a small group of people chosen by God, and Christianity is the realization of the promise of that religion. Islam is a heretical upstart that emerged in an alien land, the product of a “false prophet” known as Muhammad. The “pagans” of the Old and New Worlds were living in “darkness” and needed to be “shown the light.” To be redeemed, the adherents of all of these other religious traditions needed to learn about and adopt Christianity, the one “true” religion that had developed in the West. Similar thinking demanded that other societies also adopt Western systems of politics and economics, and even dress.

It was not always like this. During the Roman Republic and in the early Empire, the Roman government permitted the peoples it conquered to retain most of their customs, including their religions. As the Empire expanded, new temples to “foreign” deities were built alongside established temples, often in the capital itself. As a result, Rome was long a center of religious pluralism and tolerance.

All this changed when the Emperor Theodosius recognized Christianity as the state religion of Rome in 380 C.E. (“Current Era”). With that the Christian claim to a superior and exclusive truth could be enforced by the power of the state, and it was. By 435, all non-Christian shrines and temples in the Empire had been shuttered and all non-Christian rituals and beliefs had been declared illegal under penalty of death. All citizens of the Empire were required to be Roman Catholic (from the Greek word *katholikos*, meaning “universal”), with the exception of Jews. Judaism remained legal, but its followers were typically kept apart from Christians. (The European “two-class” system of Christians and Jews has its roots in this time.)

These new imperial policies primarily affected the people of the cities. For several more centuries, the people who lived in the towns and villages and in the countryside continued their ancient practices. During those centuries, the Roman Catholic Church exerted a great deal of effort to expand its sphere of influence outside the cities and ensure that only those doctrines which it approved were promulgated. Aided by the very nobility whose rule it legitimiz, the Church acted—often with great force—to eradicate alternative beliefs. The
Inquisition was established to root out heresy at home, and the Crusades took the battle abroad.

The Church’s desire to maintain its monopoly on thought even embroiled it in matters usually regarded as belonging to the purview of science, such as the controversy between the geocentric (“earth-centered”) and the heliocentric (“sun-centered”) models of the solar system. By the sixteenth century, however, the Catholic Church’s internal problems and the excesses brought about by centuries of wielding power led reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wycliffe to offer correctives to a faith that they believed had strayed far from the truth. Their messages attracted followers for both religious and political reasons, and brought new churches into being that soon became powerful enough to openly oppose the Catholic Church. Most of these, moreover, now asserted their own exclusivist claims to the truth, resulting in the clashes known as the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). The conflicting forces of religion and politics produced some strange bedfellows. Catholic Spain and Austria joined forces against Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and parts of Germany, all of which had adopted Protestant ideas. To thwart the ambitions of the Spanish and Austrians, Catholic France allied itself with the Protestant countries. Finally, after an entire generation of warfare, the combatants agreed to the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the conflict and left a patchwork of competing interpretations of Christianity across the European continent. Weary of religious tensions and excited by the prospect of a new political landscape in which religions could peacefully coexist, many people became open to different ways of looking at religion.

Rationalist Thinking: “There Are Many Paths to God”

As the struggles between the various sects of Christianity destroyed both lives and property, new ways of regarding religion began to emerge. These perspectives did not negate religion, but viewed different religions as specific expressions of a single deeper underlying truth. These rationalist movements emphasized reason over revelation and argued for a more universal understanding of religion by emphasizing the similarities between religions rather than their differences. One variety of this thinking was known as deism. The word was first used in the seventeenth century to refer to a belief in God but lack of adherence to any specific dogma. Deists rejected the idea that religious truths had been “revealed” by God and argued instead that all religious ideas should be exposed to critical and even skeptical scrutiny. They were incensed by the power of the churches to enforce adherence to dogmatic notions that had to be accepted solely on the basis of faith. In their eyes, it was these demands of unquestioning obedience that had led to many of the excesses that had occurred in the name of God. The deists believed that religion’s true purpose was to promote morality and
that, apart from moral teachings, no other doctrines were needed. The deists believed in a God, who was conceived of as the “First Cause” of the Universe, which had established the laws of nature that were then being discovered by scientists such as Nicolaus Copernicus, Isaac Newton, and others. But the deists thought that once God had created the Universe, he no longer intervened in its workings, but rather allowed the Universe to run itself according to the principles he had established.

Deism was a popular belief among many of the early patriots and founders of the United States, including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington. Because of his convictions and his awareness of the destructive potential of religious conflict, Washington went to great lengths to ensure that the U.S. Constitution did not contain a single reference to Christianity or even to God. Perhaps the clearest expression of the Founding Fathers’ wariness of religious dogmatism and intolerance is found in Article VI, which states that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any office or public Trust under the United States.” But deism was a product of rationalist thinking, and the wave of anti-intellectual evangelism that took place in the early 1800s (especially in the frontier regions) essentially ended the deist movement. Nonetheless, many of deism’s core ideas—such as freedom of religion—remain with us today.

Deism influenced the development of universalism, the view that the common themes in different religions reflected different paths to the same end. In the United States, the universalist movement taught that God would never restrict his grace solely to people who adhered to a particular dogma, but would grant salvation to all. Although this was a relatively novel idea in the West, many Asian religions (especially Hinduism) have long held similar views. Indeed, some contemporary Hindus regard Jesus as a recent incarnation of the God Vishnu, and several modern Hindu temples have statues of Jesus alongside their many other deities.

Deist and universalist ideas were propounded in one form or another during the early Christian era. But the Church branded these ideas as heresies and persecuted those who espoused them. The ideas emerged once more in the atmosphere of religious tolerance that developed in Europe in reaction to the centuries of religious wars and persecution. These movements represent attempts to preserve and distill the common elements of different religious traditions and instill a profound appreciation of the role that religion plays in human life. Such rationalist perspectives, and the tolerance for diversity that they called for, provided the basis for a more objective approach to the study of religion.

Comparative Thinking: “Religions Are Objects for Study”

The nineteenth century witnessed an explosion in the European awareness of non-Western religions. Both sacred and mundane texts of other cultures were translated into European languages for the first time. Texts from India attracted considerable attention, for they demonstrated that sophisticated beliefs and elaborate rituals, as well as a complex priesthood, had been present in South Asia long before the rise of Christianity. Confucian and Buddhist texts also became available, providing additional evidence of the complexity of Asian religious thought.

In 1872, a curator at the British Museum in London named George Smith stunned the world when he announced that he had discovered an ancient cuneiform account of a flood that had numerous parallels to the version contained in Genesis. This Epic of Gilgamesh provoked many questions about the origins of the stories in the Old Testament, as did ancient Zoroastrian texts from Persia that contained some of the earliest evidence of monotheistic ideas. These discoveries not only suggested that the stories contained in the Old Testament might have been derived from earlier sources, but also implied that at least some aspects of religion are products of historical events.
These findings suggested that by comparing sacred texts and other evidence, one could discern universal aspects of religions and cast light on the functions of religion.

One of the first persons to put these ideas into practice in an academic context was F. Max Müller (1823–1900), a German scholar of languages who supervised the translation of numerous texts as part of a series entitled Sacred Books of the East. Müller became convinced that all religions contained some truths, but that these had often been obscured by the historical and cultural events that had shaped each religion. In 1868, he became the first Professor of Comparative Theology at Oxford University. Because he treated all religions as essentially equal, Müller was accused of undermining morality and the Christian faith. But Müller's attitude was a scientific one: In order to free the study of religion from bias, a researcher had to look at all religions with the same objectivity that he might bring to the study of rocks or clouds.

It was clear during Müller's time, and it is still clear today, that not everyone regards religious tolerance as a virtue. As we have seen, religious bias is nothing new. Today, some work in “comparative religion” is still carried out in support of a religious agenda that aims to bolster claims of superiority of one religion over another. Skeptical researchers who delight in pointing out the errors and flaws in all religions represent the other end of the spectrum. But the modern academic field of comparative religion attempts to avoid these extremes. It looks at historical trends, considers how religions have influenced one another, and attempts to determine the core features of religion and to identify the social factors that produce patterns in religious practices. Scholars in comparative religion are also working to develop new frameworks for the encounters between different religions, some of which we will examine in the last chapter of this book. This is an important effort for our time, for as the human population continues to grow, and as international trade, travel, and telecommunications whittle away at both geographic and cultural isolation, it is becoming increasingly clear that we humans need to develop new ways of “agreeing to disagree.”

The Development of Anthropological Approaches to Religion

The comparative study of religion that began during the nineteenth century helped set the stage for the development of anthropology. As a product of Western thought, anthropology in its early history was shaped by many of the same trends in thinking that affected Western society at large, including the notion that Europeans had a superior culture and a more civilized way of life. It was only natural that the lenses through which outsiders were perceived and comprehended would be similar to those used to view other aspects of the world. Two of anthropology’s major accomplishments have been to point out that these lenses do exist and to create ways to control them so that other cultures could be seen in their own light, in terms of their own cultural beliefs and meanings.

In some ways, anthropology originated in the notebooks and reports of the merchants, soldiers, colonial officials, missionaries, and others who wrote about their experiences with foreign peoples. In recording their encounters, these writers were exhibiting the same interest in the exotic as the ancient Greeks and other travelers in the ancient world did—and for many of the same reasons: the desire to trade, the urge for conquest, the need to administer colonies, and simple curiosity. But modern anthropology could emerge only when the human tendency to view others with an ethnocentric sense of superiority was overcome and the recording of anthropological data became more rigorous. How difficult this was can be seen by considering what is widely recognized as the first anthropological theory of religion.

The Englishman Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) developed this first theory, which provided a framework both for comparing religions and for considering the manners in which religions developed. Tylor noted that all societies had a belief in spirits, and he attempted to explain this by asking which human experiences could be so profound and yet so common that they had led people everywhere to develop these religious concepts. His answers were the experiences of dreaming and death. Tylor argued that the universal human experience of dreaming—during which a nonphysical entity appears to leave the physical body—would inevitably lead people to make a distinction between a material body and a nonmaterial “soul.” Death could then be explained as a permanent cutting of the ties between the two, while other religious phenomena (trance, possession, ghosts, etc.) could be construed as unusual relationships between them. Tylor used the term anima (from the Latin anima, meaning “air” or “breath”) to refer to the nonmaterial aspect of our existence (e.g., spirits and souls) that resided within ordinary bodies and objects. Anima is the animating principle that is responsible for life and activity. Tylor proposed that the religious systems of every society had developed out of this recognition of the anima, making animism the original and universal basis of religion.
Tylor then applied one of the prevailing ideas of his time—the notion of progress—to religion. The idea of progress was based on the recognition that as time went by, both nature and societies produced increasingly complex forms, forms that were generally regarded as improvements. Tylor used his own religion (he was a Quaker), which teaches that there is just one deity, as the standard for his comparisons. He knew that the people of many past societies (such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans) had believed in numerous deities, each of which was responsible for a particular facet of nature. Different Gods and Goddesses were responsible for the weather, plant growth, warfare, and love. Tylor suggested that the one God of Christianity had supplanted these many Gods when people came to realize that these were simply different aspects of the one. In Tylor’s eyes, monotheism evolved out of polytheism.

Working in the opposite direction, Tylor then argued that the many Gods of polytheism developed out of earlier animistic beliefs that the world was populated by spirits. As more complex societies emerged and people became more sophisticated in their thinking, they realized that the many different groups of anima were controlled by a smaller number of more powerful anima (just as different groups of people are controlled by a smaller number of rulers). These “anima leaders” were the first deities. Eventually, these lesser deities came to be seen as nothing more than different aspects of one all-powerful deity.

This model of religious development—from animism to polytheism and ultimately monotheism—was central to Tylor’s theory of unilineal evolution, his idea that all societies developed in essentially the same sequences, although at different rates and times. Because it provided a way to compare societies and determine where each stood on an evolutionary scale that stretched from “savagery” to “barbarism” and ultimately to “civilization,” the unilineal evolutionary model is regarded as the first comparative theory of modern anthropology. Other scholars soon applied this theory to compare and classify societies on the basis of their technology, marriage and family forms, and political structures. But no matter which domain of human activity was being considered, one thing was constant. The “civilized,” most highly evolved way of doing something was always the way that it was done in the scholar’s own society; that is, in Europe or the United States. Consequently, not only monotheism, but also monogamy, writing, and nuclear families, came to be regarded as hallmarks of civilization.

Societies that lacked these traits were by definition something less than civilized.

As the unilineal evolutionary model was applied to an ever larger number of cultural traits, however, it became apparent that it was fundamentally flawed and that not all societies could be fitted into such a simple and rigid schema. The ancient Greeks were polytheistic, but practiced monogamy and had writing. The Moroccans of Tylor’s time believed in one God and had writing, but many practiced polygamy. From the perspective of our time, it is clear that unilineal evolutionary thinking was simplistic, and the assertion that Western societies represented the pinnacle of social evolution was clearly self-serving and ethnocentric. Furthermore, the societies that Tylor and others used for their comparisons did not accurately reflect the diversity found in human societies, and much of the information about these societies was inaccurate. But in spite of these shortcomings, Tylor’s unilineal evolutionary model deserves recognition as the first comparative theory of anthropology, and it spurred other anthropologists to think about the social determinants of different forms of religiosity.

Tylor’s greatest legacy may be the fact that he introduced the word “culture” into the English language (although he used it as a synonym for “civilization”). Tylor viewed culture as something that a person or a society acquired more of while progressing along the path from savagery through barbarism to civilization. Like his theory, Tylor’s definition has been replaced by a much more sophisticated understanding of culture that recognizes that all human groups possess a complex culture of their own.

Historical Particularism and Cultural Relativism: The Foundations of American Anthropology

The person most responsible for pointing out the inadequacies in the theory of unilineal evolution was Franz Boas (1858–1942), who is considered the “father” of American anthropology. Born and educated in Germany, Boas earned his doctorate in physics with a thesis titled “Contributions to the Understanding of the Color of Water” (1881). In 1883–1884, he lived in Baffinland (an island in eastern Canada) as part of a team conducting geographical research on the island. There, he encountered the Inuit (“Eskimo”) people.

Boas was impressed by the sense of community he observed among the Inuit. When a hunter was successful, he shared his catch with the other members of his
group, and even with the visiting scientists. When there was no food, the community endured hunger together. This contrasted greatly with Boas' experiences in Germany, with its emphasis on private ownership and looking after oneself, as well as the treatment of the German Jews as second-class citizens. The Inuit, he found, did not make such distinctions.

These experiences led Boas to shift his focus from the study of the physical world to the study of humans. As he became familiar with the Inuit language and culture, Boas realized that their worldview was more abstract and sophisticated than previously thought. He began to question unilineal evolutionary thinking, which ranked the Inuit as “savages,” far below the “civilized” peoples of Europe. His scientific sensibilities were also struck by the inadequacies of the information that was used to support the unilinear evolutionary theory. His training in physics taught him that the development of theories requires accurate, replicable, and unbiased data. But many observations about other cultures—even those of experienced anthropologists—were unsystematic, superficial, and often tainted by the researchers’ ethnocentric attitudes toward other peoples and customs. How, he wondered, could truly adequate theories about human society and behavior ever be produced from such poor data? Boas also recognized that the data which could be used to develop such theories were disappearing rapidly as native peoples around the world, especially in the Americas, were being changed and even destroyed before they had ever been studied.

These realizations led Boas to argue that the anthropologists of his time should focus on “salvage anthropology,” collecting good field data while such data were still available and leaving the development of theories for a later time. He was a great advocate of fieldwork, a research method that involves living with the people being studied in order to understand their everyday lives and the ways in which they look at the world. To ensure the quality and the validity of the data, Boas argued that anthropologists needed to learn the language of the people they were studying and live among them for at least a year. This would give the fieldworkers an opportunity to observe the annual cycle of events and as many of the customs and practices as possible of the people they were studying. It also would allow the workers to actively participate in different aspects of those people’s daily lives. This participant-observation would also enable the fieldworkers to understand the culture of the people they were studying from the perspective of those people, thereby helping the workers overcome their ethnocentrism.

While Boas recognized that fieldwork could demonstrate the ways in which societies differ from one another today, he also understood that historical and archaeological data would provide important information about how those societies had changed over time. Consequently, Boas argued that each culture was the product of a unique constellation of environmental and historical factors, and that each thus needed to be studied and understood on its own terms. This relativistic way of looking at societies—known as historical particularism—contrasted with the absolutist ideas of Tylor and other unilinear evolutionary thinkers, who argued that changes in human societies invariably follow the same sequence as they progress along the path to culture ( = civilization).
Cultural Relativism

Boas did not make a distinction between “savage” or “civilized” societies, and he considered the ethnocentrism expressed in such rankings unscientific. (Would a scientist prejudge a planet or a chemical compound?) He revolutionized the study of humans by showing that each society has its own characteristic way of life and its own culture. Boas effectively pluralized the concept of culture that Tylor introduced into English. “Culture” became “cultures,” and different cultures became equally relevant objects of study. This led to an insight that is one of anthropology’s most important contributions to modern thought: cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is first and foremost a methodological strategy that reminds us that we should examine other cultures on their own terms rather than following the assumptions of our own culture. For example, if we want to understand why some people believe that handling venomous snakes is an appropriate expression of their religious faith, we need to take the reasons they give into consideration along with other information about the practice. Cultural relativism is also a humanistic position that reminds us to treat people and their beliefs with respect.

Cultural relativism is not, as some philosophers and critics have suggested, an ethical position that implies that “anything goes.” Attempting to understand the worldview and motivation of other people does not mean that we should do nothing in the face of terrorism, genocide, religious persecution, or any other type of offensive or oppressive human behavior simply because it is practiced by the members of some culture. But it does mean that if we want to understand why people engage in such activities, we need to consider their own points of view, as well as the historical and social influences on their culture. Cultural relativism does not allow us to write off the members of a particular culture as “evil” simply because their beliefs and values are different from our own. Instead, it calls us to consider what people’s beliefs and values mean to them. Cultural relativism is, in a sense, the anthropological version of the old maxim “Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes.” Only then can we understand the people of a culture as they really are, within the system of meaning that is relevant to them. Cultural relativism moves us away from the notion that any one culture is inherently superior to another, and teaches us to regard each culture as a unique expression of the human propensity for culture.¹

To avoid being judgmental when studying other cultures, anthropologists attempt to adapt and integrate themselves as fully as possible into the culture they are studying. They learn how to dress “appropriately” (that is, according to the standards of the society in which they are living), to use that society’s language and conceptual system, and to participate in both the mundane and the significant events in the culture. Many anthropologists are adopted into the communities they study, thereby becoming recognized members in a system of kin relations. They may even participate in religious rituals.

¹This is why we do not follow the common English practice of capitalizing the word “God” when referring to one particular deity while writing others in lowercase (“god,” “goddesses”). We capitalize all occurrences as a way to emphasize the importance that these conceptions have for those who believe in them.

SOCIETY AND CULTURE

At this point, it is important to clarify two commonly used, but frequently misunderstood, terms. A human society is a group of people who are organized or structured in some way. The National Organization for Women, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the National Council of Churches are all societies that were established to promote the shared interests of their members. Most of the time, however, the word refers to a nation or ethnic group. This is why we speak of American society, Jamaican society, or Cherokee society. But whether these groups formed voluntarily to pursue specific aims or whether their identity is the result of historical forces, the people in any society are linked together by shared ideas and values. They are linked, in fact, by a common culture.

Culture is something that all humans acquire by virtue of growing up in a society and learning society’s ideas and values about such matters as the proper types of foods to eat, the causes of illness, and the types of behaviors that are considered appropriate in the presence of an elder. Although we are born into a society, we are not born with a culture. Culture is something we must learn. Humans have an innate propensity for learning culture by virtue of certain characteristics of our brains and bodies. If we think of our brains as our “mental hardware,” then culture is the “social software” that stipulates how the hardware will be used.
Yet even anthropologists have limits on how far they are willing to step outside their own beliefs. Some are unwilling to abandon their own religious worldview; others have a skeptical attitude toward all religious thought. It is precisely with respect to the study of religion that cultural relativism is most difficult to achieve, for anthropologists and nonanthropologists alike. Could you accept a religion that viewed human sacrifice as a normal religious behavior, especially if it asked you to sacrifice your own child to that religion’s God? Like most other people, anthropologists would be unwilling to participate in such behavior.

The Four-Field Approach of Anthropology

Franz Boas’ emphasis on the collection of accurate and relevant data obtained by learning the local language and conducting long-term fieldwork laid the foundation for a scientific understanding of humans. His admonition to study each society and culture on its own terms also helped transform anthropology into a humanistic discipline. His focus on looking at humans from multiple points of view led to the development of a uniquely American anthropology based on the “four-field approach” provided by cultural anthropology, archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and biological anthropology. This four-field approach provides an integrative and interdisciplinary framework for investigating religiosity.

Cultural Anthropology

Cultural anthropology focuses on culture, those aspects of human life that we learn from members of our society and in turn pass on to others. While the focus of early fieldwork was on non-Western groups such as the Native Americans that were being devastated by Western expansion, many cultural anthropologists now work in modern societies. They may study faith healers or Neopagans in the United States or conduct fieldwork to find out why so many people are now being drawn to “mega-churches” that meet in converted office buildings and sports arenas.

The Components of Culture. As humans, we have to learn a culture to survive. A person may be an American, a Kwakiutl, or a Samoan by birth. But the person does not automatically know all the things he or she needs to know to be an American, a Kwakiutl, or a Samoan. Each of us learns these things as we grow up among the people who, through their words and behavior, teach us their culture. This is why the things you learned about when you were a child probably seem so “natural” to you now.

Consider the things Americans eat and drink, and what the religion you were brought up in says about them. If you are a Christian or an atheist, it may seem perfectly normal and “natural” for you to have a hamburger and a milkshake when you go out. But if you are an Orthodox Jew, eating meat and dairy products at the same time is a violation of the dietary rules of kashrut (kosher). You could have either the milkshake or the hamburger (provided that the latter was made of beef and not ham) and, after waiting for several hours, you could have the other. The foods would have to be prepared in separate dishes or at different times. If you are a Hindu, you would likely avoid hamburgers entirely because they are made from the flesh of cows, animals that are regarded as sacred. But you could have the milkshake. There are many reasons for religious dietary rules, which vary with the environment and the season and may have as much to do with affirming group identity as they do with the avoidance of parasites and diseases. Religious dietary rules, which are often based in beliefs and attitudes about what is “clean” and “unclean,” also find their expression in objects and behaviors.

Thus, it is useful to think of culture as having three basic components: a material (or tangible) component; a behavioral (or action) component; and an ideational (or mental) component. The material component is quite literally the physical manifestation of culture and is typically the aspect that is most readily apparent to an outsider. Religious examples of the material component of culture include a Greek Orthodox church, a Hopi kachina doll, and a Jewish talith (prayer shawl).

The second component of culture is the behavioral component, which is culture in action. We easily notice behaviors that differ from what we know and expect, although we may not be able to precisely determine why a particular behavior strikes us as unusual. People talk differently, they walk differently, and they eat, drink, sleep, and greet one another differently in different societies. Religious examples of the behavioral component of culture include a Catholic going to confession, a Hindu placing flowers before an image of Krishna, and a Muslim slaughtering an animal according to the strict rules of dhabb.

The third component of culture is the ideational component. Although the term is related to the concept of “idea,” it also refers to the emotional features of a culture. The ideational aspect is typically the most difficult to notice and to understand. It takes time to learn
the concepts of a culture and the values associated with those concepts. You don't step off of an airplane and immediately see that firstborn sons have a responsibility to continue the family lineage or that elders have no fear of dying because they know they will be reborn. Since it is so abstract, the ideational component is the most complex aspect of culture to study. But it is also the most important, for it provides the rationale for both the behaviors of a person and the material objects he or she makes and uses. Religious examples of the ideational component of culture include the Buddhist emphasis on compassion, the Christian belief in heaven, and the Polynesian concept of tabu.

Although we distinguish these three components of culture, they are actually interwoven—intimately and necessarily interlinked. Our thoughts direct our behaviors and social relations, as well as our interactions with the material world. Think of one common article of Christian religious culture: a cross or crucifix. At the material level, we can easily discern its two perpendicular arms, one vertical and the other horizontal. But the behaviors that are associated with the crucifix might cause a person who is not a Christian to furrow his brow in bewilderment. Why do some people bow before it while others do not? Why do movies depict actors using crucifixes to ward off vampires, but not werewolves? And why, if crucifixes are such objects of veneration, do people use them for trivial purposes such as decorating their cars, making them into jewelry, and even putting them on their clothing? These behaviors, of course, are linked to ideas and emotions about the crucifix, which at the ideational level is a symbol for many things: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the membership in a community of believers, and, in a broader sense, the power of the Christian deity. Yet we must remember that the ideas and emotions are not present in the crucifix itself, but are projected onto it by the people who look at it. A Taoist, Jain, or Sikh will look at the same cross and see something very different from a Christian.

Methods of Cultural Anthropology: Ethnography and Ethnology. One basic aim of anthropology is to understand how the people in one culture see the world and to translate this into terms that people from other cultures can understand. By learning the local language, conducting long-term fieldwork, and engaging in participant observation, anthropologists are able to develop a report or description of a society (or of some aspect thereof). Such a description is known as an ethnography (from the Greek ethnos, meaning “culture” or “people,” and graph(os), meaning “something drawn or written”). Ethnographies are the source of the data used in comparative or cross-cultural studies to develop more general theories of culture and models of culture change, a practice known as ethnology. Anthropologists use ethnological comparisons to discern the universal features of human societies (including features of religions) and identify the ecological, social, and other factors related to nonuniversal behaviors (e.g., spirit possession).

We can understand the value of cross-cultural comparisons by considering the practice of human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism among the ancient Aztecs who lived in the Valley of Mexico. During their rituals to honor and placate their Gods, the Aztecs sacrificed thousands of people over the course of a few days. The victims were often captured weeks or even months before their sacrifice, and Aztec beliefs dictated that the captives be well fed and looked after so that they would reflect well in the eyes of the Gods. The amount of resources (food, space, and labor) that this system required was enormous. Why did the Aztecs bother?

The Aztecs themselves believed that their Gods demanded these sacrifices. While this reason may have been all that an Aztec required, anthropologists consider other explanations as well. Why did the Aztecs conduct human sacrifice while many other groups did not? Did they need to eat human flesh because their normal diet was lacking in protein? Or was the practice a response to other ecological factors?

The Emic and Etic Distinction. These different possible explanations for Aztec sacrifice demonstrate that there are two main perspectives for considering such practices. The first is the emic, or insider’s, point of view—the explanations that the people themselves provide for their behaviors. The emic (Aztec) explanation for human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism was that their Gods demanded it. The second is the etic, or outsider’s, point of view, which is derived from cross-cultural research. Here, scientific methods are used to investigate whether social, environmental, and other factors might have led to the practice of cannibalism in Aztec and other societies. (We will consider these factors in Chapter 10).

By comparing similar practices in different societies, we can discern the underlying causes of cultural phenomena and determine the dynamics and principles of culture that are valid in most—if not all—societies. By combining both the humanistic (emic) and scientific (etic) perspectives, anthropologists are able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of human behavior. In this book, we will use both of these approaches as we explore religiosity and attempt to understand the roles it likely played in the human past.
Universal Expressions of Religiosity. One method anthropologists use in their search for features common to all religions is to compare the variety of behaviors and beliefs found in the religious practices of a random sample of cultures. One cross-cultural comparison (Winkelman 1992) of a number of premodern societies and their religious beliefs has suggested that there are several types of universal expressions of religion. A feature that is a part of all aspects of anything religious can be considered as a religious universal. Given the diversity of religious activities, such universals are rare. One likely religious universal is the assumption of a spirit or supernatural domain.

Cultural universals of religion are features of religiosity found in all cultures, although not necessarily part of all of the rituals of any culture. For example, religious techniques for producing unusual experiences and states of consciousness are found in all cultures, but these cultures also have religious activities that do not involve such experiences. The following features are cultural universals of religion:

Spirit Power Beliefs. Humans hold a variety of beliefs about spirit entities (Gods, ghosts, etc.) and their abilities. These “supernatural” spirits are often said to have abilities that exceed or even defy the “natural” order. Yet in spite of these abilities, spirits are also said to possess many human features.

Magico-Religious Techniques. All societies have techniques for exerting an influence on the spirits they believe in. These techniques may involve language (spells, prayers) as well as material objects (amulets, symbols). The techniques may be directed toward affecting the spirits themselves or toward affecting or counteracting what they do, such as controlling the weather. Magic, in one form or another, is one of the most common of these culturally universal techniques.

Good and Malevolent Characteristics. The powers that humans attribute to spirits include powers to help and to harm, to reward and to punish. These beliefs find their expression in religious practices whose intention is to promote the beneficial effects of spirits and to ward off malevolent effects or protect people against them. Every society has practices that provide protection from the spirits and attempt to influence their actions; these actions may involve submission as well as dominance behaviors. All cultures have social rituals for acquiring power, protection, and information from spirits. Because spirits are understood to have both good and malevolent characteristics, they are able to serve as “role models” that teach the members of a society about appropriate and inappropriate attitudes and behaviors.

Community Rituals. All societies have collective rituals for interacting with spirits. Some of these involve the entire community, while others focus on smaller groups, such as a clan or a family. In all societies, some leadership roles are associated with supernatural powers. Religious leaders are also social leaders and may rise to power because of their perceived connection with the spirit world, because of their heritage within a special clan, or because of power acquired through other spiritual interactions.

Altered States of Consciousness. All societies acknowledge and accept some types of special spiritual experiences distinct from ordinary experiences, and some people in every society will become religious specialists who enter into an altered state of consciousness for the purpose of contacting a spirit entity. While in this altered state, they are able to interact with the spirits and to invoke their powers and knowledge, especially for healing. All cultures teach at least some of their religious practitioners how to induce and utilize such states of consciousness.

Divination. All cultures have practices for acquiring information from the spirit world. A variety of procedures, including altered states of consciousness, are used to acquire information needed for subsistence, group movement, and protection. Divination is especially important in diagnosing and treating diseases.

Healing and Illness. Healing rituals are another cultural universal of religion. The belief that religion can play a role in health and healing is present in every culture. In most cultures, the central healing practices take place in a religious context, and there are always religious practitioners who have a responsibility for healing members of the group. One universal belief, manifested as the “spirit aggression” theory of illness, is that spirits can attack people and cause illness. There are also universal beliefs regarding the ability of humans to cause supernatural illness, manifested in sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices. Sorcery, a deliberately malevolent activity, is a cultural universal of religion. In contrast, witchcraft, which involves inadvertent or unconscious magical effects, is a social universal of religion (see next section). Although found in all cultures, these cultural universals of religion are expressed in distinct ways within each culture. Cultures differ with regard to the specific spirits in which they believe, the characteristics they attribute to
these spirits, and the rituals and magical techniques they utilize to interact with the spirits.

**Social universals of religion** are found only in certain kinds of societies. Social universals of religion emerge under specific social circumstances and, consequently, differ from one society to the next. For example, priests are only found in politically integrated agricultural societies with a government hierarchy. The idea of spirit possession, the notion that a religious practitioner can be taken over and controlled by a spirit entity, appears to be a worldwide phenomenon, but it too is found only in societies with complex political hierarchies.

Hunter-gatherer societies are associated with different social universals of religion. It is in these societies that shamanism is found. In contrast, shamans are not found in the religious traditions of complex societies, where their functions have either disappeared or been taken over by more specialized religious practitioners, including witches, shamanic healers, sorcerers, and priests.

**Archaeology** is the field of anthropology that brings a **temporal** or “deep-time” perspective to anthropology. Archaeologists study ancient artifacts and other relevant materials (such as animal and plant remains) to reconstruct past societies and to understand the processes of social and culture change. Although the idea of searching for ancient artifacts may conjure up images of Indiana Jones or Lara Croft, the destructive activities of these fictional characters are very different from the work of real archaeologists, for whom unglamorous fragments of pottery or the outlines left behind by long-vanished structures may answer more questions than a crystal skull or golden statue. Archaeologists interpret artifacts using the insights and findings of the other fields of anthropology, as well as molecular biology, evolutionary psychology, geology, physics, botany, and zoology. By studying fossilized pollen and animal bones, for example, we can learn a great deal about the climate of a particular region in ancient times. By investigating the sediment layers found at a site, we can determine whether a society disappeared because of water shortages or as a result of a catastrophe, such as a volcanic eruption.

Because it takes the study of human culture into the past, archaeology provides us with one of our most important windows on early religiosity. Under the proper conditions, the material objects found at an archaeological site can provide important insights into the behavioral and ideational aspects of a culture. By analyzing the different features of artifacts (such as the materials from which they were made, the techniques used to make them, the locations where they were found, and the symbols they display), we can learn about the ways in which these objects were used and the beliefs and values of the people who made them. Differences in the spacing of bodies in a cemetery as well as the objects left with the bodies can provide insights into the presence of social hierarchies. The fact that the largest and most lasting structures that were built in the first cities were temples strongly supports the idea that religious belief systems and priestly leaders played important roles in the development of the first large-scale societies. Although we will never be able to completely reconstruct the past, archaeologists are able to provide important insights into how ancient humans lived and worshipped. One important technique is to compare archaeological artifacts from the past to analogous materials from present-day cultures.

**Ethnographic and Ethnological Analogy.** Archaeologists generally study the significance of artifacts by analogy, drawing upon information about historical and existing cultures to gain insights into the meaning of ancient objects and behaviors. Another method archaeologists use is **ethnographic analogy**, the practice of comparing the society they are excavating with ethnographic descriptions of recent or contemporary cultures that share similar features. Because cultures resemble one another in so many ways, archaeologists can reconstruct the broad outlines of long-dead cultures known only through their material remains (artifacts) by comparing these artifacts with objects from other cultures whose details are well known from anthropological fieldwork. This process of comparing archaeological and ethnographic data is one of the most important tools that archaeologists now use to describe past cultures and has provided us with important insights into many ancient cultures.

For example, evidence from Southwest Asia indicates that humans have been intentionally burying their dead for at least 100,000 years, sometimes with tools and other objects. But the material and behavioral evidence of these past cultural practices do not tell us much about the motivations of these long-dead people. What do these burials indicate? The method of ethnographic analogy can suggest an answer. In contemporary cultures around the world, burials are associated with beliefs in an afterlife. While we may never know the actual reasons why our ancestors began burying their dead, it is reasonable to assume that the people of those times had begun to think and feel in ways similar to modern humans and had a belief in an afterlife and souls.
Of course, such inferences can be wrong. A more reliable method of understanding the past by comparing it with the present can be achieved through ethnological analogy, which compares the patterns found in a sample of similar societies. The general insights about certain types of societies (such as hunter–gatherers or foragers) that have been derived through systematic cross-cultural research can reveal universal patterns of human social behavior and enable us to make much more secure inferences about the past. For instance, studies of recent and contemporary hunter–gatherer societies around the world allow us to safely infer that men have been the primary hunters in all hunter–gatherer societies that ever existed. These cross-cultural studies have provided important ethnological insights not only about people’s subsistence method, lifestyle, and political organization, but also about their religious activities and beliefs (known as shamanism). This information about the religious practices of known hunter–gatherer societies enables us to interpret and make inferences about the religious behaviors of hunter–gatherers in the past and even to reconstruct the origins of religiosity. By drawing upon models of human behavior derived from cross-cultural analysis, archaeology can help us to interpret the behaviors and beliefs of our ancestors and uncover the roots of religiosity.

Linguistic Anthropology

Linguistic anthropology—also known as anthropological linguistics—is the study of the role that language plays in human life. Language is the most important tool that humans use to express meaning and transmit cultural ideas, including ideas about religion. It is through language that we are able to communicate what we are thinking and feeling when we see an object like a crucifix, bow down before an image of God, or experience a sense of contact with a spirit. Language is so central to human life that many anthropologists and other scientists regard it as the single most important criterion for distinguishing humans from all other animals. Linguistic anthropologists record the languages of different societies and consider how these describe, shape, and even create different cultural worlds. They compare languages to investigate the extent to which language families and cultures have changed over time. They also investigate the reasons why humans have language and the role that languages play in shaping the natural and supernatural realities we experience. Of course, other animals also communicate. What makes human language different is the ways it enables us to communicate and the things we are able to communicate about. Much of what is conceptualized as religion would not be possible without the symbolic capacities that underlie language.

Unique Features of Human Language. Animals and even plants communicate in a variety of ways. Many forms of communication use chemicals. Animals mark their territories with urine and musk, and plants produce scents that attract insects and other animals in order to promote pollination and seed dispersal. A great deal of animal communication also occurs through ritualized behaviors, such as the courtship display of a male peacock when he fans open his tail feathers and the dance of a bee that tells the other members of a hive where and how far away a field of flowers is. Then there are the various grunts, howls, squeaks, and other sounds animals make to let others know about their position or the presence of predators. These communication systems used by nonhuman animals are closed systems of language. This means that the sounds a particular
species makes always mean essentially the same thing. In contrast, human languages are open systems of language in which a finite number of sounds can be combined into an infinite number of utterances, making it possible to create new words and communicate a virtually limitless range of ideas. This is the basis for our symbolic capacity, which allows us to associate meanings arbitrarily with behaviors or objects.

This symbolic capacity gives rise to another unique aspect of human language, displacement—the ability to speak of things that are not happening right now in our presence. Displacement enables humans to talk about things that happened in the past, speak of hopes or plans about the future, and even communicate about things that never happened at all. Displacement is key to many aspects of religiosity. It is what enables us to talk about our future rebirth or reward in heaven and exchange information about unseen forces and places that we will never be able to directly perceive (see Box 1.1: Symbolism and Spirituality).

Language and Experience: The Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis. Our ability to use language to speak of things that are not occurring in the here and now brings up several important questions about the relationship between language and reality. To what extent does language mirror reality? Could certain things exist without language? Can language actually create reality? These questions were given expression by two American linguists, Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Whorf (1897–1934), in what has become known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis.

The hypothesis has two forms. The “weak” form, linguistic relativism, suggests that language shapes the way we think about reality. Because different languages structure the world in different ways, a speaker of one
Box 1.2 TRANSLATING THE IDEAS OF RELIGION

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis raises important questions about translations of an original text or idea. Whether a translation can ever convey precisely the same sense in the target language as in the original is questionable. Translators must often choose among several more-or-less equivalent words, and the consequences of their choices can be significant. For example, in the Old Testament book of Isaiah (7:14), the Aramaic word *almah* is used to refer to the woman who would give birth to “Immanuel.” *Almah* can be translated both as “maiden” (i.e., a young, unmarried woman) and “virgin,” and the translator’s choice of one term over another has had important implications for Christian (especially Roman Catholic) thought.

Islamic thinking explicitly recognizes that translation always involves interpretation. While the Qur’an has been translated into numerous languages, such translations are not regarded as authoritative. That is, the Islamic position on matters of faith cannot be determined by consulting translated versions of the Qur’an, but only by examining the original Arabic text. Muslims believe that the Qur’an was given to Muhammad by God in Arabic; as a result, most also believe that the Qur’an should be read in that language. Because of this belief, converts to Islam throughout the world exert themselves to learn Arabic. The fact that over one billion people strive to read their sacred scriptures in the same language has helped to create a linguistic and religious community that binds together people in countries with cultures as diverse as those of Indonesia, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Because the Qur’an also provides a durable example for the Arabic language, Arabic has changed less since the time of Muhammad (who died in 632 C.E.) than did English or any other language of Europe.

language will learn to perceive things differently than the speaker of another language. The “hard” form of the hypothesis, linguistic determinism, suggests that language actually *creates* the way we think about reality.

We find support for the idea of linguistic relativism in the distinctions provided by the vocabularies of different languages. For example, the ancient Greeks had three different words (*eros*, *philía*, and *agápe*) to express the concept known to English speakers as “love,” suggesting that they distinguished among three different emotions. The Hindu and Buddhist traditions have a large vocabulary of terms (e.g., *samadhi*, *zazen*) to describe their meditation experiences, indicating that they are able to discern—and thus experience—states of consciousness that were unknown in the West until Westerners learned about both the meditation practices and the experiences that they produce.

The idea of linguistic determinism suggests that such places as Hades, purgatory, or Valhalla may only exist because there are words for them. Since many of the concepts that religions talk about are not open to conceptualization, it is language that creates these realities. People’s firm beliefs in heaven, hell, Gods, and other religious concepts illustrate the power of religion to create reality in people’s minds and in their behaviors. Myths, the explanations of the world provided by religion, would be unthinkable without language. Language enables us to both develop and grasp such concepts as “redemption” and *nirvana*, it provides names for such unseen forces as “grace” and *mana*, and it makes it possible for us to discuss the wrath of God and the powers of ancestors. Here again, we can see why it is so important for an anthropologist to learn the local language when conducting fieldwork. It is only when an anthropologist is able to speak of such concepts, forces, and beings in the same terms as the people she is studying that she can begin to understand the world in the same way as those people (see Box 1.2: Translating the Ideas of Religion).

Historical Linguistics. Historical linguistics is a subfield of anthropological linguistics that studies the origins of words and the ways in which languages change over time. It provides a tool for studying the concepts of religiosity in the past and examining changes in religious behaviors and beliefs over time. Historical linguists find the roots of ancient thought by comparing cognates, words that have similar sounds and meanings in different languages. By reconstructing the concepts present in common ancestral languages, the science of etymology (a subfield of historical linguistics that examines the derivations of words) can shed light on ancient religions in the origins of specific words. For example, the English word “religion” is derived from the Latin term *religío*, which referred to a “bond between man and the gods” (AHD, p. 1099). The Latin *religío* has its origins in words meaning “to bind” and is reflected in the Indo-European root *leig-* (“to bind”). Today, we still understand religion as something that binds people to a God or Gods and to one another. Many languages in the
Indo-European language family lack cognates for the word “religion.” This indicates that the concept was not present in the original Indo-European languages and suggests that it was developed after these agricultural people had begun to spread across Europe.

The common roots of a different Indo-European religious concept can be seen in the many cognates for the English word “sacred,” which is derived from the Indo-European root sak- (“to sanctify”). The similarities among the English “saint,” Spanish “santo,” French “saint,” and Italian “san” reflect their common derivation from the Latin term sanctus (“sacred”). Other Indo-European languages have similar terms. Sak- is also the root for the word “sacrament” (as well as “sacrifice”). Today, the word “sacrament” is commonly used to refer to certain Christian (especially Roman Catholic) rituals. In Latin, sacramentum originally referred to the oath that Roman soldiers would speak as part of their initiation to military service. Here again, we can observe similarities in the meanings of the root of this term and the way in which it came to be used in different religious traditions. Although today’s sacraments are very different, the idea of initiation and the practice of oath-taking is still a part of such Christian rituals as baptism, confirmation, and marriage.

Biological Anthropology

The fourth field of anthropology is biological anthropology. Also known as physical anthropology, this is the branch of anthropology that explicitly focuses on humans as animals. Biological anthropologists investigate an extraordinarily wide variety of phenomena. For example, molecular anthropologists compare samples of DNA collected from people around the world to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which humans differ from one another as individuals and the ways in which we are the same. Primatologists observe the behavior of monkeys and apes in the wild and study the cognitive and linguistic abilities of primates in laboratory settings. Paleoanthropologists use fossil remains and the artifacts found with them to reconstruct the sequence of events that led to the appearance of modern humans. These and other lines of evidence enable us to distinguish the traits and abilities that humans share with other animals from those that are unique to our species. They also enable us to consider the sequence in which we acquired our uniquely human abilities, including the human propensity for religiosity and the ways this finds expression in spirituality and religion.

Biological anthropology offers two important perspectives for looking at religiosity. First, the study of human evolution provides us with a “deep time” perspective for exploring why religiosity first appeared and how it became established in every culture in the world. The evidence contained in the fossil record, and comparative studies of the behaviors and other abilities of different animals, indicate that religiosity did not appear all at once at some moment in the past, but developed gradually over time. (We will consider this development further in Chapters 4 and 5). Second, the study of human variation makes it possible for us to understand how and why people differ from one another, both in terms of physical traits such as our hair color and in the expression of our religious impulses. Why do some people readily hear and see spirits, while others never have a religious experience? Biological anthropological research suggests that these differences are not due solely to differences in our cultural or personal upbringing, but are also the result of differences in our biological makeup.

How Humans Differ. Humans differ from one another in many ways. Many of the ways in which we differ are the results of mutations, random changes in a sequence of DNA known as a gene. Genes code for proteins, so a change in a gene may produce an altered version of the protein for which it codes. If the new version of the protein provides the individual who possesses it with an advantage over the other members of its population who do not possess it, then that individual may produce more offspring than the other members of the population. An individual might possess such an advantage because he or she can metabolize some food item more efficiently, can see more effectively at night, or can hear voices that others cannot.

It is important to note that mutations do not occur just because they are “needed”; they are random events, and most are actually deleterious to reproduction and survival. There is no intention or direction to evolution. However, once a mutation does arise, it can be subjected to selective pressures coming from the environment, and it can provide the basis for new traits and future adaptations.

Some human characteristics are the product of a single gene; they are monogenic. Your ABO blood type, for example, is determined solely by the two copies of the ABO gene that you have inherited from your parent. Such traits do not change over our lifetimes, making them very useful for assessing the relationships between both individuals (paternity tests) and groups (see Box 1.3: The Mystery of the “Black Jews”). Other traits are the result of the interactions between numerous genes; they are polygenic. Your hair color is one example. In contrast to monogenic traits,
polygenic traits are open to influences from the environment. Consequently, your hair color will change throughout your life as a result of environmental factors such as sunlight, diet, and the changes in the types of hormones you produce as you age.

Genes and Religiosity. The fact that the major features of religiosity are found primarily in Homo sapiens, but not in other animals, suggests that humans acquired some unique mutations since the time our common ancestors split with the modern apes. What might these mutations be, and is religiosity a monogenic or polygenic trait? Given the complexity of the behaviors and other characteristics involved in religious thought and behavior, we can expect that religiosity is the product of both. Thus, the many features of human religiosity arose as a consequence of numerous different evolutionary events, not a single adaptation.

Some of these events may have been relatively simple changes in monogenic traits. In his book The God Gene, Dean Hamer (2004) rather provocatively suggested that a single mutation may be responsible for at least one aspect of religiosity. Hamer found that a gene known as VMAT2 (from “vesicular monoamine transporter”), which produces a protein that plays a role in transporting certain neurotransmitters across neuronal membranes, is statistically associated with scores on a psychological assessment of self-transcendence. There are two versions (or “alleles”) of the gene for VMAT2, and the protein that each codes for differs in its abilities to transport the neurotransmitters dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin. People who possess a copy of one of the alleles are more likely to score higher on the self-transcendence scale. This may be due to the different levels of these neurotransmitters—all of which are involved in mood regulation—in their cells. This study, however, explains very little about differences in religiosity, for the gene explains less than 1% of the variance in the self-transcendence scale. Moreover, this gene has been found in people who do not have notable spiritual experiences and is often absent in people who do. If VMAT2 is indeed a “God gene,” it is not the only one, nor is it a very powerful one.

It has long been known that differences in certain proteins affect the abilities of specific cells to pass materials into and out of themselves. But it is extremely doubtful that the many forms and expressions of religiosity could be the product of just a single genetic mutation. It is much more likely that religiosity has arisen as a result of a large number of mutations and that most of the genetic differences in individual predilections to religiosity are due to a number of genes operating in tandem. Consequently, these traits are open to the effects of the environment.

One intriguing study which suggests that at least some aspects of religiosity are the product of polygenic traits was carried out by Laura Koenig and Thomas Bouchard (2006), who compared twins raised apart to determine the possible genetic bases of the psychological traits of “religiousness,” “authoritarianism,” and “conservatism,” which tend to occur together. Koenig and Bouchard found that these traits changed over the course of an individual’s lifetime as the person’s social status changed (reflecting new environments). Individuals who
scored high on standard psychological measurements of these traits before starting college showed changed scores as their college careers progressed, indicating that they were becoming less religious, authoritarian, and conservative. But when these same individuals were retested years later—after they had become parents—their scores had reverted to their precollege levels. This study demonstrates that certain measures of psychological rigidity and control—which are related to attitudes about traditional moral values—can change throughout an individual’s lifetime, thereby suggesting that these traits are the product of both genes and the environment.

It is likely that the tendencies of some people to “hear voices” or to intuit the solutions to problems are due to both genetic and environmental influences as well. Human intelligence, which varies over time and even throughout the day (try taking an exam after a large meal!), is made possible by the “mental hardware” that enables us to perform tasks such as recognizing faces, distinguishing living beings from nonliving things, and understanding logical and mathematical reasoning. All of these are polygenic traits. Consequently, we can expect that some people will tend to “see faces” in abstract images more often than others, that some individuals will be more likely to experience a feeling they describe as the unity of all things than others, and that some people will be periodically and spontaneously presented with solutions to problems they are facing—an excellent quality for a religious leader or prophet—while other people may have a difficult time “connecting the dots” to find a way out of difficulties. Because of environmental factors (which can include diet and the hormonal changes that take place during our lifetimes), we can also expect that an individual’s ability to see faces, experience mystical union, or receive revelations can change over that person’s lifetime and can be affected by changing social and family status, altered religious affiliation, increased commitment to a belief system, and even variation in diet and exercise patterns.

Religious traits that are the result of interactions between many genes and the environment tend to occur “more” in some people and “less” in others. Because they are open to environmental influences, they are also expressed differently at different stages of an individual’s life. In other words, it is biologically reasonable for us to assume that individuals will exhibit significant differences in their religious abilities and sensitivities.

Because religious institutions and spiritual experiences are a part of every culture in the world, we can conclude that the genetic traits responsible for religiosity have been present in the human line for hundreds of generations or more. But since they are the result of mutations—random changes that have occurred in our genetic makeup—we should not expect specific traits to be equally present in all populations. We can also expect that different cultures will have different understandings of what these traits mean, what they can be used for, and how to train people to make the most effective use of them. The insights of modern biology clearly suggest that religiosity is a product of our biology and that it will be expressed differently from one person and society to the next.

Key Evolutionary Concepts. The biological process by which populations of organisms change over time is known as evolution. Modern evolutionary thinking is based on several core concepts.

**Natural Selection.** The principle process through which evolution occurs is natural selection. Discovered independently by Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), natural selection is based on the insight that the members of a species all differ from one another and that these differences may affect their individual abilities to survive and reproduce. Darwin and Wallace developed the concept of natural selection to explain their observations of differences in plants and animals living on neighboring islands. Noticing that species differed from one island to the next in ways related to the conditions in which they lived, both realized that the variation among members of a population gave some individuals advantages over the others. Those with the advantages—speed, intelligence, or whatever other feature made them better adapted to their environment—were more likely to survive and hence produce more offspring than the individuals who did not possess these characteristics. Consequently, the next generation of organisms exhibited a higher frequency of the advantageous characteristics. Over time, the process of natural selection can lead to significant changes within a species and even give rise to new species.

**Adaptation.** An adaptation is an inherited feature acquired through natural selection that enables a plant or animal to survive—and, most important, reproduce—in its environment. The leaves of a plant are adaptations for collecting sunlight, which is essential for photosynthesis. Its roots are adaptations that enable it to obtain water and nutrients and to store the products of photosynthesis. Adaptations can also be behaviors. The instinctual ability of a frog to turn toward small moving objects and flee from large moving objects is one type of adaptive behavior; another is the tendency of mammalian babies to observe their mothers and, from
them, to learn the kinds of foods to eat. From a traditional evolutionary point of view, a trait or behavior can be considered an adaptation only if it is genetically encoded in DNA and thus is capable of being passed down to the next generation. Although we do not yet fully understand the ways in which our genes are related to our cultural abilities, culture—including religion—has become one of the most important of all the adaptations that enable humans to survive and reproduce.

**Fitness.** The measure of an organism’s evolutionary success in passing on its genes is known as its *fitness*. The most direct measure of an individual’s fitness is the number of reproductively capable offspring it contributes to the next generation. Thus, fitness is a relative or comparative concept that refers to the reproductive advantage that one individual has over another member of the same species who occupies the same ecological niche. Because members of a group always possess some different genetic traits, individuals will always differ from one another in terms of their fitness. Consequently, some members of a group will be more fit in a particular environment than others.

**Environment.** Whether a particular trait offers an advantage or not depends on the environment in which it occurs. The environment of an organism is composed of the physical features in which it lives (climate, geography, etc.), the other species (plants, animals, fungi) that live around it, and the other members of its own species. These members not only compete for resources, but also create other environmental demands as well. For in highly social species—especially mammals—individuals must also be able to respond to the interpersonal demands of their group, and these demands become greater as social groups increase in size and complexity.

When the environment changes, the advantage or disadvantage offered by a trait may change as well, or it may be neutral in the new environment. In a cold climate, for example, a wolf with long, thick fur will have an advantage over another wolf with short, sparse fur because the animal with the thicker fur will conserve its energy better and have a lower risk of freezing. But if the climate changes and becomes warmer, the advantage will shift to the wolf with the thinner fur, because it is able to cool itself more efficiently. In this example, the temperature of the environment exerts a selective *pressure* on the individuals with different types of fur. An environment offers many selective pressures for and against particular traits, and as the environment changes, these selective pressures change as well. It is important to note that it is not the environment in total that determines whether a trait offers an advantage, but the *ecological niche*—the specific aspects of the environment that affect the survival and reproduction of the species. For example, although the high-pitched sounds of bats are important aspects of the ecological niche in which bats (and their prey) live, humans cannot hear these sounds, and they have played no role that we are aware of in the evolution of humans.

**Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness.** If we wish to assess the evolutionary events that led to the adaptations found in modern humans, we must consider the ancient environment, and the selective pressures it presented. For it was these selective pressures that led to different adaptations becoming more common among our ancestors. Because that environment differs in many important ways from the environments in which we now live, we refer to it as the *environment of evolutionary adaptedness*. Archaeological evidence and ethological analogy both indicate that our ancestors exploited this ancient environment by living in small groups and practicing a hunter–gatherer lifestyle. Consequently, to understand the selective forces that favored the biological adaptations involved in religiosity, we need to think in terms of the advantages that these traits might have offered in the ancestral natural and social environment that existed after our ancestors had split from the lines leading to the modern apes (especially chimpanzees). For such purposes, it is more fruitful to examine the environments of premodern hunter–gatherers than the physical and social environments in which most people now live. Unlike our ancestors, most modern humans now depend on specialists to grow our food and produce the other material objects we need and desire, and we live in groups far larger than at any other time in our history or prehistory. Our environment is very different from the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, a fact that raises two questions crucial for understanding religiosity: Did environmental conditions provide selective pressures that produced religious adaptations across evolutionary time? Is religion adaptive in the environments of today?

**Side-Effects of Evolution.** The theory of natural selection is based on the insight that organisms possess certain traits because these traits contributed to their ancestors’ reproductive fitness. However, these traits—called *adaptations*—often bring with them other traits and abilities that are neutral with respect to any selective pressure. For example, the white color of our bones is not the result of direct selection (so that bones that are white would offer a reproductive advantage over bones that are different in color). Rather, they are white because
they contain calcium, which itself is white. Thus, the whiteness of our bones “came along” with the calcium that was selected for other reasons. There are several types of evolutionary “side-effects”.

**Exaptations.** An exaptation is a trait that was originally selected because it was adaptive for one function and subsequently was selected for a new function and began to serve a new purpose. For example, paleontologists believe that properties of feathers were originally selected because they kept the early birds that possessed them warm. Once present, however, feathers could be useful for a different purpose: flight. Here, feathers were originally an adaptation that enabled early birds to stay warm. Later, they became an exaptation when they were further selected because of their ability to enhance the capacity for flight. Similarly, mammary glands are thought to be an exaptation that appeared when some of the sweat glands that secreted oil and water (and that enabled early mammals to control their body temperature) were subsequently co-opted to produce milk—a different type of “sweat” that contains proteins as well as fat.

**Spandrels.** A spandrel is a trait that originally served no function at all but simply “came along” (was inherited) with a trait that was being selected. Once a spandrel becomes established, it can subsequently come to play a new role in a different environment, where it may or may not be adaptive. Spandrels may serve certain purposes or be functional for some activities, but their presence is not a direct product of selection. For instance, our chins are useful for strapping on helmets, and helmets can definitely enhance our survival, but our chin did not evolve to enhance our ability to wear helmets. Many biologists have considered religion to have the same status, at best a lucky accidental by-product of evolution.

**Evolutionary By-Products.** The term evolutionary by-product is used to refer to a new trait that does not directly serve a biological function or enhance an individual’s reproductive fitness but that is a side-effect of a feature or features that were selected for because they served other purposes. For example, our ability to fold our hands when we pray is an evolutionary by-product of the grasping abilities of the primate hand. During the course of human evolution, many evolutionary by-products have presumably been selected for culturally because they were useful for psychological, cognitive, or other purposes rather than survival and reproduction. The idea of a by-product is that it serves no useful function, but establishing that something is actually completely useless is also a challenge. Indeed, when we examine religious activities and beliefs, it is easy to find how they enhance survival and reproduction. (Think of the injunction to “Go forth and multiply.”) However, the question remains as to whether these features of religion that facilitate adaptation were the products of natural selection for religion, or whether their religious use is a by-product of other selection events.

Evaluating Adaptations, Exaptations, and Spandrels. Just because a behavior is a religious universal or cultural universal, or involves an adaptation, does not mean that the behavior is a product of natural selection. Adaptations may be used for novel behaviors without having any functional relevance for survival, as is exemplified in humans’ use of the hands for playing tennis. Human adaptations can be co-opted by other motivational mechanisms and combined with other cognitive and physical capacities in order to produce behaviors that are “universal,” such as soccer, but that are not products of natural selection (Buss et al. 1998).

Evolutionary frameworks provide criteria that we can use to assess whether something is an adaptation, exaptation, spandrel, or functionless by-product. These concepts differ in the role of selection in contributing to the manifestation of the associated feature. In the case of adaptations, these traits derived from new mutations that were selected for and that became established as universal features of the species. While the term exaptation is often used to imply that it is not an adaptation (for example, Kirkpatrick 2005), exaptations are, in fact, adaptations as well. These original adaptations, their selected and nonselected features, are the basis for exaptations and spandrels. Exaptations are co-opted adaptations that involved an original selection for an adaptive mechanism which was later involved in a subsequent selection, where it was co-opted for a new function, such as the aerodynamic properties of feathers. Similarly, spandrels, features that were by-products associated with an adaptation, may eventually be co-opted for adaptive functions in a new environment. With co-opted spandrels, properties that were coupled with selected features were the focus of an additional selective pressure that reshaped the potentials of a by-product to serve a new function.

To determine whether a trait involves a co-opted exaptation or a co-opted spandrel, we need to establish evidence that the later co-opted functions are distinct from the original functionality. However, we must follow the same logical procedure we used to
establish that the original adaptation had an adaptive function, first specifying causal processes recognized by evolutionary biology and then determining that an adaptive problem can be solved by the psychological mechanisms that have been proposed (Buss et al. 1998). Common features shared by adaptations and exaptations are specialized functions for solving a specific adaptive problem and are characteristics of special design. According to Buss et al., an adaptation has “features that define special design—complexity, economy, efficiency, reliability, precision, and functionality” (citing Williams 1966). Alleging that something is an adaptation is an assertion that it has functional aspects involving a special design that could not have arisen by chance because of its complex features.

Buss et al. note that establishing religion as a functionless by-product also requires an evolutionary analysis to establish, first, the evolved mechanisms underlying the particular religious capability or behavior, and second, the cognitive and motivational mechanisms that allow humans and religions to co-opt and exploit those capabilities. By-products do not solve adaptive problems; on the other hand, a feature that can enhance survival and be transmitted to the subsequent generation is an adaptation. “Natural selection plays a key role in both adaptations and exaptations” (Buss et al. 1998). New adaptations and their new functions are always superimposed to varying degrees on a predecessor structure that constituted a preadaptation for the new ability.

The Importance of Evolutionary Side-Effects for Understanding Religiosity. Evolutionary side-effects occur when traits that were established in a population of organisms because they served one purpose begin to be used for another purpose or give rise to new traits that can be used for new purposes. During the development of a phenomenon as complex as the human propensity for religiosity, evolutionary side-effects may have played an even larger role than features that arose as a direct result of selection in a particular environment.

For example, many humans believe in a caring, benevolent God that watches over them and protects them from harm. It is not likely that our ancestors survived as a direct result of one of them acquiring a mutation which caused that individual to believe in such a God, after which that mutation was subjected to natural selection. Rather, our belief in a more powerful being that will nurture and protect us is likely an exaptation of the normal mammalian tendency to expect that our parents will feed and look after us (Kirkpatrick 2004). In other words, the selective pressures that directly favored those of our mammalian ancestors who were able to develop a caring relationship with their parents—a relationship which increased the likelihood that the offspring would survive and reproduce—indirectly created the possibility for humans to develop caring relationships with distant spirit caretakers. But is this the entire story? Or do benevolent God concepts involve more than simply our mammalian attachment system? And if so, did this new belief in an all-knowing God with extensive supernatural powers in turn lead to something novel that could contribute to human survival and reproduction in a new way?

Understanding the distinctions among these various types of evolutionary sources and effects is essential to understanding religiosity and to considering the general sequence of steps that led to the emergence of religiosity. If we can identify traits that were adaptations at one time and then became exaptations later, it may be possible to reconstruct the sequences of evolutionary events and consider the ways in which previously existing functions continued. By identifying traits that have no parallels among animals, we can also gain a greater understanding of the uniquely human aspects of religiosity.

Whether they initially arose as exaptations, spandrels, or evolutionary by-products, the traits responsible for religiosity all involve aspects of human biology that helped our ancestors to survive and reproduce. They are all products of evolution and natural selection. Thus, even if they serve no adaptive function today, they should be evaluated in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness to determine the possible effects they had on fitness in that context. These and other factors make any attempts to assess the evolutionary status of religious features challenging.

Conclusions: The Biocultural Approach to the Study of Religion

In this chapter, we briefly examined the history of different Western approaches to understanding religion and how these led to the development of the anthropological biocultural perspectives. Anthropology considers religious beliefs from the insider (emic) perspective, as well as from a scientific, or outsider (etic), perspective. Anthropology’s four-field approach (cultural, archaeological, linguistic, and biological anthropology) illustrates how these diverse perspectives can contribute to our understanding of religiosity. Evolutionary principles provide an essential framework for evaluating the factors that are responsible for the emergence of religiosity. The biocultural perspective provided by anthropology
gives us a comprehensive tool for addressing both the humanistic and scientific perspectives on religion and integrating them in a holistic, interdisciplinary synthesis.

The biocultural perspective is based on the explicit recognition that humans are biological organisms whose primary means of adapting to the world is culture. Some of the most important—and most fascinating—ways that humans now adapt to the world are made possible by the human propensity for religiosity. As a human universal, religiosity is rooted in our biology and given expression by our culture. In ways we are only beginning to understand, religiosity is made possible by features that are coded into our DNA and expressed as we develop and build the mental hardware that we use to understand the world. As we grow up, this mental hardware is shaped and programmed by the cultural software that we acquire from the other members of our society. In this way, the propensity for religiosity that we share with the other members of our species is channeled and shaped into a uniquely individual experience.

Today, religiosity finds expression in every human society, and it plays numerous important roles in our social and cultural life. The many and varied manifestations of religiosity in cultures throughout time and across the globe clearly demonstrate that religiosity is a product of a variety of features that helped our ancient ancestors adapt to their world. In this book, we will examine these features and consider the role that they played in shaping human evolution.

We will also explore some of the many ways that religiosity finds expression in both individuals and societies today, and we will consider whether religiosity is a human trait that arose as a direct product of events in the past or whether it is a side-effect of features that arose to serve one function but could then be used for others. However religiosity arose, it now represents an evolved aspect of our biology that serves many adaptive functions. We will consider both these adaptive functions and some of the maladaptive features of religiosity as well.

To better understand the ways that religiosity continues to affect us today, in the next chapter we will step back and take a broad look at the place of humans in the natural world and the ways in which we—as societies and as individuals—are able to develop an understanding of that world. We will explore how we gain information about our world and how we structure that information into a coherent worldview. And although we now often think of science and religion as opposing ways of understanding the world, we will see that the two share many features in common.

Questions for Discussion

- What problems can result when people interpret another person’s religion using the standards provided by their own?
- When considering the reasons behind any religious belief or behavior, why is it important to consider the insider’s (emic) view as well as the outsider’s (etic) view?
- What is the relationship between language and religiosity?
- Is religiosity a direct product or a side-effect of human evolution?

Glossary

adaptation a feature of an organism that enables it to survive in a particular environment

anima the nonmaterial aspect of a living being, typically conceived of as a spirit or soul

animism the belief in the existence of spirits

anthropology the scholarly discipline that studies humans

archaeology the field of anthropology that reconstructs cultures of the past, primarily by studying the material evidence left by a culture

behavioral component culture in action; culture as expressed through human activity

biocultural approach an anthropological perspective which recognizes that humans are biological organisms whose primary means of adapting to their environment is culture

biological anthropology the field of anthropology that studies human evolution and variation (also known as physical anthropology)

closed systems of language systems of communication in which sounds always mean the same things

cognates words that have similar sounds and meanings in different languages

comparative the use of descriptions of different cultures to determine the basic principles of culture

cross-cultural the comparative perspective of anthropology

cultural anthropology the field of anthropology that focuses on those aspects of human life that we learn from other members of our society and in turn pass on to others (culture)
cultural relativism a methodological strategy that reminds us that we should always strive to study other cultures objectively and not see them through the lens of our own culture

cultural universals of religion features of religiosity that are present in all cultures but not in every ritual of a culture

culture the knowledge, behaviors, and objects shared by the members of a group and passed down from generation to generation within the group

deism a belief system that asserts that there is a God but that rejects all religious dogma

displacement the ability, thought to be unique to humans, to use language to discuss things that are not happening right now in the immediate environment

ecological niche the specific aspects of any environment that affect the survival and reproduction of a particular species

emic the point of view of someone who lives within a culture; the “native” perspective

environment the context in which an organism exists, including the physical features of the landscape, the climate, and other organisms

environment of evolutionary adaptedness the environment in which the vast majority of hominin evolution is thought to have taken place

ethnocentrism the tendency to view other cultures through the framework of one’s own culture

ethnographic analogy a method of comparing a culture known from the archaeological record with other cultures studied by ethnographers to determine the general features of the past culture

ethnography a description of a particular culture (or some aspect of one)

ethnological analogy a method of using insights obtained through cross-cultural studies to interpret the archaeological record

ethnology the comparative study of different cultures with the intent to develop general theories of culture

etic the point of view of someone outside a culture; the “scientific” perspective

etymology the study of the derivation of words

evolution a biological theory that explains how and why species change through time in response to changes in their environments

evolutionary by-product a trait that did not arise as an adaptation itself but as a side-effect of an adaptation

exaptation a feature of a species that is used for something for which it did not directly evolve

exclusivism a point of view that holds that only one religion (usually one’s own) is true

fieldwork a research method that involves living with people to study their lives and the ways they understand the world

fitness a measure of an organism’s evolutionary success, usually measured by the number of reproductively capable (fertile) offspring it produces

gene a sequence of DNA that codes for a particular protein

historical linguistics a subfield of anthropological linguistics that studies the origins of words and the ways in which languages change over time

historical particularism a relativistic way of looking at cultures and societies which recognizes that each is the product of a unique constellation of environmental and historical factors, and which advocates studying each on its own terms rather than comparing it with a supposedly superior culture

holistic looking at the “big picture”; using all relevant data when considering questions

ideational component the mental aspect of a culture; culture expressed through concepts, emotions, and values

linguistic anthropology the field of anthropology that focuses on the role of language in human life

linguistic determinism the “hard” form of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis which argues that language creates the way we view reality

linguistic relativism the “soft” form of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis which argues that language shapes the way we view reality

material component the physical manifestation of culture; the objects people make and use in a society

mental hardware the biological structures of our brains that shape how we experience and understand the world

monogenic a genetic characteristic that is produced by a single gene and that is not open to environmental influences

mutation a random change in a sequence of DNA

natural selection the process by which species adapt over time in response to pressures from the environment
open systems of language  systems of communication in which a finite number of sounds can be combined to produce an infinite number of utterances

participant-observation  a research method in which a fieldworker lives with a group of people and takes part in their activities to understand the group’s culture from the insider’s perspective

polygenic  a genetic characteristic that is produced by the interaction of multiple genes and that is open to environmental influences

rationalist  a religious philosophy that emphasizes reason over revelation and that argues for a universal understanding of religion

religious universals  manifestations of religiosity that are found in all aspects of all religions

Sapir–Whorf hypothesis  the idea that language shapes or creates the way that we view reality

selective pressure  an aspect of an environment that makes a trait advantageous or disadvantageous, in response to which the frequency of the trait in a population tends to increase or decrease

social universals of religion  manifestations of religiosity that are found only in certain kinds of societies, such as agricultural or foraging societies

society  a group of people that is organized together or structured in some way by a shared culture

spandrel  a trait that originally served no adaptive function but that “came along” (was genetically inherited) with a trait that did

symbol  an object that stands for or signifies something else

temporal  a way of looking at cultures across time, especially “deep-time”

unilineal evolution  the outdated theory that all societies develop following essentially the same sequence over time

universalism  an approach to religion that recognizes the common themes in different religions and views all religions as paths to the same end

variation  the ways in which individual organisms within a population differ from one another