In late 2010 some residents of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, became alarmed when their long-standing Muslim neighbors decided to build a new mosque. They tried to have the city council block the project, and when that failed they filed a lawsuit. Already feeling uncomfortable with Muslims in the town, they claimed that the new mosque would bring in shariah law. They were convinced that this was already happening elsewhere in America. “It’s creeping in,” said one leader of the anti-mosque faction (CNN, “Unwelcome: The Mosque Next Door,” March 27, 2011). Local contractors boycotted the mosque project, and someone torched the building equipment. The lawyer representing them in court claimed that Muslims mistreat women and that therefore Islam was not a real religion. To this point, the story seems to illustrate the inability of some Americans to accept Muslims in their midst.

But the story is not finished. At the same time that the anti-mosque folks were suing and demonstrating, other (non-Muslim) townspeople staged counter-protests, urging the town to support the Muslims’ constitutional rights to religious freedom. The judge overseeing the lawsuit ruled that Muslims had the same right to worship as did those of other faiths, and that the mosque could go ahead.

In the Murfreesboro story appear some of the challenges faced in countries where citizens practice many different religions. We may feel uncomfortable with new people and their beliefs, even fearful, and fear can lead us to accept arguments that justify our discomfort (Muslims beat their women, shariah is coming to America). Blindly accepting such arguments can contribute to violent actions, as when in July 2011, Anders Behring Breivik opened fire on youth members of the Norwegian Labor Party, killing 69 teenagers, and bombed government buildings in Oslo, killing 8 others. Breivik had written a long set of statements espousing hatred for all that he saw as destroying a properly Norwegian way of life. In his statements, he repeated claims found in the writings of far-right, anti-Islam activists from the United States and Europe. But in Murfreesboro, laws and constitutional principles proved to provide the best bulwark against hate speech. The judge applied the law and people were granted their constitutional rights.
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But even if Muslims win their rights in court, they continue to encounter suspicions that they, unlike everyone else, base all their actions on their sacred texts and, so, cannot be accepted as citizens. Commentators often suggest that their religion leads Muslims to have many children, or to react violently to events, and so we find Muslims rioting (as in Paris in late 2005), carrying out jihad, and continuing to have large families. Some suggest that Europe will be 50 percent Muslim by 2050, and that Muslims will rise in unison to take over European capitals.

Now, there is a lot to object to in these claims. For one thing, the best demographic information shows that Muslim women born in Europe are having about the same number of children as non-Muslim Europeans—just what research in immigration and fertility would predict. But I was, and am, more interested in the assumptions many current writers make about the causal force of religious texts in the everyday lives of Muslims. If we assume that Muslims shape everything in their lives around sacred texts, then we could legitimately read those texts to understand Muslims’ actions. But Muslims draw on their scriptures in much the same ways as Christians, Jews, and Buddhists draw on theirs. Some pay close attention to their holy books; others don’t read them at all. Some worship frequently; others never do. And, as with Christians, Jews, and others, Muslims interpret their scriptures in varying and changing ways. Moreover, even most highly religious people have a lot of secular aims in their lives: eating well, holding down a job, bringing up children, and so on. These were the issues behind the 2005 Paris riots, which involved many non-Muslims and people of European backgrounds, who all were enraged by problems of unemployment, discrimination, and police harassment; religion was not among their concerns (Bowen 2012).

I begin on this note because of the sense of immediacy I have about the importance of correctly understanding the role religion does and does not play in modern public life, and the contributions the anthropology of religion can make to this understanding. The issue arises most pressingly with regard to contemporary armed conflicts, from those in the Balkans in the 1990s, through the continuing struggles in parts of the former Soviet Union, Kashmir, Indonesia, and Palestine, to the post–9/11 security debates about Islam in the United States and Europe. Are people fighting because of their religion? Does their religion shape how they think and act? Or is it just a way of mobilizing support? How far can religions be stretched to adapt to new ways of life?

These basic questions are less often posed than are the answers to them simply assumed. In less dramatic ways, many people living in Europe and North America continue to search for new forms of religiosity within or alongside established religious organizations. The fast-rising Christian churches in Melanesia, Africa, and Latin America are posing new challenges to indigenous religions. Muslims are engaging in internal deliberations about how to rethink issues of gender, the public sphere, and their religion’s place in European and North American societies. Practitioners of smaller-scale religions throughout the world find themselves struggling for recognition or survival.

WHAT IS “RELIGION”? 

Discussions of religion are often based on knowledge of only a few familiar religions. Many U.S. politicians and school officials who support a moment of silence for prayer
in schools, for example, assume that all religions include the practice of silent individual prayer to a god; some people find the Islamic practice of five daily prostrations before God disruptive. German officials have declared that Scientology is not a religion. Indonesian officials exclude animist beliefs and practices from the category of religion.

What then is “religion”? I view religious traditions as ever-changing complexes of beliefs (including those authoritative beliefs called “doctrine”), practices (including formalized rituals), and social institutions. But how do we decide which beliefs, practices, and institutions are to be called “religious”?

In most Western traditions, we find two very common definitions. One emphasizes an individual’s beliefs; the other, his or her emotions. The former defines religion as a set of shared beliefs in spirits or gods. The latter identifies religion in terms of a sentiment of awe and wonder toward the unknown. I do not think we need a hard-and-fast definition of religion. This book examines a wide variety of ways in which people in different societies and times have thought about the world beyond the immediate sense-world. Some posit a set of deities; others do not. Some have a distinct sphere of life called “religion”; others do not distinguish religion from the rest of life.

Sufficient for our purposes is that the phenomena we will study—prayer to God, uses of magic, death rituals—all involve the idea that there is something more to the world than meets the eye. This definition is much broader than standard Western usage. What if we said that religion was anything that involves a stated belief in spirits or gods? In those cultures strongly shaped by modern Christianity, people do indeed tend to think of religion in these terms. But the idea of a separate religious sphere is recent even in the West. In other societies, people define the world in different ways, treating as a natural part of everyday life actions and ideas that we would want to include in a cross-cultural category of religion.

Consider the practices of the Azande people of the southern Sudan that ethnographers have labeled “witchcraft” (discussed further in Chapter 6). According to the Azande, some people carry in their bodies a substance called mangu. This substance is inherited, and it sends out emanations when the person feels jealousy, anger, or other negative emotions toward another person. The substance causes things to happen, and it fits into everyday ways of explaining misfortune: “I tripped at a place where I never trip; it must be witchcraft that caused me to trip.”

When the person causing a particular misfortune is discovered (by using oracles), he or she is asked to blow water from his or her mouth and say: “If I was doing harm, I certainly did not mean to, let it be gone.” And that is the end of the matter. The Azande do not concentrate on blame or intentions, but on the particular problem at hand and how to solve it. Indeed, they believe the substance sometimes acts on its own without the person’s knowledge.

What do we make of these practices? From a Western point of view, they refer to a reality beyond the immediately verifiable, and thus we may legitimately include them in a comparative study of religions. The Azande, on the other hand, see mangu and oracles as everyday, ordinary aspects of reality. Some of the Azande who have converted to Christianity continue their use of oracles and accusations of mangu precisely because they do not see those activities as part of a separate religion, but more in the way that an American Baptist or Catholic might regard the use of an astrological chart.

The diversity of ideas about what constitutes a particular religion places any student of religion in a difficult position. If I write about a particular religion as the
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symbols, statements, and practices of a particular group of people, I will almost inevitably differ with some of them as to what their religion is. The perspective of an outside observer, who wishes to include a wide array of opinions and activities, may be much broader than that of a practitioner, who may insist on his or her own view of what properly lies within the boundaries of the religion in question.

I have frequently met with objections to the way I define “Islam” when describing certain Sumatran village practices to Indonesian Islamic scholars. For example, many villagers gather at ritual meals to ask ancestral spirits for help in healing the sick or in ensuring a good rice crop. These practices may have their origins in pre-Islamic times, but villagers view them as consistent with their understandings of Islam and they explain them in terms of prophets and angels. Much as Catholics ask saints to intercede for them because they are presumably closer to God, these Muslims ask pious ancestors to do so. For this reason, I include them in my own writings about Sumatran Islam. But for Islamic scholars, these practices conflict with proper understandings of Islam. “Those practices are what we try to teach them to throw aside,” they say. For some of them, my own writing could become part of the very problem they are trying to solve, that is, an overly broad idea of Islam.

How do we respond to these challenges? My own response has been to realize that definitions of religion are not just academic matters but part of the very social reality we are studying. I thus refrain from giving too precise a definition for religion (or for Catholicism or Islam), and instead look at issues and debates among practitioners about where the boundaries of religion indeed lie, recording what they say and what is at stake for them. Baptists and Catholics do not agree about how to interpret Biblical texts, but we nonetheless speak about “Christianity” because both groups do refer to the Bible and do share a history.

Indeed, the boundaries of “religion” are no clearer when we look closer to home. Some people living in the United States would consider modern forms of witchcraft to be a religion; indeed, the Rhode Island state legislature passed a law making it so in 1989. People continue to debate about the limits the state should place on religious freedom, no more so than in cases of Christian Scientists denying medical treatment to their children. (Until August 1996, treatment given by Christian Science practitioners was considered “medical” for purposes of Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements, on grounds that to deny them that category would be to violate their religious freedom.)

I propose to define religion in two stages. First, we can use an extremely broad definition, such as “ideas and practices that postulate reality beyond that which is immediately available to the senses.” This is a broad definition—too broad, as it includes string theory in physics (although some physicists do consider such untested theories to be akin to religious belief!). Second, for each society we study, we ask how these people construct their world. They may have a shared set of beliefs in spirits and deities and thus fit squarely into Western definitions of religion. Or, they may speak about impersonal forces, such as the East Asian idea of a life force or chi that permeates the natural and social world. Or, they may not focus on describing beliefs at all, but rather concentrate on carrying out rituals correctly, with a general understanding that the rituals are important.

What we call religion may look quite different from one society to another—in the relative importance of a shared belief system, in the degree to which religious practice
involves strong emotions, and in the social functions and contexts associated with religious practices.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELIGION

What is the peculiarly anthropological approach to the study of religion? These days, most of us reach across disciplinary boundaries to engage with colleagues in other disciplines. As I work on my own current questions, which in 2013 include debates in Europe and Southeast Asia about religion, law, and politics, I consult the work of specialists from sociology, history, politics, law, and so forth. And yet I find that multidisciplinary research highlights rather than hides the distinctive contributions made by each discipline. Three closely connected features guide an anthropologist's study of any topic.

First, anthropology is based on a long-term relationship with people through fieldwork. We live for a fairly long time, more than one year and sometimes many years, in a particular place. During that time, we develop friendships with some people and gain, we hope, the trust and respect of many more. I have spent about six years in Indonesia, and much of that time was spent with the Gayo people in the highlands of Aceh on the island of Sumatra. My experience is not unusual. I developed a very close and continuing friendship with a Gayo family that has continued through the years, and which is now global in scope. The eldest daughter of the Gayo family now lives in the United States. She began her career with Procter & Gamble in Jakarta, moved to Cincinnati to continue her career, and then, with her Egyptian husband, moved to Sunnyvale, California. After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that devastated much of Aceh, she created a foundation to build orphanages in Indonesia, and then extended her work to Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Haiti. My children call her “Cousin Evi”; one of them used to babysit her children in California.

Close relationships are not only the joy of fieldwork but also help us to interpret social life. We trust certain people to report what they think truthfully, and we know enough such people to be able to check our interpretations with people who might be expected to disagree in their views on things. For example, I know people who have very different perspectives on religious rituals, and I can depend on them to disagree with whatever I see. One can compare this source of reliability to that which psychologists obtain by repeating experiments.

Second, anthropologists start studying a topic by learning local perspectives. Rather than studying the economy by creating a model of what people might do and then seeing whether they do it, or studying religion by reading scripture and then seeing whether ordinary people believe it, we begin with the ideas and practices we learn about in the field: how they grow rice or recite scripture. Then we follow the connections to larger institutions like government agencies, religious schools, or national banks—but we always start from local views of those institutions.

When I study Islamic law in Indonesia, for example, I begin with how particular individuals—Gayo villagers or Acehnese state judges—define Islamic law vis-à-vis customary rules or state, non-Islamic law. I look at how people make references to particular legal concepts and texts when resolving conflicts, or pursuing conflict in courts. I learn about colonial law, contemporary civil law, and Islamic codes, but only after studying everyday social life, in order to anchor these codes and institutions in local
practices. This feature distinguishes anthropology from disciplines that usually begin with historical, religious, or legal texts, or with national political institutions.

Finally, anthropologists study connections across social domains. Rarely do we look only at the economy, or at literature, or at religion. We might wish to focus on one of these domains (indeed, it is required when writing a doctoral dissertation), but when we do, we usually discover that our chosen domain is connected to other domains. Suppose I want to learn about rice cultivation and discover that the planting and harvesting is tied to the performance of elaborate religious rituals and that work on the irrigation system depends on local political structures. I have to investigate religion and politics in order to understand how rice is cultivated.

Conversely, my study of Islam in Gayo society involved learning about how rice is grown, how the major rice-growing regions were allocated among villages, how healing takes place, the origins of political parties, and the short history of a poetic genre written in Arabic script—all because they were part of local practices that people explained by referring to Islam. Indeed, I focused on Islam only as a third research project; I was brought to it because the topics I came to study—social structure and oral literature—were interwoven with Islamic ideas about society and history. Even when we work in new kinds of sites, we retain these features in our work. When by 2000, the civil war raging in Aceh had made fieldwork no longer possible, I began working on Islam, law, and politics in France. I began to sit in religious schools along with Muslim students, interview French political actors, and analyze newspaper stories and law review articles. I no longer worked in a village or even in a single neighborhood. Now I am doing similar work on Islam in England.

How is what I am doing different from the work of a political scientist? Well, it comes close to the approach of some of my French colleagues in political science—the French version of that discipline having developed more attention to everyday life than has its more behaviorist American cousin—but it retains a critical difference. I focus on how a wide range of Muslims and non-Muslims talk about matters of importance to them—schools, mosques, political coalitions, and so on—in private and public contexts. The “local” setting in which I work is multiple: a set of institutions and events across France and England in which people deliberate and debate. Starting from these deliberations and debates leads me to look at law, politics, jurisprudence, ethics, the history of immigration, and the perspectives of French and English social scientists on their own society—in other words, the connections across domains. A French political science friend once said to me, her eyebrows slightly raised, “You’re studying us, too, aren’t you?” That it was so more intrigued than troubled her; it was a way of marking our disciplinary differences and transoceanic differences in perspective, alongside our shared interests in French Islam.

**How Is Anthropology Distinctive?**

Consider how scholars in different disciplines approach a question about why people believe the (religious) things they do. As I said before, most anthropologists approach the question through fieldwork. Susan Harding (2000), for example, set out to understand how it is that people become “_convicted” (that is, convinced) followers of the Reverend Jerry Falwell’s Fundamental Baptist community. Her ethnographic approach was to spend a lot of time in the community, listening to what people said and how
they said it. She worked to counteract her basic skepticism toward Falwell by “bracketing,” as the phenomenologist Husserl put it, her preconceptions and trying to accept his statements as true. This approach allowed her to perceive the complexity and the force of the arguments made by the Baptists. It also gave her a strong, personal sense of what it meant to have a soul and to know that Satan is real. She did not convert, but she gained a felt sense of conviction.

Harding’s work fits the overall account of the anthropological approach that I offered earlier. She got to know people well enough to be able to discuss a wide range of topics with them and to grasp how they saw the world. She tried to start with their concerns, rather than bringing her own categories and ideas to the field. And she did not limit her study to one specific domain, but investigated ritual, schooling, gender issues, and politics.

Most anthropologists of religion teaching in North America or Europe carry out at least their initial fieldwork outside those areas, reflecting the general anthropological emphasis on grasping the widest possible range of human experiences, practices, and ideas. This centrifugal tendency also means that they must study and explain to their readers the social and cultural context within which they find religion: kinship and marriage systems, local and national political structures, and broad cosmologies and ideologies. One could limit one’s reading to the subfield of the anthropology of religion and nevertheless gain a good understanding of all of social anthropology.

Even though many sociologists carry out fieldwork, the fundamental orientation of their discipline is different from that of anthropology, with a greater interest in developing general propositions about social life, but (one might say ironically) less of a concern with broad-based comparative studies. Most sociologists of religion teaching in the United States study the organization of religions, changes in religious attitudes and beliefs, or new religious movements, usually focusing on people and institutions found in the United States. This focus means that they can assume general knowledge of institutions and ideas on the part of their readers, and that they often pitch their writings to generally held concerns, such as the decline in attendance at mainstream churches or the rise in New Age religions.

Penny Edgell Becker’s (1999) study of congregations illustrates one sociological approach. She asked how congregations in the United States manage internal conflict. Her concern thus was primarily organizational. She selected a sample of churches in Chicago, choosing her sample so that it would contain variation in size, organizational structure, and liberal–conservative orientation. Her concerns were primarily to develop a general model consisting of types of church organizations and concomitant types of conflict resolution. These goals were motivated by a broader theoretical literature in sociology concerning institutions and their cultures in the United States. Along the way, she discovered interesting histories of each church and ways of preaching and worshiping, but each of these minietn ethnographies was inevitably partial, useful only to the extent that it contributed to her particular question.

Psychologists more rarely study religion, but a few anthropologists have taken up the methods of experimental psychology to pursue research into why people believe certain religious propositions. Pascal Boyer (2000, 2001), for example, observed that people around the world have a strikingly small number of basic ideas about supernatural beings: that they behave much as ordinary beings or objects do except for a slight variation in their properties. Thus, one has supernatural agents who are very much like people except that they can go through walls, remain invisible, hear everything, or live forever.
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We do not find gods who exist only every other day, or who exist in six dimensions, or who think about everything in the world at once, including the contents of all our refrigerators. Why is this? Boyer and others hypothesized that people have an easier cognitive time working with a limited set of god-concepts. They then tested this idea through experiments with children and adults and found that it held across a number of different cultures. This work resembles that of other psychologists in that it is carried out through controlled experiments and tests some universal propositions about human minds, but it joins long-standing anthropological concerns with the question of what it is that humans share in their religious beliefs. (See the discussion of Tylor in Chapter 2.)

PRACTICES, CONTEXTS, AND DIVERSITY

In the chapters that follow, I examine religious life from different perspectives: the relations of doctrines to rituals; the role of religions in explaining misfortune, overcoming grief, and extending human powers; the ways that rituals of pilgrimage, preaching, and sacrificing shape religious belief and experience; the ways that images and taboos can be used to organize religious life or change it; and the role of religions in public life.

The emphasis on practice includes the study of doctrines, focusing on how doctrines are embodied in texts or other forms and how they are understood; this relation of doctrine to practice is examined in greater detail in Chapter 3. Religious practices often invoke texts: A person may read, chant, recite, or sing a text. These textual practices are critical in linking local practices to broader religious traditions.

Certain practices are especially characteristic of one or more religious traditions, and in some chapters I analyze at length those traditions. For example, images are particularly central to Catholicism, and the analysis of Catholicism in Chapter 8 focuses on imagery and worship as the basis for a more general discussion of imagery.

The particular contribution of ethnographic and social historical studies to knowledge of religion lies in the attention to interconnections among domains of social life—among religion, economy, marriage, politics, and so forth—and to the ways that cultural ideas and social institutions shape activities in many of these domains. The importance of such cross-domain connections was underscored by the social theorists Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx, who continue to have a strong influence on many anthropologists (see Chapter 2). A particular religious practice such as worship may structure communities in particular ways, or lend a religious interpretation to existing social divisions, as when a Hindu priest distributes consecrated foods according to caste standing, or when men and women worship separately in a Muslim mosque, or when church pews are reserved for those who have contributed to the church.

The interpretation of texts and doctrines is strongly shaped by local factors, as Clifford Geertz (1968) showed in contrasting Islam in Morocco to Islam in Java, a contrast I revisit in Chapter 4. Comparing two or more cases of a practice can help to highlight these shaping processes, and in each of the following chapters I engage in such comparisons. In Chapter 4, for example, I contrast treatments of death in Japan, New Guinea, and Sumatra; in Chapter 6, patterns of sorcery in Africa and Asia; in Chapter 14, Muslim migrations to different counties in Europe; and in Chapter 15, the relationship of religion and state in Germany, France, Britain, and the United States.

Finally, I consider the diversity of religious understandings and practices even in small-scale societies. This internal diversity includes questions of how knowl-
edge and ideas are distributed in the society—between men and women, or adults and children, or across other social groupings—as well as the debates among people about how best to understand the norms and forms of religious culture. Anthropology has often been insufficiently attentive to internal diversity. This insufficiency has been due in part to the idea that a “culture” is an integrated whole, an idea inherited from German nineteenth-century cultural studies, and in part due to ways of carrying out research by concentrating on a small number of “key informants”—or even, in some extreme cases, one such informant.

We know that the same practice may be interpreted in myriad and diverse ways. Beginning from particular religious practices and then examining diverse interpretations allow us to capture these diversities, and in some cases explain them in terms of accompanying social differences and changes. Certain religious traditions allow a particularly broad diversity of practices to flourish—the case of Japan is explored in Chapter 3. Debates within Islam are explored at several points in this book. I draw on my own fieldwork with the Muslim Gayo of Sumatra and on Islam in Europe in some of these chapters. I also examine debates within Christianity: concerning the role of the Virgin Mary in Chapter 8 and the nature of divine election in Chapter 11.

The final chapter returns us to the broad debates concerning the place of religion in public life with which I began this chapter. It is with an eye to these debates that I write this book. A great deal of misunderstanding and, to my mind, wrong-headed public policy in many countries, but certainly in the United States, has been based on ideas about religion that ignore diversities, debates, and possibilities. For example, particular features of certain strata of Middle Eastern societies (the role of women, views on Islamic law, etc.) are frequently confused with Islam in general. Religious beliefs are all open to debate and transformation; attending to those debates reminds us of a sense of the open-ended nature of religious ideas.

Conclusions

Anthropology approaches any social phenomenon in the terms outlined here: through long-term knowledge of people, wherein they learn local perspectives, and by looking for interconnections across domains. This perspective entails studying religious ideas and texts as they are written, read, and referred to in social life. It prevents us from assuming that we can discover something about a religion only by reading its scriptures, because we learn nothing from doing that about how people understand their scriptures. We give a broad definition of religion here, and then ask for each society we study: How do they cut up the world? Do they have concept of “religion”? How does it differ from other areas of social life?

Discussion Questions

You may have rituals you carry out in everyday life to ensure good luck; are these practices religious to you? Why or why not?

Take a current newspaper article that refers to a religion, or that identifies someone as a Catholic, a Muslim, or a Jew. What questions would an anthropologist want to pose to the author of the article?
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Media Resources