THE STUDY OF RELIGION IN CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Contents

Summary

Religion constitute a main field of research for Anthropology since the very beginning of this discipline. Anthropology of religion is a scientific discipline which holds religion as the main object of its research and analysis. It studies religion as part of cultures and of social systems from a historical and contemporary perspective. It applies the methodologies of human and social sciences, without metaphysical, soteriologic or transcendental purposes. Rational study of religion took place across cultures and in various historical periods, yet modern ethnology of religion is the result of a centuries-long historical and intellectual process started in Europe. The discipline is nonetheless significantly detached from its cultural and historical origin and has been enriched in essence by non-Western scholarship. Today, this science is well-established in many countries although not homogeneously, mainly for socio-cultural and economic reasons. Many scholars have participated to the construction and development of the discipline and have produced multiple influential theories. Throughout its history – that has lasted over a century and a half – many theories have been influential and many have been

rejected after a phase of praise or sway, as in the case of evolutionism. Others remain influential but have changed radically, like naturalism. Ethnology of religion has significantly improved its methodological tools, which are however still far from being finalized. The discipline too is far from being faultless. Since founded, it has given an important contribution to the understanding of religion, but also of cultures, of societies and of human beings. Anthropology of religion is not universally accepted as a science: cultural, confessional, social or political resistance to the scientific study of religion is still widespread. Many – but not all – of these issues are related to the nature of the studied object, strictly connected to issues of power, identity and belief. Scholars do not agree on a definition of the main object of the discipline, religion, although the divergences over a definition have greatly inspired critical analysis and theories, and therefore the development of the discipline. There is a general – but not unanimous – consensus among scholars on the dignity of the discipline as an established scientific domain, as shown also by the existence of many professorships and departments in universities in various countries. Ethnology of religion can be divided in a number of subfields based on the object under scrutiny (for example, Buddhist studies or Biblical studies) or according to the methodology employed (for example history of religion or psychology of religion). Today, the discipline faces some very interesting challenges, both on a theoretical perspective and from a practical standpoint. In fact, an enormous amount of research and of interpretation/theorization still has to be done, whilst a great amount of religious facts, traditions and behaviors have not yet been studied while humanity continuously creates new objects of study, such as new expressions of religiosity or new religious groups. From a practical point of view, ethnology of religion can contribute to a better understanding of a number of contemporary matters such as religious-justified violence, secularization, multi-culturalism or inter-religious dialogue. Finally, ethnology of religion can still contribute greatly, from a theoretical perspective, to better understand humans, cultures and societies.

1. Introduction

Anthropology of religion is one of the designations of a multidisciplinary science also known in English as 'ethnology of religion', 'religious studies' and 'science(s) of religion'. The second expression is sometimes used to designate theology, a completely different domain. The last expression, on the other hand, reflects a widely used term for this science in other languages, where it is sometimes rendered as 'religion sciences'. The discipline was also called, at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'comparative religion', 'history of religion' as well as with other, less widespread denominations.

The primary object of anthropology of religion is the study of religions from the perspective of human and social sciences. Anthropology of religion does not investigate the transcendent, soteriologic or metaphysical aspects of religion, which are realms of other (not necessarily scientific) disciplines, such as theology or philosophy. On the other hand, the range of interests and methodologies that characterizes anthropology of religion is wide to the point that this science can be divided in a number of subfields – such as Islamic studies or sociology of religion – which are sometimes regarded as independent disciplines. Compiling a list of the main objects of anthropology of religion can certainly result in a long inventory, considering the complexity and variety of religious traditions or of the manifestations of religiosity in human history. An

incomplete list of topics and perspectives which are significant to the discipline can include: religion as a social institution or as part of culture; the comparative study of religion across cultures and/or across time; the history of religion(s); religious beliefs, rites, symbols or myths; approaches to religion, or aspects of religiosity, such as totemism, animism and cosmogonies; the cognitive aspects of religious experience; translation and hermeneutics of ancient religious texts (e.g. Sumerian tablets, Maya codes or the Ṛgveda, an anthology of religious hymns written in Sanskrit). It is evident that such a wide – even when incomplete – array of research topics implies a high number of possible methodological approaches, such as philology, history, ethnography, folklore studies, sociology, psychology, literary studies and linguistics, among others. However, only a few disciplines, namely anthropology, sociology, psychology and history, have been and still are at the core of anthropology of religion.

The history of religious studies can be traced back to the first rational inquiries on religion, which took place throughout history in many societies around the world. Contemporary anthropology of religion can be traced back over 400 years in the cultural and scientific history of the West. It was caused by the following four main concurring factors: the emancipation of science from Christianity; the development of the scientific method and the growing importance of rational analysis in all fields of knowledge; a growing interest of – and sometimes an admiration for – ancient cultures, especially Greek and Roman, but also Egyptian, Mesopotamian etc.; and the realization that a great variety of religions and of approaches to the religious domain exists, both in European history and in the world. This led to comparisons, histories and, in turn, to the first theories and discussions on methods. Another factor contributing to the shaping of the discipline, although less fundamental and relatively more recent, was the discovery of – and interest for – European folk traditions during the 19th century. During the second half of the 1800s, the first claims appeared for the establishing of an independent science, with its own methodology and object of research.

In its early stages the discipline has been dominated by Western scholarship, and often also by the ethnocentrism that characterized human and social sciences until well into the first half of the twentieth century. Today it has significantly improved the methods and perspectives. Yet, obviously, it is not flawless nor free from all possible analytical distortions. Anthropology of religion is a well-established scientific and academic discipline in many countries, and the contribution from non-Western scholars has grown exponentially in the last fifty years and is today a fundamental component of the discipline. The methodology of anthropology of religion has gone through a long historical development that is, most likely, not yet concluded. The study of its history (and the awareness of the main forces that contributed to its birth and to the modeling of its most influential theories) is quite important to understand not only its contemporary methods and achievements, but also its main challenges and its theoretical limits.

In the last two centuries a great number of academic theories have been produced to explain religion(s) and related matters. Some of them, such as for instance those related to Darwinism, although extremely popular and influential in the past, have been proved wrong and have been rejected by the academic community. Unfortunately, the general consensus of scholars on the wrongness of certain theories does not mean that they have been completely abandoned. In fact, traces of long-lasting erroneous theories leading to

mistaken interpretations can still be observed in the works of some contemporary authors. On the other hand, the rejection of a theory doesn't necessarily mean that the entire field-work or analysis conducted by scholars biased by that specific theoretical perspectives should be rejected. Among the theories and methodologies produced in the last centuries, many have been changed or developed through time, adapted to new observations and to new data, dissembled and reassembled in new shapes, and can still be somehow influential or constitute an interesting analytical tool. Functionalism, sociology of religion and structuralism are good examples of this.

Much has yet to be researched by anthropology of religion, both in the theoretical and empirical domains. Some traditions are still virtually unknown for a number of reasons: because of a lack of access to data, of lack of research funds, or because of little interest in the community or due to difficulties to conduct research. For example, over thirty years of war in Afghanistan have made it impossible – as well as not a priority at all – to conduct archaeological excavations or field researches to better understand pre-Islamic traditions in that part of the world. On the other hand, very few (if any) scientific studies have been published on a number of religious traditions and beliefs in many African countries, such as Central African Republic or Niger. In these cases, although the areas are more accessible and safer to researchers, many religious traditions are virtually unknown because of the lack of funds (if not of political and intellectual interest) in richer countries where anthropology of religion exists as well as in their respective countries where the discipline is not always established in existing universities or where research funds are not available. One among hundreds of examples is the study of religion among the Kim, a (demographically tiny) ethnic group of Chad, made of about 8'000 people, where forms of syncretism between Christianity and of the pre-existing religion are well visible.

Anthropology of religion can give a great contribution to the understanding of important theoretical questions regarding the history of humans and civilizations, societies and cultures. It can contribute to the understanding of fundamental issues such as the nature of human beings from a social, cultural and psychological standpoint among others. Moreover, it can improve the understanding of phenomena and topics of high importance in the contemporary world, such as the new forms of religiosity, the inter-religious dialogue, religious intolerance and extremisms, multiculturalism or violence justified by religious beliefs.

2. A Complex Object of Study: Religion

In many countries, as well as in many cultures, societies and institutions, the scientific analysis of religion(s) does not exist for historical, economic, social or cultural reasons. In many others it is not accepted by political, religious or intellectual authorities. The main reasons for the absence of this science in the universities of many nations are strictly related to the nature of the object under analysis, and of the political, sociocultural and symbolic value of religions in most cultures and societies. Rephrasing a famous historian of religion: nobody likes to see his/her own religion under analysis, and sometimes a lot of courage is needed to face the potential risks implied in analyzing – therefore hypothetically evaluate and criticize – the official and sociocultural discourses on religions. A non-religious analysis of religion can be

perceived as threatening established powers or sociocultural structures. Through history and across cultures many scholars and thinkers, such as for instance the Greek philosopher Socrates (c. 469 BC – 399 BC), the Muslim scholar Averroes (1126-1198), the Italian intellectual Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), the Italian physicist and astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), the French historian Ernest Renan (1823-1892), the Japanese scholars Kume Kunitake (1839-1931) and Tsuda Sōkichi (1873-1961), faced forms of persecutions. They included dismissal from scholarship, imprisonment, confiscation of goods, censorship, exile, torture and death sentence, for their attempts to rationally analyze religion or simply for their opinions on the relationship between the rational and the religious domains.

In fact, religion has, in virtually all the known civilizations and societies, developed ties (of differing importance and nature) with other fundamental or universal constituents of societies and cultures, such as economy, politics, language, arts etc. Moreover, religion is a great source of power and of meanings, and therefore it is often used to construct or to explain primary sociocultural facts such as identity. It is also often used to explain or justify social structures and power relations. Therefore the rational study of religion can produce (and has in many cases generated) opposition to the discipline or to its claims because the rational analysis of religion can be perceived as threatening (e.g. for a social order or by authorities who have a monopoly on discourses on religion). It can also engender (and has caused from time to time) social conflicts or personal frictions and more generally cultural resistance from social groups, individuals, institutions or communities who feel menaced by the rational inquiry of their religion and their beliefs. It is therefore not surprising that the development of anthropology of religion has been a long historical and intellectual process, lasting about four centuries and not finished thus far. Yet, all these challenges are among the most fascinating aspects of the study of this discipline, and also can be key features to better understand issues like religious intolerance or violence in the name of religion.

On the other hand, the difficulties in approaching a scientific study of religion are not only related to the social or political value of the science or of its object. As a matter of fact, three strictly interrelated features of religion (nature, heterogeneity and the semantics of the word itself) are co-responsible for the impediments that have often questioned theories and puzzled scholars. The first difficulty can be found in what has been defined as the ontology of religion: the definition of the essence of religion (not to be confused with the philosophical reasoning called "the ontological argument"). The second obstacle results from the extremely broad and varying features of religion and expressions of religiosity across cultures and across time. The third challenge concerns the difficulties of expressing linguistically, synthetically but accurately the complexity and variety of religion(s). In other words, due to the high heterogeneity of religious traditions, due to a history which is as long as that of human beings, and because of a number of varying transcendental and metaphysical traits and a wide variety of uses, functions and features, religion is problematic to understand intellectually, while the terms labeling it and some of its qualities are very problematic to define.

Put differently, the difficulties of giving a universally valid definition of religion can be grouped in three main clusters: ontological, taxonomic and semantic. The ontological questions are those on the essence of religion. A variant to this issue, which was very

popular in the nineteenth century, was the questioning on what is the ultimate entity (or entities, if any can be defined) founding its understanding (human beings, societies, supernatural beings, energy, gods, God etc.). Also belonging to this sphere are the interrogations on the fundamental theoretical categories of religion as such, for example the idea of sacred. The sociocultural queries can also be divided in clusters of sub-questions, such as the historical or functional features of religion, the inquiries on the possible existence of main (or universal) and secondary (or historical and culturally-specific) attributes and so on. The linguistic difficulties can be split between the problems related to defining the object itself and the problems related to the use of a proper terminology aimed at a scientifically accurate description. Of course, these three macro-groups of issues are not independent but interconnected at various levels.

The ontological problems are often dismissed in anthropology of religion as not directly relevant to the field(s) and methodology of inquiry of the discipline. Nonetheless, to this category belong also questions which are central in the field of studies called phenomenology of religion, and questions which have often interested the anthropologists of religion, such as the query if religion is a fundamental human activity or if religiosity is an inherent trait of human psychology. On the other hand, matters such as the definition of religion (whether cultural-informed or academic), or the possibility of picking out universal attributes, are relevant objects of study for the anthropologist of religion.

2.1. Socio-Cultural Questions

The cluster of socio-cultural questions can be divided in a number of sub-groups that contribute to create a complete view of the issue, i.e. on the primary object of study of anthropology of religion. In fact, this group of questions is a main engine that propels the research in this discipline. Conversely, anthropology of religion can be thought as a discipline that continuously re-analyzes the cluster of socio-cultural questions on religion, which are overall based on macro-queries such as: which are the most valid questions to understand religion(s) from the methodological perspective of human sciences? What are the answers given until today? Which answers (and why) are to be considered valuable and which erroneous? What are the questions that could (or should) be posed to improve our knowledge of religion as a human and social activity?

The socio-cultural enquiries could be divided into at least six sub-categories: historical, functional, social, cultural, psychological and theoretical. Of course these categories are not separated but are (often strictly) interrelated. In fact, for instance, the historical questions being all those related to the study of the past and on how it can explain the present, they are not only the study of – say – ancient Egyptian religion, but also theoretical subjects as the fact that – to our knowledge – religion is as old as human beings. Also, functional questions have been described as belonging to three spheres: culture, society and psychology. Cultural questions are related to facts such as religious-provided order (e.g. cosmological, social, cosmogonies), explanations (e.g. origin, meaning of life, death), and behaviors (e.g. taboo, rites, sacrifices). They are also obviously related to theoretical questions, such as the fact that religions seam to share some fundamental characteristics with other main and universal components of human beings or of human societies, such as music, language or dance. Investigating religion

from a social perspective could mean studying the social functions that it covered in extinct societies, or questioning the meaning of socio-cultural behaviors such as rites, ceremonies, taboos or sacrifices, or the cultural construction giving significance to a specific cult. As for the psychology of religion, there has often been a functional approach to it. In fact, among the most usually cited psychological meanings of religion there are its psychological functions: relief from fear, comfort, and explanations (of nature, including death, of social structure, of behaviors etc.). Some scholars during the 19th century, went as far as describing religion as a psychological faculty. Even if today this (or similar theories) are regarded as incorrect, the opinion that religion is somehow an elemental part of the human psyche still exists among certain scholars.

2.2. Linguistic Issues

It has been argued that every science needs to define the object of its investigation. In this case, the question is: what is religion? This apparently easy task has taken a huge theoretical and analytical effort for many decades or even centuries, and has not been solved yet.

There are three main linguistic troubles related to the term religion. First of all, the semantics and history that this English word shares with many other European languages, has heavily influenced the theorizations of what religion is. Secondly, when a synthetic meaning is searched, comparing the languages of the world, meaning seems to get lost in a great quantity of diverging significances. In fact, a comparative analysis of the numerous words which can be associated with the idea of religion in the known languages, when a word exists (which is not always the case), shows the existence not of a definite set of meanings, but of a complex network of significations and usages covering a very wide semantic field. Finally, and related to the first two issues, any word in any given language referring to religion (when it exists) has not a universal value, but is culturally informed. Similar linguistic issues entangle other fundamental terms widely used in religious studies. One such example is the word and idea of "belief".

The English word *religion* has a dual essence. On one hand, it is exceptionally real and concrete, since it is a widely employed linguistic and cultural referent, which shows a clear meaning in its everyday use. There would be in fact no doubts – in a conversation – on the signification of phrases such as "my religion is Greek Orthodox" or "he's a very religious person". On the other hand, however, when trying to define with precision the word religion, using a scientific or an etymological approach, the very real and clear meaning tends to get dispersed in a high number of ideas and implications. The English term religion is in fact a prototypical example of a polythetic signifier: a noun which is not defined but just one set of meanings, but by a wide set of significances that are used in varying sub-sets depending on the context. The uses of the English word 'religion' – even before entering the English vocabulary, when it was for instance a word in old French – display a polysemic nature. Some of its meanings are unrelated to the point that certain scholars have suggested to conceive the word religion as a floating signifier.

In fact, the linguistic troubles that one encounters when defining the English word religion (as well as the same word in most European languages) are significantly related to its semantic history and philology, a history that implied the use of a word that didn't correspond to a universal anthropological category. These issues heavily affected the development of anthropology of religion. However, the negative consequences and methodological mistake of searching, in non-Western traditions, for the attributes expected from a religion defined with the qualities that characterized Christianity, were overlooked for centuries. This issue generated also the production of neologisms such as animism or fetishism, to describe religions which did not correspond to Western categories and to which was often attributed a negative value. The term fetishism is not in use anymore for its derogatory connotations. It was introduced by the French scholar Charles de Brosses (1709-1777), author of the book *Du culte des dieux fétiches* (about the Cult of Fetish Gods, 1760), and was used to indicate the worship of objects (for example the stars, a tree or a stone). Animism, from Latin *anĭma*, roughly meaning soul, was introduced by the British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) in a book entitled *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (1871). It is still used to indicate the belief in the sacred nature of (or in the existence of power or energy in) potentially any object or place: plants, stones, mountains, dolls etc.

The problems related to the use of culturally-related words to indicate religion (and therefore of the corresponding theoretical categories) was overlooked for a long time mainly because of the ethnocentrism that has characterized human sciences in the early stages of their development. The problem was augmented by the fact that English shares, with virtually all of the European languages that contributed to the formation of anthropology of religion, not only the etymology of the word, but also a common cultural, philosophical, religious and political history.

The English word religion comes from Latin *religio*, which is also at the origin of the French word *religion*, of Spanish *religion* or German *religio* among others. Before the beginning of Christianity, however, the Latin word *religio* already had a cultural-informed and non-universal meaning. For the ancient Romans, in fact, it indicated the dedication to the execution of rites and to obtain the benevolence of the gods, and was sometimes also used as the opposite of superstition. The Canadian historian Michel Despland (1936-) has underlined that the process of Christianization of the Roman empire implied a change in the meaning of the word, acquiring three main new significations: that of a social and political order preserved by the emperor who established on earth God's laws; a mystical meaning, i.e. the love of a soul for the Christian God; and the choice of those Christians who made a vow of perfection (hermits and monks). Medieval philosophy (which was Christian by definition and theologically oriented) added a number of meanings to the word. For instance, it was customary among scholastic philosophers to consider religion as did one of the most influential among them, Thomas Aquinas (1125-1274), i.e. classing religion among the moral virtues, related to justice since it provides God the respect and tributes that are owed to him through liturgy, prayer or devotion. Religion has been in Europe, for many centuries, a synonym of Christianity, and was also used in opposition to concepts like false religion, paganism or heresy. It was moreover, often, a synonym of institutionalized religion, monotheism and revelation. Later, it became synonym of

civilization. It was around the 17th century that the word religion started to be widely used also to indicate non-Christian traditions. It was also during the 1600s that started the production of new words to draw a qualitative distinction among the different religions of the world. The limits of using the European category of religion were especially evident when certain attributes of Christianity, such as theism (i.e. a religion defined by the existence of at least one god), were not found in other religions, and therefore words such as fetishism, animism or philosophy of life (often used in the past to describe Buddhism) were employed.

The quest for proper terminologies to describe the world religions is therefore older than anthropology of religion. It became a main theoretical issue in the West with the growing need to describe the various cultures and societies, for which the Christian-related terminology was often not suitable, that Europeans were encountering due to the military, political and commercial expansions started at the end of the fifteenth century. It was, however, particularly during the 20th century that ethnologists of religion realized that the words they employed were not objective but heavily influenced by specific cultural and theoretical backgrounds. A great-scale questioning of the language used to describe religious phenomena started. Especially during the second half of the 1900s, terminologies previously used were rejected or criticized and redefined.

The troubles associated with the use of the English word "religion" are yet part of a bigger and transcultural issue. In fact, when existing, the referent for religion (or for a somehow similar concept), in any language, is culturally-informed and not neutral. There is indeed a varied array of words, produced across time, languages and cultures, which can be translated with English word religion, but virtually none covers the exact same semantic field.

In many languages, like Navajo, Lakota and ancient Egyptian, there is no specific word for religion. This, however, does not mean that there is an absence of religion in the corresponding cultures. Navajo, Lakota and ancient Egyptian cultures have gods, rites, different expressions of spirituality, myths, and ideas of an afterlife. In other languages, the words used bi-directionally to translate *religion* cover a fairly different semantic field. For example, the Hebrew word *dath* דת, often translated in English as religion, includes meanings such as edict, law or decree which are absent in the English word religion and which are as inadequate as the English word *religion* to describe many world religions or traditions and forms of spirituality, such as for instance Taoism. Even more complex is the network of meanings attached to the word dharma, used in many languages of the Indian sub-continent to translate the English word religion, as for instance when referring to Christianity or Islam. Dharma, however, is also a loanword in English (as well as in many other languages) that isn't a synonym of religion. This ancient word is employed with different significances in a number of religions born in India, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism, and as a loanword or as a calque it appears in numerous Asian languages (e.g. Japanese *hō* 法 or Vietnamese *pháp*) and more recently in many European ones. Dharma, which is etymologically related to the idea of firmness and of a sustainer, can also mean, according to the context where it is used: natural order, cosmic regulation, vocation, duty, rituals, law, ethic, the teaching of Buddha, the way things are, and the basis of reality.

It may appear as if the more words expressing the idea of religion are compared, the more the semantic field covered widens, and the more a core of common meanings disappears. This is true also for words that, according to bilingual dictionaries, simply translate the English word religion, as exemplified by the contemporary Japanese word *shūkyō* 宗教 and by the ancient and contemporary Greek word *thrēskeia* θρησκεία. The Japanese word *shūkyō* was coined at the end of the 19th century specifically to translate the Western idea of religion. But its use, etymology and semantics are different from the English counterpart. Approximate literal translations could render it as "teaching of a school, of a sect, or of a religious group" or even "essence, main point of a teaching". The differences between the Japanese and the English terms are exemplified by their practical uses. In fact, it can happen that, when asked "what is your religion?", a native Japanese speaker may answer, "I have none." Such a statement does not correspond to the English phrase "I am an atheist", but can mean instead "I do not belong to a specific religious school or group" or even "I do not worship the Buddhas and/or the Kami (gods, spirits, energies) following the instructions of one specific doctrine." Also, the yearly Japanese government statistics, since their introduction until today, show that, when asked about their religion (*shūkyō*), an average of about 70% of the Japanese declare to be Buddhist, while another 70% declare to be Shintoist: a 140% that shows a different use of the word, applicable with difficulties in Jewish, Christian or Muslim contexts, where religion is often synonym of confession and of belonging to only one religious community. Before the 19th century (and still today) in Japan, an idea vaguely resembling that of religion was rendered with two suffixes attached to a noun: the one for Tao (in Japanese *-tō* or *-dō* 道), meaning path or way, and another one meaning school or teaching (*-shū* 宗). Used as a suffix, the word for Tao is attached to a variety of names. Buddhism, for example, is the way of the Buddha (*Butsu* 佛 in Japanese, hence *Butsu-dō* 佛道). The word Shintō also contain this suffix, *shin* being another way to call the Kami, that are gods and super-natural forces. However, the suffix *-dō* is also found attached to an art or technique, as in the case of *sadō* 茶道 (the art/path of tea) or in the case of the martial art *jūdō* 柔道 (literally: the soft/tender way). On the other hand, the suffix *-shū* 宗 can be attached to specific school names or doctrines (usually Buddhist schools). The word Zen for instance in Japanese is "the Zen school (*zen-shū* 禅宗)". Such linguistic forms reflect the religious traditions – characterized by a good degree of religious tolerance and syncretism – which distinguish the cultural and religious history of Japan. During the 20th century the word *shūkyō* has been adopted and adapted in Chinese (written with the same characters 宗教 and read *zōng jiào*) and in Korean (종교 or 宗教 read *chonggyo*), where it is still in use – generating many of the same translational issues – as their Japanese counterpart.

Another example of the controversies related to the concept and the linguistics of religion is the ancient Greek word *thrēskeia* θρησκεία. Usually translated as religion, this word is etymologically related to both *throeō* θροέω, which means 'to scream' but also 'to get scared', and to *thrēskos* θρησκός, meaning 'fear', and in all likelihood referring to the fear of the gods in ancient Greek culture. Most linguists of ancient Greek sustain that a word referring to the contemporary idea of religion didn't exist in ancient Greece, where *thrēskeia* indicated instead working on a harmonic relationship through a proper and formal way to worship the gods. The opposite, which is to say not celebrating the rites, or not doing it properly, would lead to the gods anger and wrath,

with ominous consequences, hence fear. A new meaning of the word, due to Christianity, appears with the gospels, and is at the origin of the use of the word in contemporary Greek.

These and other related issues have brought some scholars to question the validity of the idea of religion itself as universally valid. Among the most learned positions there are those of the Indian epistemologist S. N. Balagangadhara (1952-) and of the Dutch anthropologist Peter Van der Veer (1953-). Generally speaking, they sustain that in the last centuries, the Western category of religion has been universalized, and that the abandoning of the contemporary idea of religion and a linguistic and cultural reconfiguration would bring a better understanding of the world and of history.

The problem of culturally-informed terminology in anthropology of religion is not limited to the word religion. A fair number of key terms used in the past have been submitted to scrutiny and found inadequate or sometimes inconsistent, and the quest for an appropriate vocabulary is far from being concluded. A notorious example of the troubles of using an appropriate technical jargon is the word "belief", which had caught the attention of the Scottish philosopher Hume (1711-1776) long before the appearance of anthropology of religion. The British anthropologist of religion Rodney Needham (1923-2006) has dedicated a whole book to the analysis of this concept (*Belief, Language and Experience*, 1972), sustaining that it is a cultural-related, not a universal, idea. Similar hypothesis have been proved to be well-funded also by other scholars, such as the French historian Paul Veyne (1930-). Needham's studies were the continuation of those by his teacher, the British social anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973). The two scholars moved the focus of analysis from what is believed onto the idea of belief itself. Studying the language of the Nuer (exonym corresponding to the endonym Nath), a semi-nomadic Nilotic people living in southern Sudan, Evans-Pritchard noticed that in Nuer vocabulary, which is otherwise rich in terms corresponding to western religious categories and English words, there is no word corresponding to "belief" or to "believe". Evans-Pritchard remarked that in the existing Nuer-English dictionaries (many compiled by missionaries, for whom belief is an important concept) there was not a homogeneous translation of belief. Picking up the thread of reasoning from these observations, Needham compiled a list of words associated to belief in Nuer-English studies: to wish, to agree, to obey, to admit, to honor, to worship, to think, to trust etc. This was a clear representation not of Nuer culture, but of the definition of belief of western translators, anthropologists and missionaries. Needham studied the idea of belief etymologically, psychologically, anthropologically and trans-culturally. According to him, the point is not simply that there is no translation in Nuer (or in many other) language(s) of a phrase such as "I believe", but that belief is a cultural and not a universal concept.

Other examples of problematic terminologies for the ethnologist of religion could be the terms "pilgrimage" or "symbol". In ancient Greek, for instance, there was no word to mean pilgrimage as it is intended in contemporary English, although forms of devotional travel to sacred centers (which could have a political connotation unknown in the English word) existed. In other languages and cultures, the words indicating pilgrimage cover different semantic fields if compared to English or European ones. Japanese, for example, shows a much higher number of words corresponding to English

"pilgrimage", showing a specialization of the terms pertaining to devotional wandering which is much wider than in most known languages. The Arabic word *hajj* حَجّ also has cultural and religious-related features that do not seem to exist in other contexts. Equally interesting is the work of the Ghanaian-Swedish anthropologists Bawa Yamba (1944-) who described how communities of descendants from Nigerian pilgrims who left four to five generations earlier and settled in Sudan on their path to Mecca, regard themselves as being on a permanent pilgrimage. Among the other words for which there is no one clear-cut definition, there is the word symbol, as shown by the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco (1932-) who drew – among other – from the works of the British anthropologists Mary Douglas (1921-2007) and of the Scottish ethnologist of religion Victor Turner (1920-1983), both experts who dedicated time and efforts to symbolic anthropology.

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