

Religion: Fact or fancy?

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Are questions of truth essential to the integrity of a study of other cultures or irrelevant?

A pie in the sky

«You'll get pie in the sky when you die» sang the Wobbly martyr Joe Hill in *The Preacher and the Slave* (1911). Many people have agreed with this line and even more would concur with Lett (1997:104), when he argues that «anthropological science can and should be applied to the content of religious beliefs» in order to falsify them, and that «there is no rational reason whatsoever to even hypothesize the existence of the supernatural» (1997:109).

It cannot be denied, however, that religion still occupies a very significant place in human life even in Western countries, and that all predictions about its eventual demise have failed. American rates of religious belief, for example, have remained remarkably stable for more than fifty years, despite a tremendous increase in both average education levels and population engaged in scientific research. Moreover, Church membership and participation have actually risen over the past two centuries (Greely 1989; Finke and Stark 1992; Stark et al. 1996).

According to Asad (1993:27) religion can be understood as «a distinctive space of human practice and belief which cannot be reduced to any other.» Yet, for three centuries religion has got a bad press, and has been considered by modernizing elites as an archaic, reactionary mode of thinking. The theoretical perspective shared by a substantial number of anthropologists can be well summarized by Michael Kearney's words: «I thought of my own world view as scientific and materialist and quite consciously accepted that my perspective was the lens through which I was refracting the very different world view of the people of Ixtepeji» (1992:47). How did it happen that, after millennia of hegemony, religious truth is losing its hold on people

in the academia? Actually, things are not that simple: the 1969 Carnegie Commission survey of more than 60.000 American College professors gave an interesting result. In fact, «by every measure, faculty in the "hard" sciences turn out to be more religious than their "soft" science counterparts ¼ It is above all faculty in psychology and anthropology who stand as towers of unbelief» (Stark et al. 1996:434). In the latter circles the words of that fifth-century B.C. Greek speaker in *Sisyphus* still ring true: «Some shrewd intelligent man invented fear of the gods for mortals ¼ concealing the truth with a false account.»

"Thou hast the keys to Paradise"

In the eighteenth century Hume, Voltaire, d'Holbach and other philosophers were among the first to attribute religion to primitive thinking processes and, by the time of Comte, this notion was well entrenched among most European cosmopolitan intellectuals. For ages, they affirmed, humankind had been slave of "hallucinations" (1896:554 in Stark et al. 1996:2), but at last science had displaced religion as the source of ultimate truth. According to Evans-Pritchard (1965:15) those positivist scholars were agnostics or atheists who found in primitive religion a weapon which could be used against Christianity, and particularly against the old order dominated by the Catholic Church. Although the fieldwork carried out by Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard and a new generation of social anthropologists tolled the knell of the primitive mind paradigm, «anthropology has remained a bastion of anti-religious sentiment» (Stark et al. 1996:433) throughout the twentieth century. Anthony Wallace offered a widely shared opinion, when he foretold that «the evolutionary future of religion is extinction» (1966:264-265). It is a stance close to the conclusion we may infer from Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), according to Preus (1987:139): that is, «religion itself is a survival».

While Marx did not publish a specific book on religion, his impact on social scholars has been significant, and his famous sentence about religion as «the opium of the masses» is a slogan still cherished within the anthropological sceptical stronghold. Although Marx conceded that «religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world», its happiness is as illusory as De Quincey's opiate Paradise, and its abolition «is a demand for their [the oppressed] real happiness» (Tucker 1978:53-54). He considered religion, in fact, part of the mitigating complex called "ideology", which protects and justifies the control of the ruling class.

Durkheim, on the other hand, believed that religion, though not supernaturally inspired, was nonetheless very real: «Religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities» (Thompson 1982:125). Durkheim was interested in the problem of maintaining public and private morality without religious sanctions, that is in the mechanism that might serve to support a threatened social order: «If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion» (Bellah 1973:191). Religion has acted as a source of solidarity and identification for the individuals and, far from being a fantasy, it has been a critical part of the social system. Durkheim's perspective has been enormously influential, especially on social anthropologists, even if his idea of «one single moral community called a Church» (Thompson 1982:129) is referred mostly to Christianity.

Religion, therefore, is both not illusory and critically important for the social system; yet, Durkheim points out, «it does not follow that the reality which is its foundation conforms objectively to the idea which believers have of it» (Bellah 1973:190). This can be considered as a prototype of the "emic-etic" debate (e.g. Harris 1976; Feleppa 1986)

of about a century later; as a matter of fact, this notion has been a cornerstone of the anthropological building for years.

Reality, truth, and power

Most social scholars are contented to adhere to another of Durkheim's statements, one which the Founding Fathers of the American Constitution would have underwritten: «That which science refuses to grant religion is not the right to exist, but its right to dogmatize upon the nature of things» (Bellah 1973:205). Anthropologists, therefore, recognize that religion is real, but a question still lingers among their ranks: is it also true? A substantial number of them concurs with Anthony Wallace in regarding religion as «neither a path to truth or a thicket of superstition» (1966:5), and, bracketing out their convictions, set about exploring the «origin of an illusion» (Guthrie 1997:489) and its functions within human society and individual consciousness. Others are still unwaveringly dedicated «to truth», they believe that «religion is a thicket of superstition», and together with Lett (1997:111-113), feel that they are ethically obliged «to expose religious beliefs as nonsensical», and religion as «the unreal real». Ironically, Lett's pledge of "truth" parallels that of the medieval Church, which «was always clear about why there was a continuous need to distinguish true religion from falsehood, as well as the sacred from the secular» (Asad 1983:244). In his critique of Geertz's influential essay on *Religion as a Cultural System* (1973), Asad argues that, «with the triumphant rise of modern science, modern production and the modern state», the weight of religious truth shifts «more and more onto the moods and motivations of the believer» (1982:244). This author also remarks that Geertz's suggestion that religion has a universal function is one indication of how marginal religion has become in modern society as the site for producing disciplined knowledge. He explores, therefore, the relation between truth and power in Augustine, concluding that «it was not the mind that imposed the conditions for experiencing that truth» (1982:243), but coercion and discipline. Hence he invites his fellow scholars to wonder: «how does power create religion?» (1982:252). This question, which reminds us of Marx's analysis on "ideology", is paralleled by Bloch's own question: «Is religion an extreme form of traditional authority?» (1989:19).

Zande granaries and Aguaruna hens

For «pious learned Christians of the twelfth century ¼ "knowledge" and "belief" were not so clearly at odds» (Asad 1982:247). As such, they were not very different from *griots*, and, in some way, this holds also for social scholars. In fact, for many Songhay elders, ethnographers are *griots*, because, like them, they must learn history and cultural knowledge (Stoller 1994:353).

As a matter of fact, fieldwork and a post-modernist perspective in the 1980s and 1990s have triggered a substantial change in anthropology and a reassessment of "religion". As Saler (2000) puts it, Western scholars understood that "religion" is a Western folk category they had interiorized long before they had developed ideas of what to look for in searching the world for religion. At the same time, the task of identifying the essence of it has largely been a failure; hence they set about looking for "religions" and set aside the Great/Small Traditions controversy. Actually, a number of anthropologists realized that the word "religion" does not translate adequately non-Western notions: Faris reports an illuminating exchange between an anthropological linguist and a Navajo, who insisted that the term *nahaga* did not appropriately render the English word religion. A better translation would be "the way, moving along in ceremony, or the practices by which Navajo life came to be as it is" (Faris 1990: 241, in Goulet 1998:xxvi-xxvii). Brown criticizes Leach (1968), Beattie (1970), and Tambiah (1968, 1973), when these authors distinguish between magic and practical work, and remarks that, like the Trobrianders, «the Aguaruna see magic as a set of procedures that are complementary to, and intertwined with, practices that we would call empirical. The Aguaruna think of magic as a challenging and esoteric form of action but nonetheless "real" for that» (1997:132, n.2).

In his classic ethnography of the Azande (1937), Evans-Pritchard tells the story of a man, who died in what a Western observer would label as an "accident". He later wrote: «At first sight it looks absurd to hold that if termites have gnawed the supports of a granary and it falls on a man sitting in the shade beneath and kills him, this is an act of witchcraft» (1963:99-100). For the Azande, in fact, there are two causes at work: the contingency (the fallen granary) and witchcraft, operating together to

kill the man. This way Evans-Pritchard replies to the claims about the pre-logical mentality of primitives, and affirms that, «although witchcraft, divinatory and magical powers are patently non real, Zande thought is none the less perfectly logical. ¼ Instead, what he questions is the final veracity of their foundational ideas » (Crandall 2004:317). Yet, even if ethnographers must try to find a balance between being outside and inside a culture, and being "neutral", sounding neither like a witch nor like a geometer (Geertz 1976:223), eventually even seasoned veterans of the fieldwork such as Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner found themselves in trouble with the problem of belief. Both converted to Catholicism (Engelke 2002), probably because this denomination offers the triple advantage of belonging to a Western Christian tradition, being highly ritualized, and being rich in magic lore. Other scholars went even further, becoming Muslims; however, as Ewing comments, «the embarrassing possibility of belief» (1994:571) is usually left out from ethnographies. Furthermore, she observes that, albeit "objectivity" has been challenged theoretically, this stance is still vigorous in practice.

In an intriguing story about a nasty encounter with a Potawatomi sorcerer, who got the better of him, Clifford concludes: «But I do have some prudent, personally tested advice for any such venturesome, maybe overconfident young anthropologist: why take unnecessary chances? *Don't mess with Eagle power!*» (1992:45). Kearney fared a little worse, and «deep in these dark foreboding mountains of dangerous and mysterious forces» (1992:54), looking at the welts on his arm, he knew he had been bewitched and feared for his life for some terrible moments. After this experience, he writes (1992:55), his scientific view had lost its innocence, and refracted reality differently. Stoller went as far as he could as an apprentice of a Songhay sorcerer, before giving up after an almost fatal attack from a sorceress (Stoller and Olkes 1987). Positioning "on the fence", Ewing (1994:573) argues that sometimes it is impossible to demonstrate neutrality; according to her, the clearest admission of a challenge to Western or scientific reality comes from Favret-Saada's account (1980) of her work on Le Bocage witchcraft, when she states that only by believing she was able to see the practice at all. Actually, Favret-Saada

(1980) demonstrated that it is impossible to understand native religion and yet remain outside of it (D. Tedlock 1995:269), a fact which also holds for European society. On the other hand, other scholars took a very different stance: both Luhrmann (1989) and Ashforth (2000), for example, disclaim believing in magic unambiguously. They do not claim, however, that magic does not exist, leaving open the problem of belief (Engelke 2002) and scientific truth (Kearney 1992).

Lucy in the sky with diamonds

From a religious point of view, one can define me as a “superstitious” atheist. The force runs strong in my family, to paraphrase Alec Guinness’s Obi Wan-Kenobi, and since I was a child I have experienced what Lett (1997:110) calls the “paranormal” and Winkelman (1997: 394-428) and other scientists (see Tart 1969, 1975; Lapassade 1987, 1990) know as altered states of consciousness or ASC. In another culture, probably I would have become a shaman (see Halifax 1979). Although considered a little heretical, I have always been able to study the occult side of our culture, as well as shamanistic societies, and neopaganism (see Bowie 2000 for a general treatment), without being considered “rightist” in the leftist circles (about political polarization see, for example, Murphy 1992), something equal to a witchcraft charge elsewhere. This has given me the chance to discover that, contrary to the current opinion, many highly educated people believe in the paranormal: among those believers, there was a substantial number of friends and acquaintances, otherwise staunch atheists and monolithic communists (unfortunately only a small number of anthropological studies, centred on Southern Italy, have been produced, e.g. De Martino 1959, 1961; Herzfeld 1981, Galt 1982, 1991; Argyrou 1993, leaving out witchcraft in the Northern industrialized regions). As Geschiere (1997, 2000) puts it, the secret of the continuing resilience of witchcraft might lie in its special capacity to relate the “micro” and the “macro”, and to articulate itself easily with the process of globalization. He also remarks that «it seems no accident that the revival of witchcraft studies in the 1990s was especially carried out by anthropologists affected by the “post-modern” variant of the discipline» (2000:17). As a matter of fact, the oppo-

sition between religion-irrationality and science-rationality is a modern Western myth; like the Dene Tha (Goulet 1998), the Bamileke (Geschiere 2000) and other non-Western societies influenced by Christianity and modernity, also educated, politicized urbanites use both “rational” and “irrational” concepts and notions in a heuristic continuum, shifting along this continuum according to their interpretative needs.

It is time to put the question: do the religious practice labelled “witchcraft” and other “mystical” or “spiritual” phenomena exist in the physical world (that studied by the “hard” disciplines) or are only cultural products? It is an anthropological commonplace that shamanism, not prostitution, is the first profession (Moerman 1979:59). Nowadays native healers are no longer considered charlatans, but they legitimately practice their craft not only in isolated hamlets, but also in American and Canadian hospitals and prisons, schools and universities. Their healing practices are being studied beyond anthropology, and to date the paranormal is becoming a serious object of study. In fact, we can understand «the “effectiveness” of symbolic healing ¼ without having to resort to “inner selves”, “souls”, or other mystical explanations, by showing that there are no fundamental boundaries between the mental and the physical» (Moerman 1979:66). Moreover, as Winkelman (1997) points out, ASC behaviour represents fundamental human drives, and its mechanism can be explained by using psychobiological, and psychophysiological models. «The physiological properties of ASC are a “wholing” of the individual, an interaction of different aspects of brain function» (1997:421).

Conclusion

Although nowadays the dictates of political correctness suggest one should treat culturally sensitive ideas with respect, most anthropologists politely listen to other people’s explanations of the world, however, not by taking them at their face value, but by explaining them in terms of social structures, power relations, psychology, ecological adaptability and so on. A number of anthropologists have been involved in the Other’s worldviews, and have occasionally disburdened their minds of their eeriest experiences in their diaries, whereas others are striving to be experientialist ethnographers (e.g. Goulet 1998). On the whole, however,

they tend to bracket out questions of truth and rationality (Bowie 2003).

While I am tempted to state that questions of truth are essential to the integrity of a study, I must consider that probably my idea of truth is different from the one of people ready to impeach their President for a question of “truth”. In fact, I live in Italy, a country where, notwithstanding Catholic dogmas, truth is always flexible. Truth is also subject to the waxing and waning of history: not many centuries ago Democritus was only a philosopher, Lucretius only a poet, and Nostradamus was reputed to be a scientist. Scholars are beginning to realize that there is more than one way to acquire and produce knowledge: probably we will never know whether “the flame of witchcraft” in Zandeland ever existed, but we are on the verge of great discoveries about the working of our brain. Atoms have always been there, awaiting to be discovered: I do not think I am a creationist scientist if I cannot exclude that a Democritus in Le Bocage or a Dene Tha Lucretius may be able to suggest to us other roads to know ourselves and our world.

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