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The Anthropology of Religion, And Question of Methodology

Michel Sherif Mikhail¹²

Abstract

This paper looks at the methodological challenges and questions in the anthropological study of religions. Such challenges start with the very language and definition of *religion*. This literature review will first survey some of the available definitions and methodology already present in literature, then it will compare and contrast them to find points of similarity and differences, and lastly, it will offer two potential resolving approaches of such a deficiency in consensus. This review will help put the multidisciplinary, theoretically diverse opinions in one context, which may provide a helpful first step in understanding, and hence resolving, this tension.

Keywords

Anthropology; Religion; Methodology; Emic-etic Approach; Linguistics

Having always been a focal point of humane inquiry, religion seems to challenge each and every discipline that tries to look into it. It has gone through a pendulum of being an object of an utterly metaphysical realm (i.e., theology), or, at the other extreme of the spectrum, a purely empirical one (i.e., natural Science). Anthropology, being an inherently interdisciplinary discipline, was a promising approach to the forever perplexing subject. Driven by a quest to understand the *Humanity* of humans—to widen the perspective of the “other”, it had an inevitable encounter with religion. Like every other discipline, it had its share of war wounds of challenges in either definition, methodology, or the outcomes of the study of religion. This review looks at the chaotic outcomes, which are far from rewarding for the “tidy mind”, the methodology behind the outcomes, and potential solutions for these challenges. First, it will survey some of the available definitions and methodology already present in literature, then it will compare and contrast them to find points of similarity and differences, and lastly, it will offer two potential resolving approaches of such a deficiency in consensus.

Language seems to constitute the cornerstone from which such an attempt should initiate. Despite being the first step, the definition of religion has not found a colossal consensus among different theorists. This lack of consensus is better understood through Michael Lambek’s chapter “What Is “Religion” for Anthropology? And What Has Anthropology brought for “Religion”? in Companion to the anthropology of religion.” Lambek offers some definitions of “Religion” alongside the basic inquiry methods that underlie these definitions. Thus, it is helpful to start with the broad modes of “Moral Inquiry” for anything else to make sense.

Lambek makes it extremely clear that it is not a part of the anthropological view either to “go native” while observing the religious practices” (reducing) them to neuroscience or anything else” (2). Since for anthropology, “religion implicitly informs and underpins the worlds in which

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people live”, it is not at all possible to *entirely* deprive oneself of its force; and hence allowing for a margin of fate (Lambek, 3). Is religion a pure product of the human mind of "fantasy and projection" that must be treated as man-made superstition? Or does it border the limitations of the mind, implying an authentic "transcendental experience? The answers to these questions, highlights Lambek, are somewhat controversial and confusing. This is since anthropology, being an interdisciplinary discipline, consists of different “epistemological standpoints” (Lambeck, 4). Understanding any account of religion, be it on the levels of definitions, methods, or solutions, is not possible without knowing the basic structure of these standpoints. In an attempt to narrow them down, Lambek focuses on the three “rival versions of moral inquiry” provided by the philosopher Alasdair McIntyre in *The Encyclopedia, the Genealogy, and the Tradition*.

The Encyclopedia is the most direct; "we simply define or recognise religion as an object or natural kind and then describe and classify its manifestations" (quoted in Lambeck, 5). This is closer to using more scientific/evolutionary language in tracing religion. It is, in simple terms, the rationalist, descriptive, and explanatory approach. The second mode is Genealogy. It is skeptical and deconstructing of the fundamental structure upon which the modes themselves operate. Influenced by Foucault and postcolonial theories, the genealogists argue that social contexts that make the question (i.e. What is "religion"?) possible is one of liberalism and secularism. The notion that religion is an object to be "despised or admired, governed, and studied" is socially contextualised within the colonial encounters (Lambeck, 5). Furthermore, it is this notion that underlies the first mode of inquiry. Finally, the third mode is Tradition. It is interpretive and is a "more relativist encounter between traditions, none of which is explicitly understood as either epistemologically superior to or under direct hermeneutic suspicion on the other" (Lambeck, 5). The most fruitful way to see these modes is to see them as merely not meeting at a single point but not contradictory (Lambeck, 5).

The conjunction and integration between these methods shall yield, one might think, a reconciled definition of religion. However, as Fiona Bowie puts it in her first chapter “Theories and Controversies” of *The Anthropology of Religion*, the results are "less straightforward than someone with a tidy mind might wish!" (2). Bowie surveys some definitions of religion, from which I will mention just a few. The mentioning of such definitions shall give a considerable insight into the underlying methodology construing such definitions and how converging (or diverging) they are. Before surveying the definition, however, she emphasises a necessary disclaimer—which will be discussed at length later in this review—that is that the language used is based upon "European languages and cultures", and they do not necessarily respond to the same "terms" in other parts of the world.

Bowie starts with the *intellectualist* definition of religion. As Edward Burnett Tylor puts it, a minimum definition was "the belief in Spiritual Beings" (Cited in Bowie). Religions, for Tylor, is one the humans' attempts "to make sense of the world" around them. Although this definition does not but pose the question of the definition of "Spiritual Beings", it has, Bowie thinks, proven durable. Another approach to religion would be the *symbolist* approach, whose most representative figure is Clifford Geertz. Unlike the intellectualists, the *symbolist* approach kind of ignores the explanatory function of religion. It instead seeks to look into what religions represent—how the symbols and rituals "act as metaphors for social life.” An interesting critique is Horton's. He says, as quoted by Bowie, that "structural symbolism", though a proper perspective, it remains secondary to religion's nature. It is similar to defining “the substance of 'linen' in terms of its occasional use as a flag" (23). Other than the intellectualist/symbolist debate, an extended version of the definition

that includes "the extraordinary, the mysterious, and the inexplicable" offered by Arthur Lehmann and James Myers makes better room for anthropological investigation.

The approaches mentioned above, as well as the different views that rely on "what function religion serves" or look into the genealogy of religion, are attempts to merely "categorise and classify religion without really addressing the question as to just what it is we are looking at" (Bowie, 25). It appears at this point that the controversial—though not necessarily opposing—definitions of religion imply instability in the underlying structure of the methodology. It is thus conducive to look into Bowie's take on another more methodological controversy, rather than linguistic, on how to tackle religion from an anthropological perspective. She looks into three main approaches: phenomenology, rationality, and "the politics of representation".

Starting with the famous "methodologically agnostic" (i.e. phenomenological) approach, the problem of religion becomes, as Bowie quotes Evans-Pritchard, a "scientific, not metaphysical or ontological" (5). The anthropologist comparatively studies rituals and beliefs to know their "social significance" and not their metaphysical truth. It is to describe other people's beliefs with "as little comment and judgement as possible." The second approach Bowie investigates is the rational treatment of religions. There are two opposing views in this approach. The first is of James Lett, who believes that the anthropologist is obligated to "expose religious beliefs as nonsensical" (7). As Stewart Guthrie puts it, the anthropologist is to "prove that all religion is a result of anthropomorphism." This, more or less, corresponds with the current empirical stance.

On the other hand, Bowie mentions the other end of the spectrum of rationality by giving two ethnographic examples of the "irrational" take on religion. The outcomes of these ethnographic studies are better seen through the lens of "incommensurability", provided by Spies in Chapter six included in Lambeck's *Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*. However, it is very relevant to mention these two ethnographic examples here.

The first one is Bengt Sundkler, a Swedish Lutheran missionary. In his account of Bantu prophets in South African Independent churches, he clearly states both the advantages and disadvantages of his position in this quote:

I found that the very fact that I was known as a missionary [...] was a help when trying to elicit the information I wanted...Experiences of related problems in the work of one's own mission church opened up new avenues of inquiry and research (7)

Sandler sheds light on an "inevitable bias" in the quest of anthropological research; be it an atheist or a Christian, the fieldworker will go through a conceptually similar sort of bias. For Sandler, "the notion of disinterested social sciences is a myth". This constitutes a remarkably valid critique of the "agnostic methodological" method. The second example is Paul Stoller's study of the Songhay, in which he was a sorcerer's apprentice. Being scientifically trained, his last note was a bit of a shock to both phenomenological and rational approaches. Staller made sure to show the people that he was immersed in their rituals, eating their "protecting powder" and saying their "incantations". Eventually, however, as Bowie puts it, he "overstepped the mark between participant-observation and active sorcery" that he had to run away. The experience forced him to confront the limitations of his "western philosophical tradition" that underlies the approaches mentioned above.

Staller's experience hints, however, at the dynamic role of the anthropologist in an ethnographic study. This dimension creates a particular *personal* gap between the "vivid retelling of the fieldwork tales to friends, and the published monograph in academic

anthropology" (11). This gap is because of the intense involvement of the anthropologist in translation, which will be discussed in the next couple of paragraphs. Bowie emphasises the notion of "translation" even in the most seemingly first-hand documentation, such as photographs, documentaries, etc. She states, not in a critical manner, but rather in an attention-grabbing way, that "the final product is crafted by interests, skill, and aesthetic judgment of the **anthropologist** in relation *not* to the fieldwork subjects, but to an imagined audience" (11). It remains an act of translation and should not be seen as an original replica of reality. Concluding by one of the most practical perspectives on the function of an anthropologist, Bowie states that the task of an ethnographer is to "**interpret** the views of others in as **honest** and responsible a manner as possible, and to place these views and practices within a **broader** theoretical framework (13)." However, there appears to be another question standing out from this task, which is the possibility to place such a subjective human phenomenon (i.e. religious experience, broadly speaking) in **an objective** framework. This problem is methodologically tackled by Michael Agar in his article *Making sense of one other for another: Ethnography as translation*.

Agar is hinting at the tension existing between the "emic/etic" descriptions of culture. He thinks this tension was based on the model of phonetics and phonemics and through translation, which allows for any link between "local specifics and human universals". Starting by explaining this model, which is very insightful studying at cultural differences without going for an extreme of cultural relativism, Agar sets an analogy between emic/etic approaches to phonemics/phonetics relatively:

Phonetics is an orthography for most possible sounds that a human can produce given their articulatory equipment. *Phonemics*, in turn, uses that notation to figure out the subset of those possible sounds that signal a difference to speakers of a particular language. For instance, post-vocalic aspiration—a puff of air after a vowel—is distributed differently in different languages. In some, it signals a different word; in others, it does not. Nevertheless, any human can be trained to hear it and transcribe it using phonetic notation. Phonetics is universal; phonemics is specific to a language among some group at some point in time (Agar 1).

This analogy helps us see that emic and etic approaches are not different ways to look at a distinct phenomenon, but rather, they are *both* present in any way of understanding. Agar's main task, however, is to look at the act of translating itself, which implies an existence—though not yet straightforward—of a universal etic or a "broader framework", as Bowie put it, which allows for different emic approaches.

Building upon Paul William Friedrich's concept of "linguaculture", Agar established an edited version: Target Linguaculture (TLC) and Source Linguaculture (SLC). As inferred by the names, a fieldwork translator translates SLC into TLC. It is important to note, however, that this translation is rarely original. Equivalence is not possible; it is either "domesticated" (i.e. more TLC) or "foreignized" (i.e. more SLC) (3). It is as if, as mentioned in an example in the book *Translating Cultures*, given by William D. Lutz, the ethnographer explains (X) in terms of English (A, B, and C). Consequently, he says, neither of them can be a proper etic; they are mere "another emic." However, there must be something in common, which allows for the fieldwork translation; what is it then? Agar believes that we should look at the commons: "ethnography is about making sense out of human differences in terms of *human similarities*" (5). This view will make more sense in the light of Eva Spies' theory of "Incommensurability." Furthermore, at this point

of emphasis on the *space* that allows for proper cultural (and linguistic) translation, one cannot but mention the brilliant work of Lambek in his chapter *Varieties of Semiotic Ideology in the Interpretation of Religion*.

Standing at the same ground as Agar, Lambek believes that semiotics plays a massive role in the anthropological inquiry of religion. As Webb Keane means, Semiotic Ideology is "basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" (Lambek, 137). Again, hinting at the interpretive role of anthropology, which Bowie stated so clearly, he shows some linguistic stances for the functions of the "words." It is not the definition of specific words that we should be concerned with, but rather, as Wittgenstein believed, it is the understanding of their functions that should concern us. Because although, as J.L. Austin thinks, ordinary words have an unconscious ability to portray things with great fineness, there lies a danger of getting them wrong (Lambek, 138). This is clear now, putting Lutz's example into perspective; the perfect equivalence of translation remains a matter of doubt. Semiotic ideologies grab our attention to the implicit effect of the linguistic framework, in which both the ethnographers and the subjects interact. Lambek goes as far as saying that one's semiotic ideology not only affects the act of translation, but it affects how one "approaches to words in religion, and hence to religion itself" (148). This explains the different and somewhat controversial approaches to the *definition* of religion mentioned in Bowie's first chapter; it varies with the subjects' variability.

Moreover, all of this sheds light again on the gap that Agar emphasised. Even if the (x) (in Lutz's example) in the SLC corresponded with an (x) in the TLC, "it still will not be equivalent, since the two (Xs) interact with different" beliefs systems. Lambek seems to strongly agree with this view, saying that "insofar as words not only carry or convey meanings, the very meaning of the word "word" itself can shift and may not be directly translatable or commensurable from language to language" (148). This gap creates a problematic crucial to the same methods of transmitting any foreign cultural discourse. However, there are two ways, founded upon the same concept of discourse, which have the potential to reconcile this problem: a) Spies' theory of *Incommensurability*, which is more general, and b) Agar's version of Goodenough's etic space (i.e. "the third space") particularly concerned with the act of translation.

Agar's view of a "third space" view seems to imply that you cannot have a proper emic experience with an already existent universal etic *per se* in mind, but rather, as Goodenough puts it, one should opt to develop an etic space out of the comparisons of the variation in the "universal human domain." This space, as Agar describes it, has two crucial features. The first is that it is "amazingly under-theorised", and this under-theorisation is a condition of possibility for the success of any translation whatsoever (42). Because if it were theorised solidly, then the problem would instantly arise again. Secondly, as has already been stated, everyone agrees that "exact equivalence in translation is never possible" (42). This "third" space, as he puts it, is what allows for fruitful cultural exchange, which then breeds "negotiations" between two cultural "hybrids". It is only in this "third" space that the incommensurability approach will adequately function.

Spies starts her chapter "Coping with Religious Diversity: Incommensurability and Other Perspectives" by a very important acknowledging of the plurality of the perspectives present in fieldwork. This tension could be easily referred back to the etic/emic (or phonetics/phonemics) tension highlighted in Agar's article and is also quite evident in the

two ethnographic examples mentioned in Bowie's chapter. Consequently, she argues for a “pluralistic approach, that is, an open hermeneutical way of understanding differences” (Lambeck, 118). This *incommensurability* approach does not negate any potential comparison between practices but rather calls for the exact thing that Agar was pointing at. It “basically observes that different traditions (that) may not refer to the same frame of reference and are *not*, therefore, always comparable on the basis of a *single standard*” (119). This notion offers a way out from the extremes of “objectivism and relativism” highlighted in Bowie's chapter, which seemed to induce this amount of controversies. Incommensurability emphasises Agar's under-theorised “third space” by negating the reference to any “meta point of reference” when trying to understand the relation between two or more practices.

In conclusion, Spies's hermeneutical flexibility may not contribute to the reconciliation between “reality and presentation”. As she puts it, it “has been about refusing to substitute one perspective for another” to “enlarge the universe of our discourse”. In these approaches of Spies and Agar, one may hope for actual reconciliation between the anthropological scientific inquiry and the metaphysical nature of religion.

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