

# Chapter 1: The Anthropological Study of Religion

Saturday, January 25, 2014  
2:00 PM

## The Anthropological Perspective

**Anthropology** refers to the study of humanity.

**Holism** refers to the study of human societies as systematic sums of their parts, as integrated wholes.

**Four-Fields of Anthropology:**

- **Physical Anthropology** - the study of human biology and evolution.
- **Archaeology** - the study of people who are known only from their physical and cultural remains.
- **Linguistic Anthropology** - the study of language.
- **Cultural Anthropology** - the study of contemporary human societies.

## The Study of Human Societies

**Ethnography** refers to the study of human societies.

**Ethnographic Present** refers to the anthropologist discussing the studied group in present tense as they were first described by ethnographers, even though these societies have changed over time.

## Cultural Relativism

**Ethnocentrism** refers to the tendency to use of our own society as the basis of interpretation and judging other societies.

**Cultural Relativism** refers to the attempt to describe and understand people's customs and ideas but not judge them. The goal is to study what people believe not whether of not what they believe is true.

## Attempts at Defining Religion

**Analytic Definition** focus on the way religion manifests itself or is expressed in a culture.

**Functional Definition** focus on what religion does either socially or psychologically.

**Essentialist Definition** looks at what is the essential nature of religion. It emphasizes the fact that religion is the domain of the extraordinary - things beyond the commonplace and the natural.

**Supernatural** refers to things that are "above the natural"

**Sacred** denotes an attitude wherein the subject is entitled to reverence and respect.

**Animism** a belief in spirit beings (gods, souls, ghosts, demons, etc).

## The Biological Basis of Religion Behavior

**Anthropomorphic** refers to things that are not human but have humanlike characteristics and behave in humanlike ways.

**Theory of Mind** refers to the idea that people know, or think they know what is going on in another person's mind.

## The Holistic Approach

Anthropological studies take place over a long period of time and usually require the anthropologist to live within the community and to participate to a degree in the lives of the people under study, while at the same time making objective observations. This technique of study is referred to as **participant observation**.

## Two Ways of Viewing Culture

**Etic Perspective** refers to the use of words to categorize experience from the viewpoint of the anthropologist.

\*Describing what YOU see.

**Advantages to Etic Perspective:**

- See patterns in a person/groups life that they might overlook.
- Anthropologist can apply a consistent form of analysis to many different societies that are being studied. Allows for comparisons between societies.

**Emic Perspective** refers to the attempt to see the world through the eyes of the person/group being studied.

\*The person in that religion describing what THEY do.

Ex: the Fore and *kuru* being caused by sorcery.

## The Concept of Culture

**Culture** refers to a collection of mutually agreed upon things.

**Symbols** refers to the shared understanding about the meaning of certain words, attributes, or objects

## Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Religion

**The Five Approaches to Study Religion:**

- **Evolutionary**
- **Marxist**
- **Functional**
- **Interpretive**
- **Psychosocial**

**The Evolutionary Approach:**

Centered on the questions of when and how religion began.

**Animatism** refers to the concept of a simpler, more basic, and more ancient supernatural force

**The Marxist Approach:**

Centered on the idea that religion reflected society so that any criticism of religion must therefore also be a criticism of society. Also that religion was human constructed, more specifically as a construction of those in power.

**The Functional Approach:**

Centered on the questions: What does religion do? What role do religions play in a society.

**Collective Conscious** refers to a system of beliefs that act to contain natural selfishness of individuals and to promote social cooperation.

**The Interpretive Approach:**

Centered on the belief that in order to make sense of cultural systems, we must study meaning. Interpretive anthropology can discover and interpret these webs of meaning through detailed ethnographic descriptions.

**The Psychosocial Approach:**

Concerned with the relationship between culture and personality and the connection between the society and the individual.