A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion

Edited by Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek
A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion
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Edited by Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek

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The anthropology of religion is a complex field and its practitioners a somewhat independent lot. The subject does not break down easily into a series of neatly alphabetized titles or bounded bibliographic entries, nor do the practitioners readily distribute themselves as “experts” on a variety of distinct but commensurable topics or subfields. In fact, we generally rebel against the sort of encyclopaedism that is sometimes expected of us, complicating or subverting any straight recounting of “the facts” with models, theories, hypotheses, arguments, and debates, and pausing skeptically before straightforward description or comparison to rehearse matters of epistemology, ontology, and semiotic ideology. Simultaneously, we complicate and subvert these models, types, or theories, confronting them with particularities and immediacies of place and practice, never letting consistency get in the way of the singularity of the ethnography or history, nor permitting the individuality or specificity of topics to unduly disfigure the holism of social life. Writing about religion as anthropologists it could not be otherwise.

We presented a fairly open-ended invitation to our contributors to this volume. We asked them to engage in vigorous appraisal and renewal of the field. We requested non-exhaustive review articles but essays that advanced original arguments and addressed the field in a serious and critical way. We suggested and briefly described the following ten broad topics: The nature of our subject or object of inquiry. The origins and history of the field. Religion and thought. Religion, politics, and law. Religion, creativity, imagination, and aesthetics. Religion, time, and history. Religion, person, self, and gender. Religion, the transcendent, and the ordinary. Religion, the environment, and the future. Religion and disciplinarity. We added specific suggestions to many of the contributors. In most cases we received something somewhat different
from what we had expected. The result is not a series of consistent chapters, each
written to the same model on a set of clearly demarcated and evenly distributed
topics, and it is certainly not comprehensive of what is, in fact, a very extensive and
rapidly moving field. But we think it is all the better for that, truer to thought, prac-
tice, experience, and the complex and heterogeneous articulations of religion with
politics, law, economy, language, history, art, kinship, ethics, and memory.

All the chapters are original to the volume with the following exceptions. Michael
Lambek, “Varieties of semiotic ideology” is appearing simultaneously in a slightly
extended form in Words, edited by Ernst van den Hemel and Asja Szafraniec (Fordham
University Press); Birgit Meyer, “Mediation and immediacy” has appeared in Social
Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale 19 (1) (2011): 23–39, copyright European Asso-
ciation of Social Anthropologists; and Andrea Muehlebach, “The Catholicization of
neoliberalism” has appeared in American Anthropologist, 115 (Sept. 2013).

Because this is a Companion, not a thematic volume, nor the last word, we have
not urged the contributors to refer to each other’s chapters, nor do we attempt a
synthesis here, or even a review of the contents. Lambek’s first essay serves as an
introduction more to the subject than the volume. We have grouped the chapters
into sections but these are somewhat arbitrary. The essays themselves relate to each
other topically and thematically in multiple ways and can be read in any order.

The various chapters draw their insights from ethnographic fieldwork carried out
across a wide range of places, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, D.R. Congo, Egypt,
England, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Italy, Korea, Madagascar, Malaysia, Niger, Peru,
Poland, Russia, Sudan, and Vietnam. There are many more places unrepresented. In
line with current trends in the field, Christianity is probably overrepresented, albeit
in diverse ways. China and Japan are sadly missing, as are accounts of the once rela-
tively autonomous societies in the Pacific and elsewhere that for a long period formed
the core of the discipline and the basis for so many wonderful ethnographies. The
Reader in the Anthropology of Religion (Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd edn, 2008) provides a
window into this work as well as a selection of some of the major theoretical inter-
ventions in the field.

What we have here is the sort of Companion who is a steady but idiosyncratic
friend, someone who can be counted on for their knowledge and wisdom but also
for their leaps of imagination and spontaneity, their capacity to surprise, provoke,
and increase the enjoyment of shared interests. Like a good human companion,
this book does not merely accompany or proffer a helping hand but offers original
insights and points in new directions. It serves less as an authority than as a genial
provocateur.

In planning the volume we set for ourselves the condition that we would bring our
contributors together to present first drafts of their chapters. Accordingly, we sought
funds and, with the assistance of a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada, we were able to hold two very successful workshops,
one at the European Academy in Berlin and the other at the Department of Anthro-
pology, University of Toronto. We could not have done this without the help of our
good friend and colleague Heonik Kwon. Not only did he come up with the won-
derful venue in Berlin, but he also very generously supplied a significant portion of
the funding through the Academy of Korean Studies’ international research program,
Beyond the Cold War, that he directs. Throughout the process, Heonik has matched his inspirational scholarship with enthusiasm and support. We have also received extensive support from our respective home institutions, from the Centre for Ethnography and the Canada Research Chair fund at the University of Toronto Scarborough (Lambek), from the Chair’s fund, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto (Boddy), and from Trinity College of the University of Cambridge (Kwon).

In addition to the various contributors assigned to discuss one another’s essays, we had the benefit of the following discussants: Kai Kresse in Berlin, and Ashley Lebner, Ruth Marshall, Todd Sanders, and Donna Young in Toronto. We owe a special acknowledgement to Bruce Kapferer, an active participant at Berlin and, as always, an inspiring, constructive, and imaginative interlocutor.

We have been ably assisted by Letha Victor, who participated in the Berlin workshop and the proofing of the final manuscript; Seth Palmer, who helped arrange the Toronto workshop; and Matthew Pettit, who attended to editorial matters and composed the index. All three have stellar careers ahead in anthropology. We thank also Rosalie Robertson, Julia Kirk, Jennifer Bray, Allison Kostka, Ann Bone, and Sue Leigh for editorial guidance and patience. Jackie Solway, as always, has offered much good advice and companionship.

Last but not least we thank our contributors, each of whom has produced a learned, forthright, and provocative intervention in the conversation that is the anthropology of religion.

Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek
What Is “Religion” for Anthropology? And What Has Anthropology Brought to “Religion”?

Michael Lambek

The study of comparative religion has flourished only when men were secure enough in their own convictions to be unusually generous. They might be Jesuits or Arab savants or unbelievers, but they could not be zealots.

Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*

The anthropology of religion is a field of great intellectual challenge and adventure. In this essay I try show some of the reasons why.

**The Challenge of Religion**

As Winnifred Sullivan (2012) justifiably notes,

It is a commonplace in the academic study of religion to observe that the word religion is manifestly conditioned by the history of its use and that it is deeply problematic, epistemologically and politically, to generalize across the very wide range of human cultural goings-on that are now included in this capacious term. To speak of religion is to elide and conceal much that is critical to understanding the deeply embedded ways of being often denoted by the short-hand term “religion(s).”
Rather than begin by asking what religion is as an autonomous object in the world
or as a distinctive human phenomenon, and therefore how best to define it or know
it when we see it – the better to explain it and its relations with other objects – it is
more cautious to start with the question: What has religion been for anthropology?
I take anthropology to be a particular tradition of inquiry, a long conversation that
is not homogeneous or fully consistent. From this starting point one could then
compare what religion has been for neighboring disciplines (like religious studies);
for various theoretical traditions (like Marxism); for the state (or various states, like
France or Indonesia) via law, administration, and local history; for people who call
themselves Christians, Muslims, Hindus, etc. One could add people who do not
necessarily identify their ideas and practices (with respect to ontology, reproduction,
ethics, theodicy, eschatology, etc.) as “religion” or as “a” specific “religion” (as
adherence to a specific token of a generally recognized type). Such a journey would
return us to the starting point, and is in fact the path along which the understanding
of the subject for anthropology changes or grows in a slow hermeneutic spiral of
part and whole, insider and outsider perspective, ethnography, analysis, comparison,
reflection, and more ethnography.

All the challenges of translation and the tensions between interpretation and expla-
nation, structure and experience, rationalism and relativism, and universalism and
particularism that mark anthropological understanding in general find their sharpest
expression in the subject matter that has fallen under the umbrella of religion. Such
challenges indicate the importance of and recurring interest in religion as a subject
for anthropology. If at one level “religion” seems to cover expressions of a universal
human or societal need, inclination, function, product, capacity, or reality, at another
level there appear to be no sharper divisions among human beings than those indicated
by “religions” – whether in quarrels over orthodoxy or orthopraxy evident in the
European wars between Catholics and Protestants, the conflicts between Sunni and
Shi’a, the disdain that has often characterized both Christian and Muslim views of
those outside the Abrahamic purview, or, most saliently for the anthropological
project, in the tension between religion and science (Lambek 2006).1 That is because
“religion” invokes or connotes the deepest but most particular truths, irreducible
realities, and most urgent and uncompromising values according to which people
(including anthropologists) live or want to live, such that people who see the world
or live differently can appear wrong, stupid, unenlightened, immoral, misguided (or
conversely, purveyors of higher truths and values that escape us), thereby as challeng-
ing, threatening, or simply interesting – and ripe for anthropological understanding.
Anthropology struggles with simultaneously recognizing, clarifying, contextualizing,
accounting for, interpreting, deconstructing, and transcending such differences, divi-
sions, and prejudices. It is certainly not free of particular conceptions and misconceptions
of its own, yet is mindful of the need to remain standing on its own two feet.

The anthropological standpoint is only one of many but that is no reason to be
unduly anxious or insecure about its value. It is based on a balance of observation,
understanding, analysis, auto-critique, and cumulative comparison. It is not part of
the anthropological standpoint either to “go native,” to embrace all mysteries, or to
reduce them to neuroscience or anything else. Anthropologists cannot go native
precisely because we deal with so many natives who differ from each other. Moreover,
the very idea of “going native” is likely to be a naively nonnative (romantic or new-

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1 Lambek 2006
WHAT IS "RELIGION" FOR ANTHROPOLOGY?

age) inclination in the first place and hence something of an oxymoron. Hence our standpoint can only be at some remove, what one might call benevolent skepticism (a perspective that overlaps with much philosophy). The study of religion, like ethnography more generally, allows for the pleasure of discovery, including the tasting of other human worlds, but it also entails the sort of ascetic discipline that Weber foresaw. We observe the passions of others without fully committing ourselves to them; our own unselfconscious ceremonies take place not in churches or temples or on mountaintops, but at conferences and seminars; our discipline exists in acts of refereeing and being reviewed. Participation in our family and community rituals is tinged with the irony that comes from holding a double perspective.

"Religion" then for anthropology has sometimes been the compartment or cover term for all that is most difficult to understand or appreciate about other people (and perhaps oneself) yet, at the same time, possibly the most obvious; hence it stands as the greatest challenge for both rationalists and romantics, calling forth both intellectual and imaginative generosity, in Benedict’s sense, and a certain ascetic rigor. Religion as a subject of anthropology serves as a theater in which the strongest or most dramatic scenes of anthropological interpretation are played out. Hence it should be of interest even for those anthropologists not concerned with the substance of religion per se. But of course this argument risks exaggerating the importance of anthropology over its subject matter; it is religion, not anthropology that exercises the imagination of most of the world’s population. And it is the whys and wherefores of that exercising that in turn exercise anthropologists.

For anthropology, religion implicitly informs and underpins the worlds in which people live, enabling the habitus (everyday practice) to run its course, to go “without saying.” It also becomes the explicit subject and object of people’s passion in marked rituals and other forms of enactment, creation, contemplation, and devotion. It is “culture” in its purest or most rarified form, both deep and relatively invisible and also frequently refracted in constructions that explicitly distinguish it from the everyday or the commonsensical. It is for the sake of what we now call religion that ancient Egyptian and Mayan pyramids, Gothic cathedrals, Hindu temples, and Buddhist monasteries were constructed, and elaborate masquerades and beautiful music composed and performed. In the name of religion people receive, recite, and cherish scripture, perform daily ablutions, prayers and acts of penance, make sacrifices, donate alms, scarify their children, renounce sex, limit food or other creature comforts, seek visions, and set forth on arduous pilgrimages. Many of the great dramas of human life have been generated or carried out through what we call religion – and it remains an open question whether or to what degree the professional “callings” of modern life, in science, the arts, business, sport, or politics, might be seen in overlapping terms. Religion is also inherently complex; for participants it can be at once ordinary and extraordinary, practical and beautiful, necessary and ideal, comforting and frightening, absolutely clear and deeply mysterious, the site of the deepest certainties and of the most disturbing doubts.

The (history of the) anthropology of religion can be conceived in terms of how it has addressed the challenges of understanding. In the first instance, this is a matter of how anthropologists have positioned themselves vis-à-vis the object of study. That is to say, how they have conceptualized “religion,” and how they have conceptualized their own position in relation to it. There is also the question of how scholars have
distinguished difference – the salience, boundedness, coherence, and specificity of such categories as the “world religions,” the “axial age,” the Abrahamic religions, Christianity (or Islam), Protestantism (or Sunni Islam), Pentecostalism (or Sufism), etc. – and what lies outside each and all of them. Terms such as “primitive religion,” “totemism,” “the savage mind,” “polytheism,” “magic,” “shamanism,” “paganism,” “fetishism,” “indigenous spirituality,” and TAR (“traditional African religion,” a term I heard recently in Mali), each have problematic connotations as, for other reasons, do formulations like “Malagasy religion” or “Sakalava religion.” A particular challenge has been how to address those constellations of thought and practice that do not self-consciously describe themselves as “religions,” as commensurable tokens of a common type, and yet seem to share certain features with those that do. Is “religion” a category whose criteria of membership include self-conscious recognition as “a” religion? Are the criteria to demarcate “religion” from what is “not-religion” or one religion from another objectively discernible? In what sense is religion a natural phenomenon or “kind”?

Or ought we to see “religion” as a polythetic class in the sense that there is no single criterion universal to all members? Do such criteria hold equivalent weight (are there weaker or stronger tokens of the type, those closer to or further from a prototype)? Where, for example, would we place astrology?

In place of substantive definitions, is religion better seen as an ongoing function of society or mind, rather than a distinct object within the former or discrete product of the latter? Is it society’s means or moment of recognizing (or misrecognizing) itself, as Durkheim argued, or perhaps of motivating its members, as Weber proposed? Is it culture’s means or mode of establishing truth and anchoring reality, as suggested variously by Berger and Luckmann, Geertz, or Rappaport? Is religion social hierarchy’s means of asserting its legitimacy and mystifying the workings of power and exploitation, as conveyed in the Marxist tradition? (During the Cold War, the famous Hungarian mathematician Paul Erdős impishly referred to God as The Supreme Fascist.) Is it the inevitable product or by-product of the workings of the mind, whether of fantasy and projection, as in Freud, or as elaborations of the rational impulse to distinguish, classify, compare, mediate, order, and unify things in the world, as in Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, or theorists of rhetoric or cognition? Is it the places where the mind acknowledges the limits of its own understanding, or is it the recognition of authentically transcendental experiences, the acknowledgment of manifestly extra-human sources of well-being (and misfortune), beauty (and horror), power (and abjection), goodness (and evil), truth (and perplexity)? Is it only when some set of these diverse functions conjoin in perduring symbols and practices or manifest in ritual performances, or when the mental products and experiences coalesce and are rationalized and stabilized in scriptural traditions, material artifacts, or formal institutions that we speak, or should speak, of “religion”?

**Incommensurable Modes of Inquiry**

Answers to all these questions are sometimes contentious or at least confused. This is in part because anthropology entails a mix or conjunction of diverse epistemological standpoints and goals, including at minimum what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1990) described as “three rival versions of moral inquiry”: the encyclopedia, the
genealogy, and the tradition. Encyclopedia has been the most straightforward; from such a perspective we simply define or recognize religion as an object or natural kind and then describe and classify its manifestations. The exercise begins as a kind of natural history but moves increasingly toward hypotheses to explain religion’s presence, structure, force, etc. Today the encyclopedic approach flourishes in multiple endeavors, including attempts to accurately depict and compare particular religions, religious traditions, or religious movements historically and ethnographically, theorize the growth of secularism or fundamentalism sociologically, account for how ritual works anthropologically, explain the subjects of belief cognitively or how we come to believe developmentally, trace the progress of religion on continua construed in evolutionary, biological, and historical terms (e.g. Bellah 2011), or test various hypotheses experimentally.

The genealogical approach is skeptical, as characteristic of much continental philosophy, in which the categories themselves are interrogated and social constructionist accounts are paralleled by deconstructions. Here the main influence for anthropology has been Foucault; conjoined with postcolonial theory, arguments concern the ways in which Western European notions of “religion” as an object or objects to be admired or despised, governed, and studied were formulated with respect to the colonial encounter and the rise of the modern liberal state. Religion thus emerges as a product of discriminations in knowledge, law, and the workings of power. It is religion and religions apprehended in this sense, genealogists argue, that underlie encyclopedic approaches (even as the early encyclopedic accounts of religion outside Europe helped consolidate Europe’s understanding of itself). To phrase this more positively, such an approach constitutes a historical ontology (Hacking 2002) of religion and religions. Within anthropology, it is paralleled by a movement skeptical of “domaining” practices (McKinnon and Cannell 2013), in which religion is distinguished from economy, politics, medicine, or kinship and in which the public distinguishes the religious from the profane or the secular.

Finally, the approach MacIntyre calls tradition is an interpretive and more relativist encounter between traditions, none of which is explicitly understood as either epistemologically superior to or under direct hermeneutic suspicion by the other. One can use such an approach to understand the world of a non-Western society or a past era, but equally to explore the relationship between religious and scientific outlooks within the West or elsewhere. “Tradition,” then, and as it is used throughout this chapter, is not the hidebound opposite to “modernity,” but rather an ongoing, historically layered set of conversations and discursive practices; modernity itself is constituted by (even if corrosive of) multiple traditions no less than are nonmodern societies. A hermeneutical inquiry might challenge any radical separation between religious and rationalist perspectives, hence, in conjunction with a genealogical inquiry, also question the foundations of a specifically anthropological, secular approach.

In brief, and to oversimplify, encyclopedia is rationalist, descriptive, and explanatory in inclination, tradition is relativist and interpretive, and genealogy is skeptical of its own (and all) terms. It is hard to imagine anthropology without any one of them. Whereas MacIntyre sees these as mutually exclusive alternatives, they are in practice inclusive within much anthropology, often within the work of a single anthropologist or the course of a single monograph. They may be described as incommensurable to
one another, that is, as not fully meeting on every point, rather than as contradictory. Anthropology moves between them and is, in fact, the work of doing so. Anthropology juxtaposes and balances incommensurable perspectives rather than progressing definitively and irreversibly from one paradigm to the next (as proponents of each have at times polemically asserted). In effect, anthropology qua tradition is one in which each of these modes of inquiry is drawn into conversation with the others (Lambek 2011). Moreover, it is clear that proponents of any one perspective will not necessarily think alike; objectivism, hermeneutics, and skepticism each come in many forms.

It is evident that the basic definitional question – what is religion, or how do we recognize religion – will look different from each perspective; indeed, the very concern with producing an external, objective definition is particular to the encyclopedic stream. Genealogists might argue that the social context that makes particular definitions possible is one of liberalism or secularism, in which “religion” becomes an object (shifting historically, as it were, from ground to figure) (Asad 1993, 2003). But from the perspective of tradition there would then follow an interest in subjecting liberalism and secularism to the same sort of deep hermeneutic investigation we apply to religion. Whether this is the purview of the anthropology of religion or of some broader field cannot be answered without returning to problems of definition that generated the argument in the first place. Insofar as it is an investigation of “modernity” or throws modernity into question, it partakes of what has been called the postmodern but might better be seen as metamodern or immodern (Lambek 2013). In any case, it is an advance within the same intellectual tradition of social theory (of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, etc., now invigorated by postcolonial thinkers) that takes modernity as a condition to be understood. I will have more to say about secularism below.

None of the preceding arguments mean to suggest that we cannot judge between the relevance of any given perspective for addressing particular goals or between better and worse arguments, depictions, projects, or theories within each perspective. Moreover, once inadequate accounts are exposed, we replace them with ones we risk claiming are better – truer, more accurate, nuanced, contextualized, complex (or simpler), etc. This has been a mission of anthropology. We must continue to pursue it, even as we also pursue the genealogical path.

If the anthropology of religion does not consistently advance in the manner or image of biomedicine or mathematics, nevertheless, there have been major achievements. By and large, our understanding of ideas and practices both within and outside the scientific, Christian, Abrahamic, and world religious spheres has improved enormously. Misperceptions have been replaced by more perceptive accounts, homogeneous portraits by recognitions of heterogeneity, monovocal by plurivocal, oversimplicity and stereotype by complexity and nuance, and occasionally overcomplexity by more direct and ostensibly simpler accounts (as you may by now wish were the case here). The encyclopedic pursuit of accuracy and the hermeneutic pursuit of understanding proceed alongside the genealogical unraveling of unduly privileged conceptions. Genealogical work has been necessary for better observation, analysis, and interpretation and has long been part of the anthropological canon – including Steiner (1956) on taboo, Lévi-Strauss (1963) on totemism, Ruel (1997) on sacrifice, and Asad (1993) on religion itself. New work in this vein is exemplified by Paul Christopher
Johnson (2011; also Johnson forthcoming) on possession. These works in turn inform the positive depiction and analysis of religious forms and practices evident in our major ethnographic works. As the monographs show, good interpretation draws on the intellectual resources of the Western tradition (including comparative ethnography) to find words, concepts, and arguments that match the subtlety of what is being understood; this involves positive recovery in addition to genealogical critique. The hermeneutic position would be: What else than the language of our respective traditions do we have to work with?

**Human Activity**

Where then do we look for, or where have we found, religion? Are there kinds of ideas and acts or conjunctions of activities that we single out as specifically religious?

One of the strongest directions anthropologists have taken is to examine the ways humans have constituted (inherited, reproduced, created, transformed) the foundations and contours of specific worlds, confronted or concealed the social and conceptual mechanics of world-building, and lived their lives within these worlds. This is to begin with the human condition. Human activities include describing, rationalizing, reflecting upon, and responding to the existential issues of life within their respective worlds. Questions of truth and certainty, origin and prediction, cause and remedy, objectivity and subjectivity, goals and reasons, ends and means, order and beauty, are central to human being. So are matters of distinguishing the human from (and relating the human to) other beings or kinds of being, external forces, and different worlds. There will always be anchoring concepts of time, space, cause, and person, as Kant argued (albeit not necessarily universal in their manifestations); yet questions of cosmology, ontology, theodicy, and epistemology are inescapable. They may be addressed by emphasizing either transcendent (nonhuman or extrahuman) forms, forces, or beings – or human experience, interventions, and history. The human condition is also characterized by concerns with livelihood, reproduction, exchange, freedom, oppression, exploitation, subjection, and intentionality, and by attempts to live well and according to ethical criteria and to address failure to do so consistently and completely. Where the capacity to address these matters seriously is frustrated, for example by having to defer to a regime of technocrats, or by severe structural violence, objectified religion can provide a welcome home. It gives people a place in the serious business of addressing life, that is, a place to recognize – and to acknowledge that recognition of – the seriousness of life, and not simply leave it to scientists and intellectuals or the vagaries of war or capital.?

It could be fruitful to begin with the three kinds of activity that Aristotle distinguished as creative production (*poiesis*), ethical action (*praxis*), and philosophical contemplation (*theoria*) – making, doing, and thinking – and seeing how such activities conjoin to form lifeworlds or living traditions as well as how given traditions inform each of these activities. First there is what humans bring into being. Religion is a source, means, idiom, and context of human creativity, through imagination and craft, in realms from dreams to dance, the musical and plastic arts, as well as captivating performances of various kinds from preaching sermons to shamanic voyages. Second, there is how humans act in the world. Religious practice is an expression,
elaboration, and enlargement of the ethical. It provides ends and means and means-as-ends for achieving the best life, for establishing and discerning values and for practicing the virtues. It can stretch the human capacities for creation and for undertaking decisive acts and commitments like founding, financing, or filling a monastery. At times it transforms, inspires, and renews value and virtue. Third, religion forms a locus of reflection on the sources, consequences, and limits of human creation and action, on the meaning of life, history, and cosmos, and on what might ground, decenter, or contextualize the human.

Each of these activities shapes and interpenetrates the others. If contemplation – thought – appears to be largely a mental activity, making and doing are each fully embodied yet also semiotically mediated activities, entailing the trained hand and eye, cultivated disposition, and concentrated, deliberate presence. Making and doing are not fully distinguishable from one another but refer here to the imaginative and the practical, the aesthetic and the ethical, the material and the forceful, the generation of particular objects and particular conditions (circumstances, relations, etc.), respectively. Myths (or masks or music) are composed (made) by means of the structural relations and transformations discerned by Lévi-Strauss (1966); thought is materialized in the semiotic details of the myth (the plumage of birds or color of flowers); and myths are recited and performed (enacted) to various ends and consequences. Deployed rhetorically or ideologically, they further shape thought, creative production, and practice, and their effects readily escape the intentions and even horizons of their original creators. Rituals provide a distinctive means of action; and acts in turn are mythically informed, draw on material objects and technologies, and are ethically and creatively consequential, bringing new criteria and conditions into being. Worlds are simultaneously constituted, conceived, and lived.8

The structuralist tradition has been very powerful. After a short hiatus when Lévi-Strauss’s formulations seemed to have exhausted themselves, structuralism has returned with a flourish in discussions of ontology (Descola, Poirier, this volume), perspectivism (Vivaça, this volume), and in elaborations of the relationships between culture and nature, now examined more systematically (Descola 2005) than just the ostensibly simple opposition that lay at the heart of Lévi-Strauss’s work.

A limit of structuralism might be that it tends to focus on the products of activity rather than action itself and that to the extent that it addresses activity, it examines contemplative thought and poiesis (making) but ignores action (doing). Here it may be complemented initially by two further initiatives.

Firstly there is the Foucauldian approach, advocated by Asad and his school, which considers the work of power and religious discipline and the ways that ethical dispositions are cultivated within specific religious traditions (Laidlaw, this volume). Second, especially with respect to the practices of smaller-scale societies, a focus on ritual drawing upon Durkheim (1995) and van Gennep (1960) has prevailed. Victor Turner (1967, 1969, 1974) and others (e.g. Kapferer 1983; Coleman, this volume) have elucidated the process internal to ritual as well as the place of ritual in broader social process. Drawing on linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin (1965), Roy Rappaport (1999) shows powerfully how ritual completes its work, instantiates transformations, and establishes certainty, commitment, and an original form of truth.9 Indeed, in Rappaport’s ambitious and comprehensive argument the very idea and force of the sacred emerges from ritual, even as it is the subject of ritual.
A systematic comparison of the work of ritual with the work of discipline (or between the two conceptualizations of the same phenomena) has not to my knowledge been made, but notions of temporality and completion are different in the two cases. Any given ritual act is embedded in a sequence of such acts, which Rappaport refers to as a liturgical order. Such orders have properties akin to structuralist models but their enactments also have consequences in the world. Each enactment is simultaneously a repetition and something new. To Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of what he called reversible time, which is critical for understanding ontologies, is added a powerful account of irreversible time, or consequential acts, which is critical for understanding social process, historicity, and ethical life.

Rappaport’s approach also offers an analytic by which to distinguish “religion” or the “religious” from the rest of culture or social life without thereby compartmentalizing it. One dimension of liturgical order is a hierarchical one; in certain core rituals sacred postulates are realized and these then lend themselves to ritual acts of greater social specificity, which are thereby sanctified, as when grace is said before meals. Rappaport argues that the most sacred utterances are highly repetitive, yet deeply meaningful and perduring, like the Jewish shema, which has continued unchanged for millennia, or the Muslim shahada and fatiha and Christian sacraments. Thus religion is a mode of producing a certain kind of truth or certainty that operates explicitly in certain relatively pure rituals and diffuses throughout social action. There is no clear place to establish its boundaries.

Perduring sacred postulates carry little specific information or injunctions. Rappaport argues that religious order gets into trouble when more specific postulates are elevated in the hierarchy; when, for example, affirmations of priestly or premarital celibacy are given the certainty and weight of the statements uttered in the Eucharist. Rappaport refers to this as idolatry, calling it a pathology of religion.

In sum, and far too briefly, to understand religion through Asad, Rappaport, or indeed Turner, is to begin not with concepts or beliefs, nor with theories of practice grounded in the individual, instrumental, and immediate fulfillment of need, self-interest, or competition. At the same time, their attention to ritual does not rest exclusively on its properties of formal iteration. Action is understood as structurally (culturally) mediated, intentionally predicated, and ethically consequential.

A matter of theoretical interest is whether the properties attributed to ritual are found in the illocutionary force of all utterances and hence intrinsic to sociality and constitutive of ordinary reality (Lambek 2010b) or whether, as British social structuralists and Marxists would have it, rituals are second-order phenomena, representations or distortions of ordinary reality. Maurice Bloch articulated the latter position in a number of papers (e.g. 1989a). He is therefore critical of Rappaport’s claim that ritual founds the social contract, and of mine that rituals performatively constitute social persons and relations and produce or put into play specific criteria by which persons and practice can be described and evaluated. In other words, Bloch draws a sharper line between ritual or religion and ordinary life than I do, though he acknowledges (personal communication, May 2011) that it is difficult to assess precisely where this line lies and has softened his position (2013). This debate raises profound questions about social ontology and the place of mystification or necessary fictions in meaningful social worlds. One point on which we agree is that the more formal the ritual the more it overcomes the contingencies of everyday practice.
EXPERIENCE

Some scholars argue that the distinguishing feature of religion is a kind of experience. Rudolph Otto (1923) famously described this as numinous, characterized by awe, and recently Charles Taylor (2007) has taken a similar view. However, while religious experience and the phenomenology of religion are rich topics of investigation, they have not seemed to most anthropologists to offer much analytic or comparative purchase and are more likely to be starting places for those who take religious accounts at face value.

Not all approaches to experience begin with the numinous. As some existential philosophers have it, being human is being subject to anxiety – about what we can know, what will happen, how to live, being alone, achieving the good, deserving what we get, or simply (and too specifically) about death. Religion has been understood as redressing anxiety by offering certainty, truth, justice, predictability, parental figures, redemption, union, deference, deferral, guidance, or simply avenues to follow with some direction, hope, conviction, or excitement. Equally, however, religion can contribute to anxiety; in Weber’s famous analysis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2011), it is activity in worldly matters (adhering to a capitalist work ethic and saving money) that serves to offset the anxiety produced by religion (the uncertainty of salvation) rather than the reverse. Moreover, whether and in what measure it produces truth or skepticism, certainty or anxiety, well-being or pain, religion may heighten the stakes around each of these and also enable attentiveness, care, mystery, irony, and what might simply be called wisdom.

Religions meet and generate these challenges in their own particular ways, offering their own versions of truth and order (and ambiguity and disorder), their own specific ends and means, attractions and repulsions, sites of consensus and conflict. They draw upon their own traditions – time-honored ideas, practices, liturgical orders, and forms of transmission, discipline, and reproduction – as well as on charismatic ethical spokespersons (Weber’s “prophets”) to do so in new ways in the face of particular historical circumstances and often by means of heated debate. There is also a whole range of practices that anthropologists study under the realms of healing ritual, exorcism (Kapferer 1983), divination (Webner in preparation), and the like.

One of the most interesting features of religion has to do with the way immediate circumstances (“events”) are absorbed or encapsulated within sets of relatively enduring ideas and practices (“structure”). Religions in this sense are not simply stable or static “worldviews” but time machines, capable to varying degrees and in various ways of slowing down or turning aside the impact of immediate events. This argument has been made in different ways both by advocates of structuralism (Lévi-Strauss, Sahlins) and by analysts of ritual (Turner, Rappaport). Conversely, religious movements can act to speed things up, producing sharp transformations in the social order and lived world (Robbins 2004) or transforming a relatively ordinary event into a potent and perduring cultural symbol (Kormina, this volume). In northwest Madagascar (Lambek 2002b) spirit possession effects a poiesis of history, articulating a historical consciousness composed of multiple voices from different periods in the past speaking in and to the present. Any analysis of religion must bring to bear questions of structure (structuring), order (ordering), reiteration, conservation,
revitalization, and natality – bringing something new into the world (Arendt 1998) – to mediate or counterpose to the immediacy, unpredictability, and disruptiveness of experience and event. Experience and event occur at many scales, including (to rehearse Geertz 1973) such recurrent, pervasive, or sporadic matters as individual death, suffering, puzzlement, and unfairness, but also such things as conquest, movement of capital, class transformation, displacement, interpersonal violence, and epidemics. Several of the chapters in this volume address temporality in original ways, whether looking back to ancestors (Cannell), understanding death (Astuti and Bloch, Kim, Kwon), questioning the present (De Boeck), or grappling with the sense of a single life (Badone).

It is a strong and cumulative insight of anthropological studies that religion cannot be reduced to social or psychological effects, nor religious acts to instrumentality. Many practices that anthropologists consider under the rubric of religion are ones in which ends and means are conflated. People do things on behalf of others, the world, or their religion, as well as themselves, and deliberately as well as spontaneously, with foresight rather than in mere reaction. Structure and liturgical order stand outside particular events, circumstances, needs, interests, or ambitions; it is structure and liturgical order that shape and render things meaningful, as acts, events or interests of a particular kind, in the first place. Thus, while not specifically religious in a narrow sense of the term, the devotion that so many Americans give to maintaining green, weed-free, and perpetually well-shorn front lawns (el Guindi 1977) cannot be fully explained in external (“material”) terms, whether ecological, sociological, or psychological.

Although I raised matters of function and anxiety, I understand culture and religion as much in the sense of the exercise and extension of human capacities as in the meeting of human needs (Macpherson 1973; Sahlins 1976). To write or sing a hymn or play a Bach sonata is to celebrate God and to cultivate and enjoy a capacity for creating, performing, and listening, more than to stave off a particular anxiety, meet an immediate need, compete with another performer, or ask God for a favor. However, to restate a point made strongly by Geertz, generalizations about things like the human capacity for (the enjoyment of) music are empty in the absence of specification: of particular genres, practices, disciplines, instruments, performances, and occasions.

INCOMMENSURABILITY AND PLURALISM

If religious traditions or human worlds can be distinguished in this manner, each generating, articulating, and meeting challenges in distinctive ways, it is also the case that they do not exist in isolation from one another. Not only are they likely to articulate their distinctiveness most sharply along their borders (analogous to what Barth 1969 described for ethnic groups or Bateson 1958 referred to more generally as schismogenesis), or conversely, to borrow, overlap and merge into one another, but the human situation is characterized more generally by what one might call pluralism (here, religious pluralism). That is to say, if we examine any given social field it is evident that more than one tradition or set of practices is available to people interacting within it, more than one goal or value (Das, this volume). Traditions and practices are incommensurable to one another in the sense set out by Bernstein 1988
(Spies, this volume) and of course proponents within a given tradition are often in disagreement, counterposing more than one interpretation of what things mean or what to do.

Evans-Pritchard (1937) famously noted that for Azande, causality had two axes, one which corresponded more or less to Western materialist explanation – granaries collapse because termites eat the wooden posts – and the other which did not – individual granaries collapse on the heads of specific people sitting under them because of someone’s act of “witchcraft.” For Evans-Pritchard, the latter was a thicker and socially consequential alternative to the European concept of coincidence. But in addition to science (or material causality) and coincidence, Europeans also draw from a repertoire of ideas of luck, fate, astrology, unconscious motivation, divine punishment, just desserts, and so forth. These ideas are not all fully commensurable with one another and they do not produce a single model as Evans-Pritchard so elegantly did for the Azande (although Evans-Pritchard himself remarked that Zande logic was less one of commensurate ideas or structure than of practice).

Whereas structuralism, whether in the terms of Lévi-Strauss or those of Dumont, was able to propose, and often demonstrate quite spectacularly, that a society could be understood from a single underlying structure, set of structural transformations, or conceptual hierarchy, in practice alternate and incommensurable means for understanding the world and acting in it are available in most societies. The idea of a long conversation can be evoked to describe the relationship between originally distant traditions that become mutually embedded in one another through relations of power, as in the Comaroffs’ account of the history of Christianity in southern Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Broadly analogous models could be drawn upon to examine relations among indigenous and Muslim traditions in West Africa or Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist traditions in East Asia. On a much smaller scale, people on the Western Indian Ocean island of Mayotte in the 1970s and 1980s articulated ideas from three incommensurable traditions in their daily practice, in this case Islam, cosmology (or astrology), and spirit possession, not to mention European traditions (Lambek 1993). Looking more closely, spirit possession was itself comprised of incommensurable traditions, one drawing from East African and Islamic ideas about spirits and the other from Malagasy conceptions. And these too broke down still further. Of course they can be (and are) both eroded by the forces of history and pieced together in the kind of everyday operations that Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage* (1966), in the efforts of virtuoso poets, craftsmen, and professional rationalizers, as well as in the simple acts of living together (Das 2007, and in this volume). A political economy of knowledge also shows that different members of society, whether distinguished by gender, class, education level, or other, have differential access to specific practices, authority, and truth with respect to given traditions.

Along another dimension of internal differentiation, the relationship of individuals to specific bodies of knowledge, practices, or kinds of truth shifts, sometimes continuously, between perspectives that Schutz (1964; cf. Lambek 1993) identified as those of the expert, the well-informed citizen, and the man on the street. These refer not to discrete roles or levels of knowledge but to different attitudes toward knowledge, different degrees of participation, attention, and interest. Thus, to recognize someone as Buddhist or Baptist is not to know her investment in a particular credo or practice at any given moment. Matters of consistency or commensurability only