Anthropology is not only a general approach and a set of fieldwork methods; anthropologists studying religion also draw from one or more bodies of social theory. Rarely in anthropology does theory become a set of propositions to prove or disprove. Instead, theory serves to suggest questions and guide research. Theoretical choices also predispose researchers to follow certain initial questions, study certain dimensions of religion, and engage in certain kinds of scholarly activities rather than others.

In what follows I make distinctions among several general sets of questions and approaches to studying religion anthropologically, all which have continued to provide guidance for research. We continue to read major works in social theory because they set out those questions and approaches for us. E. B. Tylor asked why people hold certain religious ideas and not others, and this question has retained its importance. Émile Durkheim asked how it is that social norms have such a hold on us, and we continue to pose this question, albeit in new ways. Karl Marx and Max Weber asked how modern capitalism came to dominate the world, and gave very different answers; their work continues to provide starting points for contemporary social scientists. I prefer to distinguish in this way “social theory” as a body of work from which social scientists draw questions and guidance, from specific “theories of society,” which may prove more or less perceptive and appealing.

Religion as Intellectual Activity

One dimension of religion is the intellectual: what do people think exists, and why do they think those things? These questions can survive the rise and fall of specific answers to the question.
In the mid-nineteenth century, the early years of anthropology as a formal discipline, scholars in most disciplines tried to explain the diversity and complexity of today’s religions by postulating a process of religious evolution. They were strongly influenced by German idealist philosophers, who saw human history as the development of a set of human essences. These philosophers understood religion as a unity of thought and feeling, intellect and emotion that had developed historically from initial germs. The philosopher Hegel postulated a universal idea of religion that preceded its particular historical manifestations. As it developed over time from an initial germ, it became increasingly complex. This idea of development or evolution did not concern the history of a particular religion or a particular people, but the evolution across time and space of an idea, independent of particular cultures.

This theory of general human cultural evolution provided the intellectual framework for the early anthropology of religion, as well as for social anthropology generally. The comparative study of religion in the late nineteenth century was based on two assumptions: that religion progressed from the simple to the complex, and that one could reconstruct the origins of religion by studying “primitive peoples” in the world today. Many students of the origins of religion did not subscribe to the universal truths offered by their churches, and their accounts were more or less subtle ways of discrediting the absolute truth of Christianity. If Catholic or Anglican beliefs evolved from something very simple then they looked much less absolute than if they had been delivered through divine revelation.

E. B. Tylor and the Origins of Religious Ideas

The most famous study along these lines was *Primitive Culture* (1970 [1871]) by Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917). Tylor was the first person to be appointed to a university position in anthropology in England, in 1884 at Oxford. Tylor argued that primitive people acted as proto-scientists when they created religion, constructing concepts to explain what they perceived through their senses. Tylor (1970, vol. 2) asked: “What is true of all religions?” He looked around him and saw that all religions employed a belief in spiritual beings. The higher ones had souls, gods, angels, and so on, while the more primitive ones had spirits and ghosts. The primitive form of this belief he called animism. He saw this belief as basic to religious development.

“Why do people come to hold such a belief?” he then asked. Well, he answered, they perceive things that lead them to suppose these spiritual entities. They perceive different states of consciousness (wakefulness, sleep, death), dreams (and the appearance in them of places and persons), and shadows. Then they think up things to explain these appearances. “Soul” explains the different states of consciousness, because as soul sleeps, or leaves the body, we lose consciousness or life. “Ghost” explains the phenomenon of dreams, because as we sleep, our ghost or spirit leaves the body and travels to other places, and we vaguely remember these wandering perceptions when we wake. Finally, shadows are one form taken by souls and ghosts. Tylor was able to amass a large body of evidence to support his claims. (Indeed, the ways many people today speak about sleep, dreams, death, and shadows do sound very much like Tylor’s account.)
Religion is therefore due to “the plain evidence of men’s senses” for Tylor. As it develops it continues to build on perceptions and logic. People reasoned that because animals, too, have life, then they must have souls. If they are killed, then their souls can follow those of their masters to the world of the beyond, and there do work for them. Burial practices from such diverse civilizations as Egypt and China attest to this belief. Furthermore, because plants also live and die, they must have souls as well. All living things, concludes Tylor’s primitive thinker, thus have souls; such is the origin of “animism,” the belief that all living things are “animated” by souls.

But how is it, asks Tylor, that such ideas have survived until today? One way is through psychological development. As children, we have the very same experiences, and make the very same inferences, as did primitive people: we have dreams and we attribute life to things and play with them as if they were alive. When we grow up we are thus prepared to accept as true, because in some sense natural, the claims of the religions we are taught. We do so because—and here is the second way the early ideas survived—the ideas of advanced religions are merely further elaborations of the primitive ideas. Tylor offers the example of the Eucharist, the Christian ritual wherein bread and wine become, or symbolize, Christ’s body and blood. This ritual might appear to be far from primitive religion. But, he argues, it is a development of the idea of sacrifice, which itself was based on the notion that the soul of the sacrificed animal or person would travel to the world beyond.

Tylor’s account of religion captures elements that one does, indeed, find throughout the world. The ideas of soul, spirit, dreams that he described as basic or primitive do indeed animate many religious systems. Tylor’s weakness, from our contemporary perspective, is that he emphasized an essential commonality to all religious beliefs and thus played down what most anthropologists emphasize today, namely, the diversity of ways in which humans have constructed their religious beliefs and practices. But by analyzing the logic of a set of beliefs, Tylor did inspire his successors to analyze the different ways people have constructed their understandings of the cosmos, their “world views.”

An eminent successor to Tylor in this enterprise was James Frazer (1854–1951), whose massive compendium of religion and myth, The Golden Bough (1981 [1890]), first issued in two volumes and later expanded to twelve, brought together in a readable style much of the knowledge of the day about comparative religion. Frazer followed Tylor in sharply distinguishing among science, magic, and religion as distinct modes of thought. Religion, in their view, involves acts intended to appease deities; magic, like science, assumes impersonal relationships between certain actions and their outcomes. Magic rests on two basic, albeit mistaken, ideas. The first is the idea of similarity, that like causes like (a green stone will cure jaundice). The second is that of contagion, that contact between two objects allows someone to control one through manipulating the other (a person’s hair-clippings can be burned, thereby harming the person). Magic is thus pseudoscience; religion proper involves a qualitatively different kind of activity.

Tylor and Frazer’s intellectualist legacy has been to focus anthropological energies on understanding how particular people view the world, taking their world view seriously as an intellectual or philosophical enterprise. Most anthropologists continued to pose these questions thereafter.
In the United States, Franz Boas and his students developed cultural anthropology around a twofold approach to studying small-scale societies. On the one hand, they sought to discern the patterns of each culture as they were reflected in art, myth, kinship, and everyday ways of speaking. On the other hand, they traced the historical processes through which people transmit cultural ideas across societies and also change them. This dual focus on both ideas and empirical processes reflects Boas’s own German training in both empirical sciences and idealist philosophy.

**Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Structure of Mythic Thinking**

Boas’s complex approach to myths probably was best continued by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss drew from Tylor’s analysis of the intellectual operations detectable in myth-making, but he also, following Boas, sought to trace transformations of myths as they have passed from one society to another. Myths, in his analysis, are composed according to intricate codes, each of which concerns a distinct level of local life and awareness: a code of flora and fauna, one of geography, one of social institutions. These codes are structured as oppositions among categories: cold versus hot, high versus low, mother’s versus father’s relatives, and so forth. Moreover, neighboring peoples often tell contrasting versions of these myths, and these contrasts across societies indicate that myths reflect differences in local social life, and that they may function to underscore the boundaries between peoples.

In one of his best-known analyses, Lévi-Strauss dissects a myth told among several peoples of the Northwest Coast of North America, the “Story of Asdiwal” (1976). The myth is structured around four distinct codes of geography, economy, society, and cosmology. Events often concern all four codes at once: for example, a marriage involves geographical movement, fishing, a particular kind of marriage institution, and movements between earth and sky. Lévi-Strauss argues that the myth depicts in especially salient ways the contradictions that are at the basis of Tsimshian society. Marriages among families of chiefs, for example, were supposed to create or reaffirm relations of hierarchy among them, but precisely who was superior to whom was debated fiercely at each marriage. The myths depict such chiefly marriages as ending in death and battle, thus representing in heightened form problems inherent in the social structure. The myths also try out alternative realities, such as trying to inherit from one’s father and one’s mother, “in order to show that they are untenable” (1976, 173).

Differences between two versions of the myth show how myths, as they are transferred from one place to another, are recast in light of local conditions. One version was collected along the coast, from people who make a great seasonal migration from one region to another to catch candlefish in the spring on one river and salmon in the summer on another. In their version of the myth, characters travel great distances and they engage in very different economic pursuits, as do the humans telling the myth. Lévi-Strauss points out that this version of the myth is characterized by strong oppositions between categories along geographical and economic codes. But oppositions are also strong along the social and cosmological codes (for example, featuring people who are distantly related to each other), as if to follow the oppositions generated by the codes of economic life and geographic movement. This priority of some codes, the economic
and geographic, over others is mentioned by Lévi-Strauss in referring to himself as a Marxist.

In the versions of the myth that were collected along a river where the residents made fewer movements in the course of the year—they hunted candlefish but not salmon, for example—the oppositions were weaker, again along all four codes. This comparative analysis thus supports Lévi-Strauss’s conclusions that codes of a myth are internally integrated, and that they all differ in a systematic way across societies. Others, especially James A. Boon (1990), have used this insight in their own ethnographic analyses of how people structure religious and social life through their use of oppositions and contrasts. In these studies, myths are seen as extended commentaries on the practice of everyday social life.

Religions in Social Life

Although neither Tylor nor Lévi-Strauss conceived of religious ideas and practices as divorced from society, they underscored the intellectual dimension of religious ideas. Boas, too, and especially his students, emphasized the ways in which religious and other ideas cohere in patterns. As we will see, this emphasis on the cultural patterning of religion has retained a central role in anthropology.

At the same time, social theorists stressed that religious ideas, sentiments, and orientations had developed out of specific social conditions. Each of the three major social theorists of modern Europe—Durkheim, Marx, and Weber—crafted some distinctive ways of understanding religion’s relationship to broader social processes. All three theorists were primarily concerned with explaining features of modern life—the rise of modern capitalism, challenges to social solidarity, and the peculiar nature of rational and legal authority. In the process of developing their theories they also tried to explain the role of religion in pre-modern societies.

Émile Durkheim on the Social Origins of Religion

Some scholars continued Tylor’s quest for the origins of religion, but sought those origins in social life. The sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), for example, saw the birth of religion in the ideas and emotions generated out of collective social action. “Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities,” he wrote (1995, 9). Durkheim was not entirely the originator of this general idea. Aristotle, after all, had declared that “men create the gods after their own image.” The French historian Fustel de Coulanges (1830–1889) and the Scottish scholar of Semitic societies W. Robertson-Smith (1846–1904) linked social organization to religious ideas in ancient societies. Robertson-Smith had argued that the earliest societies had been totemic, that is, they had been organized into clans, each of which had a special relationship to a species of animal—“my clan is a wolf.” Sacrificing this animal was a way to communicate and commune with the deities, and at the same time it was a means to strengthen the emotional bonds among clan members.
Durkheim drew from these earlier writers to argue that knowledge in general, and religious knowledge in particular, has a social foundation. His argument was philosophi-
cal, against Kant’s idea that humans had innate categories of the understanding. But it was also social and moral, and grew out of the concerns of the day (Lukes 1973).

Durkheim wrote at a time of great social and moral turmoil in France, when older certainties about God and Church had been excised from public and legal life by the Revolution, but no alternative moral certainties had yet replaced them. The country appeared to be polarized between urban agnostics and rural Catholics. Battles were especially sharp over the future of the school system: should it be secular or Catholic, and if secular, what would be its moral content? No wonder that in his first articles, Durkheim was deeply sensitive to the problem of social cohesion in contemporary society: “A society whose members are not bound to one another by some solid and durable link,” he wrote in 1886, “would resemble a loose pile of dust which could at any time be dispersed by the slightest wind to the four corners of the world” (quoted in Alexander 1982, 82). But what are these bonds? And how do they unite people in societies that have not undergone the sort of schisms experienced by France?

As one would expect given the evolutionary way of thinking in vogue at the time, Durkheim sought his answer in a study of The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, the title of his 1912 book. The book posits an early type of social consciousness in those societies where everyone is for all important purposes alike: everyone has the same statuses, duties, and roles. In such societies people’s feelings are also alike, and thus strongly reinforce each other whenever people gather together. Moral sentiments, religious beliefs, and other cultural ideas are all very strong, and law, religion, and social norms are strong as well.

Durkheim postulated that religious beliefs and sentiments must correspond to something real, and that they could not be purely illusory or mistaken, as Tylor and Frazer had concluded. They clearly were false if taken at face value. The problem then was to go underneath the symbol to the reality that it represents and that gives it its true meaning. What is “religion”? Rather than defining it as the belief in spirits, as did Tylor and Frazer, Durkheim viewed it as involving a fundamental division of the world into sacred versus profane things. Religion is thus a collective reality that concerns how the members of a particular society divide up the world, rather than an individual reality consisting of what a person believes. But how the world is divided into sacred and profane varies greatly from one society to the next; what determines this division?

Here Durkheim accepts Robertson-Smith’s thesis that totemism was the earliest basis for social organization and that it was the wellspring of religion. He turns to the religions of Australian aborigines to prove his thesis. In these societies specific groups perform rituals at sacred sites that are associated either with ancestral spirits or with mythical beings that lived during the ancient “dream time” that came before the time we know. Each group also has objects made of wood or stone engraved with symbols of these ancestors or mythical beings, and these churinga objects themselves have sacred powers.

Each such social group also has a special ritual relationship toward certain species, such as kangaroo, or certain natural phenomena, such as rain or wind. Members of the group may have special rules regulating their activities with respect to these species, the
group’s *totem*, and the group can carry out rituals that increase the species’ numbers. These rituals sometimes involve eating an item of the species, and Durkheim thought that this practice confirmed the theory that sacrifice and communal eating were the earliest, basic forms of religious ritual.

Durkheim argued that the general idea of spiritual force that underlay totemism existed prior to ideas about spirits or souls, and he cited related ideas from other societies, such as the notion of impersonal force or *mana* in Melanesia. (He also could have cited the Chinese idea of life force, or *chi*.) This same force, at later stages of development, gives rise to ideas of souls, ancestral spirits, and God, stated Durkheim.

Durkheim set out his argument on two different levels. First, he explained the variety of religious ideas by arguing that particular features of societies give rise to particular features of their cultures and religions. Religion thus represents society. So, there are “societies in Australia and North America where space is conceived in the form of an immense circle, because the camp has a circular form.” The early division of society into two halves or *moieties* gave rise to ideas of the cosmos as dualistic. In societies such as the Australians just discussed, where people were organized into clans, these people often postulated an animal, or sacred place, or force, as the totem of that clan. These totems were the projections onto a spiritual place of a sense of belonging together in the clan. As the society grew and spread over a wider area, giving rise to a sense of a broad social group with shared interests that spilled over the boundaries of the clan, totemic representations synthesized into the idea of one or more gods, “the god being only a figurative expression of the society,” Durkheim summarily stated (1995, 227).

This level of argument presumes that there already is a general religious idea that can be shaped by society. So arguing at a second level, Durkheim tried to explain the emergence of general religious ideas and sentiments in the first place. People sense a moral force that is exterior to them, he argued. This idea is given social content in those moments when people come together in social assemblies, such as dances, meetings, or festivals. These assemblies create a social effervescence out of which religious ideas are confirmed and given stronger emotional meaning. A qualitative change takes place, and people began to feel themselves transported to an altered state.

Religion serves the function of strengthening social solidarity by communicating specific ideas and sentiments, and by regulating and strengthening social relationships. A totem, for instance, reminds you what kind of person you are (a member of a certain clan) and thereby regulates relations among individuals. It also gives you a feeling of strength: speaking of one Australian society, Durkheim wrote: “The Arunta who has properly rubbed himself with his churinga feels stronger; he is stronger” (1995, 229).

This functional perspective on religion gave Durkheim a way of discussing the place of religion in modern society. Religion is no longer a satisfactory cognitive solution to the “problem of meaning,” in which science is now the master. But religion continues to be symbolically important: cult and faith are essential to any society’s social solidarity, including our own.

Durkheim emphasized the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of religious ideas and practices. His *Elementary Forms* focuses on the social origins of religion by way of a theory of collective emotions; but there and in other writings, Durkheim also empha-
sizes the logical nature of religious classifications. In *Primitive Classification* (1963 [1903]), Durkheim and his nephew Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) compared the symbolic classifications found in Australian, native North American, and Chinese societies. The Zuni Pueblo people of the U.S. Southwest, for example, assign to each of the cardinal directions (plus center, and the zenith and nadir of the sun’s apparent motion) a color, a season, and a kind of weather, together with a general force such as creation or destruction, a specific group, and an animal. Durkheim and Mauss claimed that members of these societies have created totalizing religious systems; these systems unite the social, natural, and cosmological realms. Their comparison of logical similarities across these societies inspired later anthropologists to more detailed studies of symbolic classification.

Durkheim’s legacy in the field of religious studies was twofold. First, he connected the religious to the social, leading later anthropologists to look for social origins or functions of specific religious practices and ideas. This strain of his legacy was a foundation of British social anthropology, from A. R. Radcliffe-Brown through Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas. For Mary Douglas, for example, the key to understanding food taboos, whether in the Hebrew Bible or in the societies of central Africa she studied in her fieldwork, is to look for the social functions such taboos may have served. She argued that by separating the sacred from the profane, and then by restricting membership in the community to those who observed the rules, food taboos make group membership sacred.

Durkheim also emphasized the ways that participating in collective religious practices confirm faith, and this insight remains compelling. Consider how many European Catholics find visions of Mary to be central events cementing their faith, or perhaps their hope within their faith. In less spectacular ways, the good feelings of participating in something with friends and neighbors may also make the religion particularly “true.” Particularly important is the way in which public ritual generates religious commitment. A service, for example, in which many people worship together, can be a wonderfully compelling context, generating a sense of being together and being in the presence of something else. Such feelings, perhaps most startlingly displayed when Christian worshipers speak in tongues, lay behind Durkheim’s claim that coming together as a social group gave rise to the earliest ideas of the supernatural. Most people, however, most of the time, experience their activities of carrying out worship, consulting oracles, or avoiding tabooed foods as routine actions. It may indeed be the case that the routine nature of most of religions’ demands, the integration of religion into everyday life, provides a social and psychological comfort.

Secondly, Durkheim connected the religious to the intellectual, continuing Tylor’s emphasis. “The essential notions of scientific logic are of religious origin,” he wrote in *Elementary Forms* (1995, 431). This statement has broadly echoed in cultural anthropology throughout the world, and most notably by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who saw classificatory systems as the product of intense, imaginative intellectual activity. Rather than seeing totems and totemic social organization as a primitive form of identification that then gave rise to higher forms of society and religion, Lévi-Strauss considered them, in his *Totemism* (1963a [1962]), as one among many ways of classifying the world in order
to understand it. Particular plants or animals are chosen to be totems not because they have utility or excite awe in themselves, but because they provide a usable symbolic template through which to make distinctions in the natural, social, and cosmological worlds.

Karl Marx on Religion in Capitalist Europe

Durkheim’s approach to religion assumed that society, and therefore religion, was an integrated whole. But what if society is not like that, but consists instead of several groups whose interests and ideas are in conflict? How then ought we to understand the social origins and functions of religion?

This question lies behind the work of both Karl Marx and Max Weber. Karl Marx (1818–1883) emphasized the historical process by which different social groups come to dominate social life. The key to this process was the interplay between the material forces of production and the social relations of production: how things were produced and how their production and distribution was organized. Each historical period in European history has thrown up its own distinctive dominant ideology: politics in classical Rome, the Catholic Church in the medieval period, and capitalism as ideology in the modern period. Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, saw religion as serving ideological functions in all periods, as providing social cement in the face of class divisions, but also as expressing class interests (Marx and Engels 1965 [1946]).

Studies of religion inspired by Marx have looked for the material interests served by movements gathered together under the banner of religion. Engels (1956 [1850]) argued that the religious wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Germany, although couched in the language of religious dissent, were motivated by the disparate interests of the nobility, burghers, and peasants. Among these movements were those millenarian Christian movements that prophesied the imminent moment (the “millennium,” or thousand years) when the corrupt leaders of the church would face the Day of Judgment. German millenarian prophets combined apocalyptic teachings with calls for the end of the feudal system, supporting Engels’s thesis that material interests and religious ideas were intertwined. Engels thus showed the power of religion to subvert as well as to confirm the existing social order. His study launched a distinguished tradition of investigations (for example, Worsley 1968) into the material and religious sources of those radical religious movements whose leaders preach an imminent radical transformation of society, if not the end of the world—“millenarian” in today’s general sense of the term.

Max Weber on Religion in Modern Civilizations

Max Weber (1864–1920) also analyzed the relationships between particular interest groups and religious ideas. Weber (1978 [1956]) took the social action of the individual as his unit, distinct from Durkheim’s emphasis on social structure and function, and Marx’s emphasis on changing modes of production. Weber wrote that one can only come to understand social action by, first, discovering the meaning of the action for the
individual and, secondly, explaining it in terms of the social conditions and actions that preceded it. Social science thus involves both interpretation and causal–historical explanation.

Religion provides one major source of ideas and orientations for the actor, and Weber devoted much analysis to the comparative study of religions. His interest was not religious doctrine per se, but the spirit or ethos that was produced in individuals by their adherence to one faith versus another, as well as the social conditions that allowed new types of religious orientation to emerge. Weber saw the development of Western society as the progressive rationalization of society, a concept that implies both the increasing differentiation of social life into functionally defined domains or spheres—family, economy, religion—and the systematic reorganization of each domain around a single set of values or rules. Economy gradually became reorganized around the maximization of profit; family, around the general solidarity of kin; religion, around the worship of God. In Weber’s view of Western world history, religion gradually shed its “magical” character and developed a set of universalistic doctrines about a divine order, and a set of ethical principles that apply to everyone, everywhere.

Weber’s theory of religious history is both sociological and universal. Weber carried out separate studies of India, China, Islam, ancient Judaism, and modern Europe. He saw each of these societies as characterized by a distinctive set of religious beliefs, a particular economic ethic, and a specific set of interest groups; his research concerned the interplay of these three elements. In his study of India, for example, Weber argued that the caste system and the doctrine of karma—the idea that one’s actions in this or a previous life determined the course of one’s life—inhibited the development of a rational economic ethic because it led religious energies away from this world and directed them toward the “other world.” Only with the development of Calvinist Protestantism in Europe did there arise a religion-driven energy to rationally remold the world; this energy pushed forward modern capitalism.

Weber traced similar developmental processes within each socio-religious system. In the larger-scale societies he studied, prophets arose to challenge an older way of thinking, often in the name of a universal creed and god. But with the demise of the prophet, followers had to “routinize” the movement, creating a religious community or congregation. The eventual development of a rational, differentiated religious system required the parallel development of a bureaucratic state, whether in India, China, or Europe.

Weber’s analysis rested on the “ideal types” he created—the other-worldly mystic, the this-worldly prophet. These types give us an initial, clear sense of the contrasts in dominant ideas among large-scale religions. But they are less useful in analyzing the many ways in which people reinterpret and transform those ideas. Weber’s ideal types have been questioned by later students of each society. For example, Weber based his claims that the Indian doctrine of karma would retard economic development on the assumption that the doctrine, as contained in religious texts, was also what ordinary people believed. But popular Indian ideas about fate and action in the world are not the same as the textual doctrines (Babb 1983), and they have not prevented people from engaging in modern industrial development (Singer 1964).
Clifford Geertz and the Ethnography of Civilizations

Although a number of anthropologists began to study large-scale societies, or “civilizations,” in the 1950s, probably the best-known among them has been Clifford Geertz. In his *Religion of Java* (1960), as well as in other works on Indonesia and Morocco, he analyzes the diversity of religious beliefs in a large Muslim society.

Geertz draws from Weber’s emphasis on the answers that large-scale religious doctrines provide for life’s key questions, such as: Why is there evil in the world? Who gets to heaven and why? But whereas Weber worked largely from the writings of religious figures and other literate men—those who formed what Robert Redfield (1956) was to call the urban “great traditions”—Geertz relies on the testimonies of ordinary village and townspeople, those people participating in what Redfield called the rural “little tradition.” Geertz looks at the diversity of ideas in a single society.

Geertz’s method is to define three “streams” of Islam on Java, each situated in a different institutional context: a set of village understandings that focused on spirits and community rituals; a more scripturally oriented Islam of the religious school and the market; and a focus on status and etiquette among noble Javanese. Although criticized for not emphasizing that people in all three streams were Muslims, and that many read works of Islamic doctrine and spirituality, his analysis was able to capture both the variety of ways Javanese men and women talked about religion and society, and the ways that large-scale institutions of politics, economics, and religion shaped their understandings and their actions.

Geertz’s approach has been especially influential in the anthropology of religion. Today many anthropologists place even more emphasis than he did on the ways that villagers and religious experts (“culture brokers”) interpret and reshape the texts and ideas of religious traditions in their societies. For example, Stanley Tambiah (1970) studied the uses that monks and other villagers make of Buddhist texts in northeastern Thailand. Dale F. Eickelman (1985) traced the career of a rural Moroccan judge. In these and other studies, anthropologists have situated large-scale changes in specific towns and villages and with respect to specific people.

The Psychology of Religion

Cognitive and social approaches to religion sometimes fail to provide a full account of the psychological dimension. The individual as portrayed in Tylor and Durkheim, for example, is rather one-dimensional: he or she is a would-be scientist, or simply part of a crowd marked by religious euphoria.

Weber and Suffering

Of theorists considered so far, Weber paid the most attention to the psychological dimension of religion. He wished to explain how different religious orientations toward the world would produce different economic ethics, leading to different kinds of economic organization. In particular, he sought to explain how Protestant ideas spurred
on modern capitalism in Europe. The key Protestant idea was the doctrine of “unknowable election”—the idea that some people were elected to heaven and others condemned to hell, but that no one could know his or her category nor change what God had preordained. Weber argued that this doctrine, taught by the theologian John Calvin, was so unsettling that people worked hard to succeed in this world, grasping at the idea that the material signs of their success also were signs of God’s favor. The “Protestant ethic” was thus the psychological consequence of a specific doctrine, and it, not the doctrine itself, was a key element in the rise of modern capitalism.

Weber thought that the idea of predestination also served to affirm the absolute, transcendent power of God over his creations. The idea explains the presence of evil in the world by stating that God’s motives are beyond human understanding. The idea is basic to one of the most powerful and enigmatic of the Bible stories, the story of Job. The story concerns how Job retains his faith in God through a series of terrible tests—he loses his family, health, and wealth. God wagers with Satan, allowing Satan to inflict these sufferings, with Job’s faith as the prize. Job has done nothing to deserve his suffering, but suffer he does. Others voice to Job their belief in a rule-bound God: “Does God pervert justice?” asks one. But of course God does do precisely that, or, rather, he stands above human norms of justice. It is human self-righteousness that leads people to challenge God: “Will you condemn me that you may be justified?” answers God out of a whirlwind (40 Job v.8). The point of the story is to show the reader or listener someone who loses everything and yet keeps his faith—and finally understands the total power of God and his demand for total submission to him.

The Book of Job offers to those who read it a sense that their own suffering is not to be argued with but accepted. This acceptance may provide a psychologically powerful, perhaps comforting way to survive suffering. One finds similar narratives in other religions. For many Muslims, the story of the martyrdom of Husain at the Battle of Karbala plays this role. The story concerns how Husain, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad, died through treachery in battle. The story is important to those Muslims who believe that Muhammad’s descendants are his rightful successors. Every year, these Muslims, called the Shi’i, or “Shiites,” celebrate Husain’s martyrdom as an enacted narrative of their own suffering, and their position today as a minority within the Muslim world. Processions in which Husain rides his horse through large crowds of celebrants, while some beat themselves bloody with sticks or chains, dramatize and religiously contextualize suffering (Waugh 1977).

Some Christians stage similar reenactments of Christ’s suffering on his way to crucifixion. In some societies people volunteer to play the role of the crucified Christ, enduring great suffering as they are hung from crosses. These “Passion plays,” public dramatization of suffering and death, remind the faithful of the human drama captured in the phrase, “he died for your sins.”

Each of these stories and reenactments represents suffering as part of a broader framework, one that transcends human societies but also adds meaning to human societies. We can see these stories as several responses among many to the general human problem of how to endure suffering. They can enable us to place our own problems “in perspective.”
Religion Explained by Emotions

Other social theorists have based their approaches to religion more completely in psychology than did Weber. Although the notion that religion springs from emotions is ancient, an important modern argument along these lines came from David Hume, the philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment. In his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), Hume argued that religion first came from “the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind.” Religion thus offers one way of overcoming anxiety.

This idea was given ethnographic substance by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), one of the first anthropologists to carry out long-term fieldwork. Malinowski worked in the Trobriand Islands, today part of Papua New Guinea, between 1915 and 1918. He distinguished between the practical, rational knowledge and skills that Trobrianders employ to carry out their everyday tasks and the religion and magic they call on to supplement their knowledge and powers. Ideas about the afterlife help people live despite their knowledge that death awaits them, wrote Malinowski, and funeral rituals add further authority to the idea that something awaits them after death. These rituals and ideas “save man from a surrender to death and destruction” (1954 [1925], 51). Ideas about the powers of spells and prayer to change the world also serve a psychological function; they reduce the anxiety that comes from uncertainty, allowing people to carry on their practical life. Religion and magic are thus not pseudosciences; rather, they arise in response to deep-seated, innate human fears and concerns.

Malinowski was influenced by the psychologist William James (1842–1910) as well as by David Hume. In his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1972 [1901–1902]), James defined religion in terms of a set of individual human attitudes, as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” James advocated pragmatism in philosophy and science; in his version of this approach, the experiences one accumulates, whether in the laboratory or in everyday life, are the basis for deciding about truth and falsehood. Since belief in God works toward the general good, it is “true.” Religious beliefs are validated when they are shown to have beneficial consequences, such as reducing anxiety and fear.

References today to innate or unconscious psychological impulses usually draw on the writings of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of modern psychoanalysis. Freud argued that the psyche was more than the conscious. Powerful drives for self-preservation and pleasure often shape our actions and conscious ideas in ways of which we are only half-aware. These drives in the individual run headlong into societal norms, creating repression and neuroses. Freud’s (1930) views on religion were negative. Born of infantile feelings of helplessness and society-caused suffering, religion only keeps us from rationally critiquing and rebuilding our social lives, he wrote. But Freud’s ideas about the power of religious symbols have been used by some anthropologists to explain why certain objects—hair, the color white, blood—have the frequent and powerful positions they do in religious ritual.

Other theorists and historians of religion have taken up the issue of how and why certain symbols have widespread power. Among them are theorists who stress the irreducible nature of religious experience. Carl Jung (1875–1961), a student of Freud,
saw religion as an experience of awe at the power of the divine, a submission to a superior power that is later codified into doctrines and rituals. Jung followed William James and the theologian Rudolf Otto in finding the truth of religion in these religious experiences. But Jung then postulated a “collective unconscious” of humankind that contains all religious symbols. These symbols stem from “archetypes” that are innate in every human being, and that make possible the translation of religious experiences across persons and cultures. These archetypes—the hero, the earth mother, gods—form the basis of the universal religious experience.

Also viewing religion in terms of archetypes is Mircea Eliade, born in Romania in 1907. Eliade exemplifies the “phenomenological” study of religion, that is, bracketing what we think we know of the external world to focus our study on experience itself as an irreducible phenomenon. For Eliade (1954 [1949]), religious objects, acts, and roles are symbols that have multiple meanings, but that eventually come together in a cosmological unity. This unity is mainly about the primordial creation of the universe. Eliade examines myths and rituals from many societies, interpreting each as fundamentally about the creation of life, order, and the world. The view of religion in terms of universal archetypes has become even more popular through the writings of Joseph Campbell (1949) on myth. As with Tylor’s intellectualist approach, however, this approach points to broad patterns but is unable to provide an analytical foundation for understanding specificities: how people have come to create and understand particular religious forms in particular times and places.

Symbols between Society and the Individual

Among anthropologists seeking to integrate sociological and psychological dimensions of religious practices was Victor Turner, whose work has focused on symbols and meanings. Turner is attentive to unconscious meanings and near-universal symbols, but he emphasizes the ways that ritual and social uses of symbolic objects shape their meanings for particular people.

Turner (1967) analyzes the meaning of symbols from three distinct perspectives. He begins by asking how members of the society explain a ritual or unpack the meaning of a statue. He then asks how objects are used in ritual processes and in interpreting their use. Finally, he examines the place of the object in a system of symbols. The meanings he derives from these three perspectives themselves are arrayed between two poles: one around which cluster meanings that relate to general human emotions and desires, especially those of a natural or physiological sort, and a second pole of social norms and values.

Turner’s most famous symbolic analysis illustrates this process. His ethnographic work was done among the Ndembu of Zambia, a society organized around matriliney, that is, the continuity between mothers and children. When a girl reaches puberty, the Ndembu hold an initiation ceremony, during which they wrap the girl in a blanket and place her at the foot of a tree, the mudyi, known for its white latex. This ritual is thus known as a “white” ritual.

Turner understood the “native symbolic meaning” of the symbols largely from many discussions with one “key informant,” a man named Muchona. Based on these discus-
sions, he concluded that the tree stands for human milk, for the ties between the girl and her mother, and for the principle of ties through women more generally. These meanings seem consistent with other Ndembu statements and practices, although discussions with a broader range of Ndembu men and women might have introduced a greater diversity of meanings into the analysis.

These symbolic meanings include both physiological and social poles: aspects of the human body and of social institutions. Turner then considers the way the tree is used in ritual practices, and here he finds several distinct meanings: in one event the tree is the center for all-female activities from which the men are excluded (meaning of women versus men); in other contexts it is associated with the girl undergoing initiation.

Finally, Turner examines the broader system of symbols, and finds this tree to be one among several trees that are used in ritual activities, each associated with white, red, or black. Each color calls forth associations with natural substances: black with putrification and feces, red with blood, white with milk and semen. Although these associations are “natural” in the sense that blood is indeed red, the values placed on these associations are cultural and relatively arbitrary. Is blood good? Powerful? Polluting? The Ndembu highlight certain values and play down others. Red is linked to power and wealth; black is linked to pollution and disease; white is linked to purity and life. They then can interpret the value of various ritual and medicinal objects in terms of this color scheme. Medicines made from the “white” mudyi tree, for example, aid a woman having difficulties breastfeeding.

For the Ndembu, then, the three primary colors provide a template for much of social life, just as do the four cardinal directions for the Zuni. Turner’s account of religious ritual situates the ritual in its matrilineal social context, analyzes the Ndembu explanations of rituals and symbols, and considers the emotional power of Ndembu ritual associations. Other anthropologists, for example Gananath Obeyesekere (1981), emphasize the ways that personal, sometimes unconscious meanings of key symbols in a culture shape the lives of individuals. For these and other writers, symbols are studied for their roles in the lives of individuals in particular societies.