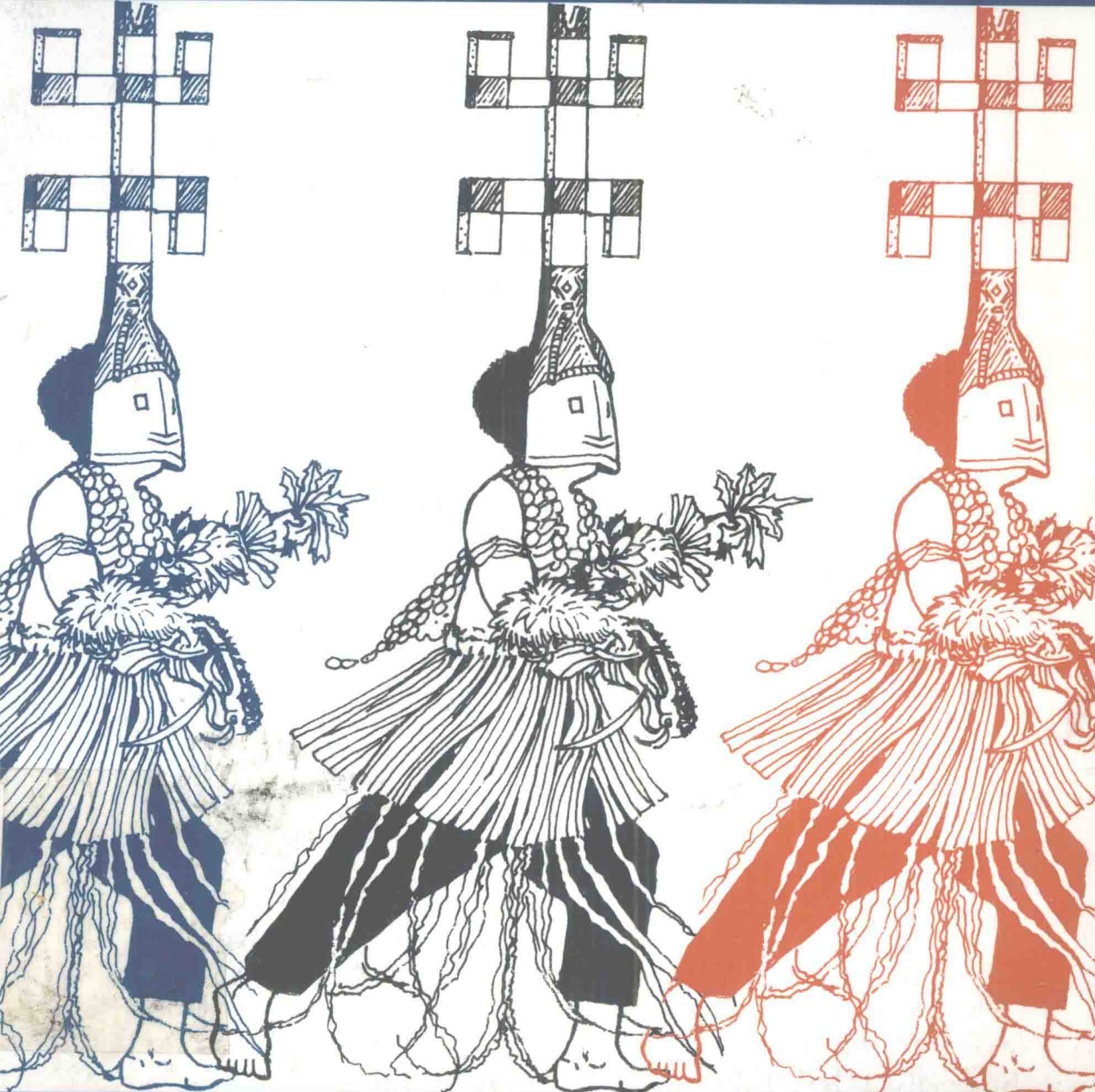


RELIGIONS IN PRACTICE

Second
Edition

An Approach to the Anthropology of Religion



JOHN R. BOWEN



SECOND
EDITION

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John R. Bowen

*Washington University
St. Louis, Missouri*

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Preface

I have written this book for anyone—from the student of religion to the general reader—who wishes to learn more about the rituals and rules, symbols and laws that shape religious lives in different societies. I am an anthropologist by trade, engaged in a lifetime of ethnographic research on many topics, and I bring to the present work my own perspective and experience. This book grew out of years of teaching an undergraduate course on religion and ritual, for which I found no satisfactory textbook. In that course, and for this book, I presume little previous knowledge about religion or about anthropology, but build toward that knowledge by alternately discussing case studies and general findings.

Taking an ethnographic perspective means starting from what people say and do as they engage in religious activities. I take a broad view of “religion,” including in its domain those activities that, in one way or another, invoke realities and powers beyond the reach of ordinary senses. (I discuss the problem of definition in Chapter 1.) Religion thus includes healing through spirit possession and obeying religious taboos, sacrificing to appease the gods and quietly speaking to God, uttering harmful spells and reciting scripture.

In each chapter, I consider a specific practice or aspect of religion, and use examples from both small-scale and large-scale religions. In my discussions of large-scale religious traditions, such as Islam, Hinduism, and Catholicism, I focus on one or more emphases within that tradition rather than attempting to survey all its dimensions and branches. For example, I examine the importance of sacred speech in Navajo, Islamic, and Protestant traditions, with extended examples drawn from Baptist churches as well as from Luther’s writings. A study devoted to Protestantism per se would have encompassed Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, and other denominations. This book, concerned with comparisons across religions, must be more selective.

The book is intended to be read on its own by any interested reader. As a course textbook it can be supplemented in various ways. In an anthropology course it might be combined with ethnographic case studies, either those referred to in the chapters or others. In a course on comparative religions it could be used together with some of the many excellent introductions to Islam, Hinduism, religions of China, and other large-scale religions. The companion reader—*Religion in Culture and Society*—contains articles arranged parallel to the chapters in this book. Also very effective are video clips and films on pilgrimage, church singing, sacrifice, and other practices.

In preparing this edition of *Religions in Practice* I benefited from the comments of many readers and users of the first edition, among them Robert Hefner, Jon Anderson, James Boon, Pascal Boyer, Diane Mines, Beiel Dor Cernes, the many students who sent comments and questions by e-mail, and the anonymous readers for this press. From my friends and teachers in the Gayo highlands of Sumatra I have learned much about religion, devotion, and humility. Most of all, my wife, Vicki Carlson, not only taught me much and helped me through months of writing, but also is the coauthor of the opening section of Chapter 1.

I would also like to thank the reviewers for their comments: Joseph Rubenstein, Richard Stockton College; Robert Hefner, Boston University; and Katherine Donahue, Plymouth State University.

I would appreciate your critical comments and suggestions for additional materials; as an inveterate user of e-mail I am best reached at <jbowen@artsci.wustl.edu>.



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1

Studying Religion through Practice

Many friends and relatives attended my mother-in-law's memorial service at the First Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs. Mary Anne, Annie to her friends, had been reared in this church community. Her father had been an elder in the church and her mother a deaconess, visiting the shut-ins, the hospitalized, and the recently bereaved. Like many women of her time, she helped others through illnesses, tragedy, and heartbreak. Perhaps her most important, yet often invisible, work was to assist elderly relatives as they faced failing health, the diminishing circle of friends and loved ones, and ultimately their deaths.

Mary Anne lived out those traditions of service just as her parents had. They had sat in the same pews to celebrate or grieve the rites of passage of loved ones—baptisms, weddings, and funerals. They listened to sermons, readings, and hymns meant to capture the meaning of this earthly life and that of the spirit. What they heard was a simple story of comfort and direction, that God, through Jesus, gives life, an abundant life here on earth and a never-ending spiritual life—a gift offered for nothing more than faith by the believer. For them, Jesus offered the gift of eternal life and a model of human earthly life centered on love, simplicity, forgiveness, and generosity.

At Mary Anne's memorial service, the minister (who had been her mainstay during her husband's last illness and death years earlier) spoke about her life of service within the community and her faith in her personal relationship with God. He shared with those assembled her one last regret—that she would not be able to see her grandsons grow up as her own mother had shared in her children's upbringing. Only when she had come to accept this loss was she able to let go and die peacefully.

The minister ended his message with a discussion of sainthood, by which he meant service, a life on the path, and the promise of reunion with other saints in the life hereafter. For most in attendance, the image of Mary Anne reunited with her beloved parents and husband and her cherished friends who had gone before, all free from illness and earthly strife, was a source of comfort as they dealt with their own sadness at losing her and with the renewed realization of their own inescapable deaths.

As I listened, I was struck by the disparity of the minister's idea of sainthood and that found in original Presbyterian teachings. Sitting in a church whose official history

traced back to the teachings of the sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin, I recalled that “saint” referred to the Elect, those people predestined to salvation, an idea powerful in the early churches of New England. I also thought about how hard to live by were these ideas of an unknowable Election—you might be saved, you might be damned, but you could not change it and you could not know which you were. No wonder the idea of Election was largely supplanted by the idea that we might just save ourselves through good works.

My wife, my main informant on life in this community and church, recalls that the dominant teaching her family heard in this church was that individuals were saved by grace, by simply accepting the gift of God’s love. Good works rather than causing salvation follow naturally from it. Many theological realities were represented that day: some Calvinist, some based on faith by works, some agnostic, and perhaps some atheist. Individuals’ theological journeys vary even as people come together in community and provide each other comfort and hope.

In St. Louis, our religious community is the First Unitarian Universalist Church. We do not share such a long history with this community but we help each other in similar ways. We hear sermons, readings, hymns, and discussions on spiritual and earthly concerns. In this church there is no set of shared beliefs; in fact the church stands for the liberty to pursue one’s own creed. Sainthood is mentioned here, too, as in a sermon preached on the 152nd anniversary of the church’s founding by William Greenleaf Eliot in 1835. He was a man of many accomplishments, including the founding of his church, Washington University, the St. Louis public schools, and other civic institutions. In 1852, Ralph Waldo Emerson toured what was then the West and visited Eliot’s by then well-established church. In a letter sent back East, Emerson called Eliot the “saint of the West.” He could only have been referring to Eliot’s earthly accomplishments, for Eliot’s still Calvinist Christianity was totally at odds with the nature-oriented transcendentalism Emerson espoused.

My own upbringing was in the framework of the Episcopal Church. I recall attending some Sunday school sessions but little intense church involvement or private religious devotion. I grew closer to the comfort and purposiveness of religion during my fieldwork in Sumatra with the Gayo people, all of whom are Muslims. Living in village and town with them for several years, I helped heal the sick and bury the dead, and I learned about prayer, spells, and collective worship. I fasted during the month of Ramadan and participated in many collective religious activities.

It was during the times leading up to and following the death of a friend or neighbor that I was most drawn into religious life. Deeply saddened by their loss at such times, my Gayo friends focused not on recalling the deceased’s life, but on helping the deceased’s soul to weather the transition between life and death. Relatives prepared the corpse in a certain way, bathing and wrapping it before burial and, afterward, spoke to the deceased’s soul, prayed for its welfare, and engaged in rituals of chanting to God on the soul’s behalf.

I remember one such Sumatran funeral, for an older man with whom I had spent many hours over a period of 10 years. On the evening of his death, dozens of men and women gathered at the house of his family to chant Arabic prayers of praise to God. Most believed that their actions helped the soul of the deceased person in its transition from

this world to the next. During a rest in the evening's work, a religious teacher explained that we were generating blessings not just for the departed soul of this man, but for the souls of Muslims everywhere. The religious ideas he conveyed satisfied us that our work was for a purpose and that the deceased could be comforted. Our coming together to do this religious work underscored the intense ties of shared responsibility among us. We would gather again on three other occasions to repeat the chanting for this man's soul.

These two events—a funeral carried out by Muslim villagers and a memorial service in a Presbyterian church—were part of very different social and religious contexts but both were religious events. In the Gayo village and the Presbyterian church, someone made a speech that set the death in a religious context by speaking of a soul and of a transition to another life. In both, people participated in a highly scripted event, parts of which took place in a religious building and which included prayers for the spirit's well-being. Both sets of practices attended to the emotional needs of the living and stressed the shared responsibility of friends, relatives, and neighbors.

The practices thus invoked religious ideas, shaped emotions, and created social contexts that performed social functions. In the chapters that follow these same elements will appear recurrently woven together. Ideas, emotions, social contexts shape each other over time to produce complex and differentiated sets of practices and ideas that we call "religions."

Defining Religion

In the 1950s and 1960s, many social scientists and historians in the United States argued that Western societies were becoming secularized and that religion was fading out as an important part of public and even private life. But they were wrong. Religion has not only retained its importance for most people in the United States, it has become the subject of current public debate about national culture and political practice. In the United States and in Europe these discussions have concerned the proper place of religious symbols and practices in public settings, from prayer in the schools to public display of crèches. As Islam becomes increasingly prominent in these countries, notions that national culture is based on a Christian or Judeo-Christian heritage are challenged. Some people welcome this increasing pluralism of religious life. In December 2000, some U.S. high schools announced the beginning and end of the Islamic month of fasting, Ramadan, and excused Muslim students from school to observe these occasions. But others see the future of world politics as a polarization around two or three religion-based civilizations: Christian, Islamic, and Confucian.

Discussions of religion are often based on knowledge of only a few familiar religions. Many U.S. politicians and school officials who support a moment of silence for prayer in schools, for example, assume that all religions include the practice of silent individual prayer to a god; and some people find the Islamic practice of five daily prostrations before God disruptive. German officials have declared that Scientology is not a religion. Indonesian officials exclude animist beliefs and practices from the category of religion.

What then is “religion”? I view religious traditions as ever-changing complexes of beliefs (including those authoritative beliefs called “doctrine”), practices (including formalized rituals), and social institutions. But how do we decide which beliefs, practices, and institutions are to be called “religious”?

In most Western traditions one finds two very common definitions. One emphasizes an individual’s beliefs; the other, his or her emotions. The first defines religion as a set of shared beliefs in spirits or gods. The second identifies religion in terms of a sentiment of awe and wonder toward the unknown. For me there is no hard and fast definition of religion. This book examines a wide variety of ways in which people in different societies and times have thought about the world beyond the immediate sense-world. Some posit a set of deities; others do not. Some have a distinct sphere of life called “religion”; others do not distinguish religion from the rest of life.

Sufficient for our purposes is that the collection of phenomena we will study—prayer to God, uses of magic, death rituals—all involve the idea that there is something more to the world than meets the eye. This definition is much broader than standard Western usage. What if we said that religion was whatever involves a stated belief in spirits or gods? In those cultures strongly shaped by modern Christianity, people do indeed tend to think of religion in these terms. The idea of a separate religious sphere is recent, even in Western history. In other societies people define the world in different ways, treating as a natural part of everyday life actions and ideas that we would want to include in a cross-cultural category of religion.

Consider the practices of the Azande people of the southern Sudan that ethnographers have labeled “witchcraft.” According to the Azande, some people carry in their bodies a substance called *mangu*. This substance is inherited, and it sends out emanations when the person feels jealousy, anger, or other negative emotions toward another person. The substance causes things to happen, and it fits into everyday ways of explaining misfortune. “I tripped at a place where I never trip; it must be witchcraft that caused me to trip.”

When the person causing a particular misfortune is discovered (by using oracles) the person is asked to blow water from his or her mouth and to say: “If I was doing harm, I certainly did not mean to, let it be gone.” And that is the end of the matter. The Azande do not concentrate on blame or intentions, but on the particular problem at hand and how to solve it. Indeed, they believe the substance sometimes acts on its own without the person’s knowledge.

What do we make of these practices? From a Western point of view they refer to a reality beyond the immediately verifiable, and thus we legitimately may include them in a comparative study of religions. The Azande, on the other hand, see *mangu* and oracles as everyday, ordinary aspects of reality. Some of the Azande who have converted to Christianity continue their use of oracles and accusations of *mangu* precisely because they do not see those activities as part of a separate religion, but more as an American Baptist or Catholic might regard the use of an astrological chart.

The diversity of ideas about what constitutes a particular religion places any student of religion in a difficult position. If I write about a particular religion as the symbols, statements, and practices of a particular group of people, I will almost inevitably differ

with some of them as to what their religion is. The perspective of an outside observer, who wishes to include a wide array of opinions and activities, may be much broader than that of a practitioner, who may insist on his or her own view of what properly lies within the boundaries of the religion in question.

I have frequently met with objections to the way I define “Islam” when describing certain Sumatran village practices to students in Indonesian Islamic colleges. For example, many villagers gather at ritual meals to ask ancestral spirits for help in healing the sick or in ensuring a good rice crop. These practices may have their origins in pre-Islamic times, but villagers view them as consistent with their understandings of Islam, and they explain them in terms of prophets and angels. For this reason I include them in my own writings about Sumatran Islam. But for the Islamic college students these practices conflict with proper understandings of Islam. “Those practices are what we try to teach them to throw aside,” the students say. For some of them, my own writing could become part of the very problem they are trying to solve, that is, an overly broad idea of Islam.

How do we respond to these challenges? My own response has been to realize that definitions of religion are not just academic matters, but part of the very social reality we are studying. I thus refrain from giving too precise a definition for religion or Islam, and instead look at issues and debates among practitioners over the boundaries of religion, recording what they say and what is at stake for them.

People in the United States have not worked out definitive answers to these questions either. Some people would consider modern forms of witchcraft practiced in the United States to be a religion; indeed, the Rhode Island state legislature passed a law making it so in 1989. What limits the state should place on religious freedom is also a matter of continued debate, no more so than in cases of Christian Scientists denying medical treatment to their children. (Until August 1996, treatment given by Christian Science practitioners was considered “medical” for purposes of Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements, on grounds that to deny them that category would be to violate their religious freedom.)

I propose to define religion in two stages. First, we can use an extremely broad definition, such as “ideas and practices that postulate reality beyond that which is immediately available to the senses.” This broad definition allows us to look at a very wide range of things. Second, for each society we study, we ask how *these* people construct their world. They may have a shared set of beliefs in spirits and deities and thus fit squarely into Western definitions of religion. Or they may speak about impersonal forces, such as the East Asian idea of a life force or *chi* that permeates the natural and social world. Or, they may not focus on describing beliefs at all, but rather, concentrate on carrying out rituals correctly, with a general understanding that the rituals are important. (This description fits the practitioners of Jain religion in India [Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994].)

What we call *religion* may look quite different from one society to another—in the relative importance of a shared belief system, in the degree to which religious practice involves strong emotions, and in the social functions and contexts associated with religious practices.