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Araştırma Makalesi

Din Üzerine Antropolojik Düşünceler

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Öz

Din antropolojisi, sosyokültürel antropolojinin bir alt dalı olarak, dini ve onunla ilişkili toplumsal kurumları antropolojik bir bakış açısıyla inceler. Bu alan, teolojik ve metafizik yaklaşımlardan belirgin biçimde farklı bir yöntemsel tutum benimser. Dinsel inançların doğruluk değeri ya da doktrinsel geçerliliğiyle ilgilenmek yerine, din antropolojisi fenomenolojik ve agnostik bir duruş sergiler. Metafizik iddialar paranteze alınır; dikkat, dini yaşamın deneyimlenen boyutlarına, simgesel ifadelerine ve sosyokültürel dinamiklerine yöneltilir. Bu doktrinsel doğruluktan deneyimsel yoruma geçiş, dinî anlamı inkâr etmez; aksine, bu anlamın insani bağlamlarda nasıl inşa edildiğini, ifade bulduğunu ve müzakere edildiğini anlamayı amaçlar. Bu yönüyle din antropolojisi, toplumsal yaşamda dinin rolünü ve işlevini kavramaya yönelik özgün ve insan merkezli bir çerçeve sunar.

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Research Article

Anthropological Reflections on Religion

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Abstract

The anthropology of religion, a subfield of sociocultural anthropology, examines religion and the social institutions associated with it through an anthropological lens. It adopts a methodological approach that differs significantly from theological and metaphysical perspectives. Rather than engaging with the truth value or doctrinal validity of religious beliefs, the anthropology of religion takes a phenomenological and agnostic stance. Metaphysical claims are bracketed, and attention is directed to the lived experiences, symbolic expressions, and socio-cultural dynamics of religious life. This shift from doctrinal truth to experiential interpretation does not deny religious meaning, but seeks to understand how such meaning is constructed, expressed, and negotiated in human contexts. In doing so, the anthropology of religion offers a distinct and human-centered framework for understanding the role and function of religion in society.

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Introduction

Religion is one of the most profound and enduring aspects of human existence, yet fundamental questions remain unresolved: When did religion first emerge in the course of human life? How did it take shape? And under what conditions did it arise? For this reason, many thinkers have sought answers to these questions that have occupied humanity by developing various theories about the origin of religion. These theories about religion generally aim to explain its origin and function, and it is possible to trace them back to the Presocratic period.[1] In fact, according to Daniel L. Pals, the earliest theories concerning the origin of religion emerged when the first travelers left their regions and discovered that their neighbors worshipped different gods with different names. The ancient historian Herodotus (484–425 BC), for example, proposed a theory of religion when he attempted to explain the Egyptian gods Amon and Horus as equivalents of Zeus and Apollo, the deities of his own people. Similarly, Euhemerus (330–260 BC) regarded the gods as distinguished and influential historical figures who began to be worshipped after their deaths.[2] Although several early thinkers put forward similar ideas about the religions of various communities or tribal peoples, the attempt to explain religion from an anthropological perspective first emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, when a group of intellectuals proposed the use of specific methods and techniques for the comparative analysis of religious beliefs and practices. In this sense, the anthropology of religion is a scientific discipline that studies the religious sentiments of social groups and conducts observations and research on the practices and motifs of religious patterns within cultures.[3] Although there is an intense and ongoing interest in religion, there is neither a unified anthropological theory of religion nor a common methodology for studying religious beliefs and rituals. Scholars in the field have not reached a full consensus on how religion should be defined or what the term *religion* encompasses. Therefore, the starting point of the anthropology of religion is the debate over how religion can be defined. In a sense, this debate reveals the impossibility of establishing a universal, monothetic definition of religion. Instead, it may be more meaningful to propose a polythetic definition-one that emphasizes the diversity of religious beliefs and structures across different anthropological communities.

1. The Problem of Defining Religion

The discussion surrounding the definition of religious phenomena and religion began with Émile Durkheim's effort to formulate a definition applicable to both theoretical inquiry and empirical research. According to Durkheim, such a definition is necessary in order to distinguish between experiences that appear religious but are not, and those that seem non-religious but are, in essence, religious. In his influential work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which had a significant impact on anthropology, Durkheim examines two major approaches that had dominated definitions of religion up to that point. The first of these defines religion in terms of the "supernatural." In this view, religion is regarded as a realm of mystery -an incomprehensible and unknowable world that lies beyond human understanding. Accordingly, religion becomes

[1] Robert A. Segal, "Theories of Religion," *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, Edited by John R. Hinnells, USA and Canada: Routledge, 2015, 49.

[2] Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3-4.

[3] Ali Coşkun, *Din Antropolojisi,* (İstanbul: Kesit Publications, 2014), 25-26; İsmet Tunç, *Türkiye'de Dinler Tarihi Çalışmalarında Antropolojinin Etkisi*, (Ankara: Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Doktora Tezi, 2019), 38-39.

nothing more than speculation about things that fall outside the boundaries of science. Durkheim rejects this conception, which situates religion in a supernatural realm, arguing that the boundary between the natural and the supernatural is ambiguous and not clearly understood. He maintains that attributing extraordinary powers to ordinary objects may signify a sense of mystery or the supernatural for modern people, but what truly amazes us today might have been entirely mundane for so-called primitive humans. For example, it was not irrational or mysterious for early peoples to believe that they could influence objects through sound or mimicry, cause rain to fall, move the stars, or bless the earth. In fact, Durkheim argues, there is no fundamental difference between the techniques used by contemporary agriculturalists to cultivate the land and the rituals performed by early peoples in their attempts to ensure fertility.[4] For Durkheim, religion is an attempt to make sense of the natural world, not the supernatural. His critique of the supernaturalist approach marks an important stance against evolutionist theories that establish a hierarchical progression from magic to religion to science, as we shall see later.

The second approach to defining religion emphasizes the presence of God or spiritual beings. Durkheim rejects this definition on the grounds that such entities are not present in all religions -for example, in Buddhism- which means the definition fails to capture a universal phenomenon. In other words, this approach does not meet the criterion of universality that is required for a scientific definition. Religion, according to Durkheim, is broader than the idea of God or spiritual beings and cannot be adequately defined solely in these terms.[5] This line of opposition, in turn, challenges the hierarchy of religious credibility traditionally afforded to monotheistic religions.

After critiquing the prevailing approaches in the search for a universal definition of religion, Durkheim turns to examine the concept of the "phenomenon of religion" itself. In accordance with his methodological principle of moving from the simple to the complex, Durkheim maintains that a whole can be understood by analyzing the constituent parts that compose it. Accordingly, any phenomenon consists of a systematic association of its elementary components. In this framework, religion -as an integrated and systematic phenomenon- comprises two main categories: belief and rites. Beliefs, which are associated with thought, consist of specific mental representations; rites, on the other hand, refer to particular forms of action. These actions derive their specificity from the beliefs in which they are grounded. For this reason, rites cannot be properly defined without first defining belief. Furthermore, belief itself -one of the two core components of religious phenomena- is composed of two subcategories: the sacred and the profane. At this point, religious belief is defined by its relation to the *sacred*, and not to the *profane*, from which it is sharply and categorically separated.[6] After a long conceptual preparation, Emile Durkheim describes the phenomenon of religion as follows:

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.[7]

[4] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. By Karen Fields, (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 22-26.
[5] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* 27-33.
[6] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* 34.
[7] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* 44.

Religion emerges as a reflection of collective unity, as people come to regard common symbols and objects around which they gather as sacred. This collective unity is most concretely manifested in society itself. Therefore, the symbolic power of religion -its capacity to influence individuals- ultimately derives from society. Religion, then, functions as a system that provides instrumental support for society to recognize and affirm itself through a network of shared symbols. In this sense, religion is understood as the social experience of reality, situated far beyond the bounds of individual experience. Through it, individuals come to sense the presence of a distant, external, and coercive force that transcends their own being. Contrary to the view of reality as a purely social construction, as Warren suggests, Durkheim emphasizes the relatively autonomous structure of religion, and in a certain respect, treats it as a product of cultural construction.[8]

2. Magic, Science, and Religion

The first anthropological theories developed by 19th-century thinkers such as James Frazer, Edward Tylor, and Herbert Spencer center around the relationship between magic, science, and religion. These thinkers -often referred to as evolutionist anthropologists- regarded magic as a form of false or incomplete science practiced by so-called primitive communities. In this framework, magic served as a way for the "primitive mind" to make sense of incomprehensible natural phenomena. This mind, according to them, lacked the ability to form deep causal connections.

Tylor, in particular, sought to explain religion through belief in supernatural or superhuman beings. He argued that the origin of religion lay in *animism*, the belief in spiritual beings. According to Tylor, religion emerged as a result of early humans' attempts to make sense of events and conditions that could not be explained through everyday experience. For instance, the effort to understand dreams and altered states of consciousness (such as trances) led to the belief that the human body contains two entities: one active during the day, and the other -its "twin" or soul-active during sleep or trance states. Although these two forms of existence never directly meet, they are interdependent. Death, then, occurs when the soul permanently departs from the body. Tylor coined the term *animism* from the Latin word *anima*, meaning "spirit." Tylor also proposed that religion evolved through distinct stages, beginning with animism. Polytheistic and later monotheistic religions developed as subsequent phases of this evolutionary process. He believed that if religion emerged as a way of explaining phenomena that people found difficult to understand, then it would eventually lose its significance as science provided more accurate and comprehensive explanations. In his view, humanity had already reached a scientific level capable of explaining many of the mysteries that had once required religious belief.[9]

Frazer, who argued that religion arose from early humans' attempts to explain and make sense of their experiences within the natural world and daily life, also supported the idea that human intellectual development progressed through three stages: magic, religion, and science.[10] He positioned himself as a scientific theorist of religion and deliberately excluded miraculous or supernatural events from his explanations and descriptions of religious phenomena. According

[8] Schmaus Warren, *Rethinking Durkheim and His Tradition*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 123.
[9] Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1883), 368-417.
[10] Fiona Bowie, "Anthropology of Religion," *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, Edited by Robert A. Segal, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 8.

to Frazer, for instance, the Jewish adherence to the Ten Commandments is not based on the belief that these laws were divinely revealed by God. Rather, each of these commandments, he claimed, can be explained through natural or rational grounds and is therefore intelligible and acceptable to both religious and non-religious individuals.[11]

Accordingly, Frazer, as a scientific theorist of religion, adopted the method of comparison and classification in his work *The Golden Bough*. For example, if a particular practice can be shown to occur in a similar form across ten different cultures, this would enable the formulation of a generally valid theory.[12] To this end, he drew on disciplines such as ethnology and anthropology, which allow for the examination of intercultural similarities, behavioral patterns, and parallels.[13] Frazer was not concerned with the moral correctness or incorrectness of the so-called primitive religions he studied. Rather, he approached beliefs and rituals as a historian would -analyzing their development, diffusion, and eventual decline. In his view, explaining a religion is only possible by tracing its origins, examining its earliest and most basic forms, and then following the trajectory of its historical development. This kind of understanding, according to Frazer, cannot be achieved merely by knowing the religion or culture of a single society. It requires a comparative analysis with similar religions or cultures in order to identify shared patterns of behavior across different primitive societies.[14]

The relationship between magic and religion constitutes the central theme of *The Golden Bough*. According to Frazer -as summarized by Pals- the significance of magic and religion for so-called primitive peoples is closely tied to their basic struggle for survival. For instance, hunters depend on animals to sustain themselves, while farmers rely on sunlight and rain to cultivate their crops. When natural conditions fail to meet these essential needs, the primitive mind believes it can influence, control, or correct changes in the natural world. The earliest method for attempting this kind of intervention, according to Frazer, is magic.[15]

Frazer referred to this as "sympathetic magic," based on the belief that nature could be influenced through emotional or symbolic connections. According to him, magic operates on two fundamental principles. The first is the principle of imitation. Primitive people believed that a desired event could be brought about by mimicking it. For example, in a Russian village suffering from a prolonged drought, three individuals climb fir trees in a sacred forest: the first strikes a cauldron with a hammer to imitate thunder; the second produces sparks by rubbing pieces of wood together to simulate lightning; and the third sprinkles water around to represent rainfall. Through this ritual of imitation, they aim to cause rain.[16] The second principle is what Frazer calls contagious magic, which is based on the idea that objects once in contact continue to influence one another even after separation. Actions performed on one object are believed to affect the other. For instance, if someone wishes to harm another, they might create an image or effigy of the person and then destroy it, believing the harm will be transferred. In another example, it is believed that

[11] Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion,* 44.
[12] Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*, (New york: Oxford University Press, 1960), 187.
[13] Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion,* 44.
[14] Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion,* 45.
[15] Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion,* 35.
[16] James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A study in Magic and Religion*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925), 63.

there exists a powerful connection between a person and anything that has been detached from their body -such as hair or nails. If someone gains possession of these items, they are thought to gain influence or control over the person to whom they belonged.[17]

The primitive people's belief in magical rituals functioned, for them, as a kind of science-it expressed certainty. Through magic, they believed they could control, influence, and alter the course of natural events. In the early stages of human development, the primitive mind could not clearly distinguish between the natural and the supernatural. In other words, the boundary between gods and humans was blurred. Supernatural beings were not perceived as superior; rather, humans believed they could intimidate or manipulate them through magical means. However, as knowledge of the natural world grew, humans began to realize their own smallness, vulnerability, and limitations. This growing awareness highlighted the failure of magic and led to a new belief: that powerful, supernatural beings must lie behind the inexplicable forces of the universe. At this point, the distinction between gods and humans became more defined, and the earlier sense of equality faded. Primitive humans lost faith in the magical practices they once believed could guide the workings of nature and instead began to view God as the sole and ultimate possessor of the supernatural powers they once thought they shared. As a result, with the development of knowledge, faith, prayer, and sacrificial rituals emerged. Magic was gradually relegated to the background, becoming associated with superstition and ignorance, and was increasingly viewed as a means of invoking evil spirits. Moreover, magic came to be regarded as a profane intrusion into the domain of the gods.[18] According to Frazer, the fate of magic would later be repeated in the religious phase. Over time, the explanations and solutions offered by religion also ceased to satisfy human inquiry. Eventually, religion was replaced by science, which Frazer saw as the third and most advanced stage of human thought.[19]

In sum, the relationship between magic, religion, and science is often presented in a hierarchical and evolutionist framework. Within this hierarchy, science is regarded as the highest and most advanced form of knowledge, while religion and magic are positioned at the lower levels. This perspective, also found in Tylor's work, has been the subject of considerable criticism. One of the main critics of this model was Lévy-Bruhl. He rejected the hierarchical comparison, arguing that magic and religion constitute entirely different systems of knowledge that cannot be properly compared to science. Lévy-Bruhl emphasized that so-called primitive thought is neither irrational nor a misapplication of logical principles but rather possesses its own internal rationality and coherence.[20] Moreover, according to Lévy-Bruhl, a form of primitive mentality exists in all human minds, regardless of intellectual development. This mentality is deeply rooted, resilient, and cannot easily be dismantled. In fact, he argued that it is unlikely to ever disappear. Were it to vanish, elements such as poetry, art, metaphysics, and even scientific discovery might also cease to exist. Thus, this mentality represents something fundamental and indestructible within human nature.[21]

[17] Frazer, *The Golden Bough,* 11-14.
[18] Frazer, *The Golden Bough,* 91-92.
[19] Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion,* 35.
[20] Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality,* trans. Lilian A. Clare, (New York: Routledge, 1923), 59.
[21] Stanley Jeyaraja, Tambiah, *Büyü, Bilim, Din ve Akılılığın Kapsamı*, tras. By. Ufuk Can Akın, (Ankara: Dost Publications, 2002), 128.

One of the major criticisms of this hierarchical approach came from Bronisław Malinowski in the early 20th century. Challenging this framework, Malinowski argued that magical and religious rituals -as well as beliefs in supernatural powers and beings associated with them- should not be viewed as primitive or inadequate forms of rational, scientific knowledge. Contrary to the claims of Frazer, Tylor, and others, it is misguided to interpret religion and magic as mere illusions or delusions of the human mind during a period when science and technology had not yet developed significantly. According to Malinowski, religion and magic are fundamentally different in nature and fulfill entirely distinct functions within human societies.[22] On the other hand, magic and religion are qualitatively distinct, and it is not possible to reduce one to the other. Magic is logically grounded in the interpretation of mental associations or symbolic connections and must take a "sympathetic" form. In the magical imagination, nature operates solely through sympathetic correspondences-that is, through influences. It is governed by a set of immutable laws, leaving no room for temporary desires, chance, or randomness.[23] Religion, by contrast, regards nature as flexible and subject to change. It holds that nature can be altered by a superhuman force responsible for its creation. Therefore, in light of this fundamental difference between the two, it is not a sound perspective to claim that magic precedes religion or that religion emerged directly from magic.

3. Symbolic Approach

Prominent 20th-century anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and E.E. Evans-Pritchard -who have significantly influenced many recent ethnographic field studies- adopted a new perspective on the study of religion. This shift redirected anthropology's focus toward understanding the meanings religion holds for people and exploring questions such as: What does religion mean to individuals and communities? and How does religion make the world and human existence meaningful?[24] In this context, Clifford Geertz, who conceptualizes religion as a cultural system that provides meaning to human life, offers a comprehensive definition. According to Geertz, religion is:

> (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[25]

However, this approach is not also without its criticisms. Talal Asad, in particular, challenges Geertz's attempt to construct a universal definition of religion centered on symbols. In his influential essay "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," Asad critiques the universalist conception of religion that Geertz proposes in "Religion as a Cultural System," and explains why such a definition is ultimately untenable. According to Asad, "there can be no universal definition of religion", as the elements and relationships that constitute religion are historically specific. More importantly, he argues that any such "definition is itself the historical

[22] B. Malinowski, *Büyü, Bilim ve Din*, trans. By. Saadet Özkal, (İstanbul: Kabalcı Publications, 1990), 7-25.
[23] Mustafa Alıcı, "Din Antropolojisinin Kurucularından James George Frazer", *C.Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, (2010), Volume: XIV, Number:2, 22.
[24] T. H. Eriksen, *Küçük Yerler, Büyük Meseleler: Sosyal ve Kültürel Antropoloji*, trans by A. Erkan Koca. (Ankara: Birleşik Publications,2009), 330-331.
[25] Clifford Geertz, "Religion As A Cultural System", *The Interpretation Of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (Oxford: Fontana Press, 1993), 90.

product of discursive processes."[26] Furthermore, Asad believes that Geertz's symbolic approach insufficiently accounts for the role of social practices and discourses in shaping religion. In his view, scholars of religion should not begin with the assumption that religion is primarily a set of meanings; rather, they should approach religion as the product of historically situated social disciplines and power structures. In this context, Asad contends that Geertz's framework ultimately obstructs the possibility of analyzing how religious knowledge and dispositions are related to material conditions and social practices-and how they are shaped by them.[27]

Conclusion

The anthropological study of religion, from its early formulations in the evolutionist thought of Frazer to more culturally nuanced interpretations such as Geertz's symbolic approach, demonstrates the shifting perspectives on what religion is and how it functions in human life. While Frazer viewed religion and magic as primitive forms destined to be surpassed by science, later thinkers like Durkheim redefined religion as a social reality embedded in collective life. The criticisms that followed -by Lévy-Bruhl, Malinowski, and especially Talal Asad- have shown the limitations of both reductionist and universalist models. As these debates make clear, religion cannot be reduced to false knowledge, universal symbols, or abstract systems of belief. On the contrary, contemporary anthropology emphasizes that religion must be understood within its social, cultural, and historical contexts, as a dynamic field of meaning, power, and practice. In this regard, the task of the anthropologist is not to verify or falsify religious truth claims, but rather to investigate how such claims function within communities, what kinds of worlds of meaning they construct, and how they are lived by individuals.

This methodological commitment often manifests itself in the form of an agnostic or phenomenological neutrality. From this perspective, it is more accurate to consider the phenomenological attitude not merely as a methodological choice, but as a particularly fitting approach to the experiential dimension of religion. Religion is, above all, a phenomenon that manifests itself, is felt, and becomes meaningful within the subject's lifeworld. Focusing on how ordinary people live, interpret, and share their religious experience enables us to approach religion not only through its institutional structures, but also from within the contours of lived consciousness. In this respect, further exploration and deepening of the phenomenological orientation within the anthropology of religion can be regarded as a productive and illuminating direction. Such a perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of religious phenomena at both the individual and collective levels.

[26] Talal Asad "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz", *Man*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June, 1983), 238.
[27] Asad "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz", 239

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