FORUM 34–35: RELIGION, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND THE 'ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION'

A b s t r a c t : This discussion concerns certain important issues in the anthropology of religion. In recent decades, there have been claims in the social sciences that 'religion' has outlived its usefulness as a concept, with criticism coming from a range of disciplines. Thus it is reasonable to ask how significant and intellectually credible the term 'religion' may be, and how useful to our research and writing. Other questions that may be encountered when studying religion(s) are related to the confessional or non-confessional identities of researchers. In the anthropology of religion, there is particularly extensive attention paid to the personal standpoint of individual scholars and specifically to the extent of their involvement with a given religious tradition. On the other hand, among the specificities of religious fieldwork is the high degree of 'agency' of our informants, as expressed especially in the efforts made in a particular religious group to convert the observer to their own beliefs. The participants of the discussion accept the challenges of these difficult problems, and strive to analyze the processes of anthropological and sociological description and interpretation of religion(s).

Participants in Forum 34–35: Religion, Anthropology, and the 'Anthropology of Religion'

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Forum 34–35: Religion, Anthropology, and the 'Anthropology of Religion'

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Keywords: anthropology of religion, ethics of fieldwork, religious conversion, epistemology, critiques of the scholarly category of religion, politics of identity.

FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

In the latest Forum published by the journal, participants were asked to address key questions in the anthropology of religion, one of the most active fields of investigation in post-Soviet Russia and internationally. The following questions were circulated, though a number of the participants chose to focus on just one of the issues raised, or to give an outline of their own work in the subject. The Forum attracted a record number of answers, not all of which are published in the English version, but we have published a substantial proportion of the material, including the final essay by Jeanne Kormina, Alexander Panchenko, and Sergei Shtyrkov, the organisers of the discussion.

Albert Baiburin,
Catriona Kelly

1 *In recent decades, there have been claims in the social sciences that 'religion' has outlived its usefulness as a concept, with criticism coming from across the disciplinary range. Examples include the claim that 'Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes' [Smith 1982: ix], or Asad's contention that 'a transhistorical definition of religion is not viable' [Asad 1993: 30], or Boyer and Bergstrom's assertion that religion is 'a common prescientific category'[1] rather than a useful heuristic concept in scholarly enquiry. How significant and intellectually creditable do you consider the term 'religion'? How helpful is it to your own research and writing? In what contexts would you use it? Do you consider that it is requisite to employ special methods and approaches in the study of 'religious' groups, practices, and movements?*

2 *In the anthropology of religion, there is particularly extensive attention to the personal standpoint of individual scholars and specifically of the extent of their involvement with the religious tradition under scrutiny. What, in your view, are the reasons for this? What does this heightened sensitivity to the identity of scholars tell us about the particularities of the religious 'field' (or 'fields')?*

3 *The characteristic practice of anthropological research is that the cultures under study are to a greater or less extent perceived as 'other'. How significant in your own analytical work is the 'defamiliarisation' of the religious cultures that you observe, the preservation (or creation) of distance from the object in view? Or are such issues not of concern in your work?*

4 *Among the specificities of religious fieldwork is the high degree of 'agency' of our informants, as expressed especially in the efforts made by contacts in a particular religious group to convert the observer to their own beliefs. This is particularly the case when the groups concerned are anyway engaged in active proselytism, as with charismatic Christian groups, for instance [Harding 1987; Kormina 2013]. But this is by no means the only case where members of religious groups may make efforts to make the researcher 'one of them'. Have you yourself encountered such efforts, and if so, did you follow the path of distance or assimilation? Which strategy is most effective, in your view? Have you ever encountered difficulties because of your refusal to undergo religious conversion of one kind or another?*

5 *In the contemporary world, the impact of electronic communication and particularly of the Internet means that it is in principle easy for our research findings to become accessible to members of the groups under study — and we may indeed ourselves pass on our publications and*

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1 'The term religion is to an evolutionary anthropologist what "tree" is to an evolutionary botanist, a common prescientific category that may need to be replaced with other, causally grounded, scientific categories' [Boyer, Bergstrom 2008: 112].

research papers to them. What impact does this have on our research into religious culture? Does the accessibility of research results to informants represent a problem for scholars, or an opportunity?

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YULIA ANTONYAN

<div style="float:left">**1**</div> The question of the term 'religion' is part of a broader academic discussion around the basic concepts of sociology such as 'culture', 'civilisation', 'society', 'identity',[1] etc., the use of which is becoming more and more difficult as a result of a growing multiplicity of meanings and resulting vagueness. At the same time it would be even more problematic not to use such concepts at all, since in that case a certain level of abstraction, which is essential to academic knowledge, would be lost. The term 'religion' is also stuck in a hermeneutic cul-de-sac: not only, as anthropology has evolved, has its scope been widened and its meanings transformed, but so has the relativity of its 'direct' and 'metaphorical' usage. It is hard to understand where religion is religion as such, and where it is 'religion' in inverted commas, that is a phenomenon which does not seem to be a religion, but which has all the features of one (e.g. ideology). The many attempts to define religion have only made the problem worse. Those definitions which make one think of religion as a term when one reads them are, as a rule,

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[1]   There has been a long and extensive discussion of the term 'culture' in academic publications (see, for example: [Gupta, Ferguson 1997]); Norbert Elias and Lucien Febvre have written about the relative nature of the term 'civilisation' [Febvre 1930; Elias 2000], Bruno Latour has reflected on the topic of 'society' [Latour 2005], and Rogers Brubaker has warned against an over-active use of the term 'identity' [Brubaker 2004].

very narrow and include only a small part of the characteristics of the phenomenon (such as 'the institution of relationships with super-natural beings'). But when, for example, one reads Clifford Geertz's well-known definition of religion, which aims to describe the phenomenon as widely as possible, it is extremely difficult to guess what he has in mind.[1] Hence the conclusion that the understanding of religion as a whole continues to be very subjective and specific, despite efforts to expand and universalise it. On the other hand, if we reject the very provisional term 'religion' in favour of a series of more concrete terms, we may be faced with the collapse of the theoretical foundations of the discipline, which may lead to the loss of a systematic vision and the logical connections between a multitude of phenomena which the present-day concept of religion embraces. A multiplicity of new directions will emerge, and each of them will end up inventing the wheel and discovering America, and then conduct long discussions about whether it would not be worth reuniting (which, as we know, is practically impossible for a whole range of technical reasons, as has happened in the case of the separation of sociology and anthropology, which took place accidentally and at the whim of different scholars and institutions, so that now they cannot come together again, although no one can give a comprehensible explanation of what the difference between them is). On the other hand, this 'systematic vision' is also an academic construct, and whether the system really exists is questionable. Indeed, why should we unite archaic magical rites intended to increase the harvest or the fertility of domestic beasts with a collection of social norms such as sharia? What is systematic about that? Only that both are founded on the presence of a world view that asserts the existence of a certain power which is capable of creating and transforming objects, living beings, processes and phenomena? This is very abstract and again begs a lot of questions.

But notwithstanding, none of those who criticise the term 'religion' have, in principle, anything to offer in its place, just as nothing has yet been offered in place of the concepts of 'culture' and 'society'. It may be that from the point of view of scholarship (or simply of common sense?), just reinterpreting a well-known, familiar word, adding new meanings and excluding obsolete ones, offers better prospects than inventing a lot of new terms instead of one old one. Perhaps the fundamental task of the anthropology of religion is indeed the constant renewal of the discourse of the understanding of the term 'religion' through the study of its various facets, mani-festations, transformations of old meanings and identification of new ones.

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[1] 'A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic' [Geertz 1973: 90].

2 They say that it is the people who need to deal with the bats in their own belfry that become psychologists. To a certain extent this is true of anthropologists and sociologists in the context of their choice of research topics. An interest in a particular sphere of anthropology often develops against the background of the peculiarities of the anthropologist's personal biography or the social milieu in which his / her personality was formed. The connection between anthropologists' and sociologists' personal interrelations with religion was discussed by Evans-Pritchard in his essay 'Religion and the Anthropologists'. He found a certain regularity: most of the anthropologists of religion who had preceded him or were his contemporaries had a completely secular attitude to the object of their research (as an invention, an illusion, in a word, what is now called a social construct), while the religious group of anthropologists were invariably Catholics, which proved, in his opinion, that Protestantism included the premises for a secular perception of religion [Evans-Pritchard 1960: 104–18]. This conclusion may be related to the fact that the founding fathers of anthropological theories of religion, Edward Tylor, James George Frazer and Émile Durkheim, had all grown up in very religious Protestant or Jewish families. Now too, amongst anthropologists and sociologists of religion one may encounter both religious people who actively practice their religion and completely secular people. But, to tell the truth, I would not speak of any concrete regularity, although, based on my personal observations, the number of secular anthropologists of religion is far greater than the number of religious ones. But again, the manifestations of the religious and the secular may be very ambiguous and individual. One person's religion may be a tribute to his / her family tradition and part of their identity, while another's uncompromising secularity may be a hidden form of religion. Besides, we know of cases when anthropologists have changed their position in the course of their research and become practising initiates of the tradition that they were studying, receiving, for example, initiation as a shaman. It seems to me that often the choice of a particular field or topic of research may be dictated (sometimes subconsciously) by inner problems, contradictions, convictions and spiritual / intellectual searching, not necessarily of a religious character.

In the secular Soviet milieu, an interest in religion as something forbidden but desirable could also manifest itself through scholarship. Moreover, since direct research into religion was also unwelcome to the Soviet academic establishment, religious topics were studied in the wider context of 'archaic traditions', 'popular beliefs and superstitions', folklore, etc. Furthermore, the collection and study of 'traditional' beliefs and practices was often perceived not only as preserving them and saving them from oblivion, but also as material for their potential reconstruction. The ethnographers and folklorists

who had begun their careers in the 60s and 70s became in the 90s initiators of the 'reconstruction' of various practices (magical, shamanic, parochial, festival, etc.). In general, in the 90s the tendency towards the 'rationalisation' and commercialisation of scholarship, in connection with the commercialisation of all spheres of society, was very fashionable — a practical use and pragmatic application had to be found for everything. I myself was given 'advice' on more than one occasion to write something practical and applied, such as a guide to traditional healing practices (while I was writing my dissertation about them) or (while I was doing research into neopaganism) to assist in the reconstruction of some pagan ritual or the details of the cult of some divinity or other. For me, of course, this was just an opportunity for irony, but for many people this sort of activity was part of their personal relation to religion. One of my colleagues, whose field of interest was polytheistic religions, became seriously interested in the possibility of becoming the priestess of a neopagan community.

3 The degree to which one is distanced from the subject of one's research depends, in my view, on the preconditions and context of the research. There was indeed a time when the fundamental idea of anthropology, which was born in the West at the time of modernism and evolutionary theories, was to penetrate 'another' culture (tacitly understood as 'less developed') and try to 'translate' it into the language of 'one's own' culture (correspondingly 'more developed') with the aim of the better understanding of the latter's evolutionary journey. Moreover, the word 'another' was understood literally, and the further it was from the researcher's place of residence, the more unfamiliar, the more exotic, the better. One must without fail journey to the ends of the earth, learn languages that were as different as possible from one's own, and live in conditions which were as dissimilar as possible from what one was used to. Then, when local 'ethnography' arose as a counterbalance to colonial anthropology, its task was the reconstruction, study and interpretation of 'its own' culture (of which the anthropologist / ethnographer considered himself / herself a representative), with the aim, as a rule, of raising its prestige, 'preserving' and 'saving' its traditional forms from the processes of modernisation in the context of nationalist ideologies and movements. However, today both these patterns are losing, or have already lost, their relevance. Now any community or culture is studied as the 'other', in relation first and foremost to the researcher himself / herself, irrespective of the cultural or social milieu from which he / she comes. Sometimes the road to the 'other' is reminiscent of the archaeological method of 'excavation', when the researcher wants to show that in familiar social and cultural surroundings one can find an unfamiliar 'other', little-known or completely unknown, with which most members of the said community do not come into

contact in their everyday lives. Thus the French scholar Jeanne Favret-Saada, who was born in North Africa and worked there as an anthropologist, afterwards 'unearthed' in modern France completely 'archaic' practices of witchcraft and magic comparable to what they have in Africa, invisible to the eye, not part of everyday life, but incorporated into the context of the social interrelations in the milieu studied [Favret-Saada 2007]. I have found myself doing the same in Armenia, 'discovering' magical practices of healing and divination, contact with which gave rise to a feeling of a journey into a mythical 'timeless' past, or observing neopagan rituals. Closed communities, to which outsiders and the unconverted have limited access, such as a monastery, may also serve as examples of such an 'other'. In other cases, anthropological research tries rather to construct (and then deconstruct) 'the other' in a milieu which is considered entirely 'one's own' according to its social, cultural and temporal parameters. This is the genesis of research that discusses various mechanisms and subtleties of the formation of religious identity, for example, or religious everyday life, holiday practices, etc., of the average social or ethnic majority to which the researcher himself / herself belongs. In these two cases the problem of distance which the question raises is completely different. In the first case the distance is there from the beginning; both the researcher and the informant are aware of it, and the aim of their communication is precisely to overcome this distance, which was always the traditional aim of anthropology. In the second case the distance is deliberately constructed by the researcher himself / herself, since he / she needs to discern 'the other' in a place where there is much more of 'his / her own'.

4 I have come across situations where my interest in a community, its members, and their ideas and practices has been understood as the interest of a potential convert or at least as that of someone drawn to these ideas if only subconsciously ('you didn't come here by chance'), the logical culmination of which ought to be conversion. Thus after a week of 'visiting' a community of the newly-formed 'Spring of Life' movement, Protestant in character, in the Armenian community of Lebanon, my new acquaintances, who up to then had answered all my questions with enthusiasm, began to display open impatience: 'You have found out so much and seen so much, now it is time for you to accept Christ into your heart'. I had to reply that I had not yet made the decision and I needed more time. Such an answer was received with understanding. But I never found out how long that 'understanding' would have lasted, since my stay in Lebanon was, unfortunately, not long enough. However, I had similar problems lying in wait for me among the neopagans with whom I made friends and in whose community I was, on the whole, accepted as 'one of their own' precisely because I never raised objections to anything

they asserted. This was probably perceived as a readiness to convert, since I had only to make certain incautious comments in a recent public lecture concerning the discourse about 'the genetics of the nation' to unleash a storm of bewilderment, disappointment and resentment from my neopagan friends, who suddenly discovered that I did not share some of their fundamental convictions. Judging by some of the comments that reached me, they seem to have decided that this was a temporary madness, the influence of external evil forces. How I shall recover from my 'madness' in order to return to the field I do not yet know.

For me personally the problem is not agency itself, but certain of its forms. 'Agency' may manifest itself anywhere where there is the conviction that this particular religion / ideology / world view is the sole bearer of truth. Vegans, for example, can be no less 'agentive' than Jehovah's Witnesses, even taking into account that the latter are active proselyters as a matter of duty. But this can become a real problem when 'agency' is directed not towards the exposition and apologetics of one's convictions with the aim of attracting other people to one's side, but towards the aggressive identification of those who do not agree, as a result of which the researcher is directly or indirectly required to state his / her position clearly. In this case such a situation makes the research very difficult, and sometimes psychologically impossible. Thus I have understood that I sub-consciously avoid contact with aggressively minded personalities and prefer to deal with more liberal informants, which of course might have an influence on the objectivity of the results of the research. But sometimes this is beyond me. Thus one interview with a priest — a militant supporter of the patriarchal family, a homophobe and fundamentalist — during which he set out his convictions and proudly recounted examples of his 'struggle' for them, was so difficult that by the end of it I had a feeling of complicity in his activities, which were not only inhuman but, in fact, criminal. In order to neutralise that feeling at least, I had cautiously to express my attitude to certain of his stories. In reply he started to instruct me in a self-satisfied manner that I was wrong to 'pity them', because 'they are not human beings'. I did not dare to express any stronger opposition for fear of spoiling my field, but I am still not sure that I was right to act as I did. Overall, in such cases I am always faced with the question of where the boundary lies between the researcher and the human being with certain convictions, and in which cases it ought to be crossed, and in which one ought to restrain oneself and remain 'behind the scenes', or even play along with it. And to what extent this can be regarded as hypocrisy. The answers to these questions always depend on situation and context; I hardly think it possible to draw up a universal model for the researcher's behaviour and reactions in such cases.

5 As in everything else, in the situation described one can see both the problem and the prospects. Everyone knows the problems: the reaction of a religious community that is being studied may be completely unpredictable, even to the point of creating obstacles to further contact with them. Naturally, it goes without saying that texts which may become accessible to people who have been subjects of research must be written in accordance with all the norms and rules of ethics (which, incidentally, does not always happen in reality), but even under these conditions it is precisely the neutral, secular tone of description and analysis proper to academic texts that may seem offensive to a religious person. The emphasis that a researcher places on particular materials may also provoke disagreement. Moreover, the reaction is not necessarily from the subject 'being studied'. For example, after one of my articles about neopagans, in which I mentioned that among the neopagan converts there was a priest, I received a phone call from the chancery at Etchmiadzin (the residence of the Catholicos of All Armenians) demanding either that I should give the person's name or else write a denial of this 'slander' on the clergy of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

In the process of the interview an anthropologist is often required to give at least an external expression of agreement with the thoughts, ideas and norms that are part of the religious identity of the persons being studied (see the previous answer). The researcher must create the illusion of loyalty, that is pretend that he / she at least has no serious objections. But when we write our texts often what we are engaged in is the deconstruction of what makes up the essence of the convictions and practices of the religious community being studied. When an anthropologist's behaviour is compared with his / her texts it may well create an impression of hypocrisy, and even of malice (if the informants are inclined towards conspiracy theory).

But besides this, the very situation, in which one person is in the position of the researcher, tacitly recognised as a 'high' position, and the other is in the position of 'being researched', which is consciously perceived as a lower position (analogous to the positions of doctor and patient or teacher and pupil) may create an unpleasant feeling for the 'subject', particularly if in his / her opinion the researcher is less intellectually and spiritually evolved that he / she, the informant, is himself / herself. After all, anthropologists are people too (forgive me for being trite), there are those among them who are pleasant and those who are unpleasant, those who are witty and widely educated and those who are less so, winsome, charismatic, and the reverse. But, I think, when in the field, all are visited by the temptation to believe themselves something of a superman (or superwoman), who holds everything that takes place around him / her in his / her field of attention, or even has the ability to change or direct the course of events by means of his / her questions or actions. However, very

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often this position of a 'superman' subconsciously or deliberately seeps into the tone of the texts written up on the basis of his / her results, which may upset the informants, whose attitude to the text may be partly based on their personal impressions of the researcher. In a word, it is almost impossible to avoid problems connected with the accessibility of the results of the research to the community that has been its subject, because of the extreme subjectivity and unpredictability of their reactions. As a last resort one might write about very sensitive topics in languages which the subjects of the research cannot for the most part read (assuming, of course, that the researcher is able to do so).

There are without doubt, however, also opportunities in this, including above all reaching a new level of demand for anthropological scholarship and a new interactive research methodology. In the end, any decent anthropological text is an attempt at self-knowledge, speaking in the name of a human community. It may be painful both for the 'subject' and the author, it is true, in rather different senses, and for the author this may go as far as threats against his / her liberty, health and life, if it is a question, for example, of doing research in the fundamental milieu of radical Islam or the militant nationalist branches of Christianity. But perhaps this is a unique means of making anthropology a really necessary discipline, and not a 'glass bead game'. As for the research methodology, the 'etic' approach will be replaced by a dialogue, an interaction between the emic and etic approaches to the topic. The informants' reaction to the research becomes a part of it. In this way the research does not end with the writing up and publication of the text, it continues, one might say, spontaneously, since it is on the basis of informants' reactions that the social discourse on the topic is composed and it is possible to see the real disposition of forces and influences, the distribution, re-cognisability and similar perception of ideas, practices, signs, stereo-types and so on, and finally identify a series of meanings hitherto unclear and hidden behind the conventions of social interrelation-ships. At a wider level of comparisons, the 'primary' academic text may become the provocation that models a concrete situation, which gives the anthropologist the possibility of working practically in 'laboratory' conditions.

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