

Tools for Understanding Folk Religions

Introduction to Social Science and Religious Research

1. The "scientific" study of religion
 - a. The phenomena of religion (as defined by the researcher) are examined: practices, rites, rituals, ceremonies, symbols, artifacts, belief systems, etc.
 - b. These phenomena are analyzed rationally in light of the underlying assumptions of the researcher. The analysis is used to develop models or theories of the religion being studied.
 - c. The problem of reductionism: the bulk of social science approaches to religion overlook the theological content and are interested in fitting the observed phenomena into the researcher's paradigm (the following descriptions are adapted from Hiebert; for extended discussion see Evans-Pritchard, Theories of Primitive Religion and Taylor, Beyond Explanation, 17-66):
 - i. Edward B. Tylor's evolutionary model, which envisioned a development in religions from animism (or magic) to religion and then from religion to science. He saw religion as fundamentally an illusion brought about by the immaturity (in evolutionary terms) of the minds that proposed the ideas. Frazer's contemporaries also manifested similar attitudes.
 - ii. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's functional theory, which limited the consideration of religion to a people's self-expression serving as a social glue (truth was not important, only religion's function in holding a society together)
 - iii. Freud's psychoanalytic view, in which religion is explained in terms of projected emotions and unconscious motivations by which we seek to deal with our guilt and anxiety.

2. Two significant issues in the study of religion (see Terry Muck, *The Mysterious Beyond*)
 - a. **What kind of observer am I?**
 - i. The insider: the stance taken by proponents of the religion.
 - ii. The reporter: the stance taken by an outsider whose job is to objectively report what he/she sees (a kind of scientist of religion). We must beware of "relative" objectivity--actually subjectivity disguised to look objective.
 - iii. The specialist: essentially reporters who go beyond the normal reporting method and specialize in one religion or one aspect of religion.

- b. **What does it mean to take other religions seriously?**
 - i. Respect: Handling with care the religious beliefs we are working with
 - ii. Humility: A way of doing a reality check; we must approach this whole topic with humility.
 - iii. Sensitivity: we are rarely sensitive enough about the religious commitment of others, and all-too-often over sensitive about our own.
 - iv. Advocacy: Inappropriate at the data collection stage of religious research.

3. Tools of research: What are some of the major reasearch "brushes" that we can use to understand folk religions?
 - a. Participant observation
 - b. Symbol and ritual analysis
 - c. Script analysis
 - d. We use these tools to help understand the building blocks of folk religions, including:
 - i. World view
 - ii. Powers
 - iii. Myth
 - iv. Symbol
 - v. Ritual

4. A Christian evaluative approach:
 - a. The general Christian approach is to examine religious doctrines and/or ideas and evaluate them in light of divine revelation. There appear to be two foundational tests of all religious claims:
 - i. Are they in harmony with God's revealed word? (Deut 13:1-5)
 - ii. Do they work? (Deut 18:20-22)

 - b. Builds on significant presuppositions, including:
 - i. The Bible is God's revelation about Himself to all people of the world
 - ii. All cultures have elements which Scripture commends as well as elements which Scripture condemns
 - iii. The Holy Spirit is at work today in the lives of all genuine believers, who have the ability to develop a relevant, Scriptural approach to life in their context
 - iv. All humans are affected by sin; every human endeavor or activity is in some way tainted by its effects.
 - v. God is the author of cultural variation, and all cultures can be subsumed under His authority.

vi. The chief focus of history is not human cultures or religions, but the Kingdom of God. (Matthew 24:9-14; see also Mark 13:10). The proclamation of the kingdom is to go to all nations. In our day of religious pluralism, and with many calling for a cessation of Christian mission under the rubric of all roads lead to heaven, this passage stands as a reminder that we must preach the good news of Jesus to ALL nations, not just to those that already have a Christian influence. Ladd states, "This Gospel of the Kingdom, this Good News of Christ's victory over God's enemies, must be preached in all the world for a witness to all nations. This is our mission." (Ladd, Gospel of the Kingdom, p. 130). Further on, he states: "*The ultimate meaning of history between the Ascension of our Lord and His return in glory is found in the extension and working of the Gospel in the world. . . . The divine purpose in the nineteen hundred years since our Lord lived on earth is found in the history of the Gospel of the Kingdom. The thread of meaning is woven into the missionary program of the Church.* (Ibid., p. 133; emphasis mine).

5. Excursus: Emic and Etic Perspectives (Pelto and Pelto, Anthropological Research, p. 62

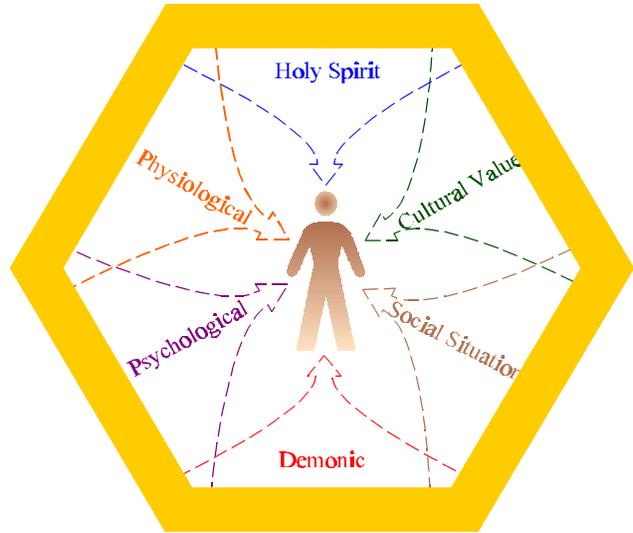
This distinction was developed for anthropology by Ward Goodenough as an application from linguistic theory, named by linguist Kenneth Pike in 1956 (Bernard, Research Methods, p. 226).

Emic Approaches (<i>Insider's perspective</i>)	Etic Approaches (<i>Outsider's perspective</i>)
1. The primary method is interviewing, in depth, and in the vernacular.	1. Primary method is observation of behavior.
2. The intent is to seek the categories of <i>meanings</i> , as nearly as possible in the ways the people themselves define things.	2. Intent is to seek patterns of behavior, as defined by the observer.
3. The people's definitions of meaning, their idea systems, are seen as the most important 'causes' or explanations of behavior.	3. Impersonal, nonideational factors, especially material conditions, are seen as significant movers of human action.
4. Systems and patterns are identified through ical analysis, especially by a quasi-linguistic analysis of contrast sets.	4. Systems and patterns are identified through quantitative analysis of events and actions.
5. Cross-cultural generalizations must wait for the <i>conversion</i> of culturally specific patterns and meanings into more abstracted, intercultural categories (etic categories!).	5. Cross-cultural generalizations <i>can</i> be made directly, by applying the same methods of observation, with the same outside-derived concepts, to two or more different cultures.
6. The methodological strategy is fundamentally inductive, for research cannot proceed until the "peoples' categories of meaning" have been <i>discovered</i> .	6. The methodological strategy can range from "pure induction" to various mixtures of inductive and deductive research.

6. A holistic and integrated approach

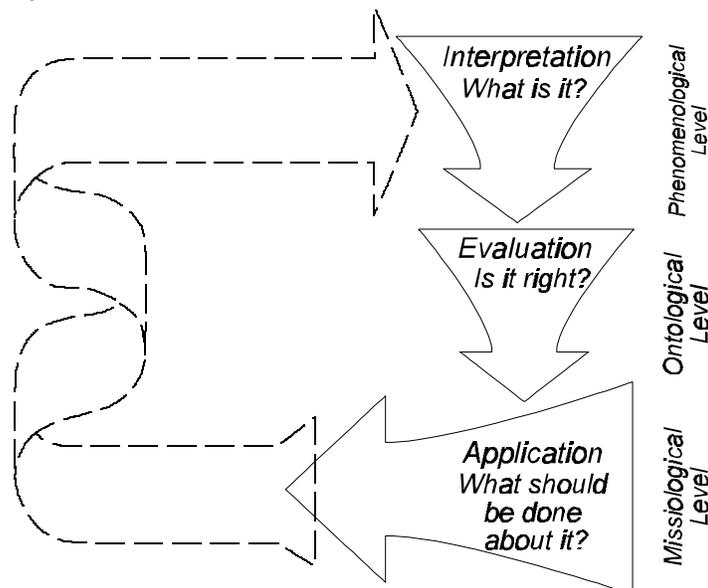
a. The problem: Many elements of religions are socially observable phenomena, but not all of them are. At the same time, many elements of religions are theological, but not all are.

- i. The scientific approach reminds us of the need for careful observations. It also helps us understand the context of the culture in which the religion is found.
- ii. The theological approach provides the evaluative paradigm or hermeneutical grid through which our analysis is to take place.



b. Levels of analysis

- i. Phenomenological analysis: emic in nature; requires holistic understanding of the elements and environments of culture, including the spiritual environment (diagram). See, for example, M. W. Payne's analysis of Akinsola Akiwowo in "Akiwowo, Orature and Divination: Approaches to the Construction of an Emic Sociological Paradigm of Society."



- ii. Ontological or epistemological analysis: etic in nature, requires holistic understanding of the religious propositions and/or ideas underlying the practices and the development of a biblical response to them.
- iii. Missiological analysis: lives in tension between emic and etic. It should be:
 - (1) Sensitive to the culture/phenomena
 - (2) In conformity to the governing principles of Scripture
 - (3) Focused on facilitating an indigenous response to the issues.