

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION, MAGIC, AND WITCHCRAFT

FOURTH EDITION

Rebecca L. Stein & Philip L. Stein

The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft

This concise and accessible textbook introduces students to the anthropological study of religion. Stein and Stein examine religious expression from a cross-cultural perspective and expose students to the varying complexity of world religions. The chapters incorporate key theoretical concepts and a rich range of ethnographic material.

The fourth edition of *The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft* offers:

- increased coverage of new religious movements, fundamentalism, and religion and conflict/violence;
- fresh case study material with examples drawn from around the globe;
- further resources via a comprehensive companion website.

This is an essential guide for students encountering anthropology of religion for the first time.

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The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft

Fourth Edition

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For Elijah

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Preface

Although courses in the anthropology of religion are usually upper-division courses taught at four-year institutions to anthropology majors, the course is increasingly being taught at the lower-division level, especially at community colleges. Here the emphasis is not on the training of majors, of whom there are few, but on meeting a general education requirement in the social sciences or humanities. Most significantly, this course is probably the only anthropology course that such students will take. Therefore the instructor has the obligation not only to discuss the topics of religion, but also to teach the student about the nature of anthropology and to present its basic principles.

We had great difficulty in finding a textbook that is appropriate for this type of course. Three types of books exist. First is the reader, which often includes articles that are too advanced for the introductory student. A major problem is the inconsistency of terminology and concepts as the student moves from article to article. The second is the general textbook on the anthropology of religion; but these appear to be written for upper-division students who have already been introduced to the field and often heavily emphasize theory. Third, there are abundant books on the more familiar world religions but few that discuss religions in small-scale societies, where much of the anthropological studies have been conducted. Our goal in writing this text has been to introduce the beginning student to the basic concepts involved in the anthropological study of religion, including an introduction to ethnographical information from a wide range of societies and a basic introduction to the field of anthropology.

One of the most difficult decisions we have had to make in writing this text is the organization and order of presentation of topics. The range of topics is large, and they overlap in myriad ways—everyone has his or her own approach. We have attempted to present the material beginning with basic concepts and proceeding to the more complex. For example, we begin with

myth, symbolism, and ritual before moving on to magic and witchcraft later in the text.

We have attempted to include a number of ethnographic examples with a good geographical distribution. Societies discussed in the text are included in Table 1.1, "Culture areas of the world," and the locations of many of these are shown on the maps at the front of the book. Of course, many topics are associated with classic ethnographic studies, which have been included. We have also attempted to balance the presentation of a wide variety of cultures with the inclusion of certain key societies that reappear as examples of several topics throughout the text, to give students some continuity and a deeper understanding of a small group of societies. These societies include the Navaho of North America, the Yanomamö of South America, the Azande and Yoruba of Africa, the Murngin of Australia, and the Trobriand Islanders off the coast of New Guinea.

The writing of a manuscript is a major and complex undertaking. It is a thrill to see the book in print, but when reading it in book form and using it in class, the authors often see things that could have been done a little differently, as well as having ideas for new avenues to explore. We have continued to make a number of changes in this fourth edition. Some of these changes are minor: a little reorganization, an expansion or contraction of a particular topic, the introduction of a new example or elimination of an old one, and a little rewording to make the point a little clearer. Other changes are more substantial. For example, we have added a new Chapter 12 in which we discuss fundamentalism, formerly in Chapter 11, and new material on religion and conflict, violence and peace. We have added small sections on apotropaic features found in archaeological context, vampire beliefs in New English, big gods, and witchcraft in Soweto, South Africa. We have also added four new boxes on "The Power of Storytelling," "Spiritualism and Séances," "Nationalism as Religion," and "The Veil in Islam."

To assist the student in learning the material, we have divided each chapter into several sections with different levels of headings. Terms that appear in the Glossary have been set in bold. Each chapter concludes with a summary, study questions, suggested reading, and suggested websites. Additional materials for students and instructors are available on the companion website www.routledge.com/cw/stein

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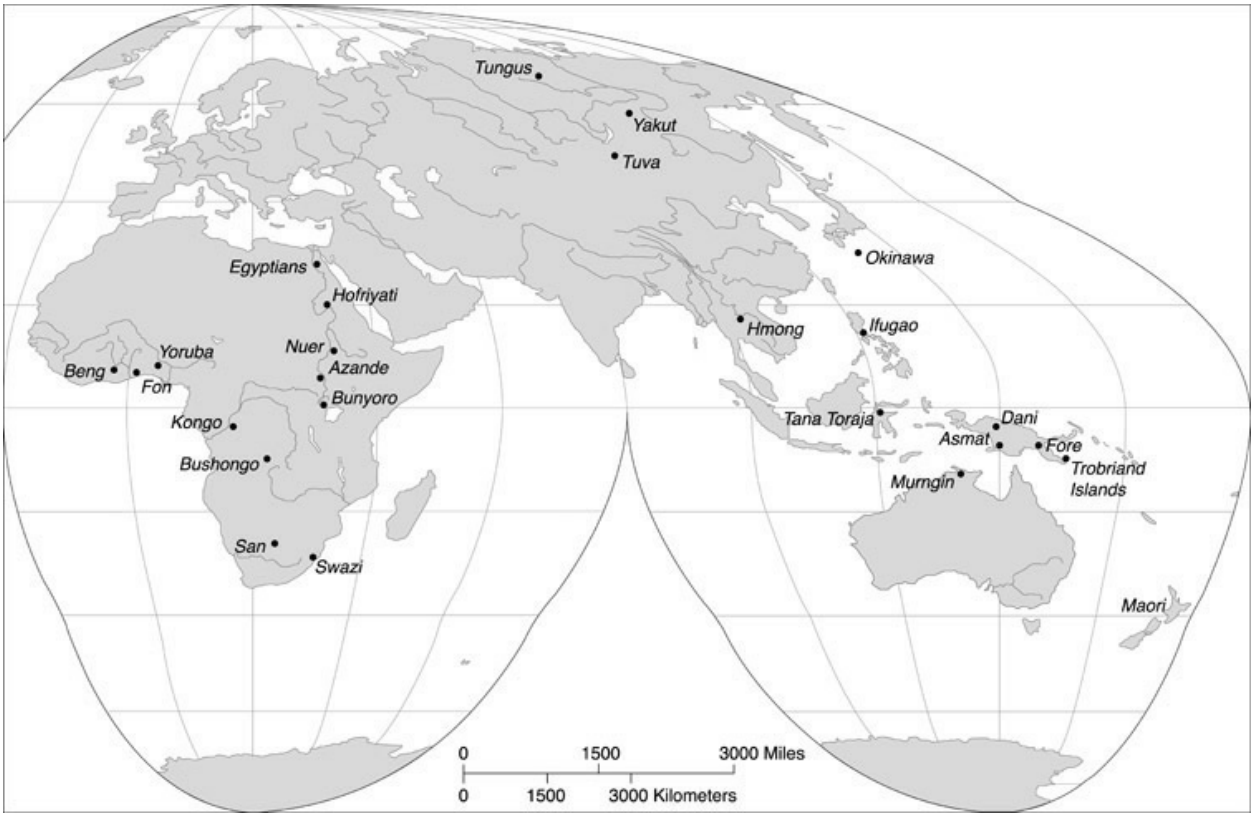
We would like to thank everyone at Routledge for their assistance and support in the writing of this book. We also want to thank our students for

their assistance. After all, this book was written for them. The text was originally based on our lecture notes for an anthropology of religion course which developed over many years with student dialogue. The manuscript was then used as a textbook, which provided an opportunity for student feedback.

Finally, we wish to thank our respective spouses, Robert Frankle and Carol Stein, for their patience and support, and assistance.



Map 1 Map showing location of societies discussed in text: Western Hemisphere



Map 2 Map showing location of societies discussed in text: Eastern Hemisphere

Chapter 1
The anthropological study of religion

Human beings pose questions about nearly everything in the world, including themselves. The most fundamental of these questions are answered by a people's religious beliefs and practices, which are the subject of this book. We will examine the religious lives of a broad range of human communities from an anthropological perspective.

The term *anthropological perspective* means many things. It is a theoretical orientation that will be discussed later in the chapter. It is also an approach that compares human societies throughout the world—contemporary and historical, industrial and tribal. Many college courses and textbooks focus on the best-known religions, those that are practiced by millions upon millions of people and are often referred to as the "world's great religions"—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, among others. This book will expand the subject matter to include and focus on lesser-known religious systems, especially those that are found in small-scale, traditional communities. As we do this, we want to look for commonalities as well as to celebrate diversity.

This book will not simply describe a series of religious systems. We will approach the study of religion by looking at particular topics that are usually included in the anthropological definition of religion and providing examples to illustrate these topics from the anthropological literature. We obviously are unable to present the thousands of religious systems that exist or have existed in the world, but we can provide a sample.

The anthropological perspective

The subject of this book is religion as seen from an anthropological perspective. What does this mean? The term **anthropology** refers to the study of humanity. However, anthropology shares this subject matter with many other disciplines—sociology, psychology, history, and political science, to name a few. So how is anthropology different from these other disciplines?

One way in which anthropology differs from other subjects is that anthropology is an integrated study of humanity. Anthropologists study human societies as systematic sums of their parts, as integrated wholes. We call this approach **holism**. For example, many disciplines study marriage. The anthropologist believes that a true understanding of marriage requires an understanding of all aspects of the society. Marriage is profoundly influenced by politics and law, economics, ethics, and theology; in turn, marriage influences history, literature, art, and music. The same is true of religious practices and beliefs.

The holistic nature of anthropology is seen in the various divisions of the field. Traditional anthropologists speak of *four-fields anthropology*. These four fields are physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistic anthropology, and cultural anthropology. Today, with the rapid increase and complexity of anthropological studies, anthropologists are becoming more and more specialized and focused on particular topics. The often-simplistic concept of anthropology as being composed of the integrated study of these four fields is rapidly breaking down, but a review of these four fields will acquaint those who are studying anthropology for the first time with the essential nature of the discipline.

Physical anthropology is the study of human biology and evolution. Physical anthropologists are interested in genetics and genomics; evolutionary theory; the biology and behavior of the primates, the group of animals that includes monkeys, apes, and humans; and paleontology, the study of the fossil record. Anthropologists with a biological orientation discuss the evolutionary origins and the neurobiology of religious experience.

Archaeology is the study of people who are known only from their physical and cultural remains; it gives us insight into the lives of now extinct societies. Evidence of religious expression can be seen in the ruins of ancient

temples and in the art and writings of people who lived in societies that have faded into history.

The field of **linguistic anthropology** is devoted to the study of language, which, according to many anthropologists, is a unique feature of humans. Much of religious practice is linguistic in nature, involving the recitation of words, and the religious beliefs of a people are expressed in their myths and literature.

Cultural anthropology is the study of contemporary human societies and makes up the largest area of anthropological study. Cultural anthropologists study a people's social organization, economics and technology, political organization, marriage and family life, child-rearing practices, and so forth. The study of religion is a subject within the general field of cultural anthropology. However, we will be drawing on all four subfields in our examination of religion.

The holistic approach

Studying a society holistically is a very daunting task. It requires a great deal of time—time to observe human behavior and time to interview members of a society. Because of the necessity of having to limit the scope of a research project, anthropologists are noted for their long-term studies of small, remote communities. However, as isolated small communities become increasingly incorporated into larger political units, anthropologists are turning more and more to the study of larger, more complex societies. Yet even within a more complex society, anthropologists maintain a limited focus. For example, within an urban setting, anthropologists study specific companies, hospitals, neighborhoods, gangs, clubs, and churches. Anthropological studies take place over long periods of time and usually require the anthropologist to live within the community and to participate to a degree in the lives of the people under study, while at the same time making objective observations. This technique of study is referred to as **participant observation**.

Students of anthropology are initially introduced to small communities such as **foraging bands**, small **horticultural** villages, and groups of **pastoral nomads**. They become familiar with the lives of the Trobriand Islanders off

the coast of New Guinea, the Navaho of the American Southwest, the Yanomamö of northern South America, the Murngin of northern Australia, and the San of southern Africa. Some people refer to these societies as being "primitive," but *primitive* is a pejorative term, one laden with negative connotations such as inferior and "less than." A better term is **small-scale**. When we say *small-scale*, we refer to relatively small communities, villages, and bands that practice foraging, herding, or technologically simple horticulture.

We will also be examining aspects of what are often referred to as the "world's great religions." Like the term *primitive*, the term *great* involves a value judgment. These familiar religions include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. They are similar in that the origins of these religions are based on the lives of a particular individual or founder, such as Moses, Christ, Mohammad, and the Buddha. These religions have spread into thousands of different societies, and their adherents number in the millions. The small-scale societies that are more traditionally studied by anthropologists, by contrast, are usually not based on the lives of particular prophets or founders. They tend to be limited to one or a few societies, and their adherents might number only a few hundred or a few thousand.

If they involve only a very small number of people, then why study these small-scale religions? Among the many questions that anthropologists ask about humanity are the following: Are there characteristics that are found in all human societies, what we might call **human universals**? And when we look at universals, or at least at very widespread features, what are the ranges of variation? Returning to the example of marriage, we could ask the following questions: Is marriage found in all human societies? And what are the various forms that marriage takes? We might ask similar questions about religion. To answer these questions, anthropologists go out into the field, study particular communities, and write reports describing these communities. Questions of universality and variability can be answered on the basis of descriptions of hundreds of human societies.

In addition, the goal of anthropology is to study the broad range of human beliefs and behaviors, to discover what it means to be human. This is best accomplished by examining religious and other cultural phenomena in a wide variety of cultures of different sizes and structures, including our own. It is often said that the aim of anthropology is to make the strange familiar and the

familiar strange. Only through cross-cultural comparisons is this possible.

The study of human societies

Ethnography is the descriptive study of human societies. People who study human societies and write ethnographies about them are cultural anthropologists; they are sometimes referred to as **ethnographers**.

However, not all descriptions of human societies are written by ethnographers. For example, an archaeologist is someone who studies the physical and cultural remains of societies that existed in the past and are known today only from their ruins, burials, and garbage. Yet archaeologists can, to a limited degree, reconstruct the lives of people who lived in ancient societies. Sometimes the only descriptions we have of people's lives are those written in diaries and reports by explorers and colonial administrators. Although these descriptions are far from complete and objective, they do provide us with some information.

Although we will visit a few societies that are known solely from their archaeological remains, most of the examples in this book are from societies that exist today or have existed in the recent past. Many of the societies we will discuss were first visited and described by anthropologists in the early to mid-1900s. Although these societies have changed over time, as all groups do, and although many of these societies have passed out of existence, anthropologists speak of them in the **ethnographic present**; that is, we discuss these groups in the present tense as they were first described by ethnographers.

Throughout this book we will be presenting examples from the ethnographic literature. These communities are found throughout the world, including some very remote areas. To better understand their nature and distribution, we can organize these societies into **culture areas**. A culture area is a geographical area in which societies tend to share many cultural traits. This happens because these groups face similar challenges from the environment and often come up with similar solutions and because cultural traits that develop in one group easily spread to other nearby groups.

Each human society—and even subgroups within the society—exhibits

unique characteristics. The common traits that define a culture area tend to lie in the realm of subsistence activities and technology, a common response to the challenges from the environment, although some similarity in other facets of the society, including religion, may also be found. For example, the California culture area, whose boundaries are somewhat different from the present-day political unit, includes a group of communities that exploit acorns. Acorns require processing that involves many steps and much equipment, but they provide a food resource that is plentiful and nutritious and that can be stored. These features permit the development of permanent and semipermanent communities, unlike those developed by most foragers.[1]Table 1.1 lists the major culture areas of the world along with the names of representative groups. All of the groups used as examples in this book are included. Many are located on the maps at the front of this book.

Table 1.1 Culture areas of the world

Culture area	*Societies discussed in text*	*Features*
	North America	
Arctic Coast	Inuit, Yup'ik	Hunting of sea mammals and caribou, fishing; shelters made of snow blocks, semisubterranean sod houses, summer tents made of skins; dog-drawn sledges, tailored skin clothing; settlement in small family groups.
Northern Subarctic	Chipewyan, Winnebago	Hunting caribou, fishing; conical skin tents, bark or skin canoes, snowshoes, toboggans; highly nomadic bands with chiefs.
Great Basin-Plateau	Paiute, Shoshoni	Acorn collecting, fishing, hunting of small game; small brush windbreaks, elaborate basketry; band organization.
California	Cahuilla,	Acorn collecting, fishing, hunting of small game; simple brush dwellings, semisubterranean lodges; basketry;

	Chumash, Pomo	multiplicity of small contrasting tribes, semipermanent villages.
Northwest Coast	Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw, Tlingit	Salmon and deep-sea fishing, hunting and collecting; large rectangular plank dwellings with gabled roofs, large canoes, lack pottery, elaborate development of decorative art; permanent villages, chiefs, elaborate system of rank.
Plains	Arapaho, Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Crow, Kiowa, Lakota, Ojibwa	Hunting of bison, some horticulture; tipi dwellings; transport by dog, later horse; absence of basketry and pottery, hide utensils; large bands, competitive military and social societies, warfare important.
Eastern Woodland	Iroquois, Seneca	Horticulture, hunting; multiple-family dwellings of bark (longhouses); matrilineal clans, village chiefs.
Southeast	Cherokee, Natchez	Similar to Eastern Woodland with Mesoamerican influence.
Southwest	Apache, Hopi, Navaho, Akimel O'odham, Tewa Yaqui, Zuni	Intensive cultivation of beans, maize, and squash; pueblos consisting of great multifamily terraced apartments, single-family dwellings with more nomadic groups; highly developed pottery and loom weaving; village as largest political unit.
Mesoamerica	Aztec, Huichol, Maya	Intensive agriculture; state societies with developed technology including monumental stone architecture, stone sculpture, system of writing, woven textiles, metallurgy; fully developed dynastic empires, social classes.
South America		
Marginal	Siriono, Yahgan	Hunting, fishing, and gathering; family as basic social unit.

Tropical Forest	Jivaro, Mehinaku, Pirahãs Yanomamö	Slash-and-burn horticulture; villages often consist of one communal dwelling located on rivers; bark canoes and dugouts, clubs and shields, bows and arrows, blow guns, bark cloth, hammock, tobacco; village settlements under chiefs, warfare strongly developed with cannibalism present.
Circum-Caribbean	Arawak, Carib	Intensive farming, hunting and fishing; pole and thatch houses arranged in streets and around plazas surrounded by palisade; hammocks, poisoned arrows, loom weaving of domesticated cotton, highly developed ceramics, gold and copper worked; large villages, social classes, chiefs, extreme development of warfare.
Andean	Araucanian, Inca	Intensive irrigation agriculture; paved roads, monumental architecture, highly developed ceramics, weaving, and metallurgy; large cities, divine ruler over large empires.
		Africa
Mediterranean	Berbers	Agriculture and sheep herding; marginal Near Eastern culture, towns and cities; Islam.
Desert	Tuareg	Livestock herding (horse and camel) and tent shelters; intensive fruit and cereal cultivation, camels, sheep, goat herding, stone and plaster dwellings; Islam.
Egypt	Egyptians, Nubians	Flood-irrigated agriculture (wheat and barley); early civilization.
Western Sudan	Fulani, Hausa	Agriculture and cattle herding; urban centers, dynastic rule and empires; Islam and animism.

Eastern Sudan	Dinka, Nuer	Cattle herders and scattered agriculturalists; Islam and animism.
East Horn	Abyssinians, Somali	Agriculture and cattle herding; Coptic Christianity.
East African Cattle	Bunyoro, Maasai, Swazi, Zulu	Cattle herding, dairying, hoe agriculture; iron work, age grades, warfare, ancestor worship.
Madagascar	Tanala	Marginal Indonesian culture; wet rice irrigation agriculture.
Khoisan	Ju/'hoansi San	Hunting and gathering; nomadic bands, brush shelters.
Guinea Coast	Beng, Bushongo, Dogon, Fon, Kpelle, Yoruba	Hoe agriculture, root crops and maize; large dynastic kingdoms, city and towns, market centers, judicial systems, craft guilds, artistic development.
Congo	Azande, Kongo, Mangbetu, Pygmies	Yam and banana cultivation; double-court kingdoms, markets, native courts; iron and brass work; Pygmies: hunting and gathering, trade with agriculturalists.
	Eurasia	
Southwest Asia	Bedouin	Cereal irrigation agriculture, plow, herding; Islam.
Central Asian Steppe	Mongols	Horse domesticated for transportation, milk, hides; Islam.
Siberian	Tungus, Tuva, Yakut	Fishing, hunting, reindeer domestication; conical skin dwellings; tailored skin clothing.
East Asian civilizations	Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Okinawan	Intensive agriculture including wet rice and animal husbandry; ancient civilizations; urban centers and industrialization; several religious systems including Shinto and Buddhism.
		Wet and dry rice agriculture, water buffalo;

Southeast Asia	Balinese, Hmong, Javanese	bamboo houses; Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam.
India	Nayar, Toda	Plow agriculture, wheat and barley; caste system.
European	Basques, Viking	Mixed agriculture and animal husbandry; urbanization and industrialization; mainly Christian.
	Oceania	
Indonesia-Philippine	Berawan, Dyaks, Ifugao, Tana Toraja	Irrigation and terracing, wet rice agriculture, water buffalo; large multifamily dwellings on piles, betel chewing, elaborate textiles, blow guns; Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, animism.
Australia	Murngin, Yir Yoront	Hunting and gathering economy; simple windbreaks, spears and spear-throwers, bark containers; independent bands, highly elaborate kin organization; totemism.
Melanesia	Asmat, Buka, Dani, Fore, Gururumba, Trobriand Islanders	Yams and taro horticulture, fishing; elaborate ceremonial houses, high development of wood carving, canoes, bows and arrows; isolated hamlets under local chief, regional specialization in economic production, trading voyages; chronic petty warfare.
Micronesia	Palau, Truk	Yams and taro horticulture, fishing, collection of breadfruit and coconut; expert navigation in sailing canoes; intertribal warfare.
Polynesia	Maori, Samoan, Tikopia	Taro, yams, coconut, breadfruit cultivation, fishing; large thatched dwellings, tapa cloth, kava, tattooing, sculpture in wood and stone, outrigger canoes with sails; hereditary social classes and divine chiefs;

mana, tabu.

Table 1.2 Food-getting strategies

	Foragers	*Pastoralists*	*Horticulturalists*	*Intensive agriculturalists*
Examples	San, Murngin, Shoshoni	Nuer, Maasai	Gururumba, Yanomamö, Azande	Aztec, Korean, Amish
Food getting	Food collectors: gathering, hunting, fishing	Animal husbandry	Farming with simple hand tools	Farming with advanced technology (e.g., irrigation, fertilization, plows)
Community variables	Low population density, small community size	Low population density, small to medium community size	Moderate population density, medium community size	High population density, large community size
Settlement patterns	Nomadic or seminomadic	Nomadic or semi-nomadic	Basically sedentary, may move after several years	Permanent settlements
Specialization	No full-time specialists, some part-time	Few full-time specialists, some part-time	Few full-time specialists, some part-time	Many full-time specialists
Social stratification	Generally none	Some	Some	Significant

Besides geographical distribution, there are other ways in which

anthropologists organize societies. One commonly used scheme is to organize societies in terms of their subsistence strategy, focusing on how they make a living (Table 1.2). Commonly used categories are foragers, horticulturalists, pastoralists, and agriculturalists. Of course, these are not precisely delineated categories but divisions of a continuum. Foragers are peoples without any form of plant or animal domestication. They tend to live in small, isolated groups that are found today primarily in areas that are difficult to farm. Horticulturalists are peoples who garden in the absence of fertilization, irrigation, and other advanced technologies. Pastoralists are peoples whose primary livelihood comes from the herding of domesticated animals. Peoples who plow, fertilize, and irrigate their crops are termed *agriculturalists.* The latter develop relatively large communities with more complex technologies. Societies that have the same subsistence strategy generally have other features in common, such as settlement patterns, population density, and the presence of specialists.

The Fore of New Guinea: an ethnographic example

In the preceding sections of this chapter we learned about some basic concepts of anthropology, such as holism, and we were introduced to the concept of ethnography. Now let us turn our attention to a particular example to illustrate these ideas.

The holistic approach sees human behavior as a complex set of interacting behaviors and ideas. In examining a society, we might begin with a particular problem that interests us, but we soon realize that to truly understand this problem, we have to look at many other aspects of the society.

An example of this was a study of the Fore, a group of about 14,000 horticulturalists living in the eastern highlands of New Guinea (Melanesia culture area). The problem that brought the Fore to the attention of the Western world was a medical one. The solution to the problem brought the Nobel Prize in Medicine to one of the investigators.

When the Australian government first contacted the Fore in the 1950s, a significant number of individuals were found to be suffering from a particular illness. The illness was having a major impact on the population: about 200

people were dying of the illness each year, the victims being primarily women and children.

This illness is characterized by a variety of symptoms, but the most obvious ones are jerking movements and shaking, which make planned motor activity difficult. The course of the illness is about nine months. At the end the victim can no longer stand or sit up and can no longer eat or drink water and soon dies. The Fore call this illness *kuru,* which means "to tremble with fear" in the Fore language.

The medical team that was sent in to deal with the disease sought the cause. Because it appeared to be largely confined to the Fore, the team thought it might be genetic or due to a toxin in the environment. However, *kuru* was finally determined to be the result of an infectious agent called a prion. The major question was how the *kuru* prion was passed from one person to another. Was it passed on through contaminated water, through the air, or through sexual activity? The answer to the puzzle was proposed by anthropologists: cannibalism.

It was the custom of the Fore to eat the body as part of the funeral rituals—one aspect of their religious practices. The body of the deceased was carried down to an abandoned field, where kin dismembered and cooked it. Close relatives then consumed the pieces. Because cooking does not destroy the prions, some of them entered the bloodstream through cuts and open sores and eventually entered the brain, where, many years later, the person began to show symptoms of the disease. Because women and children, who have lower social status, were more likely to eat the brain, they were the most likely to develop the disease.

The modern medical community now had an explanation for what caused the disease and knew how it was transmitted from one individual to another. The government had a "cure" to the epidemic: eliminate the practice of cannibalism. As a result, cannibalism stopped, and *kuru* eventually disappeared, although this took some time because the disease has a long incubation period. However, the Fore themselves did not understand this explanation and stopped eating the bodies of their dead only because not to do so would mean spending time in jail. The Fore did not accept the scientific explanation of the disease. Think about how difficult it would be for the doctors to convince the Fore that *kuru* was caused by tiny prions that no one could see. One might as well be talking about tiny evil spirits that also cannot

be seen.

The Fore knew the cause of *kuru,* at least in their world. It was the result of sorcery. Sorcery is the evil form of magic, which we will discuss in Chapter 7. The **sorcerer**, the person who practices sorcery, would steal something that was once a part of or in contact with the victim, such as a piece of clothing or a lock of hair. The material was then made into a bundle along with some leaves, bark, and stones and was bound up into a package. After reciting a spell, the sorcerer would place the bundle into muddy ground, and as the bundle rotted, the victim would develop the symptoms of the disease. This belief influenced everyday behavior, as individuals were careful to hide things that could be retrieved and used by a sorcerer.

In spite of this caution, people still developed *kuru*. In this case, a **divination ritual** was used to reveal the identity of the sorcerer causing the illness. As we will see in Chapter 7, many people use such techniques to reveal things that are difficult or impossible to discover by other means. Once the sorcerer was identified, the Fore had many options to counter the activity of the evildoer. A person with *kuru* might also have consulted a healer.

The fact that *kuru* struck primarily women had significant social consequences. Many men lost wives through *kuru*, and the shortage of women meant that many men were unable to find wives. In addition, men with children who had lost their wives had to perform many domestic chores normally reserved for women, including farming.

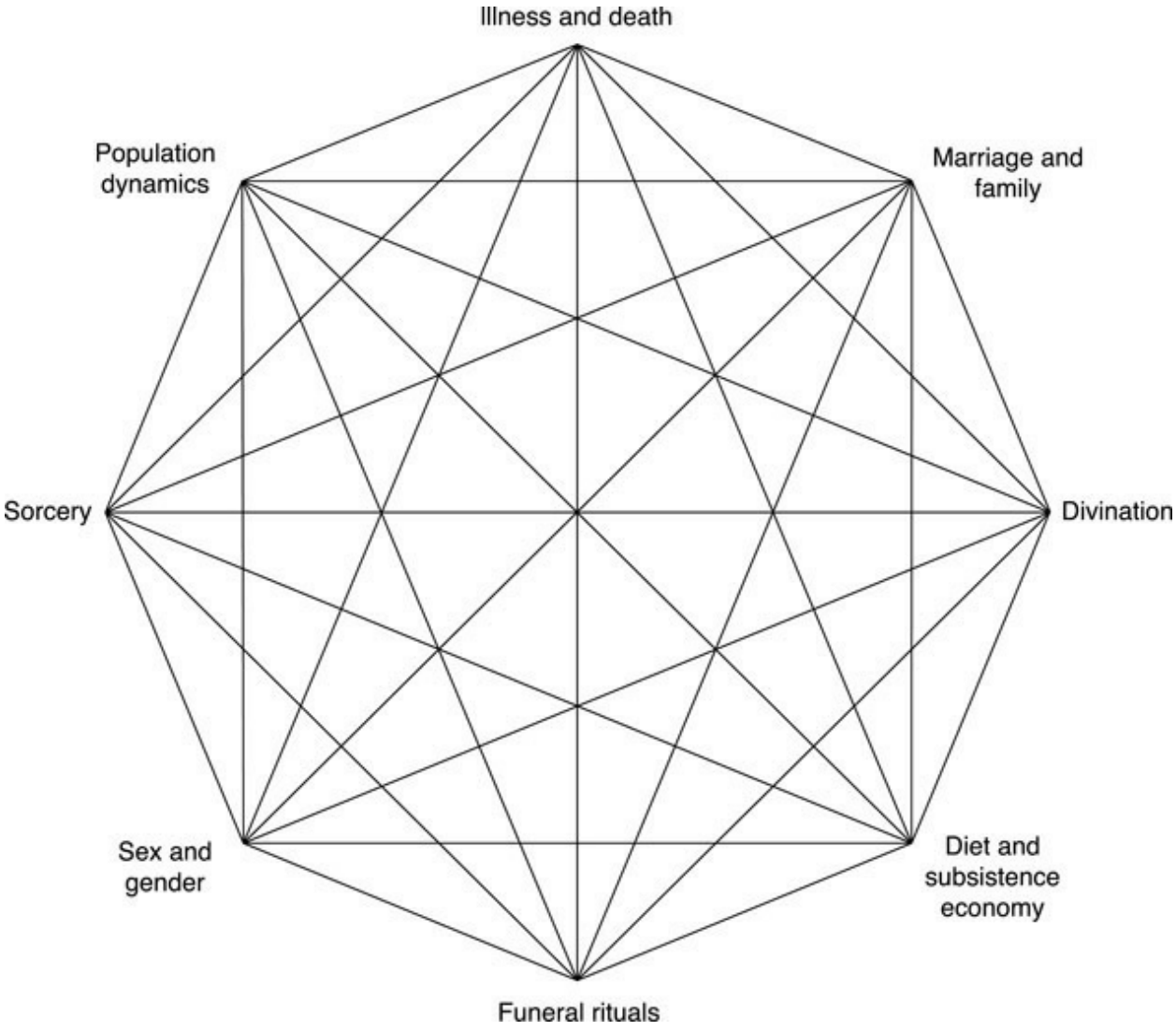


Figure 1.1 Holism. A complete understanding of the disease *kuru* among the Fore of New Guinea requires an understanding of the relationship of *kuru* to other aspects of Fore culture, some of which are shown in this diagram.

The ethnography of the Fore and the description of *kuru* illustrate the concept of holism (Figure 1.1). From the Western point of view, we begin with a medical problem: a disease. Then we see how this fatal disease affects various aspects of the society because of the death of women of childbearing age. This includes marriage, the family, the raising of children, farming, and so forth. Also, we see how the society attempts to explain and deal with the disease through religion. A description of *kuru* among the Fore as only a medical problem fails to provide us with a complete understanding of that disease.

Two ways of viewing culture

We can ask the question: What causes *kuru* among the Fore? From our viewpoint a complete answer to that question includes both biological factors (the disease-causing organism) and cultural factors (the practice of cannibalism). However, the Fore themselves would give another answer to this question: *Kuru* is caused by sorcery. Another aspect to the holistic approach is to consider both insider and outsider perspectives.

An anthropologist—or any scholar, for that matter—cannot be completely neutral and objective when describing a culture. Observation, recording, and analysis involve processing data in one's mind. One's own cultural background, education, training, and other factors will act as a filter or lens that colors what are thought of as objective observations. Physicians, using a medical model, searched for the cause of *kuru* through techniques learned in medical school that are based on a set of postulates developed through the scientific method. Although the physicians were able to discover the biological cause of *kuru*, the disease-causing protein, they were unable to discover the mode of transmission. Medical science identifies a series of transmission pathways, and none of them offered a valid explanation. It took anthropologists, viewing the situation from a holistic, anthropological viewpoint, to make the connection between *kuru* and cannibalism, although this had to be confirmed through a set of procedures mandated by the scientific method.

The physician and the anthropologist are outsiders looking in. They see Fore culture in terms of Western philosophy and theory. They speak of the Fore using words that categorize experience in a particular way. This is referred to as an **etic perspective**. There are advantages to an etic perspective. Just as a friend or therapist might see patterns to a person's life that the person might overlook, an outside analyst might see patterns of behaviors or beliefs in a culture that the members of that group might be unaware of. Another advantage is that the anthropologist can apply a consistent form of analysis to many different societies that are being studied. This permits anthropologists to make comparisons between societies and perhaps to discover some universal principles about human behavior.

Yet the Fore see their world from an altogether different perspective, using

linguistic categories and basic assumptions about their world that differ profoundly from ours. To the Fore, sorcery is the ultimate cause of *kuru*, and this makes sense in their culture. An **emic perspective** is one that attempts to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied. Of course, the big question is, how successful can we really be at this?

Cultural relativism

How do you feel about the Fore practice of cannibalism? In the course of looking at different societies, anthropologists often observe behaviors that seem strange and sometimes disturbing. We have grown up in a particular society, and the behaviors and ideas of our own society seem to us to be natural and correct. It is also natural to use our own society as the basis for interpreting and judging other societies. This tendency is called **ethnocentrism**.

Anthropologists realize, however, that a true understanding of other peoples cannot develop through ethnocentric interpretations. Thinking of other people as primitive, superstitious, and immoral only colors our observations and prevents us from reaching any kind of true understanding about human behavior and thought. Anthropologists attempt to remain neutral and to accept the ways of life of other communities as appropriate for those who live in these communities. Anthropologists attempt to describe and understand people's customs and ideas but do not judge them. This approach is known as **cultural relativism**. The goal is to study what people believe, not whether or not what they believe is true.

For example, funeral rituals differ from other rituals in one major respect: there is a dead body. All societies have ways of disposing of the corpse in one way or another. Burial is quite common, but there are a number of variables such as where the grave is located, what the body is buried in, what objects are buried with the body, and so on. Bodies can also be placed in trees to decay, and later the bones may be cleaned and buried. Bodies can be cremated, and the remains kept in a container, buried, or scattered at sea. Among the Yanomamö of Venezuela and Brazil, the cremated remains are ground into a powder. At various times after a person's death, the family

gathers together and prepares a banana stew into which some of the cremated ashes are mixed. Then they drink the mixture. And, of course, as we saw with the Fore, there is the custom of eating the body.

The practice of drinking cremated remains or eating human flesh would probably horrify most North Americans, and its practice in U.S. society would probably lead to some type of reaction on the part of the society—most likely psychiatric confinement. On the other hand, the Yanomamö are horrified by the U.S. practice of burial because it leads to the decay of the body in the ground. They believe that the finest expression of love is for close relatives to provide a final resting place for their loved ones within their own bodies. Is this practice wrong, immoral, or dangerous? The answer to this question, of course, lies within the cultural practices of the group and how that group defines correct and appropriate behaviors.

Postmodernism

We may wonder if it is at all possible for someone from one society to truly get to know and understand people living in another society. Beginning with the Renaissance, scholars based their knowledge on the ideals of rationality, objectivity, and reason. Science was seen as the means for the discovery of knowledge, truth, and progress. This way of approaching an understanding of the world is termed **modernity**. It was thought that through modernity order could be created out of chaos. Based on the principles of modernity, scholars believed that it was possible to gain a true understanding of all peoples and all societies.

Beginning in the 1980s, the **postmodern** movement had a broad academic impact across many disciplines. In stark contrast to the ideas of modernity, postmodernism denies the possibility of acquiring, or even the existence of "true" knowledge about the world. All knowledge is seen as being a human "construction" that we must try to "deconstruct." The postmodern movement emphasizes the limitations of science, that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, that there are multiple viewpoints and truths, and the importance of being aware of our own viewpoints and biases. In contrast to modernity's emphasis on order, postmodernism sees contradictions and instabilities as

being inherent in any social group or practice.

The value of postmodernism for anthropology has been to reinforce the idea of multiple ways of seeing the world—that there is no one right way to think or to do things. This is an extension of the concept of cultural relativism. Postmodernism serves as a reminder of how the ethnographer herself can influence the fieldwork situation. As a result, ethnographers are more self-conscious and more aware of their own positions and biases (Box 1.1). Every person sees the world through the lens of his or her own culture. We cannot remove the lens, but we can become more aware of it.

Postmodernism, taken to its logical extreme, says that it is impossible for a person from one culture to understand someone from another culture. Perhaps it is even impossible for any one person to truly understand any other person. Given all this, could anthropology as a discipline even exist? Most anthropologists have taken a middle ground approach—appreciating the lessons of postmodernism while attempting to avoid this extreme point of view.

Box 1.1 Karen McCarthy Brown and Vodou

Karen McCarthy Brown first met Mama Lola in 1978. On the basis of a dozen years of research and writing, Brown would write the classic ethnography *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*.[2] This book was at the forefront of many important trends in anthropology. It was centered on the experiences of a single individual and was influenced by feminist and postmodern ideologies. In the book, Brown speaks candidly of her own experiences doing participant observation research and how she became involved in the religion of Vodou to a degree that perhaps even goes beyond that standard—becoming a Vodou priestess herself. (The Vodou religion will be discussed in Chapter 11.)

The book focuses on the life and practices of Mama Lola, a Haitian immigrant living in New York City. Among the themes of the book is the persecution experienced by Haitians in the United States and the difficulties they face in trying to practice their religion. Brown continues to focus on religious practices that take place outside of standard

religious institutions. This kind of activity has become a major part of religious life in modern urban cultures. This is especially true in the United States, where religious pluralism is on the rise, partly owing to recent immigration patterns.

Universal human rights

Some anthropologists, however, question the approach of complete neutrality represented by cultural relativism and the approach of complete subjectivity of postmodernism and ask: Are there any basic human rights and universal standards of behavior? This is an area of debate, one that often focuses on the religious practices of other peoples that may include such customs as physical alterations of the genitalia or cannibalism.

Cultural relativism is one of the basic concepts necessary to anthropology, and it should not be put aside lightly. Our first approach to any cultural practice should be to try to understand it in context—to understand the meaning it has for people in that culture. After doing so, however, is it possible to say, "I understand this practice and why this culture does it, but it is still wrong"? The difficulty in this is knowing where to draw the line, and strict criteria must be used. One such set of criteria was proposed by Robert Edgerton:

> I shall first define [maladaptation] as the failure of a population or its culture to survive because of the inadequacy or harmfulness of one or more of its beliefs or institutions. Second, maladaptation will be said to exist when enough members of a population are sufficiently dissatisfied with one or more of their social institutions or cultural beliefs that the viability of their society is threatened. Finally, it will be considered to be maladaptive when a population maintains beliefs or practices that so seriously impair the physical or mental health of its members that they cannot adequately meet their own needs or maintain their social and cultural system.[3]

It is important to note that the criteria are based on the survival of the society and its ability to function—not on an outsider's perception of morality. Edgerton includes as an example the high levels of stress and fear related to witchcraft beliefs in some cultures, a topic to which we will return in Chapter

10.

The Aztec practice of cannibalism is another example. The prehistoric Aztecs were an agricultural society located in the Mesoamerica culture area. In Aztec society a small elite used religious and military power to conquer neighboring groups. They took tribute in the form of gold and other valuables from the people they conquered. Both slaves and captured prisoners of war were sacrificed and eaten. The benefits of the conquest went almost exclusively to the elite. One analytical approach to the practice of cannibalism by the Aztecs argues that it was an adaptation to a protein-poor environment. A culturally relativistic approach would also point out that the sacrifices were done to please the Aztec gods. Edgerton argues against both of these interpretations.

Edgerton points out that sacrifice and cannibalism were conducted with very little ritual preparation—bodies were rolled down steeply sloped temple steps to be butchered below. The bodies were dealt with in much the same way as a side of beef might be. Human flesh was considered a delicacy and greatly desired, to such an extent that wars were fought with the primary goal of gaining human captives for sacrifice.

The negative impacts were not only on the neighboring groups. The Aztec elite did not share the wealth with the commoners. Even commoners who served in the army did not do so as equals. While the nobles wore helmets, armor, and shields, the commoners had none of this equipment. As Edgerton writes, "The splendors of Aztec culture cannot be denied, but they were achieved at great cost by the many largely for the benefit of the ruling few."[4]

Despite this questioning, cultural relativism remains of utmost importance to anthropologists. Our first approach should always be to try to understand a culture's beliefs and behaviors in context, to learn what meaning the world has through their eyes.

The concept of culture

In the previous examples of the Aztec and the Fore, we observed a number of specific behaviors and beliefs. For example, an anthropologist living among the Fore for a period of time would, of course, record descriptions of Fore life

in much more detail and cover many other aspects of their lives—marriage and family, child rearing, hunting and farming, trade, technology, political organization, folklore, and so on. It is obvious that the body of behaviors and beliefs of the Fore are quite different from ours. These behaviors and beliefs make up Fore **culture**.

In anthropology the term *culture* is used as a technical term. It does not refer to the arts or the "finer things of life." Although the term is widely used and discussed, finding a definition that is acceptable to all anthropologists is a difficult task.

The British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) first used the term *culture* in its anthropological sense. In 1871, Tylor wrote, "Culture … is that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[5] In this definition Tylor recognized that culture is a "complex whole," which is a reference to the holistic concept. And he noted that culture includes customs that people acquire by growing up in a particular society; that is, culture is learned.

When we look at a group of social insects, such as ants, we see a society in which individuals behave in certain stereotypic ways. When we look at a group of humans, we also see certain behaviors that appear to be stereotyped, repetitive, or customary. Yet besides the much greater complexity of human behavior, there is a major difference between ant and human behavior. Ant behavior is innate; that is, it is coded in the genes—it is a part of the ant's biological heredity. Although some aspects of human behavior are likely to be innate, the preponderance of human behavior is learned, handed down from one generation to the next, and is shared by a group of people. Culture is seen in the way people dress, how they greet one another, how they go about their chores, and how they worship their gods. For example, the actions that are performed in a ritual are actions that are learned from someone else, perhaps a parent or a priest, and thus they are passed down from one generation to the next.

One of the consequences of the social transmission of culture is that human behavior is complex and variable. Unlike biological inheritance, in which change occurs slowly through the mechanisms of biological evolution, learned behavioral patterns can change very rapidly in response to changing

conditions. Also, the human species, which is very homogenous biologically, exhibits a great many different cultures.

Another important feature of culture is that it is based on the use of **symbols**. Symbols are shared understandings about the meaning of certain words, attributes, or objects, such as the color red symbolizing *stop* in traffic signals. The connection between the two is arbitrary; there is no obvious, natural, or necessary connection. For example, in most Western societies black is the color associated with mourning. However in other cultures, the color associated with mourning may be white, red, or even green.

Culture is learned primarily through symbols. Language can be thought of as a string of symbols, and we learn, communicate, and even think through the use of these symbols. Symbols are obviously an important area of discussion for the study of religion. The Christian cross, for example, symbolizes not just the religion itself, but a particular philosophy and history. Chapter 3 discusses the nature of symbols and their role in religious practice.

Viewing the world

The idea of culture involves much more than describing human activity. People also have different belief systems and different perceptions and understandings of their world and their lives.

Culture gives meaning to reality. We live in a real, physical world, yet this world is translated through the human mind onto a different plane. We look out a window and see a mountain rising above us. To the geologist the mountain is a structure made of rock formed through natural processes. To the hydrologist concerned with bringing water to a desert town, the mountain is the place where snowfields are found. To the biologist it is the home of a great many plants and animals, many of them perhaps endangered.

To many people, however, a mountain is much more than a physical thing. The mountain might be the home of the gods or the place where the souls of the dead congregate after death. Mountains figure prominently in many Biblical stories; for example, Mount Sinai was where Moses received the Ten Commandments, and Mount Ararat was where Noah's ark came to rest. Psalm 121 reads: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh

my help."[6] Other sacred mountains include Mount Olympus, where the gods of ancient Greece lived, and the four sacred mountains of the Navaho world. We may label these images as being part of the imagination of a people, yet to the people the sacredness of a mountaintop may be as real as the presence of rocks, snow, or plants.

The study of religion

The beginning point of any discourse is to define the object of study—in this instance, **religion**. Yet the task of defining this term is a challenging one indeed. We must avoid using a definition that is too narrow or one that is too vague. Many definitions that have been proposed have been so narrow that they apply only to some cultures and only to some of the phenomena that anthropologists traditionally place within the domain of religion. Such definitions often are ethnocentric, including only those ideas that are considered "religious" for that culture. In such definitions many topics, such as magic and witchcraft, are often excluded. On the other hand, a definition that is too inclusive and vague loses much of its meaning and usefulness.

In spite of the difficulties of defining religion, anthropology is a social science, and the methodology of science requires that we define our terms. We need to use an **operant definition**. This is one in which we define our terms so that they are observable and measurable and therefore can be studied. So what would a good operant definition of religion be? We can start by looking at the various ways in which scholars have attempted to define the term.

Attempts at defining religion

Many definitions of religion share many of the elements that we included in our definition of culture. Perhaps we can define a religion as a system of beliefs and behaviors, based on a system of symbols. But how can we distinguish religious beliefs and behaviors from other aspects of culture? After

all, we can recognize, for example, particular beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that define political or economic processes.

Analytic definitions focus on the way religion manifests itself or is expressed in a culture. An example would be defining religions by stating that religious practices generally include rituals.

Ninian Smart, for example, stated what he felt were the six dimensions of religion.[7] These comprise the following:

- the institutional dimension (organization and leadership);
- the narrative dimension (myths, creation stories, worldview);
- the ritual dimension (rites of passage and other important ritual activities);
- the social dimension (religion being a group activity that binds people together);
- the ethical dimension (customs, moral rules);
- the experiential dimension (religion involving experiences of a sacred reality that is beyond ordinary experience).

Functional definitions focus on what religion does either socially or psychologically. For example, rituals would be seen as a means to bring a group together and bring individuals comfort. Theorists who have used a more functional definition of religion include Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and anthropologists Émile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz. Geertz wrote:

> A 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.[8]

One of the problems with functional definitions is that they could apply equally well to beliefs and behaviors that are not religious in nature. Others feel that functional approaches are reductionist, reducing religion to a few feelings and behaviors that are not, in and of themselves, religious. For both these reasons, it can be difficult to separate religious and nonreligious systems using a functional definition. This does not mean that the social and psychological functions are not important. They are, and functionalism as a theoretical approach to studying religion (discussed further below) has much

to offer. As a definition, however, it alone is not sufficient.

An **essentialist definition** of religion looks at what is the essential nature of religion. It emphasizes the fact that religion is the domain of the extraordinary—things beyond the commonplace and the natural. On the basis of this idea we would say that a religion is a system of beliefs and behaviors that deals with the relationship between humans and the sacred supernatural.

The term **supernatural** refers to things that are "above the natural." Supernatural entities and actions transcend the normal world of cause and effect as we know it. In the supernatural world, wondrous things occur. Supernatural beings defy the basic laws of nature. In the supernatural world, objects move faster than light, heavy objects fly, and creatures become invisible.

However, not all supernatural phenomena are thought to be religious. Consider the folktale in which the handsome prince is turned into a frog. This is surely a supernatural occurrence—handsome princes do not turn into frogs in the natural world—but this occurrence is hardly a religious one. To address this problem, we add the term *sacred* to the definition of religion. **Sacred** denotes an attitude wherein the subject is entitled to reverence and respect.

Many theorists have defined religion in terms of the supernatural as the core religious beliefs of any religious system. In 1871, Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as **animism**, a belief in spirit beings (gods, souls, ghosts, demons, etc.). Much later, Melford Spiro defined religion as an "institution consisting of culturally patterned interactions with culturally postulated superhuman beings."[9]

The problem with an essentialist definition is that such definitions often become too specific, focusing narrowly on spirit beings for example, or risk being too vague if they only reference the supernatural. As with other definitions we have looked at, essentialist definitions by themselves may not be enough but do point to areas of great importance in religion.

A true understanding of the breadth of religious practices among the world's societies will become clear as you progress through this text. We encourage you to keep an open mind and settle on your own definition as you gain more knowledge and understanding. However, as was discussed previously, as an endeavor in the social sciences, this text needs an operant definition in order to proceed.

One would like to have a simple definition of the term *religion*. However, the search for a simple, yet useful definition remains elusive. Religion is a concept constructed by the human mind that includes a particular set of human beliefs and practices. As a cultural construct it is strongly influenced by culture and by philosophical and theoretical backgrounds. The practices that are included under the rubric of religion vary from scholar to scholar, and definitions that focus upon religious systems found in large, urban societies differ considerably from those found in small-scale societies. Each definition previously explored offers clues to important elements of religion, but each by itself is incomplete.

Perhaps it is best to think of religion as a set of cultural beliefs and practices that usually include some or all of a basic set of characteristics. While not an exhaustive list, it will provide us with an operant definition as we move ahead with our studies of religious systems. These characteristics are as follows:

- a belief in anthropomorphic supernatural beings, such as spirits and gods;
- a focus on the sacred supernatural, where sacred refers to a feeling of reverence and awe;
- the presence of supernatural power or energy that is found in supernatural beings as well as physical beings and objects;
- the performance of ritual activities that involve the manipulation of sacred objects to communicate with supernatural beings and/or to influence or control events;
- an articulation of a worldview and moral code through narratives and other means;
- provides for the creation and maintenance of social bonds and mechanisms of social control within a community;
- provides explanations for the unknown and a sense of control for the individual.

The domain of religion

The discussion of definitions highlights the contrasting concepts of etic and

emic. The very concept of religion as a separate cultural category is a Western one. Western cultures are divided into very distinct cultural domains, such as economics, politics, technology, and, of course, religion. As we move through our day, we move from one domain to another, yet the domains do not overlap, or they overlap to a small degree. For example, when we go to work, we might punch a clock or sign in, for "work" is a distinct segment of our life, which we can define in terms of location, activity, relationships to coworkers, and so forth. Religion as a domain may be restricted to very specific activities held in special places during specific times—a Sunday morning church service, for example. When we use the term *religion*, we might immediately picture such things as special buildings dedicated to religious activities (churches, temples, and mosques) and full-time specialists who perform religious rituals (priests and rabbis).

Our analysis of religion becomes more difficult when we turn our attention to more traditional societies. If we analyzed small-scale religious systems by applying the definitions and concepts that have been developed in Western cultures, we would likely find that certain elements that we consider to be vital parts of our religious systems simply do not exist—*in our terms*. For some people it follows from this that other religious systems are "defective," "incomplete," "primitive," "false," or "full of superstitions." Clearly, this leads us into highly ethnocentric conclusions that cloud our ability to understand the religious systems of other peoples.

When we study traditional societies using an emic (insider) approach, there might be no equivalent term to our concept of religion. Religion is not separated out from other dimensions of life but is fully integrated into the fabric of beliefs and behavior. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote, "To the believer, they are parts of the universe; to the observer, they are parts of a religion."[10]

Theoretical approaches to the study of religion

Just as there are many definitions of religion, there are also many approaches to the study of religious phenomena. Here we will describe five approaches that anthropologists have used to study religion: evolutionary, Marxist,

functional, interpretive, and psychosocial.

The evolutionary approach

The **evolutionary approach** was centered on the questions of when and how religion began. This viewpoint developed in the late 1800s when the focus was on the concepts of science, logic, and monotheism as the pinnacles of human achievement. Scholars of the time emphasized empiricism, or observing and measuring, saying that the only real knowledge is scientific knowledge; any knowledge beyond that is impossible.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of the concept of a general evolution of culture. It was thought that religion naturally evolved from the simple to the complex and that this evolution was a natural consequence of human nature. An interest in the religion of "primitive" peoples arose from the supposition that "primitive" peoples represented an early stage of cultural evolution and that one could learn about and understand the historical roots of the religion of "civilized" societies by studying living "primitive" peoples.

Edward B. Tylor used this approach in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871).[11] He concluded that all religions had a belief in spiritual beings. Whereas the religions of "civilized" peoples included beliefs in gods and souls, those of "primitive" peoples focused on the belief in spirits and ghosts. He termed this early belief system *animism*.

Tylor thought that the belief in spirit beings was the natural and universal conclusion reached by all peoples through the observation of sleep and dreams, possession, and death, during which the soul is thought to leave the body, temporarily or permanently. Because other animals are also living, they must also have souls that leave the body when the animal dies. All living things are animated by souls, as are nonliving things such as waterfalls and mountains.

In attempting to find a common thread in all religious systems, Tylor failed to discover the great variability among the world's religious systems. This was in part because Tylor did not go into the field to become immersed in the complexity of a particular culture. Instead, he relied on reports of explorers,

missionaries, and colonial administrators who described, often in simplistic and biased ways, the peoples they encountered in their travels.

Robert R. Marett developed the concept of a simpler, more basic, and more ancient supernatural force that he labeled **animatism**.[12] Marett thought that the idea of animatism simply grew out of human emotional reaction to the power of nature. This belief in an impersonal supernatural power is well articulated in the religions of Polynesia and Melanesia, where it is referred to as *mana*. In Chapter 7 we will discuss the ideas of another scholar from the evolutionary school, James Frazer, who wrote extensively about magic, a category that he considered to be separate from religion. Frazer saw a natural progression in cultures from magic to religion to science.[13]

The evolutionary approach has many critics. Many of the ideas found in this school of thought are ethnocentric—for example, Tylor's idea that the religion of "primitive" peoples focused on spirits and ghosts while more "civilized" peoples focused on gods. In addition, any ideas about the origin of a cultural practice are, of course, highly speculative. Although the idea of cultural progression, with Western societies being more "evolved" than smaller-scale traditional ones, is no longer used in anthropology, the general question of the origins of religion has remained a concern.

However, many contemporary anthropologists use an evolutionary approach. After all, the history of human society has witnessed progressive changes through time from foraging to horticultural to agricultural and, finally, industrial societies. Scholars look for correlations between these changes and various aspects of a society, including religious system. For example, foraging societies are often characterized by shamanic practices with part-time religious practitioners while on the other hand, state societies are characterized by full-time religious specialists who may be members of a highly organized priesthood.

The Marxist approach

Another influential theorist of the 1800s was Karl Marx. Like many of this era, Marx was critical of religion. However, Marx did not criticize the logic of religion as others had done. He felt that religion reflected society so that any

criticism of religion must therefore also be a criticism of society. Indeed the **Marxist approach** to religion cannot be understood without the framework of his approach to society. He saw religion as a human construction, more specifically as a construction of those in power.

Marx felt that religion did not reflect the true consciousness of people but a false consciousness designed to divert people's attention from the miseries of their lives. This misery was seen as being the result of exploitation of the masses by those in power under the capitalist system. Of course, religion existed before capitalism. Marx's basic view is that religion is a natural consequence of the human experience of distress. In the past, this may have arisen as a result of the human struggle with nature. However, Marx's focus is on the capitalist system in which this struggle has shifted to human conflict with other humans. Religion is seen both as a means of compensation and as a way of getting people to go along with a capitalist culture that is not in their best interests. For example, he felt that religion teaches people to be obedient to authority as a condition for achieving future happiness through salvation:

> Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.[14]

Critics of Marx point out that there usually is no single, dominant ideology in a society; instead, there are different ideologies that correspond to different subcultures and different classes.

The functional approach

In contrast to the evolutionary and Marxist schools, the **functional approach** asks the question: What does religion do? What role do religions play in a society? For example, a religion might enforce social cohesion by bringing members together for rituals and providing a foundation for shared beliefs. Religions might also function on the individual level to relieve individual anxiety by providing explanations and meaning.

Émile Durkheim, for example, saw society as problematic.[15] Although sanctions exist to keep people in line, Durkheim thought that these were not enough. He believed that the key lies in the **collective conscious**, a system of beliefs that act to contain natural selfishness of individuals and to promote social cooperation. Collective representations, or symbols, are a reflection of the collective conscious. During rituals, these collective representations are displayed, resulting in a reattachment to the value system of the group.

Both Durkheim and Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown saw society as being like an organism in which the parts act to maintain the whole.[16] Radcliffe-Brown also thought that for society to survive, certain feelings need to be encouraged in people's minds. He thought that anything of great social value is seen as possessing supernatural power; the greater the value, the more powerful it is. Rituals, then, function to express the basic sentiments of a society and to pass these ideas down from generation to generation. Religion, in general, is seen as an integrative force in society.

Box 1.2 Malinowski and the Trobriand Islands

Bronislaw Malinowski was born into the nobility in Krakow, Poland, in 1884. He studied mathematics and physical sciences and received his Ph.D. from the University of Krakow in 1908. However, illness prevented him from continuing his research, and while recovering, he read *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer, a classic anthropological work that describes magical beliefs in cultures around the world. Malinowski later wrote in 1926, "no sooner had I begun to read this great work than I became immersed in it and enslaved by it."[17] Reading this book changed his life. From then on, Malinowski devoted himself to the study of anthropology, and he traveled to England to study at the London School of Economics.

In 1914, Malinowski joined an expedition to the Pacific. He would not return to Europe until 1920 because, being a Polish subject, he was considered to be an enemy alien by the British during World War I. However, during the war he was allowed to continue his research in the Pacific and to spend the time between expeditions in Australia. Because

of these circumstances, Malinowski spent a greater amount of time conducting field research than had ever been done before. This included a total of twenty-six months spent in the Trobriand Islands, located off the coast of New Guinea.

During his stay in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski completed the most detailed anthropological study that had been done up to that time, and the Trobriand Islands remains one of the most fully described of any small-scale society. Unlike other anthropologists of his day, Malinowski participated in the life of the society he was studying. He pitched his tent in the middle of the village and learned the language. Malinowski was a pioneer of the participant observation method that became a hallmark of the field of anthropology.

Malinowski became a major figure in the development of British anthropology and influenced nearly everyone who trained in the field during the 1920s and 1930s. Among his pioneering contributions was the concept of *functionalism*. He thought that culture does something—that social institutions exist to fulfill the needs of, and serve the interests of, members of a society.

Radcliffe-Brown's approach to function was in terms of a part contributing to the maintenance of the whole society. Another important theorist in the functional school, Bronislaw Malinowski, had a different approach (Box 1.2). Malinowski looked at religion and other features of a society in terms of their purpose in meeting basic human needs. For example, in his analysis of magic, Malinowski stressed that magic is a logical system that people turn to in times of uncertainty or emotional stress. Magic functions to provide control and certainty in an otherwise uncertain world.

The functional approach is still used today and will be referred to in future chapters. Researchers have recognized many phenomena that we will address as contributing to the health and maintenance of the society or the individuals in that group. In general, religious phenomena function to provide answers and explanations and to provide a course of action.

The functional school is not without its critics. Some see functionalism as committing the error of reification (treating something abstract as if it were concrete and alive). Can we really talk about social institutions having needs

and purposes in the same way that humans do? Functionalism is also seen by some as being tautological (a circular argument) because it argues that we know that something must be functional because it exists; it exists because it is functional. Does every institution and cultural practice have a function? Historians of religion argue that analyzing religion in terms of functionality implies that religion is purely illusory, existing only to fulfill those functions. For instance, some functionalists see religion as just a crutch for the masses or a power play by the ruling class. Instead, historians of religion emphasize a powerful and lived experience of a sacred reality.

Others argue that while the functional approach is useful, more care needs to be taken in terms of which possible functions are logically valid. For example, Melford Spiro states that when arguing that a certain function is the cause of a religious behavior, it is necessary for individuals to both recognize and seek to satisfy that functional requirement. He argues that an unintended functional consequence (recognized only by outsiders) could not possibly be its cause.

The interpretive approach

Clifford Geertz was an American anthropologist who popularized the metaphor that culture is a text to be read and in which anthropologists can read meaning.[18] Part of his inspiration for this **interpretive approach** was the work of the sociologist Max Weber and his concept of *verstehen* (i.e., understanding the other's point of view).[19] This Weberian approach was opposed to the more popular functionalist approach of the time. Geertz emphasized that the task of anthropologists was not to discover laws or study origins and causes but instead to make sense of cultural systems by studying meaning. Anthropologists need to seek to interpret the culturally specific "webs of significance" that people both create and are caught up in. Interpretive anthropology can discover and interpret these webs of meaning through detailed ethnographic descriptions.

Religion specifically is described as a cluster of symbols that together make up a whole and provides a charter for a culture's ideas, values, and way of life. The set of symbols provides ways to interpret the world. Geertz described

symbols as playing a double role. They are both "models of" and "models for" in that they both represent the way things are while also directing human activity. Geertz argued that religious symbols establish very powerful moods and feelings and help explain human existence by giving it an ultimate meaning. These symbols claim to connect humans to a reality that in some ways is "more real" than everyday life, thus giving religion a special status above and beyond regular life.

Geertz felt that the study of religion needed to take place in two stages. The first stage is an analysis of the systems of meaning that are embodied within religious symbols. The second stage involves relating these systems to social structures and psychological processes. Critics point out that in reality he devoted much more time to the first stage than to the second.

The psychosocial approach

The **psychosocial approach** to the study of religion is concerned with the relationship between culture and personality and the connection between the society and the individual. One example is the work of Sigmund Freud.[20] Freud's model of the mind and his concept of defense mechanisms have been used both by Freud himself and by his followers to explain religious phenomena. For example, defense mechanisms are psychological maneuvers by which we distort reality in ways that help us to avoid conflict and reduce anxiety. The most important of these for our discussion is projection, in which the subject is transposed and the emotion is projected. So "I hate X" becomes "You hate X." Psychosocial anthropologists believe that individual emotions also get projected at the cultural level.

The best example of this is studies that look cross-culturally for correlations between various beliefs and behaviors. One example of this approach uses this methodology to hypothesize a connection between the characteristics of parents and the characteristics of supernatural beings. Childhood experiences are dominated by powerful figures—parents. Children build up parental images that stay with them throughout life. In adult life these parental images are projected onto spirit beings. For example, if parents are generally nurturing, the expectation is that the gods would be considered to be

nurturing as well. However, correlation does not equal causation, and this and several other issues challenge the correlational approach.

Box 1.3 Evans-Pritchard and the Azande

E. E. Evans-Pritchard was born in Sussex, England, in 1902. After receiving his master's degree in Anthropology from Oxford University, he went on to study at the University of London, where he became one of Malinowski's first students. He conducted several field expeditions to Central, East, and North Africa from 1926 until the beginning of World War II. During the war he left teaching and research to join the military. After the war he returned to academia and ultimately held the position of chair of Social Anthropology at Oxford University.

Evans-Pritchard is best known for his work with the Azande of southern Sudan, which was then the British colony of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Between 1926 and 1930 he made three different visits and spent a total of twenty months among the Azande. Following his work with the Azande, he went on to study the Nuer. He had found the Azande to be friendly, but his work with the Nuer was much more difficult. In the early days of his research in particular, they were hostile and uncommunicative, and he was frequently ill.

The Azande are known today as the classic anthropological example of witchcraft in a small-scale society. Evans-Pritchard's early articles on the subject were greatly influenced by the functional perspective of his teacher, Malinowski. For example, Evans-Pritchard believed that witchcraft beliefs provided explanations for events and helped to uphold moral standards (see Chapter 10). Ultimately, however, he was not satisfied with this type of explanation alone. He emphasized the importance of looking at beliefs and behaviors from an insider perspective and wanted to show how even seemingly irrational beliefs were in fact logical and coherent from the emic perspective.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1937).

The biological basis of religious behavior

What we perceive and think of as our reality is actually a creation of our brain. Our awareness of what is "out there" is based upon input from a series of receptors such as our eyes, nose, and tongue. The stimuli that are picked up by these receptors enter the brain, where they undergo processing before they enter our consciousness. For example, the clear, detailed, three-dimensional, colored world revealed through sight is an illusion created by our brain from a hodgepodge of electrical impulses produced by the photoreceptors in the retina of our eyes. Color is a complete illusion of something that does not exist in the real world, but is our brain's way of representing differences in the wavelength of electromagnetic energy.

And not all of the information that enters our brain from the outside enters our consciousness. For example, there was a patient who was blind because of a series of strokes that completely destroyed the visual cortex of his brain; his eyes and optic nerves, however, remained healthy. Information entering the brain from his eyes was used by his brain to permit him to walk down a hallway full of objects on the floor without stepping on them. His brain knew where the objects were even though his consciousness did not.[21]

This then brings up the question: Does our brain create realities that are indistinguishable from "reality," whatever that means? An important part of religion is religious experiences, which range from feeling good to hallucinations and revelations. Could, for example, seeing a ghost, having an out-of-body experience, or being visited by an angel be examples of brain-created realities? The answer is yes.

Figure 1.2 shows a pair of brain scans that compare brains at rest with brains of individuals in deep meditation. The bright areas are regions that are active during particular mental activities. In the meditating brain, we see an increase in activity in the frontal lobe, indicative of increased concentration, and a decrease in activity in the parietal lobe. This latter area is in the region associated with people's orientation of their bodies in time and space. Changes in activity in this area may be related to the development of out-of-body experiences or to a sense of blurring of the boundaries between self and other. In another interesting area of research, it has been found that patients suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy, when the functioning of the brain goes

haywire, report their seizures as intense religious experiences.

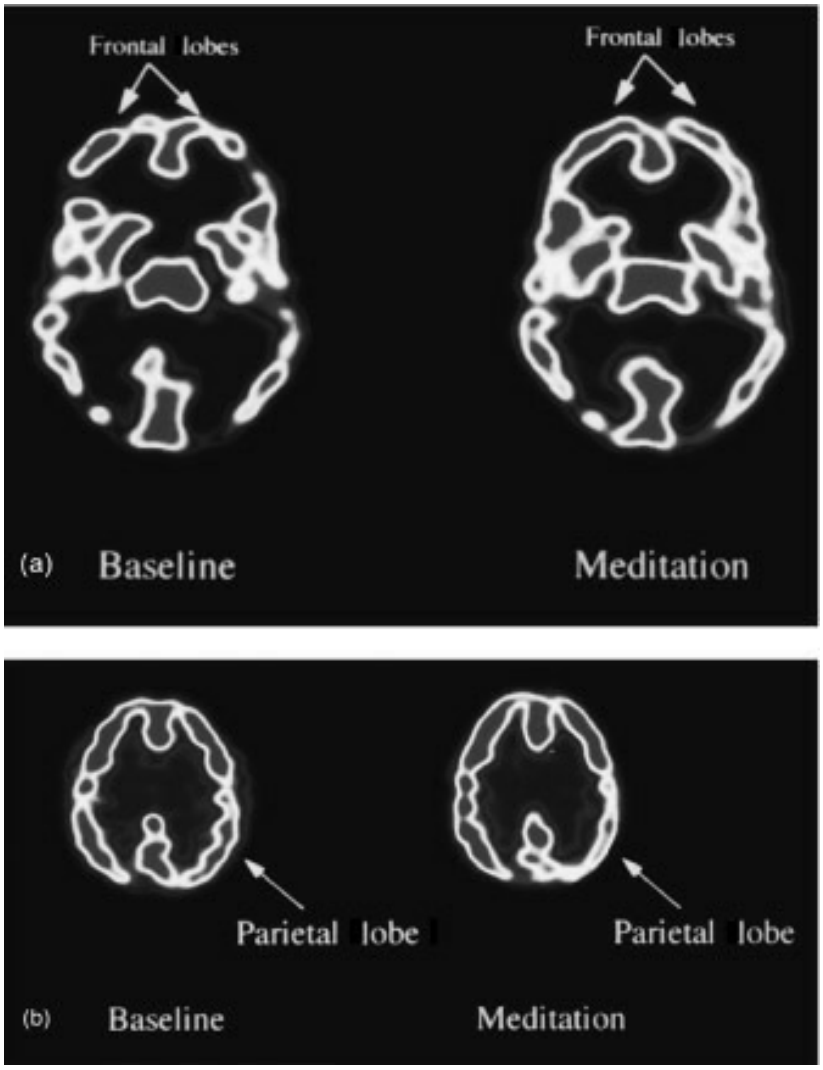


Figure 1.2 Brain scans. Single photon emission computer tomography (SPECT) images of the brain of a Tibetan Buddhist showing baseline image at rest and in deep meditation. Top images show increased activity in frontal lobe in area associated with focusing attention and concentration. Bottom images show decreased activity in parietal lobe in area responsible for sense of orientation in space and time.

It is tempting to associate religious feelings and experiences with a particular point within the structure of the brain—a God module perhaps. However, most neuro-scientists who are interested in these issues see religious experiences as more complex, involving changes in many different regions of the brain.

Considering biological influences is a part of anthropology's holistic

approach. It is something we will consider as we discuss phenomena such as altered states of consciousness and near-death experiences.

Beliefs in spirit beings

Another aspect of the biological basis for religion is the impact of the way the human mind works. An interesting application of this is a phenomenon that appears to be common to all human religious systems, concepts of supernatural anthropomorphic causal agents within their environment. (The term **anthropomorphic** refers to things that are not human but have humanlike characteristics and behave in humanlike ways.) This is the core of the concept of animism, the belief in spirit beings, which was introduced earlier in this chapter.

One explanation for the development of a belief in spirit beings is based on the concept of theory of mind. **Theory of mind** refers to the idea that people know, or think they know, what is going on in other people's minds. People recognize and often identify with perceived feelings, desires, fears, and other emotions in other human beings. The presence of a theory of mind is thought to be what makes us human, although evidence suggests that there may be some development of theory of mind in other animals, albeit on a very limited scale. This is what allows people to explain other peoples' behavior and to predict what others will do in a particular situation. Thus a theory of mind is essential for the development of complex social patterns.

Many scholars believe that the human brain actually extends the theory of mind into the minds of animals and other living and nonliving entities. It is this extension that leads to anthropomorphism and attribution of humanlike qualities to animals. The idea that nonhuman entities and forces possess "minds," that they have intensions, emotions, and interact with the human world, is the basis for the development of a belief in spirit beings.

If anthropomorphic supernatural beings interact with the human world, then things do not happen simply because they follow the rules of nature. This explains why things occur that lie outside rational analysis. And this also provides the means, through ritual, to influence and perhaps to control nature.

The evolution of religion

With the emerging interest in biology and religion, new explanations for the origin of religion have been proposed that look at the question from the perspective of biological evolution. If humans have a biological mechanism for religion, why did it evolve?

Evolutionary explanations are actually not all that different from the functional, needs-fulfillment explanations we discussed earlier. Some evolutionary scientists have suggested that religion evolved as a way to fulfill social needs such as encouraging cooperation between individuals, reinforcing kinship ties, and imposing order and stability on society. Others have focused on emotional needs and have argued that as humans became more intelligent and self-aware, anxiety would have been a natural response. Once we are aware that we exist, we become aware that we will die and therefore begin to worry about dying. The evolution of greater awareness and consciousness would create a dysfunctional, anxiety-ridden species if religion had not evolved as an adaptation to cope with this by providing explanations of and meanings for both life and death.

Other theorists have focused on the nature of human **cognition** as an explanation for the origin of religious beliefs and experiences. (*Cognition* is a general term for processes of the human brain that include perception, learning, memory, concept formation, and problem solving.) Religion is seen not as existing to serve a purpose but rather as an accidental by-product of the way the human brain works.

The human brain appears to have two different and innate ways of interpreting the world. One has to do with physical things like rocks, the other with psychological things, such as people. We interpret a rock moving through space and a person moving through space very differently. To a person we attribute such things as intentions, beliefs, goals, and morality or lack thereof. These two systems seem to be biological adaptations that help us to deal with objects and with people. However, these systems go awry in ways that provide the foundation for religion.

For example, we are dualists; we see mind and body as two separate and distinct entities. Despite what psychologists know about how the brain works, we intuitively feel that we merely occupy our bodies, not that we actually are

our bodies. This provides the foundation for a belief in both bodies without souls and souls without bodies. A dead body is seen as lacking its soul. The soul without the body is often believed to survive and have another, separate existence after death. A further extension of souls without bodies would also include other supernatural beings, such as gods.

The second way in which cognition feeds into the evolution of religion is the human tendency to overextend our system of social understanding and infer purpose, goals, intention, and design even where there is none. We attribute human characteristics to an amazing range of inanimate objects as, for example, the computer that seems to purposely break down at the most crucial moment. Humans seek and find patterns in random arrays—what looks like a face in a stucco ceiling or the Virgin Mary on a grilled cheese sandwich.

Pascal Boyer has pointed out that although religious concepts do violate some expectations about the world, they do preserve other expectations. He focuses in particular on the social nature of human beings and the inferences that the human brain draws that regulate social interaction. For example, Boyer points out that gods and other supernatural agents are seen as being very human-like in cultures around the world. Yet there are obviously crucial differences. Boyer points out that gods differ from human in that they have access to all the possible information that is relevant to the issue at hand in a social interaction.

However, gods are rarely omniscient cross-culturally. For example, the idea that "God knows you are lying" seems more natural than "God knows the content of every refrigerator in the world"—unless in your refrigerator is something that you stole. The main point of Boyer's discussion is that supernatural concepts are just extensions of everyday cognitive categories and the way that the human brain processes information. As he writes, "People do not invent gods and spirits; they receive information that leads them to build such concepts."[22]

Conclusion

As we have seen in our discussion of the definition of religion and different approaches to the study of religion, ethnocentrism can be and has been a major impediment to developing a true understanding of religious beliefs and practices in other societies. The goal of anthropology is to move past ethnocentrism toward an approach of cultural relativism. This is especially true in the study of religion. The anthropological approach—and the central way of looking at the religious world in this book—is to study what people believe and do in regard to a sacred supernatural, not to judge whether these beliefs and actions are based in an objective truth or not. The anthropological study of religion calls for a methodological agnosticism.

Although **agnosticism** has taken on the connotation of not having made up one's mind, the original meaning of the word is different. Agnostics say that the nature of the supernatural is unknowable, that it is as impossible to prove the nonexistence of the supernatural as it is to prove its existence. In this book we will be seeking neither to prove nor to disprove but merely to observe. In the words of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, writing in the seventeenth century, "I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn human actions, but to understand them."

Summary

Anthropology is the study of humanity. Anthropologists study human societies as integrated wholes, an approach that is termed *holism*. This approach is seen in the broad scope of anthropology, which is often divided into the fields of physical anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. This approach requires that societies be studied over long periods of time, during which the investigator lives within the community and participates in the lives of the people under study, a technique known as participant observation. The final product is an ethnography, a descriptive study of a human society.

An outside observer of a community usually imposes his or her system of analysis on the group under study (etic perspective). It is natural to use one's own society as the basis for interpreting and judging other societies, a

tendency called ethnocentrism. Many anthropologists attempt to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied (emic perspective) and describe and understand people's customs and ideas but do not judge them, an approach called cultural relativism. The goal is to study what people believe, not whether or not what they believe is true.

A central concept in anthropology is culture. In 1871, Tylor wrote, "Culture … is that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Culture includes all aspects of the human experience that are passed down from generation to generation. Culture gives meaning to reality; we live in a real, physical world, but our minds interpret this world through a cultural lens and even create new realities.

Religion is a difficult concept to define when we try to include all human societies. An analytic definition focuses on the way in which religion manifests itself or is expressed in a culture. A functional definition is concerned with the role that religion plays in a society. Finally, an essentialist definition looks at what the essential nature of religion is and emphasizes the fact that religion is the domain of the extraordinary. Our definition looks at religion as a set of cultural beliefs and practices that usually include a basic set of characteristics and draws on elements of all three of these approaches.

There have been many theoretical approaches to the study of religion. The evolutionary approach, developed in the late 1800s, focused on the questions of when and how religions began and how they evolved from the simple to the complex. This evolution was seen as a natural consequence of human nature, and the religions of "primitive" peoples were remnants of an earlier, simpler evolutionary stage. Early religions included animism, the belief in spirits and ghosts, and animatism, the belief in a generalized supernatural force.

The Marxist approach is based on the writings of Karl Marx, who saw religion as being a construction of those in power, designed to divert people's attention from the miseries of their lives. This misery was seen as being the result of exploitation of the masses by those in power under the capitalist system. He saw religion both as a means of compensation and as a way of getting people to go along with a capitalist culture that is not in their best interests.

The functional approach asks the question: What does religion do? For

example, Malinowski concluded that magic functions to provide control and certainty in an otherwise uncertain situation. The interpretive approach is associated with Clifford Geertz who believed that the task of anthropologists was to make sense of cultural systems by studying meaning. He described religion as a cluster of symbols that provides a charter for a culture's ideas, values, and way of life. Religious symbols help explain human existence by giving it an ultimate meaning. The psychosocial approach is concerned with the relationship between culture and personality and the connection between the society and the individual.

Many theorists have suggested that religion is a by-product of the functioning and evolution of the human brain. The brain is capable of creating new realities. The theory of mind is the idea that one knows what is going on in another person's mind. This leads to the attribution of humanlike qualities to nonhuman entities and forces, the basis for the development of a belief in spirit beings. Thus we infer purpose, goals, intention, and design throughout the universe.

Study questions

1. How does one go about conducting a holistic study of a society? How would this be different from a study on a specific topic?
2. We can examine human societies from an etic or an emic perspective. Do you think it is possible to really understand a society other than your own from an emic perspective?
3. How would you balance cultural relativism and universal human rights? Do you think that you could remain neutral in your judgment of all of the behaviors you might see in a small-scale society?
4. What is the basic difference between a society and a culture? Can these two terms be used interchangeably?
5. Think back to a ritual that you have attended—a wedding ceremony, for example. Write three brief descriptions from each of the following viewpoints: analytic, functional, and essentialist.
6. One of the major debates in studies of human behavior is that

between nature (biology) and nurture (culture). Do you think that there is any biological basis for the development of religion in human societies? Do you think that someday someone might discover a society that has no religious practices?

7. Some scholars have argued that religion is not definable in any real sense. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: "We sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of their content, but of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the definition a kind of ornamental coping that supports nothing."[23] Discuss.

Suggested readings

Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).
[A cognitive anthropologist explains religion in terms of everyday thought processes.]

David J. Linden, *The Accidental Mind: How Brain Evolution Has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, and God* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008).
[A neuroscientist discusses the functioning of the human brain and its relationship to religion, among other things.]

William Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (2nd edn) (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004).
[An overview of theoretical approaches to religion.]

Carl Sagan, *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000).
[A skeptical look at supernatural beliefs and phenomena.]

Michael Winkelman and John R. Baker, *Supernatural as Natural: A Biocultural Approach to Religion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008).
[An introduction to the study of religion with an emphasis on evolution and neurology.]

Suggested websites

www.aaanet.org
Website of the American Anthropological Association.

http://sar.americananthro.org/
The Society for the Anthropology of Religion of the American Anthropological Association.

www.religioustolerance.org
Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance.

Notes

1 Note that we are using the ethnographic present in describing these cultures. Members of the California tribes no longer gather and process acorns, and their way of life is very similar to non-Native American peoples among whom they live.

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3 R. B. Edgerton, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony* (New York: The Free Press, 1992.)

4 Ibid., p. 93.

5 E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871), p. 1.

6 All Bible quotations in this text are taken from *The King James Bible,* except where otherwise noted.

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20 S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953).

21 A. Abbott, "Blind Man Walking," *Nature News,* December 22, 2008. www.nature.com/news/2008/081222/full/news.2008.1328.html.

22 P. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 161.

23 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 1953), #217.

Chapter 2
Mythology

A good place to begin our study of religion is by looking at myths. Myths are religious narratives or stories that provide the basis for religious beliefs and practices. Myths tell of the origins and history of the world and the creation of the first human beings. They also prescribe the rules of proper conduct and articulate the ethical and moral principles of society. Some myths exist as written texts, whereas in nonliterate societies they exist as oral narratives. Religious stories also can be told in art, music, and dance. In this chapter, we will discuss the nature of myths and provide several examples of myths from various religious systems.

The nature of myths

As we learned in Chapter 1, the lives and experiences of a people are seen through a cultural lens that imposes meaning on their world. Within this world all people have a body of knowledge within which many things are understood and controlled. However, all people also experience things that they cannot comprehend and cannot control. They ponder the origin of their world. They seek to understand the interconnectedness between humanity and the world around them, including the physical landscape, the plants and animals that dwell in this landscape, and other human beings and societies. And they question the existence and meaning of disaster, illness, and death.

Worldview

The way in which societies perceive and interpret their reality is known as their **worldview**. Their worldview provides them with an understanding of how their world works; it forms the template for thought and behavior; and it provides them with a basic understanding of the origin and nature of humankind and their relationship to the world around them.

To better understand the concept of worldview, we can compare the worldviews of two cultures, Navaho and Judeo-Christian. The Navaho today are the largest Native American group in the United States. They occupy a large reservation in Arizona and New Mexico, although today many Navaho have left the reservation and live elsewhere.

To the Navaho, nature exists and humans are a part of nature. The Navaho see their world in terms of the relationships and connections that bind the various elements that make up the world. All of these elements—the land, the plants, the animals, people, and the gods—are bound together into a systematic and balanced whole. All of the elements within the universe affect one another, existing in a state of harmony.

For the universe to function—to maintain its harmonious state—people must behave properly as defined by Navaho culture. Failure to behave properly brings about disharmony in the universe, and this disharmony can lead to natural disaster, illness, and even death. The goal of a Navaho is to remain in harmony with the universe or, as they like to put it, to "walk in beauty."

Whereas Navaho culture sees humans as one cog in the natural world, Judeo-Christians see their world quite differently. Here humans occupy a very special place in the universe. The following is from the Eighth Psalm:

> What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?
> For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor.
> Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:
> All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;
> The fowl of the air and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.

It is clear here that the world was created for the benefit of humankind and

that humankind has the authority, the right, to exploit the natural world. This active relationship with nature is seen in attempts to control nature—through dams and irrigation projects, for example. Whereas the Navaho sees illness as a manifestation of disharmony and attempts to bring resolution of the illness through ritual designed to reestablish harmony, the Judeo-Christian seeks the observed cause and then, through medical technology, proceeds to "fix it."

Stories of the supernatural

People describe their world and express their worldview in stories and other creative expressions. This includes modes as diverse as art, drama, jokes, writing on the walls of public bathrooms, folk music, and festivals. Here we will focus on stories that are told about the supernatural world.

The following is a story that is European in origin and was first published in 1823, written down from oral presentations. It has been told and retold countless times and is probably familiar to the reader in some form. It is the story of *Snow White*.[1]

> The story of *Snow White* involves an evil queen who flies into a jealous rage whenever she learns that someone in the kingdom is more beautiful than she. She keeps tabs on her status in the beauty arena by using a talking mirror. This is a type of divination instrument (see Chapter 7) that can be used to gather information about things and events in ways that are supernatural. (Certainly, one would have to agree that talking mirrors do not exist in our empirical, natural world.)
>
> Snow White is the evil queen's stepdaughter. As Snow White matures, she eventually becomes more beautiful than the queen, who sees Snow White as a threat that must be eliminated. The queen orders Snow White killed, but the huntsman who is ordered to do the killing takes pity on Snow White and lets her escape into the forest. The huntsman then kills a wild boar and presents its lungs and liver to the queen as being Snow White's. The evil queen cooks and eats the lungs and liver, thinking them to be those of her dead stepdaughter. This is an example of ritual cannibalism. Perhaps the queen believes that by eating the remains of her rival, the elements of beauty in Snow White will pass to her.
>
> Thus Snow White escapes and moves in with seven dwarfs. The evil queen, learning through her magic mirror that Snow White is still alive, finally kills her with a poison apple. After many years Snow White is discovered by a prince who, on kissing her, brings her back to life.

When we read the story of *Snow White*, it is clearly a story told for entertainment, primarily for children. However, like many such stories, it also provides a moral lesson. In this case we are told of the evils of envy and jealousy and what can happen to someone who exhibits these attributes. (In one early version of the story the evil queen is invited to the wedding celebration of Snow White and the Prince. Her evil deeds are revealed and she is made to put on a pair of red-hot iron slippers. She dances until she dies.)

Yet although this story talks about moral issues and contains many supernatural elements (the magic mirror, for example), no one would classify it as a religious story. The dwarfs are not sacred; the mirror is not holy; the resurrection of the beautiful maiden does not elevate her to the status of deity. The story does not relate the actions of any gods; it is not the basis for religious rituals; there are no churches or temples dedicated to Snow White. Adults do not believe the story of Snow White to be true.

Stories such as *Snow White* are meant to entertain; these are called **folktales**. Folktales take place in a fictional world. They include supernatural elements and frequently contain a moral. Folktales usually exist independent of time and space. (Where was the kingdom in which Snow White lived located? How long ago did the story take place?)

In contrast to folktales, **legends** are seen by members of the culture as representing events that have actually taken place, although some embellishment often occurs. Legends take place in the comparatively recent past and tell not only of such things as migrations, wars, heroes, and kings but also of local stories about buried treasure, ghosts, and saints. They may or may not include supernatural elements and may or may not be considered sacred. Legends you may be familiar with include the cities of Atlantis and El Dorado, the heroes Robin Hood and King Arthur, George Washington chopping down the cherry tree, and the story of the Holy Grail.

Legends are commonplace in our contemporary world, although people seldom see them as such. Known as **urban legends**, these stories are recounted as having really happened, primarily on the Internet or in tabloids. Some commonly circulated urban legends are the story of the woman who dried her dog in a microwave, crocodiles living in the sewers of New York City, and strangers giving out poisonous candy at Halloween.

Myths

Myths are sacred stories. They tell of the origin of the world and humankind, the existence and activities of gods and spirits, the creation of order in the universe, and the nature of illness and death. Myths relate the origins of human traditions and articulate a society's values and norms. They tell how to behave and distinguish good from evil.

Myths are thought by the people who tell them to recount real events that took place in the remote past in a world different from the one we live in now. Myths, however, are believed to be relevant to modern life and are often recounted in religious rituals. Lauri Honko writes:

> The reenactment of a creative event, for example, the healing wrought by a god in the beginning of time, is the common aim of myth and ritual. In this way the event is transferred to the present and its result, i.e. the healing of a sick person, can be achieved once more here and now. In this way, too, the world order, which was created in the primeval era and which is reflected in myths, preserves its value as an exemplar and model for the people of today.[2]

Although the term *myth* is frequently used in our society in a negative sense to mean stories that are false or only told by primitive peoples, that is not the sense in which we use the term here. Anthropologists and folklorists use the term to refer to sacred religious stories that are believed by the people who tell them to be true. In this sense, the stories of the Bible are myths, as are the writings of the Qur'an.

This analytic distinction between different types of narratives is one that is also made by many cultural groups. For example, Trobriand Islanders distinguish between *kukwanebu* (fairy tales, fictional stories told after dark for amusement), *libwogwo* (legends, stories told to impart knowledge and believed to be true), and *liliu* (sacred stories told during the preparation for religious rituals). Many societies distinguish between true stories (myths and legends) and stories that are a lie or a joke (a folktale). The distinctions between folktales, legends, and myths are summarized in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Forms of narrative

Folktales	*Legends*	*Myths*

Regarded as fiction; not considered to be sacred; meant to entertain	Based on real people, places, or events and are considered to be factual	Regarded as fact; accepted on faith; source of authority on moral and ethical issues
Include supernatural elements, yet are secular	Include few if any supernatural elements; can be sacred or secular	Include a great many supernatural elements; are considered to be sacred
Characters are human and/or nonhuman	Characters are generally human	Characters are human and nonhuman
Exist independent of time and place	Take place in the present or recent past; in the modern world	Take place in the remote past in another world or in an earlier manifestation of today's world

The nature of oral texts

Myths can be oral or written. In literate societies, written texts may form the basis of scholarly discourse and analysis as well as ritual. In nonliterate societies and in many literate societies as well, texts are recited. Recitation is much more than a simple rote presentation of the text—recitation is performance. In reciting the text, a person might speak in a manner that is not found in everyday speech. Costumes, facial expressions, body postures, and changes in the quality of the voice, all serve to create an experience. In some societies we find specialists—actors and storytellers—who memorize and recite texts.

Oral texts are frequently very long and complex. They are not always recited as a single, complete narrative and might not even be seen as a single entity. Particular segments might be recited at certain times in particular circumstances.

One of the consequences of the oral transmission of stories is that they are frequently unconsciously altered with each generation. As a result of this learning process, different versions of the same myth can exist in different

families or groups within a society. For example, there are several versions of the Navaho creation story. Each was collected by a different anthropologist working with a different elder. Although they have much in common, there are major differences.

Raymond Firth studied the Tikopia (Polynesia culture areas). He recorded different versions of a myth about the building of the Rasofiroki Temple, a building that was thought to exist on both a material and spiritual plane.[3] The actual building that could be seen by humans was believed to have a prototype in the heavens that was built by a group of sibling gods. In a version recorded by Firth in 1929, the Great God, the oldest of the siblings, asks his brothers to hand up iron nails for the building of the temple. However, the brothers only hand up coconut husk and cord. When they are done, the Great God came down, took the iron, and went off to the land of the white man. In a second version, the temple was built in England and the senior brother calls out in English for his brothers to hand up the iron. His brothers cannot understand this foreign language, so they keep handing up coconut-based materials. When the building is done, the senior brother drives them away in disgust and they go to Tikopia in a canoe. Iron was a relatively recent introduction to Tikopia and the myth of the building of the temple appears to have changed not only to accommodate this new material but also to account for why the Europeans had this material but the Tikopians did not.

If myths are written, however, the narratives that are transmitted from generation to generation tend to be very stable through time, especially if they are not translated into other languages. An example of a written text is the Qur'an, which forms the foundation of Islam. Muslims believe that the Qur'an represents the word of God as revealed to Mohammad by the archangel Gabriel in the early seventh century. It was spoken to Mohammad and was initially handed down orally but was soon set down in written form. As the spoken word of God, verses from the Qur'an are recited and memorized by devout Muslims. Because the Qur'an was revealed to Mohammad in Arabic, it is learned and memorized in Arabic throughout the Islamic world. (Of course, translations of the Qur'an do exist, but they are not used in ritual. Commentaries on the Qur'an are made in the local language.) Because printing presses produce millions of copies of this text, all identical in content, the exact text not only is found throughout the world, but also is transmitted

unchanged generation after generation. For Muslims, this lack of change is particularly important. Muslims believe that the true text exists in heaven and was given to Mohammad through revelations, which he memorized perfectly word for word. Thus the Qur'an (the word actually means "recitation") represents a perfect transcription of God's vision and should not change.

Genesis

Many written texts have their origins in oral narratives. For example, the Old Testament probably had its origins in oral narratives that were eventually written down. Folklorist Alan Dundes points out that written texts that are derived from oral narratives frequently incorporate more than one version of a particular story.[4] For example, the Old Testament opens with two creation stories (Box 2.1).

Box 2.1 Genesis

Genesis (1:1–2:3)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.

And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one

place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.

And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.

And the earth brought forth grass, and herb, yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

And the evening and the morning were the third day.

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years:

And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.

And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.

And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth,

And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good.

And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.

And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.

And the evening and the morning were the fifth day.

And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.

And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.

And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.

And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.

Genesis (2:4–2:10, 2:15–2:23)

These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew: for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground.

But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads.

…

And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

> And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him.
>
> And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.
>
> And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found a help meet for him.
>
> And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;
>
> And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.
>
> And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.

The first story is recounted in Genesis 1:1 through 2:3. The story begins with the world covered with water ("And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"). God shapes the world over a period of six days, resting on the seventh. The order of creation of living things is plants, followed by animals, followed by male and female human beings together ("male and female created he them"). This story is from what biblical scholars call the P or priestly document. It was probably written before 586 BCE. It contains many parallels with the *Enuma elish,* a Mesopotamian myth, and establishes the origin and sacred importance of the Sabbath.

The second story is found in Genesis 2:4–2:10 and 2:15–2:23. At the beginning of the story, the world was a desert ("for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth"). God first "formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." He places a man, called Adam, in the Garden of Eden. God then forms all the animals and brings them to Adam one at a time to be named. Finally, God creates woman, called Eve, from Adam's rib. This story comes from what is referred to as the J document. It was likely written earlier than the first story, sometime between 960 and 915 BCE.

The stories of Genesis are reflections of the Judeo-Christian worldview. They are very patriarchal in many ways. For example, woman (Eve) is derived from man (Adam). In many Western societies, men dominate woman, and many positions of authority, such as the priesthood, are restricted to men.

Here the religious text is acting as a **social charter** that explains that culture's view of the proper organization of human relationships.

Genesis also expresses the Judeo-Christian worldview with respect to nature. This worldview appears to be based on two assumptions. The first is that the universe is mechanistic and humans are its master. The second is that humans are a categorically different form of creature than all other forms of life.

Changes do occur in written texts, but they are usually deliberate changes that are the consequences of translation or scholarly discourse over the meaning of particular words and passages. In some religious traditions, such as Christianity, the text—in this case, the Bible—is usually found in a translated form to be read by any literate member of the community. This was not always true. It was in the Middle Ages (roughly 500–1500 CE) that Catholicism as we know it today truly emerged. In the absence of a strong central government following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Church became both a religious and a secular power. During this time the Church was seen as the intermediary between humankind and God—God's message for people came to them through the Church. Very few people were literate, and the Bible was available only in Latin. This was not seen as a problem, because the Church existed to interpret God's word. Later, the Protestant Reformation would emphasize the Bible, and not the Church, as the source for true Christianity. Among the central beliefs of Martin Luther, who began the Reformation, was that laypeople should read the Bible for themselves. This meant not only that everyone needed to learn to read, but also that the Bible had to be translated into the local languages.

Perhaps one of the most famous translations of the Bible was that ordered by King James I of England and published in 1611. The King James Bible is still widely used today. Many Bible scholars, however, note what they consider to be inaccurate translations of certain words and passages, resulting from the knowledge and political atmosphere of the early seventeenth century.

The King James Version is written in what is now an older form of English. Language changes over time, and written religious texts that do not change will, over time, appear to use words and phrases that are no longer a part of the spoken language. Religious texts are often written in a "religious" form of

a language, using words and phrases that are not used in everyday speech. Some societies even have distinctive dialects or languages that are reserved for recitation of religious narratives. For example, consider the following excerpt from the Eighth Psalm: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him?" Forms such as *thy, hast,* and *thou* were once commonly used words in English, but no longer. Today their presence in a narrative often labels that narrative as being religious.

Many modern versions of the Bible exist today. These are attempts to create what are considered to be more accurate translations of the earliest extant versions of the Bible, written in modern language that is easier to read and understand by people today. Yet many people are uncomfortable with modern translations and retain the King James Version because it sounds more "religious." This resembles the special religious language forms reserved for religious narrative that are found in many societies. Interestingly, there are versions of the King James Bible that attempt to modernize the language yet retain the use of religious linguistic forms. (See Box 2.2 for a discussion of gender-neutral translations of the Bible.)

Box 2.2 The gender-neutral Christian Bible

Written texts often exist in multiple versions. Zondervan, the world's largest publisher of Bibles, has published over a dozen different translations. Some of the translations preserve more traditional language, such as *thou,* and others attempt to translate the Bible into more modern language. One area of debate with regard to modern translations is the issue of gender. The language used in most Christian Bibles not only refers to God as male but also uses the masculine generic (e.g., saying *man* to mean both men and women). Some argue that this language is not inconsequential and actually both reflects and shapes the way that people think. Changing this language is seen as a way to address the outdated gender roles portrayed in the Bible and help achieve gender equality.

When Zondervan updated its *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) in 1990

as the *New Revised Standard Version*, it was met with much opposition from Christians who felt the changes not only were unnecessary, but in some cases changed the meaning of the text. For example, compare the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) and *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) translations of John 14:23:

> Jesus answered him, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.
>
> (RSV)

> "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them."
>
> (NRSV)

Critics argue that the new translation obscures the original meaning that Jesus and his Father would come to dwell with individual believers.

Another example comes from Acts, when Cornelius fell down and began to worship Peter. In the *Revised Standard Version,* Peter lifted him up and said, "Stand up; I too am a man" (Acts 10:26, RSV). In the *New Revised Standard Version* Peter says, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." Again, it is argued that this is an important shift in meaning from an emphasis on one's humanity ("I too am a man") to an emphasis on one's mortality ("I too am mortal").

In other cases, critics argue that the changes are unnecessary and do not make sense—for example, making the army of Israel gender-neutral (using the term "warriors" instead of "men of war") when it is historically accurate that the army was composed only of males. Similarly, they see changing Paul's statement in Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:11) from "When I became a man, I gave up childish ways" to "When I became an adult" as unnecessary because Paul is in fact a man.

Further controversy erupted in the late 1990s when Zondervan announced that it was going to publish a new, more modern translation of the company's *New International Version,* which is second in sales only to the *King James Version,* still very similar to its original 1611 form. The *New International Version* (NIV) is popular with evangelical Christians. The new version, called *Today's New International Version*

(TNIV), also uses gender-neutral language. However, the changes made in *Today's New International Version* were made only in regard to human beings. Some felt that the changes did not go far enough because God is still referred to as masculine (e.g., Father) and not with neutral terms (e.g., parent). In September 2009, Zondervan announced that they would publish a new version of the NIV in 2011 and at that point discontinue the TNIV version.[5] However, when the new NIV was published, Southern Baptists voted at their convention to reject the translation. Randy Stinson, president of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood is quoted as saying:

> Our main concern is that in hundreds of places, meaning in the Bible is eroded because of the translators' decisions to remove words like he, him, his, father, brother, son, and man. God's word is the product of his infinite wisdom and all the details of meaning are there for a purpose.[6]

Obviously, there are many issues that shape this controversy. They include the degree to which language shapes thought and society, whether the masculine emphasis of the Bible was intended and should be preserved, and how accurately translations must reflect the original text. The debate is not merely about language but about the Christian worldview regarding gender issues in general.

Understanding myths

Myths exist in all human societies. They have been collected and analyzed by countless anthropologists, folklorists, and other scholars. Many different theoretical orientations have developed as tools to study and explain myths. While myths show an astonishing degree of variability, certainly common themes occur that have become the focus of scholarly study. In this section, we will look at some of the approaches to the study of myths and survey some of the common themes that are found.

Approaches to the analysis of myths

The analysis of myths can be approached from many different perspectives. Are myths literal or symbolic? If they are symbolic, how should these symbols be interpreted? How are myths tied to the rest of culture? Do myths serve functions, and if so, which ones? Do myths reflect the way that the human mind works, the way a specific culture works, or both? Many of the different ways of analyzing religious narratives are based on the different theoretical approaches to the study of religion discussed in Chapter 1.

Searching for myth origins in the nineteenth century

The evolutionary school in anthropology saw a unilinear progression from more "primitive" societies to more "civilized" ones. Accompanying this progression was a similar proposed progression from magic to religion to science. Myths were seen as belonging to the "primitive" period, with sacred myths being replaced by secular folktales until finally dying out altogether in "civilized" societies. (It is important to remember that anthropologists no longer believe in such an evolutionary progression or that cultures can be classified as "primitive" or "civilized.")

Theorists from the evolutionary school assumed that modern people living in small-scale societies lived and thought the same way that earlier European societies had. They compared myths found in many different cultures, looking for common elements from which they could reconstruct an assumed "original form" of myth from which all others had derived. It was believed that doing this could help explain puzzling aspects of modern European society.

The work of James George Frazer (1854–1941) is a good example of this approach. He collected as many examples of myths and magical practices from around the world as possible and published them as a thirteen-volume work entitled *The Golden Bough.* Although modern anthropologists criticize the information in *The Golden Bough* as taken out of its cultural context, the book is still widely read. As an example of the comparative approach, Frazer analyzed the story of the fall of man in Genesis by looking at other origin-of-

death myths cross-culturally:

> The story of the Fall of Man in the third chapter of Genesis appears to be an abridged version of this savage myth. Little is wanted to complete its resemblance to the similar myths still told by savages in many parts of the world. The principal, almost the only, omission is the silence of the narrator as to the eating of the fruit of the tree of life by the serpent, and the consequent attainment of immortality by the reptile … If my interpretation of the story is right, it has been left for the comparative method, after thousands of years, to supply the blank in the ancient canvas, and to restore, in all their primitive crudity, the gay barbaric colours which the skilful hand of the Hebrew artist had softened or effaced.[7]

Since Frazer's time, further studies of myths have found that no single myth exists cross-culturally, but characteristic versions of a story may be found in specific areas. For example, in Africa, origin-of-death myths revolve around a failure to deliver a message, whereas among Native Americans the story centers on a debate on the subject of death.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, a new approach to the study of myth was popular. This approach argued that myth is derived from earlier ritual practices. Based on this idea, theorists tried to reconstruct these rituals. Of course, this approach is not a complete answer to the question of origins, because if myth came from ritual, where did ritual come from?

This approach to myth encouraged looking beyond the text and seeing the connection that myths have to the cultures in which they are found. Although it is now more accepted that myth and ritual are closely related, this is seen more as myth and ritual being parallel expressions than that one is derived from the other.

Fieldwork and functional analysis

Early studies of myth and religion, such as those of Frazer, were undertaken by people who read myths collected by missionaries, travelers, and others from the comfort of their own libraries. This changed in the early twentieth century with a new emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, by anthropologists such as Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski.

Many consider Franz Boas to be the founder of the academic study of anthropology in the United States. He felt that mythology could be read almost like an autobiography written by the culture itself. As such, he used myths as sources of ethnographic data about such things as kinship systems, housing types, division of labor, and hunting techniques.[8] Some of his students later challenged this approach; they felt that myths are more than just a literal reflection of what goes on in a culture. For example, Ruth Benedict, in her study of Zuni mythology, noted that myths are often idealized descriptions of things that do not happen in real life.[9] However, Boas brought to the anthropological study of myth the importance of recording full texts and of relating myths to the rest of culture.

Like Boas, Malinowski favored a literal interpretation of myth; neither favored the idea that myths could be symbolic. Both also emphasized in-depth study of one culture at a time as opposed to comparing myths cross-culturally. Malinowski was a founder of the functional approach in anthropology, previously discussed in Chapter 1, which turned from the nineteenth-century interest in the origins of myth to a focus on how myths function in a culture. Malinowski wrote that myths are seen as a force to help maintain the society:

> Studied alive, myth, as we shall see, is not symbolic but a direct expression of its subject matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive cultures an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and wisdom.[10]

Malinowski conducted fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands and described how the islanders themselves distinguish between folktales, legends, and myths. Myths are not told for entertainment or to impart historical information, but are used to justify and explain religious rituals as well as social and moral rules. For example, before the Trobriand annual feast of the return of the dead, myths are told that explain why humans die, why the spirits of the dead have to leave the village, and why they return once a year. Trobriand Islanders also engage in extensive ceremonial trading; the rules for such trade,

the magic used to prepare canoes for the voyage, and even the geographical routes taken are all related to specific mythology.

Critics of the functional approach point out that it focuses only on benefits, not on institutions or practices that may be oppressive or exploitative. Functionalism also focuses on consensus building, not, for example, the potential conflict caused by competing versions of a myth. Because of this emphasis on consensus and function, the approach does not deal well with cultural change.

Structural analysis

Structural analysis, as the name implies, focuses on the underlying structure of the myth. This approach is based on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who pointed out that humans tend to think and categorize the world in terms of binary opposites, such as black and white.[11] The division of the world into binary opposites can be seen cross-culturally in myths, as in the analysis done by Edmund Leach of the structure of the story of Genesis.[12] Examples of binary opposites contained in Genesis are light/dark, day/night, heaven/earth, man/animal, and man/woman. Leach also points out that these opposites are frequently mediated by a third, anomalous category, such as life and death being mediated by the third category of life after death.

In the following portion of Genesis, the binary opposites of light and dark as well as heaven and earth are established (Genesis 1:4–8):

> And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
>
> And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.
>
> And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.
>
> And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.
>
> And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

Structural analysis focuses on the structure, not content, of religious narratives. It demonstrates that stories that seem very different on the surface

may have a similar underlying structure. We can also apply structural analysis to a story from the Gururumba of New Guinea (Melanesia culture area). The primary binary opposition in Gururumba culture is that of nature and culture. We can see this opposition being expressed in several ways in the Gururumba myth of the origin of women, told in Box 2.3.

Box 2.3 The Gururumba creation story

The story begins in the distant past when things were not as they are today. There were no villages, no pigs, and no women. One day two brothers go into the forest to look for food. They come upon an eagle's nest in which they find eggs and food that the eagle parents have left. The brothers take the food for themselves. They return several times to do this until one time when one of the eggs hatches and the first woman emerges. The boys take the woman back to their home and feed her and she grows up.

Then one day the younger brother decides to try to have sex with the woman. However, he is unable to do so because she does not have a vagina. He asks his older brother what to do. His older brother takes a sugarcane (a symbolically male plant for the Gururumba) and hurls it at the woman to make an opening, but she runs away. The younger brother chases her, but every time he catches on to her arm or leg she turns into an animal and slips away. Finally he is able to catch hold of her thumb and have sex with her.

The woman gives birth to a son and several daughters. Later when the son is grown he asks his father if he can accompany him into the forest, but the father says no. The boy becomes very upset and jumps into the river and becomes a fish. The father does not know what to do but the brothers see smoke coming from the forest (which means a wise old man lives there). This man comes and uses magic to change the fish back into a boy. The father is so happy that he builds the first men's house and puts his son inside to make him a man. When the son emerges from the men's house, pigs spring from the ground. The boy later notices smoke coming from the grasslands and realizes that there are other men out

there who have no women and no pigs. So he gives each of his sisters a pig and sends them to the other men, beginning an exchange relationship.

Source: As told by Philip Newman, lecture in the Anthropology of Religion at the University of California at Los Angeles, 1990.

From this story, we can see that the nature versus culture dichotomy is related to the differences between the sexes. Women are part of nature, whereas men are associated with culture. The origin of the first woman from an egg and her various reversions to animal forms when she is pursued clearly associate women with nature. The wild female is only culturally transformed through human (male) agency. The sugarcane is a symbolically male plant used to change the biologically nonuseful woman into a culturally useful wife. Her son is the first male born of a female, and thus not fully cultural, as can be seen when he turns into a fish. He is not a complete adult, both biologically and socially, until his final transformation in the men's house. The boy himself then becomes a transformer, changing his sisters into wives and other men into social allies.

Critics of structuralism argue that it is a very sterile approach to the study of religious narrative and that it is ultimately dehumanizing. Structural analysis can also be very complicated, leaving mythical analysis only to those who are well versed in this approach.

Psychological symbols in myth

Another approach to the analysis of myths interprets them as being symbolic and sees this symbolism as being rooted in human psychology. This approach is based on the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

Freud described various psychological defense mechanisms, such as projection, in which one's own unconscious attribute is perceived and reacted to in some other person or some other thing.[13] For example, Freud saw individual dreams as symbolically expressing unconscious wishes and a

similar process occurring with myths for groups. Myths are therefore a type of "shared dream." Freud also emphasized the importance of early childhood experiences, such as the nature of the parent–child relationship. He then proposed a relationship between early experiences and adult projection systems such as myth. Although such processes as projection and symbolism were considered universal, the actual symbolic content would be expected to vary as childhood conditions varied.

The narrative most associated with the psychoanalytic approach is the Greek story of Oedipus, the man who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Freud argued that this story represents a deep psychological conflict experienced by all boys. Because he considered this case reflective of universal developmental issues, he expected similar stories to be found cross-culturally. In fact, Allen Johnson and Douglas Price-Williams in their research have found Oedipus-type stories from cultures around the world.[14]

Similar to Freud in its emphasis on human psychological processes is the work of Carl Jung.[15] In contrast to Freud, Jung felt that myths stemmed from something beyond the individual unconscious. Just as individuals have an unconscious mind, Jung believed that humans as a group share a **collective unconscious**, or inborn elements of the unconscious that are manifested in dreams and myths. The main characters of these dreams and myths are termed **archetypes**. Oedipus is just one example of an archetype; other archetypal characters that have been suggested include the Trickster, the Hero, the Orphan, the Seeker, the Destroyer, the Creator, the Sage, and the Fool. Another example is the Phoenix, taken from the Greek story of the bird that rises from its own ashes. The Phoenix is a story of rebirth. A familiar telling of the Phoenix archetype is found in Christianity's death and rebirth of Jesus Christ.

In part because Jung's archetypes are alleged to be universal and precultural, he has received less attention in anthropological circles than Freud, whose theories are more amenable to cultural relativism. Anthropologists have also criticized Jungian analysis for rarely using data from non-Western sources.

Common themes in myths

As we can see from the preceding discussion, underlying the diversity of narratives found cross-culturally are some common elements and themes. These similarities have been explained in various ways. Diffusion, or the spread of cultural traits from one group to another, is always a possible explanation. Others focus on the shared nature of human cognition and psychology. The ideas of Freud and Jung are good examples of this approach, although Freud saw the similarities stemming from shared individual experiences, whereas Jung focused on a universally shared collective unconscious. In this section we will explore some of the common stories that are found in religious narratives around the world.

Origin myths

Origin myths answer some of the most basic questions that humans have: Who are we? Why are we here? What is our relationship to the world? Origin stories address the most basic questions of identity, both personal and communal. Creation myths are generally the most sacred of the religious narratives. All other narratives ultimately build on the groundwork laid down in origin myths.

Box 2.4 The power of storytelling

Humans have been called "storytelling animals." We are constantly surrounded by stories from more obvious sources like books, movies, and television shows to less obvious ones like daydreams, songs, gossip, and commercials. Politics and jury trials are often about who can tell the better story.

We have discussed in this chapter how sacred stories shape meaning for cultures. In the same way the stories we tell about ourselves and our lives shape our personal worldviews and the way we see ourselves in that world. Can you explain your actions and tell a coherent story about

them? What does it mean if you cannot?

New research is exploring if we can reframe our lives by changing how we tell our own stories. For example, an intervention with Duke University students who were struggling academically focused on getting them to reframe their stories from not being cut out for college to just needing time to adjust. Students who received this intervention raised their overall grade point averages and were less likely to drop out than a control group.[16]

As you move through this class reflect on your own story, especially as it relates to education. How did the family you grew up in feel about education? What were your early experiences in school like and what impact did that have on you? What characterizes you as a student? What are your educational goals and why? How does learning about religion fit into your overall story?

A common element in origin stories is the birth metaphor. When the supernatural power doing the creating is female, this is generally a spontaneous and independent birth. When the supernatural power is male, the birth is more symbolic: the god vomits or excretes the world or perhaps sacrifices part of his own body to make the world. In the following origin story from the Bushongo, a Bantu people from Zaire (Guinea Coast culture area), the male deity vomits the world.

> In the beginning, in the dark, there was nothing but water. And Bumba was alone. One day Bumba was in terrible pain. He retched and strained and vomited up the sun. After that light spread over everything. The heat of the sun dried up the water until the black edges of the world began to show. Black sandbanks and reefs could be seen. But there were no living things. Bumba vomited up the moon and then the stars, and after that the night had its own light also. Still Bumba was in pain. He strained again and nine living creatures came forth [a leopard, crested eagle, crocodile, fish, tortoise, lightning, white heron, beetle, and a goat]. Last of all came forth men.[17]

Many origin myths begin with creation out of chaos, darkness, or the void. The following story is from the Yoruba, a society in West Africa (Guinea Coast culture area):

> In the beginning the world was a watery, formless Chaos that was neither sea nor land, but a marshy waste. Above it, in the sky, lived the Supreme Being, Olorun, attended to

> by other gods, including Orisha Nla, called the Great God. Olorun called Orisha Nla into his presence and ordered him to make a world. It was time to make a solid land and Orisha Nla was given a snail full of magic earth, a pigeon, and a five-toed hen to accomplish the assignment. Orisha Nla came down to the Chaos and set to work organizing it. He threw magic earth into a small patch. The pigeon and the hen began to scratch in the magic earth, and they scratched until land and sea were entirely separated … Orisha Nla was sent back to earth to plant trees, including the first oil palm. Olorun made the rain fall from heaven to water the seeds, which grew into a great forest. In heaven, Olorun began to make the first people. They were fashioned from earth by Orisha Nla, but only Olorun, the Supreme Being, could give them life. Orisha Nla hid in Olorun's workshop to watch. However, Olorun knew that Orisha Nla was hiding there and put him into a deep sleep, and so only Olorun knows the secret of how to bring a body to life. To this day Orisha Nla, through the agency of parents, makes the body, but only the Supreme Being can give it life.[18]

Because of the process of diffusion, certain culture areas share narrative elements in common. One example of this is the primordial egg as an element of creation stories in Asia, as seen in one Chinese origin story:

> At first there was nothing. Time passed and nothing became something. Time passed and something split into two: the two were male and female. These two produced two more, and these two produced P'an Ku, the first being, the Great Man, the Creator. First there was the great cosmic egg. Inside the egg was Chaos, and floating in Chaos was P'an Ku, the Undeveloped, the divine Embryo. And P'an Ku burst out of the egg, four times larger than any man today, with an adze (or a hammer and chisel) with which he fashioned the world.[19]

A final example of an origin myth is the emergence myth, common throughout North America. The initial acts of creation take place under the earth, which is often organized into a series of layers. The lower layers are dark and cramped. As the story progresses, the story moves up from one world to the next. This movement is an evolutionary progression as acts of creation occur and knowledge is imparted to various creatures, including humans. Finally, they emerge onto the surface of the earth.

There are several interpretations that have been given to emergence myths. The world under the surface of the earth can be seen as the womb in which creation occurs and the emergence onto the earth as a birth. The myth can also be seen as a reflection of the life cycle of maize (corn) that begins as a seed under the ground and then emerges onto the surface of the earth.

One of the best-known emergence myths is *Diné Bahane',* the Navaho

creation story. The early part of the story takes place under the earth where there are four worlds, one on top of the other. The story begins in the first world, the bottom-most world, and then progresses upward. Usually some danger or destructive power forces the creatures to escape through a hole in the sky into the next world.

In the fourth world we meet the four Holy People, immortal beings who travel on the rainbow following the path of the sunray; they can control winds and thunder. The Holy People then create the first humans, First Man and First Woman, from ears of corn. (Corn, cornmeal, and corn pollen play important roles in Navaho rituals.) The life force comes from the wind, which is likened to a person's breath. Box 2.5 presents the section of *Diné Bahane'* in which we read of this creation.

Box 2.5 The Navaho creation story: Diné Bahane'

As for the gods, they repeated their visit four days in a row. But on the fourth day, *Bits'íís lizhin* the Black Body remained after the other three departed. And when he was alone with the onlookers, he spoke to them in their own language. This is what he said:

"You do not seem to understand the Holy People," he said.

"So I will explain what they want you to know.

"They want more people to be created in this world. But they want intelligent people, created in their likeness, not in yours.

"You have bodies like theirs, true enough.

"But you have the teeth of beasts! You have the mouths of beasts! You have the feet of beasts! You have the claws of beasts!

"The new creatures are to have hands like ours. They are to have feet like ours. They are to have mouths like ours and teeth like ours. They must learn to think ahead, as we do.

"What is more, you are unclean!

"You smell bad.

"So you are instructed to cleanse yourselves before we return twelve days from now."

That is what *Bits'íís lizhin* the Black Body said to the insect people

who had emerged from the first world to the second, from the second world to the third, and from the third world to the fourth world where they now lived.

Accordingly, on the morning of the twelfth day the people bathed carefully. The women dried themselves with yellow corn meal. The men dried themselves with white corn meal.

Soon after they had bathed, they heard the distant voice coming from far in the east.

They listened and waited as before, listened and waited. Until soon they heard the voice as before, nearer and louder this time. They continued to listen and wait, listen and wait, until they heard the voice a third time as before, all the nearer and all the louder.

Continuing to listen as before, they heard the voice again, even louder than the last time, and so close now that it seemed directly upon them, exactly as it had seemed before. And as before they found themselves standing among the same four *Haashch'ééh dine'é*, or Holy People as *Bilagáana* the White Man might wish to call them.

Bits'íís doot l'izh the Blue Body and *Bits'íís lizhin* the Black Body each carried a sacred buckskin. *Bits'íís ligaii* the White Body carried two ears of corn.

One ear of corn was yellow. The other ear was white. Each ear was completely covered at the end with grains, just as sacred ears of corn are covered in our own world now.

Proceeding silently, the gods laid one buckskin on the ground, careful that its head faced the west. Upon this skin they placed the two ears of corn, being just as careful that the tips of each pointed east. Over the corn they spread the other buckskin, making sure that its head faced east.

Under the white ear they put the feather of a white eagle.

And under the yellow ear they put the feather of a yellow eagle.

Then they told the onlooking people to stand at a distance.

So that the wind could enter.

Then from the east *Nilch'i ligai* the White Wind blew between the buckskins. And while the wind thus blew, each of the Holy People came and walked four times around the objects they had placed so carefully on the ground.

As they walked, the eagle feathers, whose tips protruded slightly from

between the two buckskins, moved slightly.

Just slightly.

So that only those who watched carefully were able to notice.

And when the Holy People had finished walking, they lifted the topmost buckskin.

And lo! the ears of corn had disappeared.

In their place there lay a man and there lay a woman.

The white ear of corn had been transformed into our most ancient male ancestor. And the yellow ear of corn had been transformed into our most ancient female ancestor.

It was the wind that had given them life: the very wind that gives us our breath as we go about our daily affairs here in the world we ourselves live in.

When this wind ceases to blow inside of us, we become speechless. Then we die.

In the skin at the tips of our fingers we can see the trail of that life-giving wind.

Look carefully at your own fingertips.

There you will see where the wind blew when it created your most ancient ancestors out of two ears of corn, it is said.

Source: Republished with permission of the University of New Mexico Press, from *Diné Bahane': The Navajo Creation Story* by Paul G. Zolbrod, 1984; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

Apocalyptic myths

Many myths found in a great many societies tell of the catastrophic destruction of the world, an **apocalypse**. The destruction takes many forms, one of which is by flood. A disciple of Freud's once explained this as being related to dreams that happen when the person has a full bladder. An alternative explanation lies in the fact that floods are likely to be frequently experienced, as people need to live near a water source. The Judeo-Christian

flood myth is the story of Noah's ark in which God sends the flood to rid the earth of the wickedness of man.

In many societies we see a cycle of creations and destructions. The ancient Aztecs of Mexico tell of four worlds that existed prior to the present world, the fifth world. The following story tells of the destruction of the fourth world:

> During the era of the fourth sun, the Sun of Water, the people grew very wicked and ignored the worship of the gods. The gods became angry and Tlaloc, the god of rains, announced that he was going to destroy the world with a flood. However, Tlaloc was fond of a devout couple, Tata and Nena, and he warned them of the flood. He instructed them to hollow out a great log and take two ears of corn—one for each of them—and eat nothing more.
>
> So Tata and Nena entered the tree trunk with the two ears of corn, and it began to rain. When the rains subsided and Tata and Nena's log landed on dry land, they were so happy that they caught a fish and ate it, contrary to the orders of Tlaloc. It was only after their stomachs were full that they remembered Tlaloc's command.
>
> Tlaloc then appeared to them and said, "This is how I am repaid for saving your lives?" They were then changed into dogs. It was at this point, where even the most righteous people were disobedient, that the gods destroyed the world, ushering in the present era of the Fifth Sun.[20]

While the previous examples are of apocalyptic floods that took place in the mythological past, not all apocalypses involve floods and some involve predictions of future events. A good example comes from the New Testament in the Book of Revelations (21:1–9). Revelations focuses on a coming battle, both earthly and spiritual, between the forces of good and evil. The myth tells us that the "Lamb" of God (believed by most to be Jesus Christ) will save his people from a time of great tribulations on earth, destroy the wicked, and usher in an age of peace in which his people will live in the presence of God and Christ in a heavenly city.

> And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.
>
> And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
>
> And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.
>
> And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death,

neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.

Much of the symbolism and story of Revelations is familiar to Americans even if they are unfamiliar with the source, including the four horsemen of the apocalypse, the lamb of God, the seven seals, the beast, the harlot of Babylon, and Satan and the lake of fire. As we will see in Chapter 11, Revelations is the basis for many new religious movements as individuals interpret modern-day happenings as being those foretold in the myth.

Hero myths

Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) described the story of the hero's journey in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The title refers to the fact that although there are thousands of different **hero myths** or stories involving heroes throughout the world, they all follow the same basic story line, what Campbell calls the **monomyth**. Campbell describes the monomyth as follows: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."[21]

The hero's journey is a common theme encountered in many myths. Sometimes the hero is based on a real person whose story has been idealized. Other times the hero has no basis in real life. The first stage of the hero's

journey is the departure. The hero, frequently an orphaned youth, is thrust out of his or her community for one of several reasons, such as the destruction of his or her home by some supernatural force. The second phase, initiation, includes the hero's training, as he or she learns to utilize supernatural tools, such as a sacred sword, under the direction of a master, who frequently possesses supernatural power. In the third phase, the return, the hero returns and accomplishes the task. The monomyth is frequently found in origin stories, where the hero is responsible for bringing some knowledge to humans.

Entire religious systems may be based on a hero story. Buddhism is based on the story of the Prince Siddhartha Gautama. Gautama leads a very sheltered life in his father's palace until he becomes aware of sickness, suffering, and death and the fact that he too is subject to them. He leaves behind his worldly possessions and spends years wandering, fasting, and meditating. He learns all he can from various teachers, but nothing seems to appease his sorrow and emptiness. In desperation, he resolves to sit under a Bodhi tree until he finds the answers he has been looking for. He is attacked by Kama-Mara, the god of love and death, but is victorious. During his time under the tree, Gautama gains knowledge and enlightenment and is thereafter referred to as the Buddha, or the "Enlightened One."

The same monomyth structure is also frequently used in popular films, such as *Star Wars, The Wizard of Oz, The Matrix, The Lord of the Rings,* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.*Table 2.2 compares some elements that are common to some of these movies.

Table 2.2 The monomyth in cinema: a sampling of common features

	The Wizard of Oz (1939)	*Star Wars (1977)*	*Harry Potter (2001)*
Hero	Dorothy Gale	Luke Skywalker	Harry Potter
Remote childhood	Lives with aunt and uncle in arid Kansas	Lives with aunt and uncle on arid Tatooine	Lives with aunt and uncle; is unaware that his parents had magical powers
Call to adventure	Follows Toto fleeing witch	Follows R2D2 fleeing Empire	Invited to attend Hogwarts

Introduction of the helper	Good Witch	Ben Kenobi	Dumbledore
Given amulet	Red shoes	Light saber	Wizard's wand
Physical transportation out of previous life	Tornado	Mos Eisely Spaceport on Millennium Falcon	Train to Hogwarts
Enters Land of Enchantment	Oz and witch's castle	Death Star	Hogwarts Academy
Companions	Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, Cowardly Lion	Han Solo, C3PO, Chewbacca	Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley
Faces challenges	Wizard makes impossible demands	Freeing Princess Leia	Three-headed dog, Devil's snare plant, winged keys, etc.
Uses magic to accomplish goal	Dorothy uses red shoes to return to Kansas	Luke uses the Force to destroy Death Star	Harry uses magic to defeat Voldemort

Conclusion

The most fundamental questions asked by human beings—about the nature of life, existence, and death—are answered in the religious narratives we tell. These stories both explain and structure the world of a particular group of people. By examining religious narratives, we learn much about a specific group's worldview, including rules for moral behavior. Myths are stories to live by. They create networks of meaning that affect the life of people in that culture far beyond the domain of religion.

As we explore other topics in the study of religion, we will frequently return to the issue of religious narratives, because these stories often form the

foundation of religious practices. This will be particularly important in the next two chapters on symbols and rituals.

Summary

The ways a society perceives and interprets its reality is known as its worldview. The worldview provides an understanding of how the world works; it forms the template for thought and behavior; and it provides a basic understanding of the origin and nature of humankind and its relationship to the world. People express their worldviews in stories.

Myths are sacred stories that tell of the origin of the world and humankind, the existence and activities of gods and spirits, the origin of human traditions, and the nature of illness and death. They tell how to behave and how to distinguish good from evil. Myths are thought to recount real historical events that took place in the remote past. They provide the basis for religious beliefs and practices.

Myths can be both written and oral. Written forms tend to be very stable through time, and changes that do occur are usually deliberate changes that are the consequences of translation or scholarly discourse about the meaning of particular words and passages. Oral texts are recited, and this recitation often has the characteristics of performance. One of the consequences of the oral transmission of stories is that they are frequently unconsciously altered with each generation, which explains the existence of different versions of the same myth within a society.

There are many ways of interpreting myths. Functional analysis sees myths as forces that help to maintain the society. Structural analysis focuses on the underlying structure of myths. The psychoanalytic approach sees myths as symbolically expressing unconscious wishes.

Certain basic themes are common throughout the world. Origin myths provide answers to the questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What is our relationship to the world? These stories play an important role in laying out the culture's worldview. One common element is the birth metaphor, in which the world is born from a god or goddess or by creation out of chaos,

darkness, or the void. Apocalyptic myths tell of the past or future destruction of the world. Hero myths are stories about culture heroes who, through knowledge and mastery of certain skills, are able to bring about marvelous results.

Study questions

1. A society's worldview includes how that society sees the environment and its relationship to the environment. Do you think that two societies with two radically different worldviews could ever come to an agreement on how to deal with issues of environmental exploitation such as lumbering and mining?
2. In our society a religious organization might set up a table on a college campus and distribute copies of the Bible. In a small-scale society a storyteller might set up a "stage" at a local market and offer to tell stories. How are these two activities similar and how are they different? How does the transmission of religious stories differ in these two societies?
3. Using the Navaho creation story and Genesis, show how a religious narrative can be a social charter for a society.
4. Why do we label the movies *Star Wars, The Wizard of Oz, The Matrix, The Lord of the Rings,* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* monomyths? What are some other movies or television shows that are monomyths?
5. Why do you think that commonalities exist in myths found in different cultures?

Suggested readings

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2nd edn) (Princeton, NJ:

Princeton University Press, 1972).
[A description of the hero myth in societies around the world.]

Scott Leonard and Michael McClure, *Myth and Knowing: An Introduction to World Mythology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003).

Fiction

Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2012).
[In a story filled with symbolism, a young boy grows up in New Mexico in the 1940s.]

Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (New York: William Morrow, 2011).
[The old gods of mythology battle the new gods of technology for control in America.]

Suggested websites

http://pantheon.org/mythica.html
Encyclopedia Mythica is an encyclopedia of mythology, folklore, and legend.

www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html
An extensive collection of folk and mythology texts.

www.sacred-texts.com
An Internet text archive.

www.navajocentral.org
Information about the Navaho.

www.jcf.org
The Joseph Campbell Foundation.

www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/revelation/white.html
Understanding the Book of Revelation.

Notes

1 This is a brief synopsis of the story of *Snow White* as retold by the authors. We realize that most readers are familiar with the *Snow White* story. The story has been retold and changed over the decades. Unfortunately, some of the most fascinating elements of the story have been eliminated from recent versions. We encourage you to read the early versions, which are much more interesting than the sanitized versions that are most frequently found today.

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7 J. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York: McMillan, 1923).

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9 R. F. Benedict, *Zuni Mythology,* 2 volumes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

10 B. Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1954), p. 101.

11 C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology,* Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

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13 S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953).

14 A. Johnson and D. Price-Williams, *Oedipus Ubiquitous* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

15 C. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (reprint edn) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

16 T. Parker-Pope "Writing Your Way to Happiness," *The New York Times*, January 19,

2015, http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/19/writing-your-way-to-happiness/?_r=4.

17 Brief quote from page 44 from *Primal Myths: Creating the World* by Barbara C. Sproul, © 1979 Barbara C. Sproul. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

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21 J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2nd edn) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 30.

Chapter 3
Religious symbols

All animals communicate with one another. Most often, this communication is simple and very specific to the situation. A stimulus—such as the sight of a stranger, predator, or food—may bring about a response of some kind: threat, flight, or eating. However, the situation exists in the here and now. The reaction is an immediate response to the specific circumstances.

Humans also encounter strangers, predators, and food. However, the human response is more complex than that of other living creatures. Humans react to the presence of a stranger entering their midst, but the stranger may be seen as an enemy warrior, a merchant, or a monk—and will be dealt with appropriately. The reaction to a predator might be to prepare a spear for defense or to perform magical rites to ward off the danger. Humans feel hunger and respond to the presence of food, but many edible and nutritious foods are shunned because of cultural or religious prohibitions. All of these behaviors involve communication, be it storytelling, ritual, or the articulation of food prohibitions.

The complexity of human communication is made possible through the ability of humans to create and use symbols. Symbols permit people to discuss abstract topics and to talk about things in the past, in an envisioned future, or even in a supernatural world. The world of religion is a symbolic world.

What is a symbol?

Let us begin by picking up an apple in our hand. We know that this is an

apple by its shape, color, and smell, and we know what to do with it. Many nonhuman animals will react to an apple in very much the same way. Show an apple to a horse, and the horse will know by its shape, color, and smell exactly what it is and might take the apple from your hand and eat it. In this way, humans and other animals are very similar.

As humans, however, we can do something that horses cannot do. For example, we can draw a blue triangle on a piece of paper and declare that this blue triangle represents an apple. It certainly does not look like an apple or smell or taste like an apple, but as long as everyone in our community accepts the idea that a blue triangle stands for an apple, we can use it in place of a real apple in communication. If we have a fruit stand at an outdoor market, we can fly a banner with a blue triangle above our booth so that people will know that we have apples for sale. Newcomers might not know that a blue triangle stands for apples, but we can tell them, and once they become regular customers, members of our small community, they will participate in our system of communication. (Of course, a nonhuman animal can be trained to respond to a blue triangle, but a human creates the symbol and a human does the training.)

In our community, the blue triangle is acting as a symbol. It is something that stands for something else. Most symbols have no direct connection with the thing they refer to. The association of a blue triangle with an apple is **arbitrary**; it could as easily be a yellow circle or a green square. As long as there is agreement within our community as to the meaning of the symbol, we can communicate with one another using symbols rather than real objects.

Being able to create and use symbols is extremely useful. We can use symbols to refer to things that are not directly in front of us—a faraway place, for example, or something we would like to do in the future. We might talk about going to the grocery store to buy apples, yet there might not be an apple in sight. We also can talk about fruits that we have never seen or tasted, perhaps a durian fruit from Southeast Asia. This ability to use symbols to refer to things and activities that are remote from the user is termed **displacement**. And if we discover a new fruit that no one has ever seen before, we can create a new symbol, such as a name, to refer to it. This feature of symbols is termed **openness**.

We can also use symbols to stand for things that are more complex than simple objects. Symbols can stand for emotions and complex philosophical

concepts that exist only in our minds. Symbols can create a supernatural world or create myths about the past. Joseph Church, discussing language, writes:

> we can manipulate symbols in ways impossible with the things they stand for, and so arrive at novel and even creative versions of reality … We can verbally rearrange situations which in themselves would resist rearrangement … we can isolate features which in fact cannot be isolated … we can juxtapose objects and events far separated in time and space … we can, if we will, turn the universe symbolically inside out.[1]

In our initial example we used a geometric shape, a blue triangle, as a symbol. Many symbols are physical objects or artistic representations. Symbols do not have to be physical, however. Language is a system of symbols, but here the symbols are sounds. The only reason that the word *apple* means a particular type of fruit is because when we learned English, we learned that the combination of sounds that make up the word *apple* stands for that particular fruit. There is nothing inherently "applish" about the sound of the word *apple,* just as there is nothing "applish" about a blue triangle. In fact, this fruit is known by many other names in other languages—*manzana* in Spanish and *elma* in Turkish, for example.

Religious symbols

Symbols are important elements in religious practice, and religious rituals center on symbols and the manipulation of symbols. In Hinduism we might approach a statue that represents the god Brahma. In ritual the statue may be bathed with milk, and strings of flowers may be hung around its neck. People in many different culture areas use masks to impersonate gods, such as the masks of the Hopi of the American Southwest and the Dogon of western Africa. The sand painting of the Navaho, created as a part of ritual, becomes a portal into the supernatural world.

Of course, not all symbols are physical things or artistic representations. Words, both written and spoken, are critical elements in religious behavior. In Jewish ritual the Torah is taken from the ark with great ceremony to be read. In Tantric Buddhism, found in Tibet, words or formulas have great spiritual

power, which builds as they are chanted over and over. Elements of music and dance and of space and time can also serve as symbols. We will begin our discussion of symbols by looking at basic artistic representations.

The swastika

A symbol such as the **swastika** can stand for very complex ideas and can carry great emotional resonance. Most Americans and Europeans looking at the swastika experience anger or dread. In 1919, the German Nazi Party adopted the swastika as its symbol. Because of this the swastika has been associated with the terrible events perpetrated by the Nazis in World War II. A swastika spray-painted on a wall is often defined in law as a hate crime.

The swastika is a religious symbol that is found in a great many religious systems. It is basically a pattern of lines set at right angles to one another and, as such, carries no inherent meaning. It occurs in many versions—clockwise and counterclockwise, for example. The term is derived from the Sanskrit *su* ("good") and *avasti* ("to exist"). The swastika is seen in the religious art associated with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. It is also found in the ancient art of Scandinavia and the Middle East, and it is even seen in early Christian art. In most of these contexts, the swastika has a positive meaning such as prosperity and good luck. However, in some cultures the reverse swastika is called the sauvastika and stands for darkness, misfortune, and suffering.

The swastika is found in Navaho art, in which it represents the Whirling Log, an element of a story found in the creation myth (Figure 3.1). The Whirling Log was a type of dugout canoe built by the gods. The symbol represents the log with a support pole attached beneath. Attached to each end is a rainbow rope that stand out straight as the log whirls. The culture hero Self Teacher traveled in this canoe on an epic journey. This design element is used in many rituals, including the Night and Feather chants.

The pentagram

The term **pentagram** can refer to any five-sided figure but is generally used to refer to a five-pointed star, also called a **pentacle** (Figure 3.2a). Pentagrams are among the most widely used religious symbols, both historically and cross-culturally.

Some researchers believe that the pentagram originated as the symbol of a pagan goddess. The pentagram became associated with this goddess because her sacred fruit was the apple. If an apple is cut in half through its equator, the seeds of the apple form a pentagram in each half. The pentagram is also used by the Masonic order, which traces its origins back to Pythagoras and ancient Greece.

The pentagram was associated with the Hebrew Scriptures as a symbol of the five books of the Pentateuch (the Torah). Early Christians used the symbol with a variety



Figure 3.1 Navaho blanket with swastika. Early twentieth-century Navaho blanket woven of white, red, and dark brown sheep's wool, with storm motif. Note the swastikas at each end.

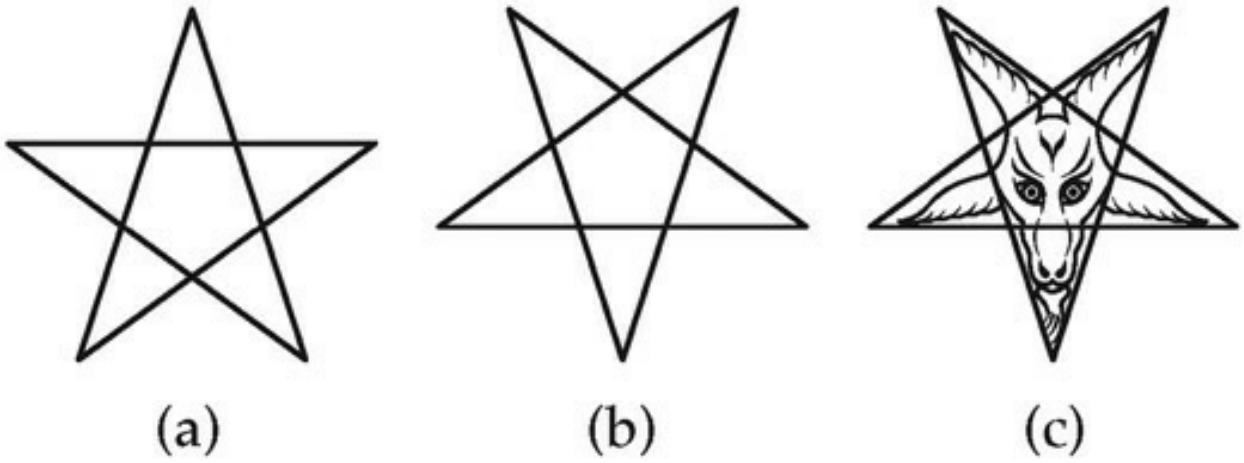


Figure 3.2 The pentagram. (a) Pentagram, (b) Satanist inverted pentagram, (c) symbol of the Church of Satan.

of meanings, including the representation of the five wounds of Christ and the star that prophesied the birth of Jesus. It was only during the Witchcraze (see Chapter 10) that the pentagram began to take on a connotation of evil. During this time, the symbol was actually referred to as the "witch's foot." This association with evil became stronger for many when twentieth-century Satanists adopted the pentagram as their symbol. The Satanist symbol is an inverted pentagram, most commonly shown with a goat's head in the center (Figure 3.2b and c). (Satanists are discussed in Chapter 10.)

As with the swastika, there are many misunderstandings about the meaning of the pentagram owing to its various associations. Most recently, the symbol has been adopted by Wiccans, members of a Neo-Pagan religion that is reviving pre-Christian religious practices. (We will discuss the Wiccan religion in more detail in Chapter 11.) Wicca is a nature-based, polytheistic religion that emphasizes the use of good magic and not doing harm. For some Wiccans the pentagram represents earth, air, fire, water, and spirit; for others it refers to the four directions and spirit. However, many Americans still associate the pentagram with evil when they see a person wearing it.

Christian symbols

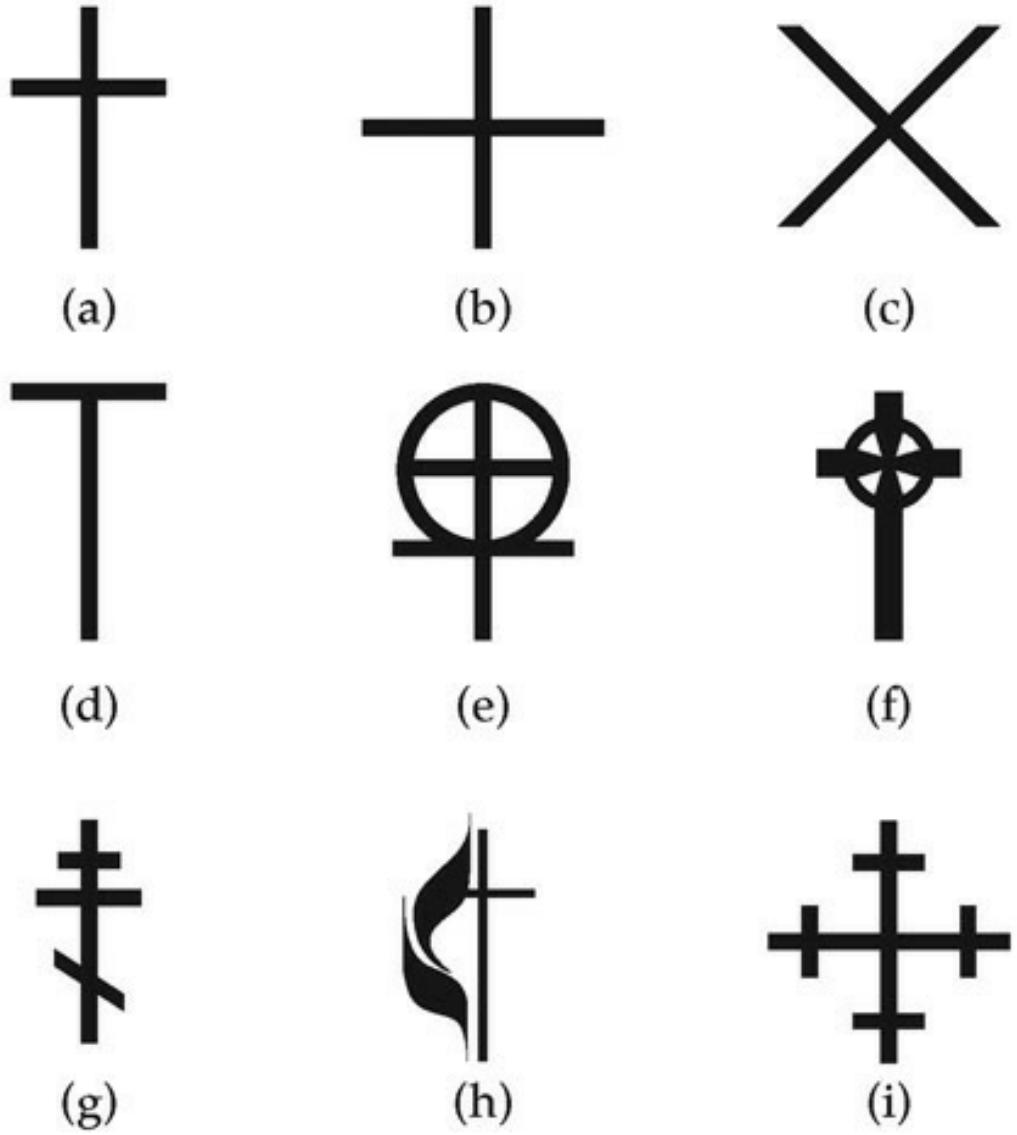


Figure 3.3 Some Christian symbols. (a) Roman Cross, (b) Greek Cross, (c) Cross of St. Andrew, (d) Tau Cross, (e) Coptic Cross, (f) Celtic Cross, (g) Cross of the Russian Orthodox Church, (h) Cross and Flame of the United Methodist Church (®The United Methodist Church), (i) Jerusalem Cross.

The **cross** is the symbol most clearly associated with Christianity (Figure 3.3). Yet the cross did not gain general acceptance for many centuries after the founding of the Christian religion. A Vatican sarcophagus from the fifth century shows one of the first depictions of a cross in Christian art. It is a Greek cross (with arms of equal length); Jesus' body is not shown. Some early Christians even argued against the use of the cross as a symbol of Christianity because it had earlier pagan associations, most specifically the Tau cross (in

the shape of the letter T).

The cross that is widely used today is a Roman cross, but there is still considerable variation in the exact look of the cross symbol. For example, Roman Catholic crosses are crucifixion scenes, complete with the body of Christ. The Protestant cross does not show the body of Christ because Protestants emphasize that Jesus has risen from the cross and is no longer on it. A cross with a dual flame behind it is the symbol of the United Methodist Church. The cross represents Christ, and the flame represents the Holy Spirit. The cross of the Orthodox Church has three cross bars: one for the inscription, one for the arms, and one for a footrest.

Box 3.1 Religious toys and games

Bible action figures, Buddha plush toys, a mosque building set, plush plagues bag, Catholicopoly, Kosherland (based on the board game Candyland), and Missionary Conquest (based on the board game Risk) are just a few of the many religiously themed games, dolls, and toys in the marketplace. Some are satirical and meant solely for amusement (e.g., Nunzilla dolls, Lookin' Good for Jesus bath products, and Holy Toast bread stamp). Others are intended to transmit the narratives and worldview of a religion.

Colors, images, and the rules of play are all symbolic. The game pieces in Catholicopoly include a dove and a lamb. In the Buddhist version of the game snakes and ladders, ethical actions move the player upward toward enlightenment, while selfish behaviors move one lower toward rebirth as a lower life form. Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris write:

> All elements of the games communicate. Not only the components that are designed to intentionally instill values or knowledge, such as cards or board design, but every element of the game, from the box to the directions, can be read as cultural text. For example, games that have long or complicated directions are usually from hierarchical or highly regulated religions. This makes sense, since the designers have included what they consider to be important, and in these religions rules and principles are fundamental and crucial constituents. Unlike the intentional symbols and meanings embedded in religious games, directions are more subliminally illustrative, yet nonetheless teach important aspects of religious

life.[2]

Bado-Fralick and Norris point out that religious games and toys make many uncomfortable by associating religion with play, commerce, and profane activities. Yet, the separation of religion as its own domain, even the separation of childhood and its games and as a distinct stage of life, is a recent invention. Games and play have long been a part of religion, as for example in divination rituals (see Chapter 7).

If the cross was not the most important early Christian symbol, what was? It was the simple fish symbol. There are several reasons why the fish was used. One often given is that Jesus referred to the apostles as "fishers of men." The most commonly given reason, though, is that the letters of the Greek word for fish, *icthus,* form an **acrostic**. An *acrostic* is a word that is derived from the first letter of a series of words. So *icthus* is derived from *Iesous Christos Theou Uiou Soter* ("Jesus Christ of God the Son the Savior"). In the early days, when Christians were a small, persecuted group, the symbol served as a type of password. One person would draw the first arc in the sand, and if the second person was also Christian, he or she would draw the second arc to complete the fish.

Sacred art

Although the swastika, pentagram, cross, and other simple symbols are important representations in their respective religious systems, they are usually elements found in more complex settings or works of art. Imagine, for example, walking into a great European cathedral with its massive stained glass windows, statuary, and paintings, all containing a myriad of symbols, or walking through a Buddhist temple in Thailand, with its many representations of the figure of Buddha, each with its own complex meaning and referents.

The sarcophagus of Lord Pakal

Artistic representations are often used to illustrate and supplement religious texts. The following is an archaeological example from the ancient Maya of southern Mexico in the Mesoamerica culture area. Although contemporary Mayan religion has many parallels with the ancient Mayan religion, contemporary studies can provide only a limited understanding of ancient Mayan art. The fact that we can know as much as we do about the ancient Maya is because they built monumental buildings, chiseled great works of art into stone, developed a sophisticated calendar, and had a system of writing. However, not all Mayan symbols have been deciphered, and much remains to be learned.

In 1949, the Mexican archaeologist Alberto Ruiz Lhuillier was working in the Temple of the Inscriptions at the site of Palenque. Like most Mayan temples, it was built on top of a large pyramid. While working in the temple, Lhuillier discovered a staircase under the floor leading to a room containing a large stone sarcophagus richly carved with Mayan pictures and writing (Figure 3.4). The cover was removed to reveal the skeleton of a man, that of one of the greatest kings to rule Palenque. His name was K'inich Janahlo Pakal, Pakal the Great, or Lord Shield. He died at the age of eighty on August 31, 683, after having ruled for sixty-seven years.

As we in the twenty-first century look at this carving from the seventh century, especially if we have never encountered Mayan art before, we probably recognize only a few elements—perhaps a reclining figure in the center and a bird near the top. Of course, if we were aristocratic Maya living in the seventh century, the meaning of all of these elements would be known to us. Our fathers would have taken us to the



Figure 3.4 The Mayan cosmos. This carving is a symbolic representation of the Mayan cosmos. The carving is found on the sarcophagus cover in the Temple of the Inscriptions, Palenque, Mexico.

temple precinct to show us the various motifs carved into the stone and to explain their meaning. As aristocrats, we also would undoubtedly have attended religious classes or received tutoring from the priests.

This carving is important to modern scholars because it is a visual representation of the Mayan cosmos. We cannot explain all of the elements, and limited space here prevents us from offering a complete explanation of what we do know, but let us examine some of the elements as examples of how symbolic representations are used to create a virtual supernatural world.

Near the base of the carving is an image of a skeletal snake. The skull of the "White-Bone-Snake" has been slit and spread out. The open jaws of the serpent form the portal that connects the world of the living with Xibalba, the world of the dead. We see Pakal at the moment of his death descending into the serpent's jaws as he moves from the world of the living into the world of the dead.

Behind the figure of Pakal, appearing to be growing out of the serpent's jaw, is the Cosmic Tree, which is the central axis of the world. The tree is rooted in the underworld; behind Pakal is the Middle World, which is the world inhabited by people; the upper parts of the tree reach into the heavens. Many of the representations in the upper portion of the tree represent constellations and heavenly bodies. For example, what appear to be branches that end in square-nosed serpents, flowers, and other symbols represent the Milky Way. The bird perched at the top of the tree is the companion of one of the gods involved with the creation of the world. We know this because of various symbols carved on the bird, such as a necklace and the "ribbon" in its beak.

The carving shows Pakal descending into the Underworld. There he will undergo a series of trials followed by his resurrection as a god. Associated with Pakal is a sacrificial bowl that is carved with the symbol representing the sun. Like the sun that moves into Xibalba at sunset and is resurrected at dawn, so does Pakal move into the Underworld to be resurrected as a god. After his death, the priests would enter into an altered state of consciousness (see Chapter 5) and contact Pakal's spirit. In fact, along the side of the staircase leading to his tomb is a pipe made of brick. This is a **psychoduct**, through which Pakal's spirit moves from the tomb into the temple sanctuary during rituals.

The meaning of color

As we saw with the sarcophagus of Lord Pakal, religious art can be quite complex. There are many important elements in artistic representation. One of these is color. Although today we see the statues and carvings of the Romans and the ancient Mayans in white marble or the color of stone, we know that at the time these statues and carvings were made, objects of stone were often covered with paint.

Colors have cultural meanings. In Western weddings, brides wear white. This tradition began with the wedding of British Queen Victoria to Prince Albert in 1840. Irish folk wisdom dictates the following:

> Married in white, you have chosen all right.
> Married in red, you'd better be dead.
> Married in yellow, ashamed of the fellow.
> Married in blue, your lover is true.
> Married in green, ashamed to be seen.
> Married in black, you'll ride in a hack.
> Married in pearl, you'll live in a whirl.
> Married in brown, you'll live out of town.

These meanings do not necessarily apply to other cultures. For example, sometimes white may be avoided because of its association with death. In Chinese culture, brides wear red.

Many scholars have studied color terminology. English has eleven basic color terms: *red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown, pink, black, white,* and *gray.* These are the colors that children learn in preschool. We also define colors more narrowly within these basic categories by using combined terms (such as red-orange) or specialized terms (such as lavender and turquoise).

All peoples in all societies, except individuals with some form of color blindness, see the entire visible spectrum of colors, but the color spectrum is not divided up into natural units of color. All languages have ways of dividing up this spectrum into arbitrary categories that are labeled by linguistic forms. However, the actual number of basic color terms and how the visible spectrum is actually divided vary from culture to culture. Generally, languages of industrial societies tend to have a greater number of basic color terms than do languages spoken in less complex societies.

A color term, a word such as *blue,* is a symbol. In this case, the word *blue* refers not to a physical object, but to a particular segment of the color spectrum, or, as a physicist might define it, a range of wavelengths of light.

When speakers of different languages are asked to identify the range of colors covered by a particular color term, we see a great deal of variation. Symbols, including color terminology, are arbitrary and learned; they are parts of cultural traditions. For example, the Navaho think of the ideal blue as turquoise. The stone of that color not only is important in jewelry making, but also has religious importance. To the Navaho, "blue is the color of celestial and earthly attainment, of peace, happiness, and success, of vegetable sustenance."[3]

Yoruba color terminology

The language of the Yoruba of Nigeria in the Guinea Coast culture area has only three basic color terms. Each term covers a much larger part of the color spectrum than do English color terms. *Funfun* includes what English speakers call white, silver, and pale gray. *Pupa* covers red, pink, orange, and deep yellow. *Dúdú* includes black, blue, purple, green, dark brown, red-brown, and dark gray.

In the English language, colors evoke emotions. We say that a sad person is feeling blue; when angry, we see red; a jealous person is green with envy; a coward is yellow. The Yoruba also associate colors with particular temperatures and temperaments. For example, *funfun* is associated with coolness, age, and wisdom; *pupa* evokes hotness; *dúdú* is dark and warm.

The supernatural world of the Yoruba is populated by many spiritual beings called *orisha.* (The *orisha* will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 9.) Obatala, the king of the *orisha,* an ethical and merciful deity, is linked to the color *funfun,* the color of wisdom and respect. Objects associated with Obatala are frequently colored white, and he is sometimes called the "King of the White Cloth." In contrast, Sango is associated with the color *pupa.* He rules thunder and lightning and is proud and quick-tempered, and his images are often colored red. Ossosi, who is associated with hunting, is introverted and unstable. He is linked to the color *dúdú,* green and blue. The messenger of the gods is an *orisha* named Esu-Elegba. He is the intermediary between the people and the gods and ancestors and is the first deity addressed in rituals. Representations of Esu-Elegba are usually done in black and white or, in

Yoruba color terminology, *funfun* and *dúdú*. These are contrasting colors and represent the god's unpredictability. Artistic representations of Esu-Elegba in carvings, paintings, and embroideries primarily use these two colors. A Yoruba seeing such a representation can identify the *orisha* in part by the colors being used.

Sacred time and sacred space

Symbols are also used to create sacred realities: supernatural worlds, sacred spaces, and sacred divisions of time.

The meaning of time

All the examples of symbols examined thus far have been things that we can directly see as part of some physical artistic endeavor, whether it is a shape or a color. Yet not all things symbolic are physical. People also handle nonphysical entities symbolically. Our example will be the cultural handling of time.

What is time? People see time as being made up of recurring units that are based on observable physical events: the movement of the sun across the sky, the phases of the moon, and the passing of the seasons. We also can divide these units into phases. For example, a day can be divided based on the position of the sun (morning, afternoon, and evening). In astronomical terms, these recurring events represent the rotation of the earth on its axis (a day), the journey of the moon around the earth (a month), and the travel of the earth around the sun (a year). Human activities are organized by particular parts of the day or certain times of the year.

Humans also create units of time that are not based on real astronomical events such as the rotation of the earth. These units appear to be arbitrary. A week in our culture has seven days. Why not five, as is common in parts of Central America and Africa? Why not eight, as was found among the ancient

Inca of the South American Andes? And why not sixteen, as is found among the Yoruba of Nigeria? The seven-day week of Western society is derived from the cultures of the ancient Near East and perhaps came from the division of the approximately twenty-eight-day lunar cycle into four quarters. In other words, concepts such as "a week" are nonphysical symbols that stand for particular periods of time. Many of these periods do not exist in the real world, but only in the human mind.

Time is an important element of religious rituals. Many rituals are performed at specific moments of time, often as part of a ceremonial cycle. As we will see in the next section, time often has important symbolic meaning.

The Mayan view of time

The passage of time had a deep religious significance for the ancient Maya of southern Mexico and Central America. They developed several systems of marking time that intersected with one another to form a complex calendar. Like many peoples, the Maya had a calendrical system based on the solar year consisting of about 365 days. The Maya divided their year into eighteen months of twenty days and a nineteenth month of five days. Each month was named, and each day within a month was numbered. A particular day was named by a combination of its numerical position within the month and the name of the month, just as we do.

The solar year is a natural unit that is determined by the movements of the sun in the sky throughout the year. However, the Maya developed a second kind of year of 260 days that was constructed from a cycle of twenty day names and a second cycle of thirteen numbers. A particular day was known by a number and a day name. The twenty-day cycle of day names and the thirteen-day number cycle are interconnected like teeth in two large gears. The same combination of day name and number occurs every 260 days.

The two calendar systems ran simultaneously, and a specific day was named after its position in both calendars, which resulted in 18,980 unique combinations of days. It took fifty-two years to go through all of these combinations and to start over again. The end of a fifty-two-year cycle and the beginning of the next was an important ceremonial event in Mayan

religious life. The fifty-two-year cycle has no astronomical basis but is a part of Mayan culture, a part of how they understood their world. And this was just the beginning. The Maya recognized several other cycles, such as that based on the movements of the planet Venus in the sky.

Thus each day from the beginning of time in the Mayan calendar was unique and was designated by a sequence of notations based on the various calendars. When a child was born, the child was taken to a priest who used the designation of the day of the child's birth to predict the child's future. Important events, especially those surrounding the ruler, were scheduled to fall on days that were considered to be particularly auspicious. Thus to the Maya, time was much more than just a flow of days and years. Time had an important religious meaning (Box 3.2).

Box 3.2 The end of time

Different religious systems have different views of time. For some, time is cyclic. For others, it is a progression from one phase to another. This was true of the ancient Maya. The Maya lived in the fourth world which began on August 11, 3114 BCE. The Mayan calendar starts on this date, and from that day forward, time is divided into a series of larger and larger inclusive units. The largest of these units is the *baktun* that consists of 144,000 days (approximately 395 years). The end point of each cycle was an important event in the Mayan calendar. December 21, 2012, the winter solstice, marked the end of the thirteenth *baktun* since creation.[4] Although many predicted the end of the world on this date, there is no evidence that the Maya saw the end of a *baktun* as an apocalyptic event. However, predictions such as these sold a lot of books and made for a plot of an action-packed movie.

Other religious systems also see time as being cyclic. One characteristic of Christian fundamentalism (Chapter 12) is *dispensationalism.* This term refers to the belief that God has divided the history of the earth into phases or "dispensations." This idea was developed by the Englishman John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) who read the Bible as a historic document from which accurate predictions could

be gleaned. His scheme consisted of seven phases, each ending with a catastrophe, such as the Fall, the Flood of Noah, and the Crucifixion. People today are living in the sixth dispensation. Like previous stages, this stage too will come to an end in some catastrophic manner. However, just before, there would be a "Rapture" in which born-again Christians would be taken up to heaven and escape the sufferings of the Last Days. Later they would rule with Christ in the seventh dispensation.

William Miller (1782–1849) was a Baptist preacher who, through careful study of the Bible as a historical document, believed that the world as it was known would end in 1843. This was the beginning of an apocalyptic tradition that characterizes much of American Christianity. His movement began to spread and was referred to as Millerism. As the date approached, Miller predicted that the Second Coming of Christ—the Advent—would occur sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. When the predicted event failed to take place, he announced a second date based upon "corrected" calculations—October 22, 1844. The failure of the Advent occurring on that date is called the Great Disappointment. Nevertheless, the idea had taken hold in American Christianity, although usually without a specified date. Out of the tradition of Millerism grew several religious traditions that survive to this day, primarily the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Rituals and calendars in modern world religions

There are many examples from modern world religions of the importance of time and calendars. Many rituals are performed according to a temporal cycle. Such rituals are termed **periodic rituals**. They often commemorate the anniversary of important events in the history of the religion. Because of the importance of setting the date of the celebration correctly, many religions continue to use calendars that are older than the one most commonly used in the Western world.

In Islam, Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which is the month during which the Qur'an was sent down from heaven to Mohammad.

The month of Ramadan is a time for worship and contemplation. During this time, Muslims follow many constraints on their daily lives, such as not eating or drinking during daylight hours. At the end of the day, the fast is broken with prayer and a meal. The *Laylat-al-Qadr* (the Night of Power) is celebrated on the evening of the twenty-seventh day of Ramadan, as the night when Mohammad first received the revelation of the Qur'an. According to the Qur'an, this is also the night when God determines the course of the world for the following year. The end of the fasting, and of the month of Ramadan, is celebrated for three days in *Id-al-Fitr* (the Feast of Fast Breaking).

The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar. Each month begins with the sighting of the first crescent of the new moon. The length of the month thus defined does not divide evenly into the solar year—it is about eleven to twelve days short. As a result, the start of Ramadan shifts from year to year. In 2017 the month of Ramadan began on May 27, while in 2020 it will begin on April 24. One of the consequences of this is that when Ramadan falls in the winter season, the period of fasting is relatively short and the weather is relatively cool. But it is quite different when Ramadan falls during the summer season.

Another example of periodic rituals being set to older calendars is the *Yamim Nora'im* (Days of Awe), or Jewish high holy days, which are observed for a ten-day period between the first and tenth days of the month of Tishri, the seventh month of the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) marks the beginning of this time period, and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) marks the end. These are considered to be the most important of all the Jewish holidays and are the only Jewish holidays that are purely religious and not based on any historical or natural event.

The high holy days are a time for penitence and prayer during which Jews are given time to repent of their sins against God and ask God for forgiveness. On Rosh Hashanah, God judges the people and records His judgment in the Book of Life. However, there is a ten-day reprieve until Yom Kippur, when the Book is closed and sealed. Yom Kippur itself is a day for fasting and prayer.

The Hebrew calendar is also a lunar calendar. But in order to keep the holidays from shifting too far, a thirteenth month is added every two or three years. In some years, extra days are added to prevent Yom Kippur from occurring on the Sabbath. Thus the major ceremonies are maintained within specific seasons of the year.

In the early Christian church, the celebration of Easter was correlated with

the Jewish celebration of Passover, since the Last Supper was a Passover Seder, and celebrated in the Spring. However, because different Jewish communities set the date somewhat differently, the early church attempted to set the celebration of Easter according to their calendar (the Julian calendar, originally based upon the calendar reforms of Julius Caesar). Yet the date kept drifting later in the year. Finally, in 1582, Pope Gregory XIII decreed a new, reformed calendar, the calendar that we use today (the Gregorian calendar).

It took several centuries for the new calendar to be accepted throughout Europe and the New World. Britain and the British Empire, including the American colonies, adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1752. By that time it was eleven days out of sync with the older Julian calendar. As a result, when the changeover took place, the date of Wednesday, September 2, 1752, was immediately followed by Thursday, September 14, 1752. Many people were unhappy having their birthdays dismissed in this fashion.

Other times, not related to a specific calendar, may also have religious significance. A common example is the time following a death. In Judaism, this period of mourning is called *shiva. Shiva* begins as soon as the mourner has returned from the cemetery and lasts for seven days. During this time, the mourner remains at home and does not participate in any of his or her normal activities, such as work or school. Friends and relatives visit the home of the mourners and often bring food.

Sacred time and space in Australia

The religious systems of the Australian Aborigines are focused on expressions of sacred time and space. To understand these systems, we must examine the concept of **totemism**. A simple definition of a **totem**, as it is frequently used, is that of a symbol or emblem of a social unit. A special relationship is said to exist between a group or individual and its totem, which is frequently, but not always, an animal. American culture possesses many such emblems. They are found primarily in athletics as mascots and in business as logos. Many athletic teams are named after animals—such as bears, bulldogs, eagles, and panthers—and the selection of a team's mascot often reflects those characteristics of the animal that are deemed important for players to display in that particular

sport. Yet to think of totems simply as mascots and logos is very superficial, as we will see.

The term *totem* comes from the Ojibwa language of Canada, in which the word *ototeman* can be translated as "He is a relative of mine." This refers to particular animal species, known as totems, that become associated with Ojibwa clans, a type of kinship group. The clans are given the name of the totem.

Totemism and the Dream Time

Perhaps the best-known examples of totemism come from Australian aboriginal groups. The totemic system has many components, including totemic symbols, myths, and a sacred landscape.

In contrast to isolated sacred sites, which are often the sites of pilgrimages, indigenous peoples live on a sacred landscape. The places described in their myths are places that exist in their own physical world—a stream, a cave, a mountain. And their origin stories tell of the creation of this landscape and the creation of the plants, animals, and people who inhabit it.

The creation myths of the Australian Aborigines begin in the dim past during the Dream Time with the creation of an earth without features, an earth devoid of mountains, rivers, and plains. Supernatural creatures then appeared on the earth. These creatures of the Dream Time appeared from under the earth or, among coastal groups, on rafts. They then traveled over the landscape, creating the world as we see it today—the physical world, the plants, the animals, the people—as well as the customs that govern people's lives. They then left the surface of the earth or turned themselves into some object in the landscape, such as a boulder or hill. The places that are associated with particular mythological beings are today sacred spaces that play important roles in religious rituals. The landscape in which the Aborigines live is a canvas on which their mythology is written, and various features of this landscape serve to define the nature of humanity.

The stories of the Dream Time establish special relationships between humans and animals, for both types of creatures are descendants of the same supernatural being that was neither human nor animal. Thus the tie of kinship

is extended to the animal world and to the rest of the living world as well as the physical landscape. These animals, plants, and natural objects are the totems of the community. Any particular place, be it a water hole or a hill, can be associated with a particular story and can be claimed as part of the religious heritage of a particular group of people.

Within a community, different groups of people share different totems. Totems exist for bands, clans, the sexes, and even individuals. Claiming a totem brings with it special obligations. One is a prohibition against eating the flesh of one's totemic animal, except during special rituals. It is acceptable for other members of the community, even your spouse and children, to eat of your totem, but not for you because you share a special relationship with the totemic species. Members of a totemic group have responsibilities to perform religious ceremonies, including initiation ceremonies. There are many other rules that are part of the special relationship between an individual or group and its totem.

Totemic affiliations also organize Australian society. Specific clans are associated with particular totems. There are rules regulating who can marry whom. Complex rules define the affiliation of one's children as well as the appropriate social behaviors between different classes of kin.

The determination of the group into which a child is born can be complex. In some groups it is determined by rules of kinship. In many groups the pregnancy is thought to be the result of a totemic spirit, perhaps residing in a sacred water hole, entering the womb of the woman. The husband and other elders will question the woman to determine which spirit from what totemic group entered her womb to determine that child's affiliation. In some groups the identity of the spirit is revealed in the father's dream. On death, the individual's soul returns to the totemic well.

At some point, young men are initiated into manhood. These initiation rituals involve the learning of ritual knowledge, including the ability to look at and handle totemic objects. These rituals also involve some type of alteration of the body, such as circumcision or the knocking out of a tooth. When visiting sacred places described in the Dream Time stories, wounds are opened or new wounds are made on the body, and a person's blood is allowed to fall on sacred objects.

Australian Aborigine culture has a rich tradition of symbolic religious art. This art includes arrangements of stones, decoration of sacred objects, bark

paintings, and rock art. Sacred spaces, especially caves and rock overhangs, are decorated with paintings and engravings; some may be as old as 30,000 years or older. Many of these were done by men as representations of totemic creatures, objects, and events; others were thought to have been completed by the totemic beings during the Dream Time. Some are said to actually represent totemic beings who turned to stone or became paintings on a wall.

The symbolism of music and dance

Music and dance play special roles in religious rituals. The degree to which music and dance are included in ritual is quite variable. Some rituals simply include a song; others focus on an elaborate performance of a myth in song and dance. Music and dance can be thought of as symbols as stories are told through movement and through music motifs.

The symbolism of music

Music is a key element in ritual. It may simply set the mood for a ceremony or may actually be the primary vehicle by which religious stories are told and by which people communicate with the gods. Music fulfills many roles during religious rituals and is used to teach, to express or engender emotional states, to produce altered states of consciousness, to please the supernatural powers, or to make contact with them.

An important function of music is the facilitation of memorization. In nonliterate societies, large amounts of narrative must be committed to memory. Anyone who has had to memorize a piece of prose in school knows how difficult this can be. Poetry is easier to memorize than prose because poetry has rhythm and rhyme. The easiest of all to memorize are the lyrics to a song. For this reason, narratives and prayers are frequently chanted or sung.

Of course, music also sets the mood for a ritual. The organ setting the mood for a funeral, a choir singing a medieval chant, the rejoicing of a gospel hymn

—all illustrate the power of music to set the ambience for ritual. We use music in a similar way for secular purposes. Compare the music you would select to listen to while studying with the music you would play when having friends over for a party or a date for a romantic evening. Movies continually use music to set the emotional tone. We know when to be happy, sad, or frightened on the basis of the music on the soundtrack.

Many early Christian missionaries understood the influence of music and brought pianos and organs with them to remote areas of the globe. A small organ might have been played in a crude bush church set in the middle of a tropical rain forest. However, these missionaries were making the assumption that the various types of music that we produce reflect universals in moods and emotions.

A somber hymn played on an organ reflects the sadness of a funeral, and a romping gospel hymn expresses the joy of closeness with God. We could assume that Euro-American religious, military, or love music will evoke the same emotional response in all societies throughout the world. This assumption, however, turns out not to be true. In reality, Euro-American music often fails to convey its intended meaning to non-Westerners, and native musical idioms fail to move outsiders. Of course, the meaning of music is symbolic, and as such, it is part of the learned traditions of a culture.

Realizing this basic fact, many missionaries and many contemporary musicians are writing music in traditional idioms and are discovering and importing tribal musical traditions into contemporary music. This is an example of **syncretism**, the fusion of elements from two different cultures. For example, the well-known Congolese composition *Missa Luba* is a Catholic Mass sung in Latin but set to music elements and instruments of the Kongo tribe of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). African drumming, Australian Aborigine songs, and Native American flute playing have all been integrated into new musical experiences.

Music in ritual

Music plays important roles in the lives of foraging peoples. Colin Turnbull studied the Mbuti Pygmies of the Ituri Forest in the Congo and recorded their

music in the 1950s. The Mbuti sing throughout their day and hunters, walking in the dense tropical forest, will use song as a way of maintaining contact with one another. The !Kung San of Botswana utilize song in their healing rituals. Several times a month they will gather around a fire in the evening and start singing. Some members of their group, primarily men, begin to dance around the singers and enter an altered state of consciousness called *!kia.* Once they reach this stage they move around the fire laying hands on each individual as a healing ritual (see Figure 5.2 in Chapter 5).

In some cultures the actual musical sounds may be interpreted as sounds of the supernatural. The sound may be produced either vocally or instrumentally. One example of this is the Tuva (Siberian culture area). For the Tuva, spiritual power is found in nature. These spirits manifest themselves both through physical appearance and by the sounds they make or that can be made through human interaction. Examples would be the sound of running water or the echo of a human voice from a cliff. The way for humans to make contact with supernatural powers is to imitate their sounds. Caves, in particular, are important for this purpose. Caves are sites of supernatural power and can be used to contact the spirits of the earth. The type of vocal sounds the Tuva use is also interesting. They are known for a technique called *xöömei,* or "throat-singing." A single vocalist using this technique is able to produce two distinct pitches at the same time.

Instruments are very important elements in music, and an unbelievable array of musical instruments can be found throughout the world. We can divide instruments into four basic types. **Idiophones** are instruments that are struck, shaken, or rubbed. Common examples are rattles, bells, wooden drums, rasps, bullroarers, marimbas, and xylophones.

Membranophones are instruments that incorporate a taut membrane or skin. These include drums. **Cordophones** are instruments with taut strings that can be plucked or strummed, hit, or sawed. These include harps, zithers, and violins. Finally, we have **aerophones**, in which air is blown across or into some type of passageway, such as a pipe. These include whistles, pipes, didjeridus, flutes, and trumpets.

For some cultures, sounds produced by musical instruments have religious significance. The best-known examples in the anthropological literature are the didjeridu of the Australian Aborigines and the molimo of the Pygmies of the Ituri Forest of Central Africa. These are very simple aerophones that are

essentially nothing more than long pipes, usually of wood. The sounds of these instruments are said to be the sounds of spirits. Initiated men play these instruments out of sight of the women and children, who are told that the sound is the actual voice of the spirits. The true nature of the sound is revealed to young men as part of initiation rites.

Music plays an important role in Africa, where it is associated with religious rituals and storytelling. Membranophones, especially drums, are important instruments. Rhythm is highly developed and, in contrast with Euro-American traditions, melody and harmony are secondary. A great many types of drums are played, and often they are combined into large drum ensembles.

The symbolism of dance

The use of dance is not common in Western religious rituals, but in many religious traditions dance is an important means of symbolically representing the supernatural world and telling religious stories. Of course, dance does not exist in isolation. Dance is usually performed to music, frequently involves the chanting or singing of words, and involves the manipulation of physical symbols such as costumes and masks, sets, and props.

Culture consists of patterned, traditional behaviors. We can define dance as a system of patterned, traditional movements. These movements, involving the whole body or sometimes just a part of the body such as the hands, are symbolic in that they have culturally determined meanings. Characters in well-known stories are identified by their traditional movements, such as their way of walking and moving their arms, as well as by their costumes, makeup, and masks. In societies that lack systems of writing, dance becomes an important vehicle for telling sacred stories to the community. For example, among native Hawaiians, hula dances told the stories of the gods and goddesses.

The Kwakwaka'wakw of the North American Northwest Coast culture area say that a human family line was created when the ancestor of the group came down to earth, took off his mask, and became human. Carved animal masks are an important religious art form for the Kwakwaka'wakw and

frequently are worn by the dancers who retell important mythic stories. Dance, however, goes far beyond the telling of stories. Dances can act as offerings, and many deities like to be entertained. Dancers also can become conduits of supernatural power. The Kwakwaka'wakw masked dancers, for example, become the being whose mask is worn for the duration of the ritual.

In many cultures, gods and spirits enter the human body and take over its functioning. The particular movements during possession identify the god within the body and may actually provide communication between the deity and the human participants. For example, possession is an important feature of Vodou. During a Vodou ritual, a song is sung to summon a particular god. When the god arrives, he or she possesses one of the dancers. A common metaphor is that the dancer is a horse on which the deity rides. Which god has possessed a dancer can be deduced by the dancer's movements and actions. (We will discuss the Vodou religion in more detail in Chapter 11.)

Early in the history of Islam, a group that was most interested in the mystical aspects of the religion broke off to form the Sufi. One of the most important of the Sufi mystics was a man named Mevlana Rumi, who lived in the thirteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Rumi founded the Mevlevi Order and revived the practice of whirling. The members of the Mevlevi Order are often called "whirling dervishes" by people in the West. They wear long white skirts that billow out as the dancers, their arms extended in the air, continue to turn. Through this whirling, the dancers seek to become one with God.

The Tewa, a Pueblo group from the Southwest culture area, say that they dance to "seek life," "regain life," or "renew life." Many symbolic references to this theme of new life can be found in the movements of the dancers, the costumes that are worn, and the songs that are sung. Dancers lift their arms upward to symbolize the welcoming of rain; lower their arms to indicate digging, planting, or harvesting; and move their arms from side to side to symbolize rainbows or clouds. Costume designs are also symbolic. Long tassels represent raindrops; woven headdresses contain depictions of squash blossoms or embroidered layers of clouds. The songs that accompany the dances make references to dawn, youth, flowers, and growing corn. The Tewa practice agriculture in a very arid environment, so references to rain and items associated with rain such as clouds, thunder, and rainbows are important symbols of life.

Tewa dances are generally held in open plazas where performers can be in

contact with the earth. The dancers array themselves in long, parallel lines and move in unison to the beat of one or more drums. The dancers themselves may sing or a chorus of singers standing nearby may accompany them. Before the dance, the participants prepare in a **kiva**, an underground room that is entered from a hole in the roof. When the dance is about to begin, the dancers emerge from the kiva and move to the plaza. This is a symbolic reference to the Tewa origin story that tells how the first people emerged from a world below into the present world.

Conclusion

To conclude our discussion of symbolism, we need to tie together several concepts that we have explored thus far. Symbols are often based on specific episodes that are recounted in myths, and they represent a specific worldview. An example we already discussed was the Tewa practice of beginning dances by emerging from a kiva to symbolize the emergence from under the earth at the beginning of the world. We will reexamine some of the other symbols we have already discussed to explore the connections between symbols, myth, and worldview.

Bloodletting was an important part of Mayan religious rituals, and the sarcophagus of Lord Pakal contains blood symbolism. The reason for this is found in the origin story as told in a document known as the *Popul Vuh,* a seventeenth-century book that recounts the history of the Maya. In the *Popul Vuh* we are told that the reason why the gods created people was to have a kind of living creature who would worship them. As they prepare to create human beings, the gods say, "So now let's try to make a giver of praise, giver of respect, provider, nurturer."[5]

This reflects the worldview of the Maya that there exists a reciprocal relationship between the Mayan people and their gods. The world was brought about by a sacrifice by the gods, but it will continue to exist only if the Mayans in turn sacrifice for the gods. The smoke produced by burning cloths soaked with blood was seen as providing nourishment to the gods.

The image of Pakal descending into the underworld to be reborn also refers

to a portion of the *Popul Vuh.* The story tells of twins, Hunahpu and Xbalanque, who disturb the Lords of Death by playing a ball game. They are summoned to Xibalba to participate in a series of trials, but they are able to defeat the Lords of Death through their cunning and are then reborn.

In a similar way, the symbolism of the Christian cross is based on the story of the crucifixion of Jesus found in the Christian Bible. The symbol of the cross also expresses the Christian worldview: that the death of Jesus provides the opportunity for salvation:

> And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then Jesus said, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And they parted his raiment, and cast lots.
>
> (Luke 23:33–34)

> And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. Then he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.
>
> (Luke 23:39–43)

> For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
>
> (John 3:16)

Another example of the connection between symbol, myth, and worldview is the yin-yang symbol (Figure 3.5). This symbol is based on the Taoist worldview of the importance of balance and harmony. The Taoists believe that there are two interacting forces in the universe, called *yin* and *yang. Yin* is the female element, associated with coldness, darkness, softness, and the earth. *Yang* is the male element and is associated with warmth, light, hardness, and the heavens. The two elements are opposites but mutually dependent, and they need to be in equilibrium. *Yin* and *yang* are believed to be present in every aspect of the world. Yet each holds the seed of the other that expands and becomes the other.



Figure 3.5 *Yin-yang.* According to Taoist belief, *yin* is the female element and *yang* is the male element in the universe.

In an ancient Chinese creation story, *yin* and *yang* were held together in a cosmic egg until the struggle of the opposing elements cracked the shell. A creature called P'an Ku took form inside the egg. P'an Ku is sometimes referred to as the child of *yin* and *yang* or as the giant of Chinese mythology. P'an Ku emerges from the egg and goes about creating the world, in several versions fashioning the earth using an adze or a hammer and chisel. But the creation of the world is not complete until P'an Ku dies, whereupon his body gives rise to various elements. His skull becomes the dome of the sky, and his flesh becomes the soil of the earth. His bones become rock; his blood, rivers; his breath, the winds; and his eyes, the sun and the moon. The fleas and parasites on his body became the ancestors of modern human groups.

These connections between symbol, myth, and worldview will continue to be important as we add one more element to the mix: ritual. In the next chapter, we will discuss rituals and the ways they are intimately connected with symbols, myth, and worldview.

Summary

A symbol is something that stands for something else. Symbols enable us to talk about things that are not immediately in front of us and to create our own realities. They are important elements in religious practice, and religious rituals center on the manipulation of symbols.

Symbols can appear in many forms. Language is symbolic in nature, because various speech sounds are used to create combinations that have meaning. Yet there is nothing of the referent that is inherent in the sound combination—its meaning is part of a cultural tradition. Recitation of religious narratives is an important feature of religious practices. Religious ideas also can be expressed in art that may contain many symbolic elements. Much artistic representation is arbitrary in that the nature of the symbol does not always communicate its meaning. Simple examples are the swastika, the pentagram, and the cross. Although an outsider might have difficulty understanding a piece of religious art, a member of that culture would have no such difficulty.

Time and space are also treated symbolically. Many units of time, such as our week and the several cycles of Mayan time, are arbitrary and provide time with deep meaning. Calendar systems exist as a way of symbolically organizing time and for scheduling periodic rituals. Space is also full of symbolic meaning, especially when mythological events are seen as occurring on the landscape. Such a sacred landscape is a part of the totemic system found among the Australian Aborigines.

Music and dance are also symbolic and are important elements in religious ritual. Musical elements suggest emotions and have symbolic meanings. What is considered to be religious music in one community might not be in another. Dance, composed of music, movement, costume and masks, and props and sets, is often used to tell religious stories in societies where such stories are not written down. All of these elements—language, art, music, and dance—interact to provide rich religious experiences.

Study questions

1. Logos and trademarks are examples of symbols that are important in American society. Select some examples and show how they express a particular emotion or idea about the product being advertised.
2. Historically, symbols can be very powerful and can evoke great emotions. This is especially true of religious symbols. List some religious and political symbols, and describe what roles they have played in human history.
3. Color has meaning in all cultures. How are colors used in American society to convey meaning? What are some of the social rules that determine the use of color in our society (e.g., a bride wears white)? Do you know of any differences in the meaning of color in other cultures?
4. How are totemism and the concept of Dream Time a social charter for Australian Aborigine cultures? How do you think these cultures would react to the presence of non-Aborigine cultures, such as those represented by missionaries?
5. Many American organizations are identified with particular animals. For example, colleges and professional football teams are often associated with a mascot, usually some kind of animal. What animals are usually used as college and team mascots? Why are those particular animals used and not others? When you go to a football or baseball game, what ritual activities revolve around the mascot animal? How does this differ from an Australian totem?
6. Describe the role of music in American culture. In what situations do you find music being played? Why is music played in these situations?
7. Choose a religious symbol that you are familiar with and describe its meaning. How is this symbol connected to the myths and worldview of the culture in which it is found?

Suggested readings

Nikki Bado-Fralick and Rebecca Sachs Norris, *Toying with God: The World of Religious Games and Dolls* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010).
[This book looks at religious games and dolls and the blending of religious symbols with popular culture.]

Norine Dresser, *Multicultural Celebrations* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999).
[This is a practical book on the appropriate etiquette for celebrations in various ethnic traditions in the United States, useful in our multicultural society.]

Carl G. Liungman, *Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Norton, 1991).
[This is one of several compilations of symbols that are useful reference tools.]

Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair: An Essay of Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
[A psychological anthropologist examines the use of symbols by Sri Lankan ascetics.]

Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2012).
[In a story filled with religious symbolism, a boy grows up in New Mexico in the 1940s.]

Suggested websites

http://symbols.net
A comprehensive listing of websites that deal with symbols in various contexts including religion.

www.planetgast.net/symbols
Symbols in Christian art and architecture.

www.cem.va.gov/hmm/emblems.asp

United States Department of Veterans Affairs available emblems of belief for placement on government headstones and markers.

www.ridingthebeast.com/articles/colors
Color symbolism and meaning in the Bible.

www.webexhibits.org/calendars/calendar.html
A web exhibit of calendars through the ages (including the Mayan Calendar).

www.mayacalendar.com/mayacalendar.html
A discussion of the Mayan calendar on the Maya World Studies Center website.

http://guides.lib.washington.edu/ethnomusicology
A list of websites related to ethnomusicology, folk music, and world music from the University of Washington.

www.folkways.si.edu/
Smithsonian Folkways makes available a wide variety of recordings of ethnic music.

http://sounds.bl.uk/
Archival Sounds Recordings (British Library) provides access to a great many recordings of music from around the world.

Notes

1 J. Church, *Language and the Discovery of Reality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 95.

2 N. Bado-Fralick and R. S. Norris, *Toying with God: The World of Religious Games and Dolls* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010), p. 172.

3 G. A. Reichard, *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 206.

4 We should note that not all scholars agree with this interpretation of the Mayan calendar and its correlation with our calendar, so the actual date on our calendar may be off by a few days.

5 D. Tedlock (translator), *Popul Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the*

Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), p. 79.

Chapter 4
Ritual

The alarm clock rings. You reluctantly jump out of bed and begin your morning routine, which might include showering, shaving or putting on your makeup, reading the newspaper, and eating breakfast. You probably do the same things in the same order day after day—or at least on weekdays. This patterned, recurring sequence of events may be termed a **ritual**.

The term *ritual* can refer to any repetitive sequence of acts. Psychologists use the term when referring to repetitive compulsive activity, such as the ritual of washing one's hands dozens of times a day. A class might begin with the ritual of roll call and announcements. However, when the ritual involves the manipulation of religious symbols such as prayers, offerings, and readings of sacred literature, we call it a **religious ritual**.

The basics of ritual performance

In some ways a ritual resembles a play. A play consists of actors, words, sets, and props presented in a set way according to a script. And a play is a reflection of the culture of a society and that society's worldview.

A public religious ritual also consists of actors (shamans and priests, for example), words (perhaps a prayer, a spell, or a sermon), sets (such as an altar), and props (such as candles, religious books, or masks) and may contain music and dance as well. Smaller-scale rituals, such as that performed by a shaman affecting a cure, also have many of these elements, although here the similarity to a play is not as strong. Of course, a religious ritual is much more

than a play. Its primary purpose is not to entertain—although in some societies rituals are an important form of entertainment—and the audience is an active participant.

Two of the most basic elements in religious practices are ritual and myth, and the two are often closely connected. Ritual is often based on myth in that the directive to perform the ritual may lie within the myth. The myth provides the elements for the development of the ritual. There is some debate over which came first. Myth is reflected in ritual; other rituals are reenactments of myth.

A society's mythology consists of stories that reflect the underlying worldview of the society. Although few people in a community can articulate in a philosophical or theological manner the basic themes and underpinnings of their religious system, everyone is familiar with the myths of their religion and accepts the basic truths of the religious system. This is also true of rituals.

Many rituals, though by no means all, are public rituals in which an entire community is involved to some degree. Ritual activities symbolize the particular beliefs and values of that community. A ritual is the vehicle by which basic ideas, such as the definition of good and evil and the proper nature of social relationships, are imparted to the group.

Unlike other forms of discourse—reading this book, for example, or listening to a lecture—people attending a religious ritual usually are familiar with the ritual and also with what it means. Perhaps they have read a commentary or attended a Sunday school class that discussed the meaning of the ritual. Thus participation in the ritual signals a public acceptance of the basic tenets of the religion. The mere fact that the activities that take place within the ritual are well known and accepted lends a sense of stability to the society and imparts a sense of social unity. Also, the fact that the elements of the ritual are repeated on a regular basis lends a sense of validity and sacredness to the religious system.

Prescriptive and situational rituals

There are many terms that we can use to describe rituals. For example, rituals may be prescriptive or situational. **Prescriptive rituals** are rituals that are

required to be performed. The requirement may be set forth in a religious text (e.g., "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" [Exodus 20:8]), may be required by a deity or a religious authority, or may simply be based in tradition.

Other rituals are performed because of a particular need of an individual or a community. These are called **situational rituals** or **crisis rituals**. Such rituals often arise spontaneously, frequently in times of crisis. A community might hold a spontaneous ritual for a group of men and women from the community who are going off to war or engaging in some dangerous activity. Situational rituals arise as a response to terrorist activities around the world. Some are as simple as flying a flag, others more complex, such as the setting up of informal altars where people lay flowers, light candles, and leave photographs (see Figure 12.2, p. 290). Many churches, temples, and mosques schedule special situational rituals to address the concerns of the community.

Periodic and occasional rituals

Another way of describing rituals is to identify them as being performed on a regular basis as part of a religious calendar or being performed when a particular need arises, such as a marriage or a death. The former are called **periodic rituals** or **calendrical rituals**; the latter are called **occasional rituals**. The classification of rituals as prescribed or situational is separate from their classification as periodic or occasional. Thus a particular ceremony —a Sunday morning church service, for example—is both prescribed and periodic.

Periodic rituals may be performed daily or several times a day, as in the daily prayers (*salaht*) of Islam. (Muslims pray at dawn, midday, midafternoon, sunset, and nightfall, as commanded by the prophet Mohammad, which makes prayer a prescribed ritual as well.) Periodic rituals may be performed weekly, such as the Jewish ritual of the lighting of candles that occurs on every Friday evening to mark the start of the Sabbath or the celebration of Sunday Mass in the Catholic Church. They also include the annual celebrations of Easter, Passover, and Ramadan.

Another example of a periodic ritual is Diwali, the Festival of Lights, one of

the most important festivals in India. It was originally a Hindu festival, but its observance has spread, and it is celebrated as a public holiday throughout India. Diwali is celebrated on the darkest night (the new moon) of the month of Kartik. During the festival, oil lamps are lit, and firecrackers are set off. The ritual is associated with several important mythical events. One such story is the return of Rama, his consort Sita, and his brother Lakshmana to their kingdom of Ayodhya after a fourteen-year exile. To celebrate their return, the people of Ayodhya are said to have lit up their houses with oil lamps. The lights that are associated with this festival are said to symbolize the removal of spiritual darkness.

The celebration of Diwali was probably originally related to the harvest season. Many periodic rituals are aligned with the phases of the agricultural cycle. This is the basis of the timing of many religious rituals in the Jewish and Christian religious calendars. The most important rituals are associated with the periods of sowing and harvesting.

For example, Passover is a Jewish commemoration of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. However, many historians believe that this holiday was also originally a spring agricultural festival. This can be seen in many of the symbolic foods associated with the Passover Seder, or ritual meal, such as parsley. Exactly seven weeks after the Passover holiday is Shavuot. Shavuot is also known as *Yom Habikkurim*, or the Day of the First Fruits, and commemorates both the beginning of the wheat harvest and the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Occasional rituals are rituals that are performed for a specific purpose when a situation arises that requires the ritual to be performed. Many occasional rituals are associated with nature and the impact of nature on the agricultural cycle. These include rituals to control an infestation of insect pests or to bring rain, performed when crops are threatened or when rain does not come. Occasional rituals are also associated with important events in the life of an individual. These include rituals marking birth, marriage, and death.

A classification of rituals

Our next step is to group the subjects of our study, in this case rituals, into a

manageable number of categories. This can be very difficult when the variation is great, and any classification is to an extent arbitrary. Here we will discuss many of the different kinds of rituals using some of the categories developed by Anthony F. C. Wallace.[1] A list of rituals can be found in Table 4.1.

A survey of rituals

Each type of ritual has its own goal and exists within its own cultural and religious context. In the next section we will survey most of the types of rituals found in Wallace's classification.

Table 4.1 A classification of rituals

Type of Ritual	*Description*
Technological rituals	**Rituals that attempt to influence or control nature**
Hunting and gathering rites of intensification	Rituals that influence nature in the quest for food
Protective rituals	Rituals designed to protect the safety of people engaged in dangerous activities
Divination rituals	Rituals that seek information about the unknown
Therapy rituals	**Rituals that deal with illness, accident, and death**
Therapy rituals	Healing rituals
Anti-therapy rituals	Rituals that bring about illness, accident, or death
Ideological rituals	**Rituals that serve to maintain the normal functioning of a community**
Social rites of intensification	Rituals that delineate codes of proper behavior and articulate the community's worldview
	Rituals that accompany changes in an individual's

Rites of passage	status in society
Revitalization rituals	**Rituals that focus on the elimination of alien customs and a return to a native way of life**

Technological rituals

Technological rituals are rituals that attempt to influence or control nature, especially in activities that affect human activities and well-being. The success or failure of human endeavors such as hunting, fishing, and farming is influenced by the vagaries of nature. Game animals might not be located; fish might fail to take the bait; the lack of rain might cause a crop to wither and die. Because these events affect the very survival of a people, all societies attempt to influence or even to control nature so as to ensure the success of the hunt, fishing expeditions, or cultivation. Examples of technological rituals include hunting and gathering rites of intensification, protective rituals, and divination rituals.

Hunting and gathering rites of intensification

The function of **hunting and gathering rites of intensification** is to influence nature in the quest for food. Although the name refers to hunting and gathering activities, these rituals also extend to other economic activities such as fishing, herding, and farming. They include periodic rituals that follow the seasonal cycle and occasional rituals performed in response to some crisis such as lack of rain. They may initiate the hunting of particular animal species as they migrate at different seasons through a traditional territory. At the start of a fishing trip, such rituals are performed to ensure success in locating fish. Rituals accompany the preparation of the soil, the planting of seeds, the protection of the growing crop from the elements and wild animals, and the harvest.

Among hunting and gathering peoples the commencement of the time when particular wild foods are available is often marked by ritual. On a

practical level, these rituals serve to regulate the gathering of that food. The premature gathering of a particular type of fruit, for example, might negatively affect the total amount of fruit that is available. They also reaffirm the rights of particular social units to specific foods and areas of food gathering. These rituals are frequently referred to as "first-fruit ceremonies." Among the Cahuilla of the southern California desert, individuals would be sent out to gather small amounts of food. Food left from the winter stores would be added, and members of each kin group would eat a ritual portion of the food in a ceremony thanking the supernatural for providing the food in a ceremony that lasted three days and three nights.

Fertility is a central theme in this group of rituals, be it the successful sprouting and growth of crops in the spring or the birth of wild animals, without which people would go hungry and societies would die. When people are successful in the hunt, rituals are performed to thank the animal for allowing itself to be caught.

The Lakota are a Native American tribe living today in the north-central United States. In the early nineteenth century they were hunters of the buffalo. Today, although wild herds of buffalo have disappeared from the plains, the Lakota manage herds of captive buffalo and sell their meat as a major source of income. Occasionally, an uncontrollable animal must be killed, which today is accomplished by a shotgun rather than a bow and arrow. But when the animal has died, the hunters gather around the body and perform a simple ritual to thank the buffalo for permitting itself to be killed, thus ensuring the continuing success of the enterprise.

The Inuit, who live on the Arctic coast, depend on seals for their survival. The success of a seal hunt among the Inuit depends on the benevolence of Nuliajuk, the Mother of the Sea. If important customs are neglected, she can cause many difficulties for hunters such as storms or breaking up of the ice. She might also keep the seals out of the reach of the hunters. The Inuit believe that Nuliajuk is at her happiest when her hair is neat, and the misbehavior of people is seen as tangling her hair. In the Inuit creation myth her fingers were cut off and the finger joints became the seals. But without fingers she cannot tend to her hair herself and it is the role of the shaman to visit her in her home at the bottom of the sea to comb her hair and thereby appease her.

The traditional Inuit belief is that seals have a soul, and many Inuit hunting customs and rituals are designed to show respect for the seals. One example is

the practice in many Inuit groups of placing fresh water into the mouth of a dead seal before it is butchered. Some groups believed that a seal that was given a drink was more likely to return again as another seal for another drink, but the general belief across the groups was that the drink would appease the spirit of the seal.

In the words of an Inuit, Peter Irniq, "Inuit were extremely respectful toward seals. My father used to catch a seal and put it into our iglu. Before my mother skinned the seal she would put a piece of ice in her own mouth to melt, then let the meltwater fall into the dead seal's mouth. She said this was to make sure the seals under the ice will not be thirsty. She did this every time. It's a spiritual belief, done out of respect for the seals."[2]

Protective rituals

There are numerous potential dangers that accompany risky activities. Imagine traveling in a small dugout canoe out on the ocean, out of sight of land, looking for productive fishing grounds, with no real ability to predict the weather more than a few hours in advance, if that. **Protective rituals** usually accompany such activities, and they may be prescriptive in that they are routinely performed at the start of a dangerous activity or occasionally in response to a gathering storm.

These are rituals designed to protect the safety of the people who are involved in dangerous tasks. Protective rituals are also performed in response to some unexpected threat to the success of an economic endeavor. Such threats might include an infestation of insect pests threatening to destroy a crop, floods and droughts, sick animals in a herd, and many other potential crises too numerous to name.

The ocean trading journeys of the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea are dangerous. There are numerous concerns, including ensuring the seaworthiness of canoes and the desire for good weather. These voyages are accompanied by a great number of rituals. The canoe captain is not only an expert on navigation and weather prediction, but also a ritual specialist, performing rituals throughout the voyage. As an example, some rituals that are performed before the launching of a canoe are rituals for expelling the

heaviness out of a canoe, rituals to make the canoe more seaworthy, and rituals to make the canoe fast, in part by making other canoes slow.

Rituals for the protection of boats on the open ocean are common among seagoing peoples. The Vikings christened a new ship by "blooding the keel," which involved a ritual human sacrifice in which a person was tied to the keel of the boat, to be crushed beneath it when the boat was launched. The Western practice of christening a new ship by breaking a bottle of champagne still carries with it the idea of a blessing from God, and the person who does the christening enters into a special relationship with the ship.

Protective rituals are also used for other modes of transportation. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria in West Africa, Ogun is the god of iron. More recently, Ogun has also become associated with cars and trucks. It is common for taxi drivers to decorate their cars with his symbols and even on occasion to offer an animal sacrifice to him asking for his protection.

Often it is not actual control that is needed. Foreknowledge of natural events that affect the success of economic efforts can lead to preventive measures, be they technical (building a fence to keep wild animals out of the field) or ritual. Such ceremonies assist communities in selecting the best time to plant or the best place to locate game or fish. Rituals that seek information are referred to as **divination rituals**. Divination will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Social rites of intensification

The next group of rituals serves to maintain the normal functioning of a community. These are termed **ideological rituals**. They delineate codes of proper behavior; define good and evil, moral and immoral; and articulate the community's worldview. They assist people and the community in getting through times of change and times of crisis. They facilitate the orderly running of the society. They tend to be conservative, sanctioning the social order.

An important type of ideological ritual is the **social rite of intensification**. These are very familiar rituals. They are usually prescribed and periodic and include the weekly Sunday morning church service found in most Christian

denominations, the Jewish Sabbath rituals, and the daily prayer or *salaht* of Islam. They also include major annual rituals such as the Christian Easter and the Jewish Rosh Hashanah. Elements that are frequently found in social rites of intensification that are most familiar to us include the reading of sections of the sacred text; a sermon, commenting on some aspects of the sacred text, commentary on current crises, or a discussion of moral issues; and prayers to the deity.

Some rituals have aspects that can be classified in more than one category. A good example of this is a funeral ritual, which is often both a rite of passage for the individual who has died (discussed in the next subsection) and a rite of intensification for those who remain. A death is a time of crisis for the group. The funeral ritual brings people together and reaffirms the existence of the social group and its values. This is seen most clearly when we examine the rituals surrounding the death of a chief or king. The death affects the entire community and ushers in a period of potential instability. In the absence of a strong leader, the group may be vulnerable to internal strife. Enemies may take advantage of both the lack of strong leadership and the fact that the focus of the community is on the death.

Among the Swazi of the East African Cattle culture area, the death of a king has the potential of precipitating a major crisis. The prosperity of the Swazi nation is bound up with the health and virility of the king, and during his life the king must avoid all contact with death. He may not visit a grave or touch a dead body and may mourn the passing of a close relative for only a few days. Individuals living in his household are removed from the homestead when they become very ill so that they will not die in the king's presence. The death of the king is kept secret until a council of kin has made the selection of an heir. Only after the heir has been installed as the new king will the burial of the old king proceed. Following the period of mourning, rituals are held to rejuvenate and revitalize the Swazi nation.

Another example of the element of a social rite of intensification in a funeral ritual is the Jewish practice of reciting the *kaddish.* The *kaddish* is known as a mourner's prayer, but variations on this prayer are recited at many other times, and the prayer itself actually says nothing about death or mourning. This prayer is a reaffirmation of faith in the face of a great loss. The prayer begins, "May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed. May He give reign to His kingship in your

lifetime and in your days, and in the lifetimes of the entire family of Israel, swiftly and soon. May His great Name be blessed forever and ever." Similarly, the simple practice of gathering at the home of the mourner after a funeral service can be seen as reaffirming important group ties.

Offerings and sacrifices

One of the functions of social rites of intensification, and other rituals as well, is to communicate with the deity. One way of doing this is through prayer; another is through **offerings** and **sacrifices**. Offerings and sacrifices can be viewed in many ways. They may be gifts or even bribes, or economic exchange designed to influence the supernatural. The supernatural in turn will reciprocate with rain, healing, economic success, and so on. Of course this is in no way coercion, and the deity is free to reject the gift.

In many societies, reciprocity plays an important role in social relationships. Important social events, such as marriages, are celebrated with gift-giving and feasting. In these societies this type of behavior is projected into the supernatural world where a harmonious and mutually advantageous relationship between the society and the supernatural will be expressed in terms of mutual reciprocity between humans and their gods.

The essential difference between a sacrifice and an offering is that in sacrifice blood is shed; that is, an animal, which may be a human being, is killed. All other gifts are offerings. The item that is offered is usually an object of some economic value and its offering often involves economic hardship for the individual or group making the offering. It therefore becomes special or even sacred. However, some of the economic value may be recovered as when, for example, food that is offered on an altar is later consumed by those making the offering. Of course, this does not happen when the offering is destroyed, as when it is burned.

Human sacrifice

Aztec society (Mesoamerican culture area) was based on agriculture and was

highly stratified. The Aztecs believed that the life of the Sun was about to end and tried to avoid that by providing the sacred food that the sun needed: blood. Human sacrifice on a large scale was an important part of Aztec religion.

A ritual would begin with a four-day (or some multiple of four) period of preparation. During this time, priests would fast and make offerings of such items as food, cloth, and incense. The ritual itself would be preceded by a dramatic procession. The participants, elaborately costumed and accompanied by music ensembles, would walk to the specific temple of sacrifice. All important rituals involved the sacrifice of either animals or humans.

The ritual human sacrificial victims were called *in ixiptla in teteo*, or deity impersonators, as the belief was that they were transformed into gods. They would be ritually bathed, specially costumed to impersonate the specific deity to whom they were being sacrificed, and taught special dances. A wide range of techniques were used in sacrifice, including decapitation, drowning, strangulation, shooting with arrows, combat, and throwing from heights. Commonly, the victim was led up the temple stairs to the sacrificial stone (*techcatl*). There the victim would be held down by four priests, and the temple priest would cut through the victim's chest to remove the still-beating heart, referred to as "precious eagle cactus fruit." The heart would then be offered to the sun for nourishment. This was sometimes followed by the body being rolled back down the temple steps, where it was often dismembered, flayed, and eaten.

Therapy rituals and healing

Of all tragedies that may befall a people, perhaps the most disturbing and disruptive are illnesses and accidents that lead to incapacity or death. All peoples have theories about the cause of illness and accident, and these are associated with techniques, including rituals, for addressing them.

There are a number of methods for dealing with accidents and illnesses that are technical rather than religious. For example, many traditional healers know how to set bones, and many of the plant materials that are administered as medicines have been found to have genuine medical value. The

anthropological study of medicinal plants is part of the study of **ethnobotany**. Such studies have led to the development of several drug therapies. Some plant material has been known for centuries to have some pharmaceutical properties, such as digitalis from the foxglove plant, which is used to treat heart problems. More recently, the drug taxol, derived from the bark and needles of the Pacific yew tree, has been used for the treatment of ovarian cancer. Northwest Coast Native American tribes traditionally treated a variety of diseases with medicines derived from this tree.

Table 4.2 Causes and treatment of supernatural illnesses

Cause of illness	*Therapy ritual*
Object intrusion	Massage and sucking to remove object
Spirit intrusion	Exorcism
Soul loss	Soul retrieval
Breach of tabu	Confession
Witchcraft	Anti-witchcraft rituals
Spirits and gods	Sacrifices and offerings

Many illnesses cannot be dealt with through technology, especially in traditional societies. Various theories of illness give rise to many types of cures that include ritual. Rituals that focus on curing are called **therapy rituals**. These are among the most important rituals found in many societies. The type of ritual will depend on the cause of the illness, with the cause frequently being discovered by means of divination. Some of the supernatural causes of illness and their treatment will be discussed at length in later chapters, but Table 4.2 lists those that are most frequently encountered.

The Navaho

As we discussed in Chapter 2, the Navaho worldview stresses the importance of balance and harmony. When this balance is upset, something bad, usually

illness, is the result. Balance is upset by human actions, and the specific nature of the transgression will determine how the illness will manifest itself. The Navaho have separate specialists for diagnosis and treatment. Diagnosis is done by hand tremblers, who are generally women. The healers are usually men.

The entire family or even the entire community will gather together for the therapy ritual, which lasts anywhere from one to nine days. Prayers, medicine, songs, and herbs in addition to sand paintings are used to restore balance and harmony and thus cure the illness. The Navaho word for sand painting is *ikaah,* which means "a summoning of the gods." They believe that if a prayer is offered with a good heart and is correct in every detail, the gods are compelled to answer it. If they do not answer, there must have been some imperfection in the sand painting or the ceremony.

The sand painting itself depicts a specific portion of the complex Navaho mythology. Usually, this is a story of a hero who encounters some misfortune, but with help from others, usually a supernatural being, the hero recovers and learns how to heal the same problem in others. The story also is recounted in long, complex chants. This example again shows the relationship between ritual, myth, and worldview.

Anti-therapy rituals

Anti-therapy rituals are rituals that bring about illness, accident, or death. When directed toward a member of one's own community, the behavior is clearly antisocial. The person responsible needs to be identified, usually through divination, stopped, and punished. However, when directed toward an enemy, an anti-therapy ritual may support an objective of the society. Among the Yanomamö of northern South America, warfare is carried out with spears and arrows, as well as through ritual activities that send illness-causing spirits into the bodies of their enemies.

An anti-therapy ritual of the Fore of New Guinea was described in Chapter 1. A sorcerer takes something connected to the victim, such as a piece of clothing, and places it in a bundle, recites a spell, and puts the bundle in the cold, muddy ground. As a result, the victim becomes ill with the disease *kuru.*

Perhaps one of the best-known examples of an anti-therapy ritual is the bone-pointing ritual found among the Australian Aborigines. This is sometimes referred to as a **cursing ritual**. Taking a kangaroo bone, the individual performing the ritual sharpens one end and drills a hole through the other. He takes a strand of the victim's hair, and puts it through the hole and secures it with a knot. Then, in public, the performer points the bone at the victim. Here is a description of what happens next.

> A man who discovers that he is being boned by an enemy is, indeed, a pitiable sight. He stands aghast, with his eyes staring at the treacherous pointer, and with his hands lifted as though to ward off the lethal medium, which he imagines is pouring into his body. His cheeks blanch and his eyes become glassy, and the expression on his face becomes horribly distorted … He attempts to shriek, but usually the sound chokes in his throat, and all one might see is froth at his mouth. His body begins to tremble and the muscles twist involuntarily. He sways backwards and falls to the ground, and for a short time appears to be in a swoon; but soon after he begins to writhe as if in mortal agony, and covering his face with his hands, begins to moan. After a while he becomes more composed and crawls to his wurley [hut]. From this time onwards he sickens and frets, refusing to eat, and keeping aloof from the daily affairs of the tribe. Unless help is forthcoming in the shape of a counter-charm, administered by the hands of the "Nangarri," or medicine-man, his death is only a matter of a comparatively short time.[3]

Revitalization rituals

Revitalization rituals are associated with revitalization movements. These include nativistic movements, which focus on the elimination of alien customs and a return to the native way of life, and messianic movements, which involve the participation of a divine savior in human flesh. These rituals are often associated with social movements and usually develop within a context of rapid culture change. We will discuss revitalization rituals in detail in Chapter 11.

Rites of passage

Among the most-studied rituals by anthropologists are **rites of passage**, a

type of ideological ritual. A society consists of a number of individuals who are related to one another and interact with one another in complex ways. We can think of a society as being composed of a series of positions, each one defined in terms of appropriate behavior, rights and obligations, and relationships to one another. Each position is known as a **status**. Examples of statuses include mother, husband, teacher, blacksmith, mayor, and priest. Of course, a person can occupy more than one status. One person can be a mother, a wife, and a teacher, depending on the social context. Here we are using the term *status* to refer to a social position, not to the relative placement of each position in the society. The term **rank** is used for this latter purpose.

When a person changes his or her status in the society—becomes an adult, marries, enters a profession, or attains political office—the individual alters his or her social relationship with other members of the society. Such changes might require that the individual dress in a new way, speak in a different fashion, and behave toward certain people in new ways. Making these changes can be difficult for the individual. They often are marked and facilitated by rites of passage.

Rites of passage imprint the change in a person's social status on the minds of the participants and grant community approval or legitimacy for the change. In a literate society such as ours, all one truly needs is a legal piece of paper. A couple can fly to Las Vegas or go to the local courthouse and be married with a brief ceremony, without the presence of family or other community members. It is the marriage license, not the ceremony, which establishes the legality of the change in status and inserts the event in the legal record of some political unit. This is not the case in nonliterate communities, where the combined witnesses and participation of family and community are required. Most couples in Western culture choose to get married in this manner as well.

Some rites of passage are very familiar. These include rites marking a person's progression through the life cycle. All cultures have terminology to refer to the phases of one's life—infant, child, adult, and senior, for example. However, these divisions of the life cycle are more formal and clear-cut in some societies than in others. As a person moves from one category to the next, the event may be marked by ritual.

The life cycle begins with birth ceremonies designed to ensure the safety and well-being of the child. Through these rituals the child becomes an

integral part of the community. However, in societies with a high infant death rate, the introduction of the child to the community may be delayed. A child may be kept in isolation and is considered a nonperson until she survives for a certain period of time. In traditional societies the child might then be presented to the family and other members of the community, receive a name, perhaps be passed over the smoke of a fire and have strings tied around her wrists to prevent the child from falling ill. Examples of birth rituals in our society are baptism in Catholicism, by which the child becomes a member of a Catholic community, and the Jewish **circumcision** ceremony whereby a male child becomes a member of the Jewish community.

The next major transition is that from childhood into adulthood. These coming-of-age ceremonies include confirmations, *quinceañeras,* bar mitzvahs, and bat mitzvahs. Other important life cycle ceremonies are marriage and death rituals. In addition to life cycle ceremonies, rites of passage mark initiation into social groups (such as fraternity initiations) or religious or political office (such as a presidential inauguration or coronation).

The structure of a rite of passage

A rite of passage that you are probably familiar with is a wedding, which actually consists of a series of rituals performed over a period of time. Although there is considerable variation, there is a general pattern found in many, but not all, weddings. We will use this example to describe the structure of a rite of passage.

Anthropologists identify three phases in the typical rite of passage. The first phase is called **separation**. In this phase the individual is removed from his or her former status. In some rituals this is an abrupt separation of the individual from the community; in others it may take place over a longer period of time.

The separation phase in a wedding is actually a series of events that take place over the period of time preceding the ceremony. A typical wedding cycle might begin with an engagement party. Next follows a number of planning and preparation activities, frequently involving wedding specialists. Although these are usually thought of as practical, logistical activities, they often take on the characteristics of ritual in that they consist of traditional

activities. These include the selection of a wedding dress, costuming the wedding party, selecting and mailing invitations, signing up with a gift registry, attending wedding showers, the rehearsal, and the rehearsal dinner. The final event in the separation phase is when the bride walks down the aisle and bids farewell to her parents and, in some ceremonies, is formally "given away" by her father and/or mother or other close relative.

The second step is the **transition** phase. During the transition phase, several activities take place that bring about the change in status. In many weddings, this phase, which is the actual ceremony, lasts from only a few minutes to over an hour. This is relatively short when compared with rites of passage found in other societies, in which the transition phase can last months or even years.

At the conclusion of the transition phase, the person conducting the wedding ceremony often will introduce the newly married couple to the congregation as "Mr. and Mrs." Thus begins the final phase, **incorporation**, during which the couple reenters normal society, though in a new social relationship. This stage includes the reception or party celebrating the marriage. The incorporation phase usually lasts several hours, although in many groups it is considerably longer. After the reception there is often a series of additional activities, such as a display of gifts and the writing of thank-you notes.

All of this can be quite daunting and very expensive. Of course a couple can fly to Las Vegas or go to the local courthouse and get the piece of paper and skip most of the traditional activities. However, many couples and their families are very uncomfortable with this and will follow such a legal wedding with some type of celebration to reaffirm the marriage, such as a reception or perhaps a second wedding ceremony attended by friends and family.

Coming-of-age rituals

A ritual that frequently assumes great importance in traditional societies is the coming-of-age ritual, which marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. An example is the rite of passage that accompanies **menarche**, or a

girl's first menstruation. Menarche is only one physiological event within a complex cycle of events we call puberty that extends over several years. However, menarche is a very definite, easily observed event.

Because puberty is so well marked in females, the ritual is sometimes an individual ritual rather than for a group of girls at one time. The announcement of first menstruation by a girl to her mother may initiate the separation phase. Among the Yanomamö of South America, a girl who is menstruating for the first time is secluded in a simple enclosure built in the corner of her dwelling. The transition period lasts three days, during which the girl sits on the floor eating little. She shaves her head and removes her ornaments in an effort to look as unattractive as possible. This is done to prevent evil spirits from seducing the girl and taking her away to be married, leaving behind her dead body. At the end of this period she is incorporated into the community. She cleans herself and puts on a new apron and ornaments. She is now considered to be an adult female member of the community.

Female coming-of-age rituals may also occur as a group ritual. In this case the ritual usually occurs several years before the onset of puberty to ensure that the ritual is completed before the onset of menstruation.

Initiation rituals for boys are often more elaborate than those for girls. Because boys lack a clearly defined physiological event to mark the onset of puberty, the timing of male initiation is fairly arbitrary. Male initiation rituals are usually group rituals in which all of the boys of a certain age range in a community are periodically rounded up to go through the ritual as a group.

Male initiation ceremonies are usually characterized by relatively short separation and incorporation phases. The separation phase may be very sudden, as when masked dancers tear the boys away from their families without warning. The incorporation phase may simply be a reintroduction of the boys, now occupying their new status as men, to the community, followed by feasting.

Transition and liminality

Initiates in the transition stage, especially in those rituals in which this stage

lasts for a significant period of time, are in an out-of-the-ordinary situation. They have shed their previous identification and place in society but have yet to take on the mantle of their new status. Their ambiguous position and the fact that they are marginal to their society—often in a real sense if they are removed to a special camp away from the village—are represented symbolically.

An often-encountered metaphor for a rite of passage is the cycle of death and rebirth. Separation is symbolized by death, and incorporation by rebirth. The period of time between death and rebirth is a time of mystery during which the initiate undergoes a metamorphosis from one kind of human being to another. Just as the process of change within an insect's cocoon is hidden from view and therefore mysterious, the activities surrounding the transitional phase may be hidden from view from women and uninitiated boys.

Initiates within this transition period are said to be in a liminal state. **Liminality** is the state of ambiguous marginality during which the metamorphosis takes place. As such, it is symbolically represented by a number of attributes. Victor Turner provides us with a list of features that characterize the liminal state. The first column in Table 4.3 lists some of the properties of liminality, which are contrasted in the second column with the normal state.

Table 4.3 Characteristics of liminality

Liminality	*Normal state*
Transition	State
Communitas	Structure
Equality	Inequality
Anonymity	Systems of nomenclature
Absence of property	Property
Absence of status	Status
Nakedness or uniform clothing	Distinctions of clothing
Sexual continence	Sexuality

Absence of rank	Distinctions of rank
Humility	Just pride of position
Disregard for personal appearance	Care for personal appearance
Unselfishness	Selfishness
Total obedience	Obedience only to superior rank
Sacredness	Secularity
Silence	Speech
Simplicity	Complexity
Acceptance of pain and suffering	Avoidance of pain and suffering

Source: Adapted from Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), pp. 94–113, 125–130.

An important feature of the state of liminality is summed up by the term **communitas**. Within this state not only is there a sense of equality, but the mere fact that a group of individuals is moving through the process together brings about a sense of community and camaraderie. This is what occurs in the Islamic *hajj,* in which all pilgrims wear the same white garments and perform the same rituals regardless of wealth or social standing. The sense of belonging transcends the tremendous ethnic diversity of the pilgrims who gather together from all over the world.

In many traditional societies the boys who are initiated together form very close bonds and will usually remain close friends throughout their lives. In some African societies this group of males will form a formal group known as an **age set**. Age sets cut across other group boundaries, such as clans and lineages, and create solidarity between groups that often are opposed to one another. Age sets serve a number of functions and may serve as important social units, such as military units.

Members of an age set may move together through various age grades. An **age grade** is a specific status defined by age, such as warrior or elder. We can think of a system of age grades as a classification of an individual into age categories. An individual or a group such as an age set will move through a series of age grades during his or her life. Here the distinction is more complex than just a transition from child to adult, and rites of passage often mark the entrance into each age grade.

Apache rite of passage

The coming-of-age ceremony for Apache (Southwest culture area) girls is a periodic ritual, held every July. The ritual lasts four days, mirroring the four days of creation. For the duration of the ceremony the girls are seen as reincarnations of the culture heroine White Painted Woman. The Apache say that White Painted Woman first appeared as a young girl, arriving from the east. She grew to adulthood, during which time she was associated with the south. As she grew older, she was associated with the west, the direction taken by those who die. As a very old woman she was associated with the north. However, after she died, she appeared again the next day as a young woman in the east. Thus White Painted Woman symbolizes the cycle of women's lives. The girls wear special costumes that contain many items symbolic of White Painted Woman.

Every evening there is singing and dancing. On the first night the songs refer to the first day of creation and so on until the last evening. The ritual that is performed on the fourth night is called *pulling the sun.* This ritual must be carefully planned and timed. The ritual specialists, known as singers, sing four sun-pulling songs, moving their hands, which have been painted with sun symbols, into different positions. As the last verse of the song is sung, the singers raise their hands over their heads. As the last note is sung, the sun rises over the mountains and falls on the singers' raised hands.

After this ritual is completed, the girls run back to the places where they are staying during the ritual, but they are not seen doing this because four large poles that were erected at the start of the ceremony now come crashing down, causing the other people to turn and look at the source of the noise. The next time the girls are seen, they are adult women. As the final component, the girl's singer comes to the girl to recite her genealogy to her. The Apache are a matrilineal society, tracing kinship through the women. The singer places three small bits of food in the girl's mouth, and her godmother places a fourth bit of food. This symbolizes the girl being fed by all the women, of all time, of her tribe.

Secular rites of passage

We find a number of secular rites of passage and other nonreligious activities that have many of the characteristics of rites of passage. One of these is basic military training, which has many of the characteristics of coming-of-age rites in tribal societies. The recruits are physically removed to an isolated and special place, the military base, where they shed their civilian clothing, have their hair cut, and are issued a standardized uniform. Civilian occupational specializations and socioeconomic ranks become irrelevant. The actual training has many of the features of transition, including the development of communitas, equality, total obedience, acceptance of pain, and many other features of liminality listed in Table 4.3. Graduation from basic training would be the beginning of incorporation. However, there is one major difference between military training and tribal coming-of-age rituals. After completing military service, the individuals often return to the status they occupied before induction and undergo a period of readjustment during which they discard their military identity.

Another example is the experience of a patient entering a hospital. Separation begins when the patient enters the hospital and has his clothes taken away from him and is given a standardized "uniform." The actual medical procedures represent transitions as the individual is in some way changed. Some of the experiences of the patient resemble features of a liminal state. Discharge represents incorporation. However, unlike the typical rite of passage, the process seldom results in a permanent change of status that is acknowledged by the society, except perhaps in the case of permanent disability.

Alterations of the human body

All peoples have cultural images of themselves that serve to separate them from the rest of the animal world. Physical appearance serves to distinguish individuals socially with regard to such attributes as gender, age, social status, and occupation as well as membership in age and social groups. Many rituals involve temporary alterations of the human body, as when paint is applied to the body to symbolize that an individual is in a liminal state. Changes in status through rites of passage are often marked with changes in dress and

hair style that mark the individual's new status.

Other alterations are more permanent changes to the human body. The process of producing the alteration creates a situation in which the individual must endure a painful procedure. Being able to have one's body cut, pierced, tattooed, and scarred without showing pain is often a critical element in rites of passage. The experience and acceptance of pain is an important feature of liminality, and this pain may play a role in developing an altered state of consciousness (Chapter 5), an important aspect of a ritual experience.

Tattooing and other permanent alterations

The oldest evidence we have of tattooing have been discovered on the body of Őtzi, also known as the Iceman. Discovered in 1991, his mummified remains had been buried under glacial ice for 5,300 years. The tattoos appear to have been produced by puncturing the skin and rubbing charcoal into the wounds. A recent analysis inventoried a total of 61 simple tattoos, such as lines and crosses, on his body. Of course it is not possible to know for certain the purpose of this tattooing. However, many are located on either side of the spine and over joints that show some degree of degeneration. Perhaps they were created as part of some therapeutic ritual.

The history of tattooing in more recent American and European cultures can be traced to the voyages of James Cook in the eighteenth century. Many of Cook's sailors were tattooed during their stay in Tahiti, and the word *tattoo* is derived from the Tahitian word *ta-tu,* meaning "to mark or strike." Tattooing involves piercing or cutting the skin and then introducing a pigment into the wound. In contemporary Western societies this is done with an electronic device, but the principle is the same (Figure 4.1a).

The social implications of tattooing in Western society have varied. At times it has been a fad among the aristocracy or members of particular social groups, such as sailors, gangs, and prisoners. In this context a tattoo served as a mark of social identity. At other times tattooing has been a way to express dissatisfaction with the social order and was a way to distance oneself from the mainstream society. Tattoos also serve a religious purpose when one places a religious symbol or a memorial to a loved one permanently on their

skin.



Figure 4.1 Alterations of the human body. (a) Maori (New Zealand) facial tattoos, early twentieth century; (b) woman from Frankfurt, Germany, with tattoos and facial piercings; (c) Mangbetu (Democratic Republic of the Congo) woman with elongated head and monkey bone through her ear.

Closely related to tattooing is **cicatrization** or scarification. This is frequently seen in peoples with dark skin on whom tattoos would not show well. In scarification, a piece of skin is raised and cut, and some material, such as ash, is rubbed in to encourage the production of scars. Closely related to cicatrization is branding, in which the scars are created by burns.

Another common alteration of the body involves piercing some body part (Figure 4.1b). Many American women, and some men, bore holes into their earlobes to hang earrings. The hole may be enlarged so that a plug can be inserted, or weights may be attached so that the earlobe will be stretched. A few societies pierce the lower lip and insert a round plate. People may also pierce their nose, eyebrow, lips, tongue, nipples, and even genitals. A socially conservative woman might pierce her ears to wear fashionable diamond earrings; her rebellious child might pierce her nose or eyebrow as a symbolic act of rebellion; a youth from the Amazon may have his ears pierced as part of a coming-of-age ritual.

Some societies see white teeth as resembling the teeth of animals. To create a boundary between humans and nonhuman animals, teeth are often knocked out, filed into various shapes, or colored, most often blackened. Other body parts can be removed, most frequently a finger joint. The bones of the skull in infants are quite pliable, and pressure on these bones will cause them to

deform. Sometimes such deformation results unintentionally from various practices such as the flattening of the back of the head in infants on cradleboards. In other societies, such as the Maya, the heads of infants born into high social classes were deliberately bound to alter their shape (Figure 4.1c).

Genital cutting

Circumcision, the removal of the foreskin of the penis, is commonly found in many cultures. In Judaism the circumcision ceremony is referred to as a *Berit Mila* (often called a *bris*). *Berit* means covenant and *Mila* means to cut, so a *Berit Mila* cuts, as in marks, the covenant with God. The ritual is a prescriptive one and is based on a passage from Genesis:

> And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed.
>
> (Genesis 17:9–12)

The circumcision is performed by a ritual specialist, known as a *mohel.* The ritual also includes a formal naming of the child. For girls the ceremony is called a *Brit Bat* (or Covenant of Daughters) and includes the naming portion only.

Circumcision is also traditional in Islam. However, here circumcision often takes place later, frequently around the age of seven, although the age varies from soon after birth to the time of puberty. In the latter case the circumcision ritual becomes a true puberty ritual.

There are other modifications of the penis found in many traditional cultures. Perhaps the best known is **subincision**. In subincision the underside of the penis is cut and the urethra slit open. The length of the slit varies. In some cases, the cut is deep enough to fork the tip of the penis. Some Australian aborigines considered this symbolic of a serpent deity; in other

aboriginal groups the subincision was reopened periodically for ritual bleeding.

Surgeries that are to a degree analogous to male circumcision are also found in females in many cultures. There are several forms of what is sometimes known as female circumcision or genital cutting. The simplest forms are where the prepuce (analogous to the male foreskin) of the clitoris or a part of the clitoris itself is removed. Sometimes the labia minora is removed with the clitoris. These forms are referred to as **clitoridectomy**. The more extreme forms are termed **infibulation**. In **Pharaonic infibulation**, found in many areas of northeastern Africa, the entire clitoris, labia minora, and labia majora are removed and the remnants of the latter are sewn together leaving a small opening for urination and the passing of menstrual blood. This surgery prevents sexual intercourse and is a requirement for marriage. The wound is reopened by or for sexual intercourse.

Female cutting may be done at adolescence as a part of a rite of passage, but it is often performed much earlier. The procedure is seen as protecting the family's honor and controlling female sexuality. Although many individuals who do female genital cutting believe that such an action is prescribed by the Qur'an, it is actually nowhere in the Qur'an. Actually the practice predates both Islam and Christianity and is practiced in some Christian communities.

Many international organizations, including the United Nations, are working to eliminate the practice of genital cutting. On one hand this is seen as a public health issue, especially because the surgery is frequently performed under unsanitary conditions by individuals not trained in proper medical and surgical techniques. The practice is associated with infections, infertility, and even death. On the other hand it is seen as a human rights issue, cast as violence against women and children.

Another element in the discussions of genital cutting echoes the discussion of cultural relativism in Chapter 1. Genital cutting is an essential element in many religious practices, including Islam and Judaism, which practice male circumcision. And there are many who see male circumcision as genital mutilation. What is to one community an expression of religion and culture may be to another community a violation of basic human rights. The big questions are, where is the line to be drawn and who gets to draw it?

Pilgrimages

In Chapter 2 we looked at stories that tell of the creation of the earth and of humankind. In particular, we read the story of creation in Genesis and the story of creation as told by the Navaho. One difference between the Judeo-Christian and Navaho stories is that the former takes place at a location that cannot be located on a modern map or visited by tourists. The Garden of Eden may be a supernatural place or a place whose location has been lost. In either case it is far removed from the immediate landscape of people who read the narrative.

By contrast, the Navaho live in the midst of the landscape of the creation. As they move through their world, they point to mountains, streams, and rock formations that are mentioned in their myths. The landscape is a constant reminder of their mythological past, and they interact with this past on a daily basis.

All religions are associated with sacred places that are mentioned in their religious stories, places associated with important events in the past. The Muslims have the Kaaba in Mecca; the Jews have the Temple wall in Jerusalem; Christians have places in Jerusalem that are recounted in the story of Jesus; Buddhists have relics of the Buddha that are housed in particular temples; Hindus have the River Ganges. These are important focal points for religious practice.

There are also sacred places where miraculous events have taken place in more recent times. In Mexico the story is told of a native who was baptized into the Catholic Church in 1525 and became known by his Christian name of Juan Diego. According to legend, in 1531 an image of the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego and left a likeness of herself on his cloak. The cloak bearing the image resides today in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City (Figure 4.2). The basilica has become a major sacred site. People come to this site for many reasons; some are seeking cures for illness. Juan Diego was made a saint of the Catholic Church in 2002.

A journey to a sacred place is often referred to as a **pilgrimage**. A pilgrimage can also be a series of rituals that are associated with a sequence of sacred spaces. In terms of our classification of rituals, each ritual in the sequence of rituals is a social rite of intensification, although therapy rituals

are often included. In fact, the purpose of a pilgrimage may be to seek a supernatural cure for an illness.

One of the best-known pilgrimage sites in the Christian world is Lourdes, France. From February through July 1858, Bernadette Soubirous witnessed a total of eighteen apparitions of the Virgin Mary at a grotto near the town of Lourdes. Today the grotto is the site of pilgrimages by Catholics seeking a cure from illness.

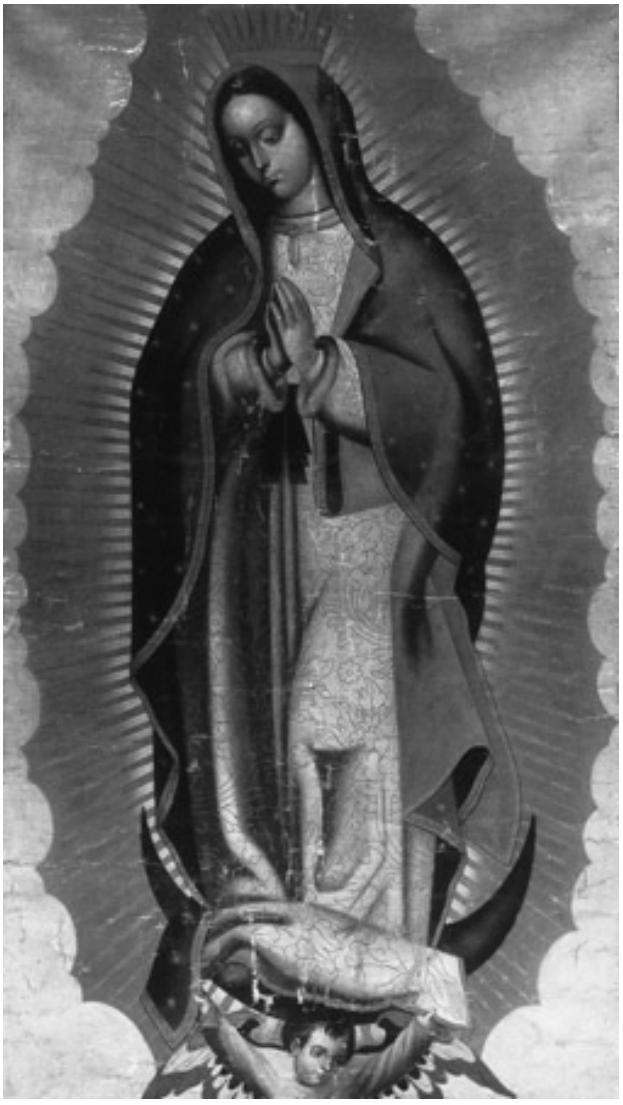


Figure 4.2 Our Lady of Guadalupe. Painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the wall of the Atotonilco Sanctuary in the State of Guanajuato, Mexico.

A pilgrimage often can be seen as a rite of passage. Such a journey may be a requirement of a religion, and a person returning from a pilgrimage may

have achieved a new status or position in the community. The experience of participating in a pilgrimage may include the three phases beginning with separation (traveling from one's home to the sacred place or to the beginning of the journey to several sacred places). During the rituals that occur at a sacred site or series of sites, the pilgrim is in a liminal state that is characteristic of the transition phase. Finally, at the end the individual reenters the everyday world, often with some symbol of having participated in the pilgrimage.

Pilgrimages also may involve visiting a number of related sites. One of the best known of such pilgrimages, and certainly one that involves large numbers of participants, is the Islamic *hajj.* This involves a prescribed visit to a series of sacred sites with specific ritual activities occurring at each one. The *hajj* is described in Box 4.1.

Box 4.1 The Hajj

One of the Five Pillars of Islam, which form the framework of Muslim life, is the *hajj,* or the pilgrimage to Mecca. All Muslims who are able to do so are expected to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. The *hajj* begins on the eighth day of *Dhul-Hijjah* (month for Hajj), the twelfth month of the Islamic year, and lasts for as long as six days. Every year, more than two million pilgrims from all over the world go to Mecca during this month. The *hajj* includes a series of rituals and symbols that are intended to bring the pilgrim as close as possible to God. A common act during the *hajj* is a constant repetition of the *Shahadah,* or statement of belief. This creed states that "*La ilaha ill-Allah Muhammad-un Rasulu-llah*" ("There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is the Messenger of God").

Although there is some variation, what follows is a basic description of the sequence of events that make up the *hajj.* Before entering Mecca, the pilgrims stop at designated places outside the city to conduct cleansing rituals. As part of this cleansing, men cut their nails, trim their beards, and put on a white seamless garment. (Women also wear white, but no particular dress is prescribed.) By wearing this special clothing, all

pilgrims become alike, symbolic of the Islamic belief that all Muslims are equal before God regardless of social status or wealth. This garment is also like a burial shroud, which symbolizes dying or turning away from earthly life to devote all attention to God.

The pilgrims then move into the Great Mosque, which can hold up to 500,000 pilgrims at a time. Here the pilgrims walk around the Kaaba seven times. The Kaaba is a black stone that stands 13 meters (43 feet) high, engraved with the sacred names of Allah. It was already a sacred object in Mecca before the time of Mohammad. The Qur'an says that Abraham and Ishmael together built the Kaaba, and it is also thought to be the site of Adam's original place of worship.

The pilgrims then travel to the plain of Mina, three miles from Mecca. According to the Qur'an, Mina and other sites such as Arafat are places where the word of God was revealed through Mohammad. After going to Mina, the pilgrims move on to the Arafat Valley, where Muslims believe Mohammad delivered his last sermon. The pilgrims gather stones and return to Mina. The stones are thrown at the *Jamraat,* three pillars that represent places where Satan tried to tempt Abraham from following the path of Allah. This act is symbolic of Abraham throwing stones at Satan when he tried to dissuade Abraham from sacrificing his son. Also related to this event is the ritual sacrifice of a sheep. This is seen as a reminder of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son, even though God's mercy allowed the substitution of a ram. The meat is distributed to family, friends, and the needy. Finally, the pilgrims return to the Great Mosque to again circle the Kaaba.

After completion of the rituals the pilgrims reenter normal life. They cut their hair, feast, and may engage in sexual intercourse. On returning home, they often wear special clothing, are given a special title, and assume important positions within their communities.

The Huichol pilgrimage

The Huichol are a Native American people living in the Sierra Madre

Occidental of central Mexico (Mesoamerican culture area). A key element of their religious traditions is the annual journey of more than 300 miles to Wirikuta, an area located east of their villages. This is a sacred journey. It reenacts the journey of the Ancient Ones, the Huichol ancestors, that took place during the creation of their world.

During the dry season, between October and February, small groups of pilgrims, each led by a shaman, leave their villages to travel to Wirikuta. Many objects are collected and prepared for the journey, including candles, small yarn paintings, coins, and special arrows. Each pilgrim assumes the role of one of the Ancient Ones. This is more than play acting, for they become the gods they represent. The shaman leading the pilgrimage becomes Grandfather Fire.

As the Huichol pilgrims journey on foot (or today partly by bus or truck), they visit a number of sacred sites, such as water holes and caves. At each of these places the story of the journey of the Ancient Ones and their visit to the sacred place is told. Offerings are made, and prayers are recited, as social rites of intensification are performed.

Finally, they reach the sacred land, where they find the peyote cactus, the "footprint of the deer." After being ritually "killed" and after offerings have been made, the cactus is collected and eaten. Peyote contains a hallucinogen. The Huichol believe that by eating the peyote, they see what the gods see. (The use of hallucinogens in religious rituals is discussed in Chapter 5.)

Religious obligations

There are a number of simple religious ritual acts that are usually performed by an individual or a small group such as a family. A Christian says grace before eating a meal. A Jew entering a building kisses the mezuzah, a small case attached to the door frame in which lies a parchment with verses from the Torah. A Buddhist lights a candle in a household shrine.

There are other ceremonial obligations that might not involve obvious ritual activity but do entail a series of obligations and avoidances of particular objects, foods, and activities that are found in daily life. For example, virtually

all cultures have certain foods that are served only on ceremonial occasions. Other foods may be forbidden to all members of the community or certain members of the society at particular points in time.

Tabu

In a society some objects and people may be off limits and are said to be **tabu**. The term *tabu* also refers to inappropriate modes of interpersonal behaviors. These are often phrased in terms of pollution. It would bring dishonor, bad luck, or some other negative result for a person to have contact with someone or something that is tabu.

Things that are sacred can be thought of as possessing supernatural power and are therefore off limits to most individuals. Contact with the supernatural can be dangerous. Priests must perform rituals to safeguard themselves and the community against this danger. This is not malicious power. It is neutral, like electricity. If you stick a wet finger into an electric socket, you will receive a large jolt of electricity, and perhaps you will die. The electricity is not evil, but it is powerful. When properly harnessed, it can be used to light our homes, run machinery, and so forth.

One of the most sacred objects in the Torah is the ark that carried the stone tablets from Mount Sinai to Jerusalem to be installed in the Temple. The journey of the ark to Jerusalem was not a simple one, and many of the episodes that occurred on this journey illustrate how dangerous the ark was. Not only was the ark a sacred object, but also God had declared that only Aaron and his descendants were allowed to touch it. On one occasion, as the ark approached the threshing floor of Nacon, the oxen that were pulling the cart that carried the ark stumbled. One of the followers, Uzzah, reached out to steady the ark. After all, it would have been a sacrilege to let the ark fall to the ground. Yet we are told that Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God" (2 Samuel 6:7). In other words, Uzzah's death was not the result of some evil activity. In fact his steadying of the ark was a good thing; but his contact with such a holy object, in the absence of ritual, resulted in his death.

The response to breaking a tabu is thought to be automatic rather than being at the decision of a deity. Sometimes nothing can be done to save the individual who has broken the tabu, but often there are ritual means of mending the situation.

Mana and tabu in Polynesia

The concept of tabu in Polynesia can be seen in the etiquette surrounding the chief. Again, this relates to the idea of things that possess supernatural power being seen as dangerous and often best avoided. In Polynesia this supernatural power is described by the term **mana**. Mana is an impersonal supernatural force that is found concentrated in special places in the landscape, in particular objects, and in certain people.

In some cases it is possible for an individual to gain or manipulate mana, thus tapping into a source of supernatural power that then can be used for some purpose. Frequently, mana is granted to a person by a supernatural being. In Polynesia mana comes from the gods. The chief, as a direct descendant of the gods, has the most mana, followed by his relatives and so on down through the hierarchy. Mana does flow from one thing to another, but it is part of the chief's role to be a reservoir and conductor of mana.

However, because of the chief's great amount of mana, he constitutes an involuntary menace to those around him, who have a lesser capacity for mana. Thus many tabus are in place to protect others from this power. Not only is it tabu to touch the chief himself, but because the chief's mana also runs into everything he uses, it also is dangerous to use his furniture or even use his fire to cook with. In some places the chief was even carried around on a litter because if he walked on a path with his own feet, the path became forever dangerous, or tabu, to commoners.

Jewish food laws

Many cultures have complex systems of food prohibitions. These prohibitions may apply to the entire community, or they may apply only to individuals of

a particular age, gender, or social position.

Kashrut is the Jewish law regarding what foods can and cannot be eaten and how foods must be prepared. *Kashrut* comes from the Hebrew root *Kaf-Shin-Resh,* meaning fit, proper, or correct. The more commonly known word *kosher* comes from the same root. Kosher foods are those that are proper according to the *Kashrut.* Food that is not kosher is referred to as *treyf.* Although some have tried to analyze these rules in terms of early health regulations, Jews who observe these dietary laws do so because the Torah says to do so. No other reason is necessary. (Rules similar to the Jewish dietary laws are also found in Islam, in which permitted foods are *halal* and prohibited foods are *haram.*)

The rules for keeping kosher include eating only land mammals that have cloven hoofs and chew their cud. ("Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is clovenfooted, and cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that shall ye eat" [Leviticus 11:3].) This is why eating pork is not allowed.

Even animals that are allowed to be eaten must be slaughtered ritually. This ritual slaughter is known as *shechitah* and is performed by a ritual specialist, a *shochet.* The ritual slaughter is done by a quick, deep stroke across the animal's throat with a perfectly sharp blade. This method is seen as being the most humane method of slaughter possible. It ensures a rapid and complete draining of the blood as well, which is also a kosher rule. The prohibition of the consumption of blood is the only dietary law that has a reason given in the Torah: The life of the animal is contained in the blood. ("Moreover ye shall eat no manner of blood, whether it be of fowl or beast, in any of your dwellings. Whatsoever soul it be that eateth any manner of blood, even that soul shall be cut off from his people" [Leviticus 7:26–27].)

Many of these obligations serve to provide a social identity to a group and to clearly separate that community from its neighbors. They also serve to separate different subgroups from one another in a multicultural society. For example, members of a particular group might wear special clothing that marks them as members of that group, such as a wearing a turban or other head covering, or might alter the appearance of their body, such as growing a beard. Particular behaviors and food prohibitions also serve as symbols of group identity and as barriers to social interactions between different social units. If you cannot eat with someone, it becomes difficult to engage in close social interactions. Such prohibitions play important roles in defining religious

groups and keeping them intact.

Box 4.2 Menstrual tabus

One common category of tabus found cross-culturally is menstrual tabus. Common rules include spending time in menstrual huts, refraining from cooking or eating certain foods, restricting contact with males (especially in regards to sex), and bathing in special locations and/or times. Many of these tabus separate women from men and are seen as protecting men from possible pollution.

The Mehinaku, an Amazonian group, tell the following myth about the origins of menstruation.

> A long time ago the Sun (Kama) wanted to have sex with Spirit Woman (Apapainyeineju). Oh, but her labia were long. The Sun took her by the wrist and said, "Let's have sex!" To which she replied, "Ah, not me. My vagina is very dangerous and frightening. Inside there is stinging ant, Mein. Inside there are snakes, such as Mekhe and others. Inside is Scorpion, Yucapanu. If it gets you, then you will really be sick. There are many of these between my labia too. I am really dangerous and frightening."
>
> The Sun went into the forest and returned with fish poison and dredged it into Spirit Woman's vagina, just as he would have done into a pool. Out floated all of the dangerous animals. Out came the snakes, then the spiders, and the scorpion. All of these came out but one tiny piranha that remained lodged deep inside her.
>
> "This is good," said the Sun, and he gave tiny piranha to all the women. Each month the piranha bite the women and make them bleed. Sometimes, the woman can feel the piranha bite, and tell their husbands, "Soon I am going to have my period."[4]

As seen in the myth, for the Mehinaku, female genitalia is seen as a source of danger and possible injury. This remains true beyond mythic times as menstruating women are seen as contaminating food which can cause an illness with chest pains and a cough. Although this illness is not serious for women, it is for men and can even cause death.

Menstrual tabus are found in the world religions as well. In Judaism, menstrual blood is considered ritually unclean. Leviticus 18:19 states, "Also thou shalt not approach unto a woman to uncover her nakedness, as long as she is put apart for her uncleanness" and women are forbidden

from making any physical contact with men during menstruation and for the week following. At the end of this time, the woman immerses herself in a mikvah, a ritual bath.

Restrictions for Muslim women are for religious functions only and are based on the Qur'an 2:22 which states, "They question thee (O Muhammad) concerning menstruation. Say it is an illness so let women alone at such times and go not into them until they are cleansed. And when they have purified themselves, then go unto them as Allah hath enjoined upon you." A menstruating woman may not enter a shrine or mosque, and may not pray, fast, or touch or recite from the Qur'an. She must refrain from sex and complete a ritual washing before she is considered clean again.

Conclusion

In the last few chapters we have introduced many basic concepts in the study of religion, such as worldview, narratives, symbols, and rituals. As we progress through the book and discuss new ideas and practices, it is important to keep in mind how these different elements are related to one another. We discussed in the last chapter the connection between worldview, symbols, and religious narratives. In this chapter we added ritual to the mix.

We defined a religious ritual as a repetitive, patterned act that involves the manipulation of religious symbols. In Chapter 3 we discussed how religious symbols are often based on specific episodes recounted in religious narratives and that they represent a specific worldview. On another level we see that rituals are often reenactments of, or directly reference, specific religious narratives. In the examples in this chapter we saw that Navaho sand paintings represent important religious stories, that the Huichol pilgrimage retraces the path of the Ancient Ones as told in religious narratives, and that the Jewish Passover ritual is based on the book of Exodus, just to name a few.

Ritual itself is an essential component of religious practice. The ritual expresses important worldviews through the retelling of sacred narratives and

the manipulation of fundamental symbols. Participation in a ritual is usually a group event and constitutes an expression not just of the beliefs of the group, but also of group solidarity. In the next chapter, in our discussion of altered states of consciousness, we will further discuss the important psychological impact of rituals. In the words of Anthony Wallace, "Ritual is religion in action; it is the cutting edge of the tool … It is ritual which accomplishes what religion sets out to do."[5]

Summary

A religious ritual is a standardized, repetitive sequence of activities that involves the manipulation of religious symbols such as prayers, offerings, and readings of sacred literature. Rituals are often based on and are sanctioned in myths that articulate the underlying worldview of a culture, and these tenets are embedded in the rituals that are performed by a society. Prescriptive rituals are ones that are required to be performed by some religious authority; situational rituals are performed because of a particular need of an individual or a community. Periodic rituals are performed as part of a religious calendar; occasional rituals are performed when a particular need arises.

There are many types of rituals. Technological rituals attempt to influence or control nature, such as hunting and gathering rites of intensification that influence nature in the quest for food, protective rituals that serve to protect individuals in some dangerous or unpredictable activity, and divination rituals. Therapy rituals are healing rituals; anti-therapy rituals are performed to bring about illness and death. Ideological rituals serve to maintain the normal functioning of a society. These include the familiar social rite of intensification that reinforces religious and social beliefs and values and the rite of passage that marks an individual's movement from one status to another. Rites of passage include birth, coming-of-age, marriage, and death rituals as well as many secular rituals such as graduations, inaugurations, and coronations. Three phases can usually be identified within a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation.

In addition to these there are many small rituals and obligations that are

demanded of adherents of particular religions. This includes the concept of tabu. Things that are tabu are separated from the society and are often considered to be sacred.

Study questions

1. Rituals are an important part of academic life, be they graduation ceremonies or pregame pep rallies. What are some of the rituals that are performed at your school? Are any rituals performed at your workplace? How would you classify these rituals?
2. Disasters often precipitate religious rituals. Describe some of the ritual activities that immediately followed the September 11, 2001, tragedy. What kinds of rituals were they? What functions did they serve?
3. Discuss a rite of passage that you have attended. Identify and describe the three phases.
4. When one enters a hospital as a patient, one's clothes and personal property are taken away and one is treated in a fashion that is very different from how one is treated outside the hospital. Do you think that a hospital stay can be considered a rite of passage? Why or why not? If so, can the three phases be identified?
5. How is adulthood defined in U.S. culture? At what point is one considered an adult? Is there a rite or several rites of passage that mark this transition? How does the lack of a formal marker of adulthood complicate this transition?
6. Many religions mandate specific ritual obligations. How do these obligations function in society? How do they influence interpersonal relationships between members of different religious groups?
7. If you have a chance, observe individuals from a particular religious group. Describe differences in dress and other behaviors. Would you label these ritual obligations?

Suggested readings

Mark J. Plotkin, *Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice* (New York: Viking, 1993).
[The story of an ethnobotanist's search for new medicines in the Amazon.]

Tepilit Ole Saitoti, *The Worlds of a Maasai Warrior* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
[An autobiography of a Maasai from Tanzania.]

Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (4th edn) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
[The story of the life of a !Kung woman from the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa told both in her own words and in the words of the author.]

Suggested websites

http://tahtonka.com/religion.html
Native American arts, humanities, and culture.

https://oukosher.org
Kosher laws.

http://web.haj.gov.sa/english/Pages/default.aspx
Official website of the Ministry of Hajj, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Notes

1 A. F. C. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966).

2 D. F. Pelly, *The Sacred Hunt* (Vancouver: D&M Publishers, 2001), p. 28.

3 H. Basedow, *The Australian Aboriginal* (Adelaide, Australia: Preece, 1925).

4 T. Gregor, *Anxious Pleasures: The Sexual Lives of an Amazonian People* (Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 142.

5 A. F. C. Wallace, op. cit., p. 102.

Chapter 5
Altered states of consciousness

Religion is a system of beliefs and behaviors that deals with the relationship between humans and the sacred supernatural. In interacting with the supernatural world, an individual may have experiences that transcend ordinary experiences, such as a trance or hallucination. These religious experiences are subjective; they manifest themselves on an emotional and psychological level. These emotions range from fear and anxiety, to a generalized feeling of well-being, to a profound experience in which a person feels an association with supernatural power or a supernatural entity such as a spirit or a god. These experiences and emotions are important elements in religious practices.

These experiences are called **altered states of consciousness**. In its simplest sense, an altered state of consciousness is any mental state that is recognized by the individual or observer as differing from a normal state. Daydreaming and the feeling that comes from drinking a little too much alcohol are examples of mental states that can be subjectively identified by the individual, and/or seen by observers, as being different from that individual's normal, alert mental state. Although everyone experiences altered states of consciousness to some degree, in both religious and nonreligious contexts, in many cultures these states are encouraged and are interpreted by the culture as important religious experiences.

The nature of altered states of consciousness

The definition of an altered state of consciousness is a subjective one that includes a wide variety of phenomena. Table 5.1 lists some of the experiences that characterize altered states. Which particular mental state is experienced and the intensity of that experience depend on a number of factors, including the nature of the factor responsible for an individual entering an altered state, the context of the experience, the individual's and society's expectation, and the physical and mental condition of the individual.

Entering an altered state of consciousness

Altered states of consciousness can be brought about by a number of physiological, psychological, and pharmaceutical factors. Table 5.2 lists a number of situations that can bring about an altered state of consciousness. Many of these factors occur in religious practices and are given a religious interpretation.

Table 5.1 Characteristics of altered states of consciousness

Alterations in thinking: disturbances in concentration, attention, memory, and judgment; reality testing impaired to varying degrees; distinction between cause and effect blurred
Disturbed time sense: altered sense of time and chronology; feelings of timelessness; time coming to a standstill; the acceleration or slowing of time seen as infinitely long or infinitesimally short
Loss of control: fear of losing grip on reality and self-control; feelings of helplessness; in spirit possession states the person relinquishes control
Change in emotional expression: sudden and unexpected displays of emotional extremes; individual may become detached and uninvolved
Body image change: distortion in body image; a schism between body and mind; dissolution of boundaries between self and others and the universe; various parts of the body appear or feel shrunken, enlarged, distorted, heavy, weightless, disconnected; spontaneous experiences of dizziness, blurring of vision

Perceptual distortions: hallucinations; increased visual imagery; synesthesia, in which one form of sensory experience is translated into other form, such as in seeing or feeling sound
Change in meaning or significance: attach increased meaning or significance to experiences; feelings of perceptiveness and insight
Sense of an indescribable experience: inability to communicate the experience to someone who has not undergone a similar experience; varying degrees of amnesia; sometimes a lucid memory
Feelings of rejuvenation: experience a new sense of hope and rebirth; hypersuggestibility, in which the person comes to rely more on the suggestions of the religious practitioner; contradictions, doubts, inconsistencies, and inhibitions tend to diminish; suggestions of the person endowed with authority accepted as concrete reality

Based on A. M. Ludwig, "Altered States of Consciousness," in C. Tart, Altered States of Consciousness (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1969), pp. 9–22.

Table 5.2 Factors bringing about an altered state of consciousness

Production of altered state of consciousness	*Examples*
Reduction of external stimulation and/or motor activity	Solitary confinement, prolonged social and stimulus deprivation, altered states while falling asleep or waking up, dreaming
Constant exposure to repetitive stimulation	Prolonged drumming or repetitive dance movements (e.g., whirling dervishes)
Increase of external stimulation (sensory overload) and/or strenuous physical activity	Third-degree tactics, spirit possession states, ecstatic trance
Increased alertness or mental involvement	Prolonged vigilance, intense mental absorption in a

sustained over time	task
Decreased alertness; passive state of mind; reduction in goal-directed thinking	States attained through meditation, daydreaming, cognitive and muscular relaxation (e.g., while floating on the water or sunbathing)
Alterations in body chemistry or physiology of nervous system	Hypoglycemia (which may be due to fasting), dehydration, sleep deprivation, hyperventilation, temporal lobe seizures, administration of pharmacological substances

Based on A. M. Ludwig, "Altered States of Consciousness," in C. Tart, Altered States of Consciousness (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1969), pp. 9–22.

Fasting

Fasting is the act of abstaining from eating food and drinking liquids over a period of time. The concept of fasting may also include other prohibitions such as that against sexual intercourse and smoking. There is great variation in the nature of a fast. In some societies the fast includes all food and drink; in some the drinking of water is permitted. In still other societies a fast refers to abstaining from a particular food such as meat.

Fasting leads to an alteration in body chemistry. In response to the absence of food intake over an extended period of time, the body turns to alternative means of providing glucose to run the body. Initially fat stores in the liver and elsewhere are metabolized. On depletion of the fat stores, the body begins to break down proteins. The feeling of hunger normally disappears after a few days.

Changes in body chemistry accelerate with intense, prolonged fasting, and the fasting individual will show the clinical features of starvation. Severe symptoms of starvation, including death, have occurred in religious fasting; this is a rare, maladaptive outcome. Because most religious fasts last only a day or two, or involve some intake of food during the fasting period, the features of starvation seldom develop. In intense fasting, the psychological

features that are seen include an increase in impulsive and aggressive behavior, a decrease in competence, and hallucinations. Characteristics associated with dehydration include fatigue, lethargy, confusion, and dizziness. Thus fasting can lead to the development of an altered state.

People express many reactions to fasting in a religious context. Of course, in addition to physiological and psychological features, the cultural expectations play a major role. Fasting is often seen as a sacrifice to a deity and frequently accompanies religious rituals. It can be an important element in the training of religious specialists in which it is seen as a form of discipline. Fasting also accompanies rituals of atonement as an act of cleansing.

There are many instances of fasting in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights while he was on the mountain with God. Jesus also fasted for forty days and forty nights while in the wilderness.

The Jewish calendar contains a number of fast days. The best known is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. On that day, Jews fast from sunset to sunset the next day. Fasting includes abstinence from all food and drink, including water, as well as other prohibitions such as that against sexual intercourse and bathing. Fasting is a part of the process of achieving atonement.

Fasting is found in some Christian denominations and absent in others. Fasting accompanies Holy Communion in the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Here fasting often means abstaining from certain, but not all, foods. Fasting customs vary greatly in Protestant churches and often accompany a personal spiritual experience rather than being a part of a ritual. Fasting is found in some Buddhist sects, and it is an important element of Hindu ritual.

Fasting during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, is one of the Pillars of Islam. Fasting includes abstention from food and water from sunup to sundown, as well as abstention from sex and smoking. This act is seen as moving the individual closer to God by abandoning those things that are enjoyable. As the community fasts together, people are brought together with a heightened sense of community.

Sacred pain

Altered states of consciousness can also result from pain. Pain is a common theme in religious traditions. It may be a punishment, as in the Christian legacy of Eve bringing forth children in pain ("in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" [Genesis 3:16]) or the Hindu consequences of bad karma. Pain may be seen as purifying, as with the ascetics and monks who cause themselves pain of the flesh in this life to avoid greater torment of the soul in the next life. It is sometimes an enemy or maybe even a weapon, as with Christ's battle on the cross. Finally, pain may be seen as transformative or as a source of supernatural power—pain purifies and is used to achieve exorcism.

Certain levels of pain have an analgesic quality (such as when the dentist shakes your lip before giving you a Novocain shot or when you rub the elbow you just banged on something hard). Pain can also induce a euphoric state, through the body's production of natural opiates, and may be related to experiences of dissociation or trance. The voluntary ordeals to which shamanic initiates and ascetics submit themselves may be related to this effect. This is also the goal of many participants in modern Western body modification subcultures who practice suspension (hanging from hooks piercing their skin).

In our society we tend to think of pain as a very individualistic and even isolating experience. However, religious pain is often shared pain. Sometimes this sharing is vicarious. Christianity provides many examples of the importance of vicarious suffering, including the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the existence of hell, and the public executions of witches and heretics. Some individuals have experienced localized pain in areas of the body that correspond to the crucifixion wounds of Jesus. Sometimes these are seen as marks on the body known as **stigmata**.

Many rituals use pain that is either self-inflicted or inflicted by others. For example, some funeral rituals involve self-mutilation on the part of mourners (Chapter 8). Self-inflicted pain is also effective because before performing the act, people often become very focused, concentrating on the act. They may also have undergone a period of purification before the act that might include fasting or lack of sleep.

Among the ancient Maya, male rulers would use small obsidian blades to

perforate the foreskin of their penises, and women would perforate their tongues and draw strings, often studded with thorns, through their tongues (Figure 5.1). The blood would fall onto strips of bark paper lying in a ceremonial bowl. The blood-soaked paper then would be burned as an offering. The intense pain and blood loss would bring about visions that were interpreted as the entrance of gods and ancestors into the presence of the ruler.

In Chapter 4 we examined rites of passage that included coming-of-age rituals. These rituals often include tattooing, scarring, and circumcision. Because many of these operations are quite painful, the ability to withstand pain has become an important element in these rituals. The subject often enters an altered state of consciousness in the course of undergoing such painful procedures. This altered state of consciousness often makes it possible to withstand the pain that is being inflicted.

Pain is also closely linked to emotion and sense of self. In modern Western medical practice, pain is often seen as being very disruptive and devastating to a person's life and sense of self, isolating the individual in his or her own private world. However, pain can also be experienced as healing and transformative. In these cases pain is often experienced as the catalyst for strengthening the person's sense of self. Instead of being isolating, the pain experience may reinforce the person's connections to both the social and supernatural worlds. Prime examples of changes in identity that occur through pain experiences are possession and exorcism, both of which will be discussed in later chapters.



Figure 5.1 Mayan carving. Stone carvings from Temple 23, Yaxchilán, Mexico, commemorating a ritual performed on October 28, 709 CE, celebrating the birth of Bird-Jaguar. (a) Lintel 24 shows Lady Xoc pulling a rope studded with thorns through her tongue as her husband, Shield-Jaguar, holds a torch. (b) Lintel 25 shows Lady Xoc experiencing a hallucination of a serpent.

A pilgrimage (see Chapter 4) often involves sacred pain that may be interpreted as a sacrifice, an imitation of the suffering of a god, a penance, a test, and so on. Again, such pain is related to an altered state of consciousness. One example comes from the pilgrimage to Sabari Malai in South India. The pilgrimage follows the path of the god Lord Ayyappan, son of Shiva, and his encounter with, and defeat of, a female demon. Pilgrims commit themselves to celibacy, moderate eating, walking with bare feet, and sleeping on the ground. The pilgrimage is a forty-mile journey, walked barefoot over sharp stones and hot sand. The pain of this is seen as an essential part of the pilgrimage, the goal of which is becoming one with Ayyappan. Following is a description by E. Valentine Daniel of the experience of pain on this pilgrimage:

> One tells oneself, "I shall walk on this side or that" or "Look! There's a patch of grass. Let me go walk on that. It will make my feet feel good, even though the patch is only three feet long." During this phase, one is able to differentiate between the pain caused by the blisters under one's toenails and those on one's heels. Then again, one is able to distinguish between the pain caused by blisters, wherever they happen to be, and the pain arising from strained calf muscles and tendons … The headaches caused by the heat of the noon sun and the load of the *iru muti* can be distinguished from the pain resulting from the straps of the knapsack biting into one's shoulders.
>
> Sooner or later, however, all the different kinds of pain begin to merge … The experience of pain makes one acutely aware of oneself (ego) as the victim, and the outside (undifferentiated as roots, stones, and hot sand) as the pain-causing agent … With time, pain stops having a causative agent, and ego is obscured or snuffed out because it has nothing to contrast itself with or stand against … There is a "feeling" of pain, of course, but it is a sensation that has no agent, no tense, and no comparative … Pain is the only sensation belonging to the eternal present.[1]

The biological basis of altered states of consciousness

Participants in religious rituals may report being possessed by a spirit or visited by an angel; they may feel their souls move outside their bodies; they may become one with the universe. These are real and profound experiences. But what is occurring within the brain of these individuals? Is there a biological basis for these altered states of consciousness?

Neurologist Oliver Sacks and others have looked at the relationship between migraines and religious experiences.[2] The term *migraine* is generally used to describe a type of headache, but migraines are also associated with nausea and other physical symptoms. One symptom associated with migraines is an aura, a type of hallucination. Although auras are most often visual, they may also involve distortions of other senses.

Culture plays a major role in how the patient interprets an aura. A modern migraine sufferer might experience a visual aura as pathological, a condition that makes it difficult to function—for example, to drive a car. (An aura that consists of floating lights, for example, can severely interfere with normal vision.) The same visual experience could be interpreted as a vision. In fact, descriptions of visions were written down and illustrated by Hildegard of Bingen, a nun and mystic who lived from 1098 to 1179. Her descriptions and drawings are similar to contemporary descriptions of auras by migraine

patients. Thus a particular experience may be experienced as a medical condition or, if the culture interprets it that way, a mystical experience.

Of course, migraine auras are not consciously induced, as many religious altered states are. Research in neurobiology has focused on how rhythmic, ritualized behavior affects certain parts of the brain. For example, in situations in which a fast rhythm is being used, such as with vigorous singing and dancing, the **sympathetic system** or arousal system of the brain is driven to higher and higher levels, ultimately becoming overstimulated. When this happens, the brain essentially selectively shuts down, and certain areas of the brain stop receiving the neural input that they normally receive and on which they depend to function normally.

One area of the brain that shuts down when overstimulated is a structure in the brain known as the **orientation association structure**. This is the part of the brain that enables us to sense the boundaries of our body, to distinguish ourselves from the world around us, and to orient ourselves in space. These are tasks that we normally take for granted because our brains are functioning well, but the inability to perform these tasks can cause huge difficulties for people who have sustained damage to this part of the brain. Imagine trying to sit down in a chair if you could not tell where you ended and the chair began or if you did not know exactly where your body was.

The orientation association structure becomes deprived of new information because of the selective shutdown response to overstimulation of the arousal system. The result of this is a softening of the boundaries between self and other. This may be responsible for an altered mental state described by many religious systems in which the divisions between the self and the outside world disappear and one feels as being "one" with the universe or supernatural beings. This is referred to as a **unitary state**.

Other research has focused on the emotional impact of repetitive motor behaviors, including what are referred to as marked actions or actions that are different from

Box 5.1 Altered states in Upper Paleolithic art

The Upper Paleolithic of Europe (35,000–10,000 years ago) is the time

when the first *Homo sapiens* arrived and replaced the Neandertals. It was a time of new technologies and the development of artistic traditions. Perhaps the most famous art from this era is that of cave paintings, which are found primarily in France and Spain.

Over the decades, archaeologists and art historians have wrestled with interpreting the meaning of cave art and the role it played for people of the Upper Paleolithic. David Lewis-Williams believes that the art was part of a religious experience and are graphic representations of experiences of altered states of consciousness, either created while in or immediately after coming out of an altered state.

Lewis-Williams points out that when people enter altered states there are some experiences that appear to be universal, because they result from the biology of the brain. One is the sensation of flying. Another is that of being drawn into a vortex, which is often perceived as the entrance to a tunnel that leads to another world such as an underworld. He theorizes that Upper Paleolithic peoples saw the caves in terms of such experiences. They were the "entrails of the underworld." The walls of the caves were seen as a membrane between the everyday world and the world of the spirits.

Many of the works found on the cave walls incorporate some feature of the wall itself, such as a crack or nodule. Often the painted animals appear to be coming out of the wall. These are spirit-animals, and shamans performed rituals to move these animals through the membrane so the shaman could use the spirit-animal in healing and other activities. This connection to the spirit world on the other side of the membrane can be seen in offerings—such as stone objects and animal teeth—that are wedged into cracks in the wall, thereby sending them into the underworld. Incised lines may also be attempts to penetrate to the other side.

In addition to representational images, such as animals, Upper Paleolithic humans painted geometric figures on the cave walls. In moving into a trance state, a person passes through three stages. In the first stage, geometric visual images are seen. These are **entoptic phenomena** and are the forms painted on the cave walls. These images are seen by peoples in all societies, but they are open to cultural interpretation. In the second phase, the individual attempts to make

sense of these phenomena and interprets them in cultural terms. These entoptic images are still seen in the third stage, or deep trance. They combine with iconic images of people and animals that are seen as part of the spirit world. In these deep trances, an individual will often feel changed into an animal and shares the power of the spirit-animal. Images of transformed shamans are called **therianthropes**.

Sources: D. J. Lewis-Williams and J. Clottes, "The Mind in the Cave—the Cave in the Mind: Altered Consciousness in the Upper Paleolithic," *Anthropology of Consciousness,* 9 (1998), pp. 13–21; D. J. Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).

normal ordinary movements, such as a slow bow. Other studies have looked at the impact of smell, such as that of burning incense. What is important to note is that these studies have found that it is not possible to get the exact same effects as are seen with ritual behavior just by chemically stimulating the right area. It is only with the merging of beliefs and behaviors that the full effect is achieved.

Ethnographic examples of altered states of consciousness

Altered states of consciousness are at the core of many religious experiences and enable the believer to experience the supernatural in a very immediate, visceral way. In the following section we will see the role of altered states of consciousness in ritual by examining specific ethnographic examples.

San healing rituals

The !Kung are a subgroup of the San, a hunting and gathering people of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa (Khoisan culture area).[3] In their healing rituals the !Kung experience *!kia*, which is an altered state of consciousness. According to the !Kung, an energy known as *n/um*, given to the !Kung by the gods, resides at the base of the spine. As an individual enters *!kia*, the *n/um* begins to boil and turn to a vapor, which then rises in the spine to a point near the base of the skull. At that point the individual enters an altered state.

In a large !Kung camp, during the time of year when food is plentiful, dances are held several times a month. As night falls, several women sit down around a large fire and begin to sing. Other women soon join them in a tight circle around the fire and the singing becomes louder and more energetic. Soon some of the men, and a few women, begin to dance around the circle of singers. As the dancing becomes more and more energetic they become warm and begin sweating profusely. The dancers then start to stagger and shake violently. Having entered *!kia* they begin their healing by going around the fire and laying their hands on each individual. The !Kung believe that illness is shot into people by the ancestors. By laying hands on a person, they pull out the sickness and throw it into the darkness (Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2 San healing ceremony. Healing ritual of the /Gwi band, a subgroup of the San, southern Africa. The men begin to dance around the women, who are singing around a fire.

About half of the men and about 10 percent of the women become healers. In addition to pulling out illness, a person in an altered state of consciousness can see the inside of a person and travel to the home of the gods. They experience intense emotions and a sense of ascending and flying which is interpreted as traveling into the heavens.

The Sun Dance of the Cheyenne

The Sun Dance is a major communal religious ritual practiced by many tribal groups in the North American Plains culture area, including the Arapaho, Blackfeet, Crow, Kiowa, Sioux, and Cheyenne. Each group has its own particular variations, but there are certain elements common across the different cultures. The Sun Dance takes place near the summer solstice and

represents the theme of renewal.

The Cheyenne's name for the Sun Dance, *oxheheom*, means "New Life Lodge" or "Lodge of the Generator." The ritual is closely tied to the creation of the earth and passages from the Cheyenne origin story. One myth tells of a famine that was afflicting the Cheyenne. In response, a culture hero named Tomsivsi (Erect Horns) took the beautiful wife of a tribal chief with him on a journey to the Sacred Mountain. Inside the mountain, they were taught the Sun Dance and were told that by performing the dance the world would be renewed.

The ceremony is pledged by an individual who is making a commitment to supernatural beings. This pledge may be made in hopes of healing a loved one, or a man himself may be sick and vow to do the dance if he recovers. The vow may be made to avert danger in war or may be based on a dream. From the time the man makes his pledge until the end of the ritual, there is a tabu on sexual activity. This again references the myth in which Tomsivsi refused to have sex with his companion until after he emerged from the Sacred Mountain.

The Sun Dance takes eight days to perform, with the first four days spent building the dance lodge. The center pole for the dance lodge is cut down by a man who interacts with the tree as a warrior interacts with an enemy and it is ritually transported to the lodge by chiefs. Many ritual acts and offerings to the pole are associated with the raising of the pole. During this time, secret rites are also conducted in the Lone Tipi which symbolizes the Sacred Mountain where Tomsivsi learned the dance. Many acts symbolic of earth renewal are done at this time.

The last four days are devoted to the actual public dance, which takes place in the Sun Dance Lodge. The participants in the dance face the center pole and rise up and down on their toes while standing in one place. As they rise they blow on eagle-wing bone whistles. The dancers do this almost continuously for the entire four-day period. While there may be brief rest periods, the dancers are completely without food or water.

The most dramatic part of the Cheyenne Sun Dance, and an element not practiced by most other Plains groups, is an act of self-sacrifice known as "hanging from the central pole." A man does this act with the help of a shaman who himself has made the same sacrifice in the past. The shaman fastens a rope to the central pole that will reach just to the chest of the man.

Two holes are cut in the skin of the man's chest, skewers are passed through, and the free ends of the rope are attached to the skewers. The man dances, fastened to the pole, all night trying to break free. If he has not done so by morning, the shaman cuts him free.

Dancers who make this additional sacrifice do so in hopes of gaining pity from the supernatural beings and being rewarded with good fortune. Dancers are also rewarded with public approval and social prestige. The fasting, dancing, and pain all help induce an altered state of consciousness for the dancers. Participants often report having visions during the ritual.

The Holiness Churches

The Holiness Churches are a series of independent churches that are found primarily in Appalachia, most predominantly in West Virginia. This area of the United States was once highly dependent on coal mining. It was a relatively isolated, economically depressed area. Although some of this is true today, the isolation is breaking down, and life is improving. Many Holiness Churches still survive. Each church is independent, yet individuals will frequently visit several churches in the region. The rituals do not follow a set pattern, although many elements are highly traditional, and the sequence of activities is determined largely by the elders of the church community. These practices are based on a specific portion of the Bible:

> And he [Jesus] said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover.
>
> (Mark 16: 15–18)

During the service, several members of the congregation enter an altered state of consciousness through intense concentration in prayer and with loud music with a repetitive beat. Individuals dance energetically and even enter trancelike states. In some Holiness Churches participants in an altered state

will pick up poisonous snakes and drink poison. Entrance into an altered state is a highly desired religious experience and is interpreted as being filled by the Holy Ghost. This is an example of a unitary state.

Individuals may also "speak in tongues" which is an unknown "language" that is interpreted as the voice of God speaking through the person. Also known as **glossolalia**, the language uses the sound, rhythms, and accents of the speaker's native language. The sounds are broken up into syllables that are put together unsystematically into units that resemble words and sentences but are not.

Drug-induced altered states of consciousness

The use of drugs to induce an altered state of consciousness is practiced by many societies. Table 5.3 lists various categories of drugs that produce an altered state of consciousness.

Table 5.3 Drugs that produce an altered state of consciousness

Category	*Examples*	*Effects*
Euphoria	Morphine	Reduces mental activity and induces a sense of well-being
Phantastica	Marijuana, peyote	Causes visions, illusions, hallucinations, delirium
Inebriantia	Alcohol	Produces a state of intoxication; brings about an initial phase of cerebral excitation followed by a state of depression
Hypnotica	Xanax	Sedatives or sleep producers; may cause insensibility to pain
	Analeptics,	

Excitania	coffee, tobacco	Mental stimulants
Tranquilizer	Librium, Thorazine, Valium	Reduces anxiety and mental tension; produces a state of mental calm

As with any altered state of consciousness, this can have both adaptive and maladaptive expressions. For example, a drug addict may be unable to maintain a home, a job, or normal social relationships as a consequence of his or her addiction. In discussing drug-induced altered states, it is important to recognize the difference between secular drug use, which is often extremely maladaptive, used for escapism, and leads to many personal and social problems, and ritual drug use, which is highly controlled and generally adaptive.

The problems associated with recreational drug use, such as addiction, are generally not seen when the usage is done in a religious context. Religious drug use takes place only at certain times and in certain contexts, with defined beginning and end points. The ritual setting channels the experience in important ways.

The importance of this structure and the possible dangers of drug use are often recognized in the insider's perspective as well. For example, the Huichol emphasize the role of the shaman not just to lead them on the peyote pilgrimage, but also to lead them back. They long for the ecstasy of this religious experience but also worry they might not be able to return from it. Members of the Native American Church, who use peyote as a sacrament, also caution against using peyote in anything but a religious context.

Hallucinogenic snuff among the Yanomamö

Various substances are used in religious contexts in order to bring about altered states of consciousness. Here we will explore the use of hallucinogenic snuff, tobacco, peyote, and marijuana in religious contexts.

The use of drugs is ubiquitous in South American traditional societies. A great many plants, both wild and domesticated, can be found in the tropical

forests that are exploited by traditional societies and used in religious rituals. Napoleon Chagnon describes the use of hallucinogens by Yanomamö shamans in Venezuela.[4]

The most commonly used hallucinogenic snuff is called *ebena.* It is made from the inner bark of a particular tree and is ground together with bark ashes and leaves. After the mixture is carefully kneaded it is ground to a fine powder on a heated piece of broken pottery. The final product, a fine green powder, is manufactured and used on a daily basis by the shamans of the village. One man will insert a long, hollow tube into the nostril of another. Placing a bit of powder in one end, he blows the powder with a powerful puff of air into the nasal cavity of his partner. The effects of the drug can be immediately seen. The individual taking the drug chokes and coughs; his eyes water; and long strands of green mucus drip from the nostrils. He has difficulty walking and begins to experience visual hallucinations, mainly blubs of light.

The Yanomamö provide a cultural interpretation of these visual hallucinations. They see the world as populated by tiny, humanlike spirits called *hekura.* A shaman's supernatural power depends on his ability to entice the *hekura* into his chest, which is visualized as a world of rivers, mountains, and forests. Under the influence of *ebena* they report seeing *hekura* spirits moving down from the mountains. Having decorated their bodies to make their bodies attractive to the spirits, the men sing songs to entice the spirits into their chests. Once the *hekura* have settled in the spirits will work with the shaman in bringing about healing as well as to cause illness and death to his village's enemies.

Tobacco in South America

Many ethnographies of South American cultures describe the varied ways in which drugs are used in these societies. Many of these practices are outlined by Johannes Wilbert, who, while focusing on the use of tobacco in South American societies, also touches on the use of other substances. In these societies a drug is often used in combination with a variety of substances, both collected and cultivated.[5]

The use of tobacco, often mixed with other substances, is common in South American societies. The substances are made into several different forms, and many delivery systems have developed. Of course, traditional societies do not have the option of injection, so the problem is how to get the drug into the bloodstream, where it will move rapidly to the brain.

Substances are efficiently absorbed in parts of the body that are lined with epithelial tissue that contain a high density of blood capillaries. These include the lining of lungs, mouth, throat, digestive system, rectum, nose, and eyes. Tobacco can be smoked, sucked (as in chewing tobacco), or drunk. Some tribes produce a processed form of tobacco with the consistency of a jelly, which is then rubbed on the teeth and gums. Tobacco can be dried and ground into a powder and blown up the nose.

Drugs also can be introduced into the rectum by some type of enema device. The advantages of this technique are that it will not irritate the stomach and that the drug will not be lost if the individual vomits. Sometimes the enema device is a simple tube. The drug is then blown into the rectum. Another device makes use of a bulb that can be made from rubber or the bladder of an animal. A painting on a pottery vessel found in a Mayan site solved the mystery of a particular type of pottery vessel that appeared to have no obvious function. The painting shows it being used, with a rubber bulb, as an enema syringe.

Peyote in the Native American Church

The late nineteenth century was a difficult time for the Native American population of the United States. The tribes were losing land, their traditional lifestyles were disappearing, disease had decimated many native communities, and the official policy of the U.S. government was to destroy Native American culture and to assimilate the populations into the general culture. Religion became one method of coping with this stress, and out of the chaos developed a series of religious movements known by anthropologists as nativistic movements. (These movements will be discussed in detail in Chapter 11.) Many of these movements combined both native and Christian elements, an example of syncretism.

Some of these early movements involved the use of the hallucinogenic cactus peyote. Peyote grows in northern Mexico and southern Texas and has a long history of use in religious ritual, as among the Huichol. The ritual use of peyote slowly moved into the Native American populations and is referred to as **peyotism**. Some of these groups stress Native American beliefs and rituals; others combine Native American elements with those of Christianity that were introduced by missionaries. They also tend to be **pan-Indian** in that they incorporate elements and draw membership from many different tribes. Familiar elements of ritual include meditation, revelation, prayer, and the use of native plant materials—for example, tobacco and sage.

For some groups that utilize Christian elements, peyote plays a role similar to that of the sacramental bread and wine of the Christian Mass. The peyote is believed to contain the power of God and to ingest the peyote is to absorb God's power. Members of the Native American Church say that this enables them to have a direct experience of the supernatural.

The first Native American Church was incorporated in Oklahoma in 1918, followed by others. The reactions of the various states to the use of peyote have been mixed. In some situations it was tolerated; in others individuals were tried and convicted for using a banned substance. Finally, in 1978, Congress amended the American Indian Religious Freedom Act to legalize the use of peyote as a sacrament in Native American Church rituals.

Marijuana among the Rastafarians

Rastafarians are members of an Afro-Caribbean religion that has its roots in Christianity but venerates the former emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, as the messiah. Rastafarians believe that people of African descent are the Israelites reincarnated and generally focus on issues of race relations. One of their key beliefs is in the coming repatriation of blacks in the Americas to Africa. The Rastafarians are an example of a revitalization movement (Chapter 11), originating in conditions of social and economic deprivation and meant to improve the lives of its adherents through adopting new religious beliefs. Since its beginnings the Rastafarian movement has grown to encompass not just the poor, but also the middle classes and has spread out

from its place of origin, Jamaica, partly through the international spread of both Jamaican people and reggae music.

The Rastafarians stress a philosophy of *ital levity*, which stresses the rejection of Western consumerism and emphasizes living in harmony with nature. This includes eating food that is grown without chemical fertilizers and using herbal remedies. In addition to vegetarianism and not cutting the hair (resulting in dreadlocks), a common Rastafarian religious practice is the smoking of marijuana, or *ganga. Ganga* is sometimes referred to as the "wisdom weed" or "the holy herb" and is seen as a religious sacrament and a way to gain new understandings of self, the universe, and God.

Rastafarians trace the use of *ganga* to several passages in the Bible, including the following: "thou shalt eat the herb of the field" (Genesis 3:18), "eat every herb of the land" (Exodus 10:12), and "Better is a dinner of herb where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith" (Proverbs 15:17).

Conclusion

In Chapter 1 we listed the six dimensions of religion as set forth by Ninian Smart. One of these was the experiential dimension, an encounter with a sacred reality that is beyond ordinary experience. Religious experiences can be highly emotional. They can range from a generalized feeling of well-being to dramatic visions. These mental states, states that differ from one's normal mental states, are altered states of consciousness. They define religious experience. It is through such altered states that supernatural phenomena and powers manifest themselves. It moves abstract beliefs into the realm of lived experience.

Interpreting the changes in mental state when one is in an altered state of consciousness is largely influenced by culture. In other words, culture places meaning on our experiences. A buzz from drinking several alcoholic drinks is amenable to several interpretations. Some are secular: "I've had a little too much to drink, and I'm feeling tipsy." Some people, experiencing the identical reaction, might interpret that same feeling as "I feel as if a spirit has entered my body." The objective feeling may be the same, but the subjective

interpretation may be very different.

The religious interpretations of altered states of consciousness generally fall into two categories. First, supernatural power, usually in the form of spirits or gods, enters the person's body, a phenomenon that we call **spirit possession**. An individual can control the spirit within his or her body to accomplish certain goals, or the spirit that possesses a human body can use that body to heal or to divine the unknown, often without the knowledge or the memory of the possessed person. However, possession by an unwanted spirit can bring about illness that may be cured by exorcism rituals.

The second common religious interpretation of an altered state of consciousness is that a person has entered a trance state because the soul has left the person's body. The experience of the individual in the altered state is then associated with the experiences of the soul, which is operating in a supernatural realm.

Altered states frequently play an important role in healing, for both the healer and the patient. Healing is facilitated, and in some cases even accomplished, through suggestibility, emotional catharsis, and feelings of rejuvenation. For example, when possessed by a spirit, the healer may use the supernatural power of the spirit to remove the cause of the illness, often by sucking the offending spirit out of the patient's body. When an illness is diagnosed as the loss of the soul, the healer sends his or her soul on a voyage to retrieve the lost soul of the patient.

The most common idea of religious altered states, though, is the idea of achieving a unitary state, a state in which the individual experiences a feeling of becoming one with the supernatural, however this is conceived of by the community. For some, this is becoming one with God or a spirit; for others, it may be expressed as becoming one with a generalized supernatural force. We saw an example of this in our discussion of the Sabari Malai pilgrimage, the goal of which is a unitary state with the god Lord Ayyappan.

The idea of the unitary state is often one of the major components of a religious ritual or even an entire religious system. A common religious theme is that humans were once at one with the supernatural but somehow became separated. The goal of many religious practices is to regain that unity. This theme can be seen in many familiar religions. For Christians, Jesus provides the pathway back to God; for Buddhists, following the teachings of Buddha allows an individual to attain oneness with the universe; for Muslims,

reconciliation is possible through submission of the will to Allah.

In previous chapters we discussed symbols, narratives, and the importance of religious rituals. However, it is only with a discussion of altered states of consciousness that a true appreciation of the power of rituals can be reached. Narratives provide a basis for belief, but it is only with ritual that these ideas are turned into experiences. A religious altered state in a way offers visceral proof of the existence of the supernatural. These experiences move the supernatural from the realm of abstract belief into that of a lived reality.

Summary

An altered state of consciousness is any mental state that differs from a normal mental state. Such states are characterized by a number of psychological experiences, such as alterations in patterns of thinking, disturbed sense of time, change in emotional expression, distortion in body image, and others. A person can enter an altered state through a number of situations including reduction of external stimulation, increase of external stimulation, increased alertness or decreased alertness, pain, or alterations in body chemistry such as those that accompany fasting and sleep deprivation. These factors create observable changes in the activity of the brain.

Altered states of consciousness can also be brought about by drugs and chemical agents, such as the use of tobacco, coffee, alcohol, marijuana, peyote, and a number of manufactured substances. However, the use of these substances in religious practice occurs within a religious context. The experience is strongly influenced by cultural expectations.

Study questions

1. Altered states of consciousness include familiar experiences such as dreaming and daydreaming. Describe any such experiences that you

have had. How do they fit the description of an altered state of consciousness that is given in this chapter?

2. Many factors can lead to altered states of consciousness and are likely to occur in most people's lives. What are some of these?
3. Tattooing, body piercing, and other alterations to the body that are practiced among some people in today's society are painful procedures. How does the experience of pain become a part of the total experience? You might want to talk with some people who have undergone these procedures.
4. Next time you go to a religious service, pay close attention to any experiences that could be labeled an altered state of consciousness. Describe the experience. What were the conditions that led to the experience? How do the physical layout of the church, temple, or mosque; the presence of ritual objects; and the playing of music help to produce an altered state of consciousness?

Suggested readings

Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2003).
[Examines ideas about and uses of pain in religious contexts.]

Richard Katz, *Boiling Energy: Community Healing Among the Kalahari Kung* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

Autobiographies about personal religious experiences

Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005).
[Armstrong, who has written on many religious topics, tells of her own spiritual life, including seven years in a convent.]

Madeleine L'Engle, *The Irrational Season: The Crosswicks Journal, Book 3* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).
[L'Engle's journal follows a church year and her own questioning of her faith.]

C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995).
[Lewis's autobiographical account of his life, including as a Christian and as an atheist.]

Fiction

Myla Goldberg, *Bee Season* (New York, Doubleday, 2002).
[A girl's participation in a spelling bee sets in motion events that will ultimately lead to the disintegration of her family. Largely about the spiritual quests of all four of the family members.]

Suggested websites

www.holiness-snake-handlers.webs.com
Official website of Holiness serpent handlers.

www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/hildegarde.html
The life and works of Hildegard von Bingen.

archeologie.culture.fr/chauvet
The Upper Paleolithic cave site of Chauvet-Pont D'Arc.

www.nativeamericanchurch.com
The website of the Native American Church of Strawberry Plains, Tennessee.

www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/british-museum/the-americas-bm/meso-central-america-bm/a/maya-the-yaxchiln-lintels
The lintels from the Mayan site of Yaxchilán.

Notes

1 *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* by Daniel E. Valentine. Reproduced with permission of University of California Press in the format Republish in a book via Copyright Clearance Center.

2 O. Sacks, *Migraine* (New York: Random House, 1992).

3 The various symbols other than letters used in San words stand for a variety of clicks that characterize their languages.

4 N. A. Chagnon, *Yanomamö* (6th edn) (Independence, KY: Wadsworth, 2012).

5 J. Wilbert, *Tobacco and Shamanism in South America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

Chapter 6
Religious specialists

In small-scale societies with relatively simple technologies, rituals usually are performed by most or all of the adult members of the community. However, some individuals may develop a special interest in religious practices and may develop a special ability to contact the supernatural. An example is the healers found among the !Kung San, in which around half of the men and a number of women become healers. Yet these men and women are full participants in the secular life of the group. Full-time, specialized religious statuses usually do not exist in such societies, because these societies do not produce the surplus of food that is necessary to support full-time specialists.

As we discussed earlier, religious activities are not clearly delineated from non-religious activities in small-scale societies. Religious activities are interwoven with secular activities; indeed, the separation between religious and secular is not even made. This is reflected in the lack of full-time religious specialists.

Some societies have developed part-time specialists. These are people who earn their living at some economic task, such as hunting or farming, but who are called on to perform rituals when necessary because of their special knowledge or abilities. Such a person might be paid for his or her services, but many are not.

In larger and more technologically complex societies we see the development of many occupational specializations, including religious specialists. These practitioners may be full-time specialists who derive their income primarily from the performance of religious rituals. Such individuals may be supported by the community, or they may derive their income through payment for services by individuals whom they have helped. For example, religious practitioners may be found in a marketplace, ready to be

approached by clients who are in need of services in order to secure economic success for some endeavor or perhaps a cure for an illness. In some societies religious practitioners may attain important political and economic positions.

There are many terms used to describe religious specialists. Unfortunately, the terms are not used in a consistent manner. Sometimes it is a problem of translation because the nature of religious practitioners and their activities in many societies might not neatly fit a defined category in our society or as defined by anthropologists.

Two terms frequently used to categorize religious specialists are those of *shaman* and *priest.* These are not two mutually exclusive categories, but rather ends of a continuum. Very often a religious practitioner that we might classify as a priest will perform some functions that are more characteristic of a shaman; the reverse is also true.

Shamans

The distinction between priests and **shamans** is not always clear-cut, and there are many religious specialists who fall somewhere in between. Generally speaking, in contrast to a priest, a shaman receives his or her power directly from the spirit world. He or she acquires status and abilities, such as healing, through personal communication with the supernatural during shamanic trances or altered states of consciousness. The route to becoming a religious specialist and how each functions within a society will also differ for shamans and priests.

Defining shamanism

Like many terms used in the study of religion, the term *shaman* has been used in different ways by different people. Some use the term very broadly to encompass a wide variety of phenomena; others use it in only a very narrow sense. Most agree that shamanism refers to techniques used by specific kinds

of religious specialists and that shamans can be found in a wide variety of cultures and religions (Figure 6.1).

The term *shaman* actually comes from the Tungus language of Central Siberia. It refers to the religious specialists who use handheld drums and spirit helpers to help the members of their community by healing the sick, divining the future, and ensuring success in the hunt. The term was later expanded to include similar religious specialists in other cultures, although some people believe that the term *shaman* should only be applied to these Siberian religious specialists.



Figure 6.1 Shaman. A shaman performs at the Kaijiang Festival in Harbin, China, at the start of the fishing season.

For those who apply the term more broadly, the crucial elements of shamanism include direct contact and communication with the supernatural through trance, the use of spirit helpers, the use of a specific culturally recognized and transmitted method and paraphernalia, and a socially recognized special position for the shaman.

Unlike priests, who are full-time community-based specialists, shamans are

usually part-time independent contractors. The authority of a shaman lies in his or her charisma and ability to heal. The relationship between a shaman and the community is a personal one. Shamans focus on specific problems, such as those that affect a particular individual or family. Because clients often select a shaman in a particular situation for the shaman's reputation and track record in curing, successful shamans can amass a significant degree of social authority.

Becoming a shaman

Because shamans receive their power and authority directly from supernatural beings, they frequently are chosen by spirits to become a shaman. Perhaps the behavior of a child with regard to sacred objects is interpreted as a sign of selection by the spirits for training as a shaman. Often the call comes in a dream or trance. In some societies a person may deliberately seek a call through inducing an altered state of consciousness. This is most frequent in societies in which shamans achieve some degree of social authority. In some societies, the task of being a shaman is so difficult and demanding that individuals do not seek a call. When a call comes—through a dream, a trance, recovery from an illness—the individual may be reluctant to act on it.

The spirits will commonly call to the future shaman during a particularly difficult time of their lives, including periods of stress, illness, accident, possession, or near-death experiences. Shamans have been called "wounded healers" and are seen as people driven to be shamans by their own illnesses, possibly including psychosis or possession. The shamanic initiation often includes the idea that the spirits eat, dismember, or kill the person before that person can be reborn as a shaman. The spirits are testing the initiate and the symbolism of death, transformation, and rebirth are very common.

The shaman often undergoes a period of training, usually with an older shaman. Although learning religious knowledge is important, the main purpose of the training is to learn how to make contact with the supernatural, a very dangerous activity, and how to manipulate the supernatural world in order to achieve some specified end. The candidate establishes a relationship with a spirit familiar who acts as his guide to the supernatural world. The

period of apprenticeship may include periods of seclusion, fasting, and the taking of hallucinogens, but the main goal is to learn to enter into and control the experience of an altered state of consciousness.

The shamanic role and rituals

The shaman may contact the supernatural by traditional, standardized methods that fit our definition of ritual. The ritual is only a means for contacting and establishing a relationship with a supernatural entity; it is not an end in itself. The success of a shaman lies not in her ability to memorize and perform rituals, but in her ability to successfully establish contact and some measure of control over the supernatural.

The control of spirit helpers and the ability to enter altered states of consciousness are central to the role of shaman. These spirits help the shaman fight hostile spirits and also help the shaman diagnose and treat illnesses. In some cultures illness results from the loss of the patient's soul. The shaman will enter an altered state of consciousness and send his or her soul to recapture the patient's soul and return and anchor it to the patient's body.

The shamanic ritual may be a simple affair, say a private consultation between patient and shaman, or may be a major public ritual. In the latter, it is common for the ritual to be very dramatic, aided by the use of various theatrical techniques on the part of the shaman. Drumming, singing, dancing, and elaborate costumes contribute to this effect, as do the use of ventriloquism and sleight of hand. Using these techniques does not necessarily imply intent by the shaman to deceive onlookers. Shamans operate in the realm of the supernatural, which others are unable to perceive. Using sleight of hand may represent an attempt by the shaman to represent and convince others of what they see as true accomplishments on the unseen level.

The movement of the shaman between the realm of the natural and supernatural is often related to a worldview that sees humans living in a middle zone between an upper and lower world. The three worlds are seen as linked by a central vertical axis, often referred to as an **Axis Mundi** or Axis of the World. An example already discussed is the Mayan World Tree seen on the sarcophagus of Lord Pakal in Chapter 3. The shaman is able to travel

between these worlds, usually along this central axis. In shamanic rituals, a ladder, pole, or tree is often used to represent the axis.

The shaman's ability to make this soul journey to the supernatural realm is linked to his or her special abilities at transformation, which is often linked to other ideas of transformation such as into animals or other beings. Also common is gender transformation, where the shaman wears the clothes of, or even takes on some of the social roles of, the opposite sex, or is seen as being sexually ambiguous.

Because of their ability to directly contact and manipulate the supernatural, members of a shaman's community often regard them with some suspicion. The same powers that enable them to cure sickness could also be used to cause it. Priests do not have this same ability and so are not viewed with the same concern. Although priests are capable of the same personal evil that we all are, they have no special abilities by virtue of their position.

Siberian shamanism

Shamans of Central Siberia are religious specialists who use handheld drums and spirit helpers to help the members of their community. Siberian shamans perform rituals to heal the sick, divine the future, and ensure success in the hunt. Here again the world is divided into three realms. The upper realm is one of light and good spirits; the middle realm is the home of people and spirits of the earth; and the lower realm is one of darkness and evil spirits. It is the shaman's role, while in an altered state of consciousness, to communicate with various spirits. The shaman may also journey to one of the other realms.

One of the main functions of the shaman is healing. This is accomplished in many ways. A shaman can communicate with spirits to learn what they want. He can also dispel a disease-causing spirit or retrieve a lost soul. A shaman has spirit familiars or animal souls that help in the shaman's work. These spirits give the shaman his particular qualities and powers. It is by having these spirits that the shaman is able to heal, but they also give the shaman the potential to do harm.

Other shamans specialize in contacting the spirits to help ensure a successful hunt. In this case the shaman contacts the spirits of an animal

species and makes a deal with them. The animal spirits will supply humans with food, and the humans will eventually supply the spirits with human flesh and blood. This is one cause of human sickness and death. It is the role of the shaman to minimize the amount of human sickness while trying to maximize the number of animals that will be successfully hunted. Part of a shaman's success in doing this is from a pact with the animal spirits through a special relationship with the daughter of the elk or reindeer spirit.

Yakut shamanism

The Yakut or Shkha live in northeastern Siberia. Missionaries of the Russian Orthodox Church entered the region in the early eighteenth century. They found a people living in small groups spread over a vast area, hunting, fishing, and herding horses and reindeer. Over time, many Yakut converted to Christianity, yet the practice of shamanism remained strong, and most people participated in both Orthodox and shamanic rituals. In 1931 the Soviet government began a program designed to destroy the traditional religious practices by persecuting shamans. Many were executed or deported. Ethnic Russians moved into the area and today outnumber the native population. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Republic of Sakha, a part of the Russian Federation, the ban on shamanism was lifted. With this came a sense of identity among the Yakut; shamanic rituals increased in frequency, and traditional beliefs were taught in the schools.

Like many traditional peoples living in a modern state and exposed to different religious practices, Christian elements have entered into shamanic rituals and beliefs. For example, Takako Yamada quotes a shaman in 1994:

> I didn't see many gods in the upper world. I only saw Jesus Christ, a woman god and one or two other gods. Jesus and the woman gave me a photo, asking me to look after the people in the world. So, I believe I have received a universal ability to cure not only the Yakut but also foreign people.[1]

Along with the revival of traditional shamanism have come new groups that often develop around a charismatic leader who combines shamanic and Christian elements and produces a new type of religious practice. Marjorie

Mandelstam Balzar describes a ritual performed by one such leader, Kyta Baaly.[2] Although young and poorly educated, he has attracted a significant following. He performs rituals that are based on traditional Yakut practices, yet he claims to be the son of Jesus Christ. Followers wear a small "sacred world path" pin or pendant that combines a Christian cross with a tree symbol. This is an example of a revivalistic movement, which will be discussed more fully in Chapter 11.

Korean shamanism

Although shamanism is usually thought of as a feature of small-scale religions, shamans are also found in many industrial societies. For example, Korea has a long history of shamanism. At one time shamans, who were mostly men, had considerable political influence. Over time this influence waned, and eventually shamans were persecuted and driven underground. Shamanism moved from being a prominent, public institution to being a more private, secretive activity. Today most shamans are women. This provides many women with a good source of income and also gives them some degree of influence over the community. Shamanism is now becoming recognized as an important part of Korean culture and many aspects of shamanistic ritual, such as songs and dances, are being publicly performed for entertainment.

Shamans are chosen by the spirits. Women who have experienced some type of psychological stress in their lives are especially vulnerable. The society believes that the spirits, in their search for someone to possess, tend toward individuals whose *maŭm*, or soul, has already been fractured and therefore been made vulnerable. The sign that a particular woman has been selected is manifested as possession illness or *sinbyŏng*. There are many physical and psychological symptoms of *sinbyŏng*, but the most significant is entrance into a trance state. The individual is ill with possession sickness until she accepts the call of the spirits. Many individuals chosen by the spirits are very reluctant to become shamans, who are considered by society to be social deviants. Finally, however, she apprentices herself to an experienced shaman who eventually performs an initiation ritual that transforms her into a full-fledged shaman.

Youngsook Kim Harvey recounts the description by a Korean shaman of the events that led to her initiation:

> Long before I had any indication of supernatural notification, I found myself feeling excited by the rhythm of the *changgu* ("drum"). I don't remember how I came to be brought back to myself … it happened more and more often. When I heard the *changgu*, I seemed to forget everything instantly and lose all sense of inhibition. I wanted to dance and chant to it. It is this sense of being swept up and away in a weightless sort of way that makes you dance and be a *mudang* in spite of everything else. When you are in that state of mind, you cannot think of anything else … Even now, just talking about it to you makes the temperature rise in me … You can see how people who are possessed by spirits can go insane if they are improperly initiated … You have no way of making use of the feelings that take hold of you.
>
> When you start doing your own *kut*, you just feel your spirits stealing into you and taking over; the sensation is incomparable … You just know that you've got the spirits in you … that you don't have to worry because it's them inside you, not you … You're just a medium and you feel marvelous. Otherwise, how could anyone do the things a *mudang* does in her sober mind? You lose all sense of embarrassment … all inhibition … you are suffused with the feeling, "I'm the number one, the best—there is none else like me in the whole world!"[3]

Korean shamans are called to perform shamanic rituals for a number of reasons. For example, a shaman is called to guide the dead to the otherworld. During this ritual, the shaman takes the role of the deceased who is then able to communicate with the family. Shamanic rituals are also performed to cure illnesses, for divination, and to ensure the good fortune of the family and community.

Pentecostal healers as shamans

Box 6.1 Clown doctors as shamans

Although Western medicine is undeniably effective in treating many diseases, it has been criticized for focusing only on the physical disease and neglecting the patient's illness experience. In an attempt to address this issue, many complementary therapies have been introduced. One

example is the use of clowns in pediatric hospitals. A study by Linda Miller Van Blerkom of the Big Apple Circus Clown Care Unit (CCU), which entertains children in New York City hospitals, suggests that these clowns have many similarities with traditional shamanic healers.

The clowns dress in outlandish costumes that include a white doctor's coat and a doctor's bag filled with magic tricks and props. They are described as popping red foam-rubber clown noses out of respirator tubing, hiding puppet animals under their coats, blowing bubbles, singing lullabies to children, doing magic tricks, dancing, and telling jokes. They distract patients during painful procedures and also interact with families and staff.

Van Blerkom points out that both clowns and shamans mediate between order and chaos, sacred and profane, natural and supernatural, and that clowns with healing functions are known from other cultures, particularly in Native American cultures. She notes several similarities between shamans and clown doctors. For example, both wear unusual costumes and both are viewed with some ambivalence.

The use of puppets by clown doctors is reminiscent of shamanic spirit helpers, and both use music and sleight of hand. Traditional shamans and clowns use suggestion and manipulation of cultural symbols and pay more attention to the patient's experience and social context than Western doctors typically do. Van Blerkom writes:

> The clowns say they parody doctors and play with hospital equipment to lighten up the atmosphere and make children less afraid of doctors and their instruments, but one can also recognize another shamanistic function: psychosocial support. By involving the social group, illness and curing are given public recognition and the patient receives group support. Shamanistic rituals reinforce social roles and can be therapeutic for families struggling to cope with an illness and disorder.

Source: Linda Miller Van Blerkom, "Clown Doctors: Shaman Healers of Western Medicine," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 9 (1995), pp. 462–475.

The distinction between shamans and priests is not always clear and in some Western religious traditions practitioners usually thought of as being

priests exhibit many shamanistic traits. One example is Pentecostal faith healers (see Box 6.1 for another example). Altered states of consciousness are achieved through the use of rhythmic speech and music. Participants in the ritual are often moved to shout, dance, run up and down the aisle, or cry. The healing ritual, known as "laying on of hands," generally takes place during a service. The person in need of healing stands in front of the preacher, who is standing in front of the altar. Others stand behind the person receiving the prayer in case he or she needs physical support. The preacher anoints the person's head with oil and recites incantations. The preacher may also rub the head, torso, back, or legs of the person. The whole congregation may participate by clapping in unison during the healing. The Holy Spirit is believed to possess both the healer and the patient, which can lead either one of them to convulse suddenly or begin speaking in tongues.

Similar to shamans, many Pentecostal preachers report having been called by the supernatural, in this case God, and describe prophetic dreams and visions. Pentecostal preachers also function similarly to shamans by using an altered state of consciousness to directly contact and experience the supernatural for healing another individual.

Neoshamanism

The last several decades have seen a growing interest in shamanism, primarily in the United States and Europe. Much of this can be traced to the publication of historian Mircea Eliade's book *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* in 1951.[4] This book was one of the first to look at common elements of shamanism cross-culturally and to focus on shamanism as a technique for achieving an altered state of consciousness. The interest in shamanism, however, really took off starting in the 1970s. Many cultural themes in the United States helped contribute to this, including the legacy of the 1960s drug culture, an interest in non-Western religions, environmentalism, and the New Age, self-help, and self-realization movements. Popular anthropology works also contributed, largely through the work of Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner.

Carlos Castaneda, while a graduate student at UCLA, claimed he was

apprenticed to a Yaqui (Arizona) shaman named Don Juan Matus. Based on his experiences, he wrote a series of books beginning with *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge,* published in 1968.[5] The earliest books focused on the use of mind-altering drugs to experience another reality. Later, he moved his focus to a new technique of body movements, or magical passes, that he called **tensegrity**, a term borrowed from architect R. Buckminster Fuller, who coined the term as a combination of "tensional" and "integrity." The aim of tensegrity is to increase awareness of the energy fields that, according to Castaneda, humans are made of. This is done through body movements and breathing, which Castaneda said were taught to him by Don Juan and which go back to ancient Mexico. Although Castaneda himself passed away in the late 1990s, workshops in tensegrity continue to be offered.

Castaneda's work has been criticized by many academics as fictional, not true ethnography. No one has been able to verify the existence of Don Juan and experts in Yaqui culture have cast doubts on the accuracy of his accounts, among other issues.

Michael Harner is an anthropologist who spent many years studying shamanism, primarily in the Americas (among the Jivaro in the Upper Amazon) and northern Europe (Saamiland). Harner felt that the insights he learned about shamanism from the Jivaro were applicable to all people in all places. He dubbed the concept **core shamanism**, which is described on his website as "the near universal methods of shamanism without a specific cultural perspective."[6] In 1980, Harner published *The Way of the Shaman* as a sort of self-help book for those in the West interested in pursuing shamanism.[7] Harner is the founder of The Foundation for Shamanic Studies that continues to offer training workshops in core shamanism.

Although Harner's original work with the Jivaro centered on the use of the drug ayahuasca, he focuses now on drumming to achieve altered states of consciousness. In a typical workshop, the participants are told to lie down and relax with their eyes closed or covered. A leader then directs them through either an exercise in guided imagery or a supernatural experience, depending on your point of view. The participants are told to begin their journey by entering the earth at a place well known to them in the physical world, such as a cave. They then travel down tunnels to the "lower world," where they meet and interact with spirit teachers and power animals.

Those who use techniques like those proposed by Castaneda and Harner are known as **neoshamans** to distinguish them from more traditional shamans. There are many significant differences between the two. Neoshamanism is focused on an individual, often as a self-help means of improving one's life. Neoshamans choose to participate and focus on what they consider the positive aspects of shamanism. More traditionally, shamanism is focused on helping the community. Shamans are chosen but may resist the call because of the dark side of shamanism that neoshamans often ignore. The shamanic trance is often described as a terrifying experience, and shamans are often marginalized and feared because of their ability to do great evil.

Neoshamanism has also been criticized for presenting shamanic beliefs and practices out of their cultural context through such concepts as core shamanism. A single practitioner may choose bits and pieces from many different cultures. Harsher criticisms accuse neoshamanism of cultural imperialism, neocolonial attitudes, and perpetuating racist stereotypes of indigenous people. Harner and others are seen as profiting from the commodification of indigenous identity, beliefs, and practices. Although some indigenous healers do encourage neoshamanism and are willing to teach, this is a very contentious issue, one that speaks to the larger issue of who controls cultural symbols and rituals.

Priests

Priests are full-time religious specialists associated with formalized religious institutions that may be linked with kinship groups, communities, or larger political units and are given religious authority by those units or by formal religious organizations. Priesthoods tend to be found in more complex food-producing societies, whereas shamans are associated with technologically simpler ones. Generally speaking, a society will contain either priests or shamans but seldom both. (Here we are using the term *priest* as a generic term that includes a wide variety of practitioners, including ministers and rabbis.)

A priest acts as a representative of the community in dealing with the deity or deities. In this capacity, priests are responsible for the performance of

prescribed rituals. These include periodic rituals on a ceremonial calendar that is usually tied to the agricultural cycle. A priest also performs rites of passage such as birth and death rituals and weddings, as well as performing rituals in the event of disaster and illness. A priest's skill is based on learning ritual knowledge and sacred narratives and on knowledge of how to perform these rituals for the benefit of the community. However, a particular ritual might or might not result in the desired end. A ritual performed for a rain god to end a drought might result in a rainstorm or a continuing drought. But the failure of the ritual to work is not necessarily due to the activities of the priest; it might be due to the will of the deity who has made the decision whether or not to let the rains come.

Although priests may contend with important, practical matters, such as the success of crops or the curing of illnesses, they are also associated with rituals that have more generalized purposes. These purposes are usually articulated in social rites of intensification and deal with the reinforcement of the belief system and the established ethical code. Priestly rituals legitimize community ventures—for example, the coronation of the British monarch by the Archbishop of Canterbury—and, on a more personal level, establish the legitimacy of a child as a member of the community through birth rituals.

Priests also personify the image of the ideal person. They are models of ethics and morality in their communities, and they are held to higher standards of behavior than is the population at large. When a priest fails to live up to these standards, the significance is much greater than when another person fails in the same way. This is why revelations of child molestation by Catholic priests are considered exceptionally heinous and shocking.

Priestly rituals usually take place in a space that is set aside for ceremonial activities, which is considered to be sacred space. It is usually a community space as well. It may be an outdoor area or a structure, and the structure may be large enough that the entire community can enter and participate in the rituals. However, in many societies the ceremonial structure—a shrine or a temple—is a place where sacred objects are kept and into which only a priest may enter.

Individuals become priests for a variety of reasons. Often it is an inherited responsibility, as when a priestly office is passed on from father to son. Many societies have priestly lineages, such as the Levites of the Old Testament, or priestly classes or castes, such as the Brahmins of Hinduism. Sometimes the

position of priest is one of great prestige and power and one enters the priesthood to further one's standing in the community. At the conclusion of training, the priest is formally recognized as a religious authority by the community through a rite of passage, such as an ordination.

Priests also may have received a divine call, sometimes in dreams, visions, or trances. In some societies a person becomes a priest after being cured of an illness. The very fact of being cured may be taken as a sign of divine favor. In other societies the reason for entering the priesthood might be more practical. In Europe in centuries past one of the only ways a middle-class man could get an education was by joining the priesthood. Research and teaching would be important components of his responsibilities. It was the custom in some agricultural societies that the oldest son inherited the land, the middle son entered the military, and the youngest son entered the priesthood.

The training of a priest usually involves memorization of vast amounts of knowledge, for the very survival of the community might depend on the priest's competence in the performance of rituals. Although a priest may connect with the supernatural through visions and trances, this ability is not as important as the priest's ability to memorize and perform rituals in the proper manner.

Zuni priests

The Zuni, a pueblo people of the American Southwest culture area, developed religious practices that involved a complex hierarchy of priests, which forms the basis of Zuni religious and political organization.

Young males, rarely females, are inducted into one of the six kiva groups that exist in Zuni society. A kiva is a ceremonial chamber, a sacred space analogous to a shrine or temple. Among the Zuni, kivas are rectangular rooms built above ground. (This is different than the more familiar circular underground kivas found among other pueblo peoples and so commonly seen in archaeological sites.) The six kivas are associated with the six cardinal directions, which include the familiar north, east, south, and west but also the zenith overhead and the nadir underground. Ritual responsibilities rotate among the six kiva groups. The major responsibility of the priests of each kiva

group is the accurate performance of rituals. This involves the manipulation of sacred objects and the recitation of prayers.

Zuni society also recognizes many other priesthoods. They include the priests of the twelve medicine societies that both men and women join when they are cured of an illness because of the work of the medicine society. If a man takes a scalp in battle, he joins the warrior society. In time a man may join a number of priesthoods. The accumulation of ritual knowledge over time is associated with prestige and power.

Zuni political authority is vested in a council of priests led by the priest of the sun and keeper of the calendar. Their major concern is with religious matters, such as selecting some of the participants in certain rituals, the placement of occasional rituals into the ritual calendar, and the reaction of the religious organization to natural disasters. They appoint a civil administration to handle nonreligious matters.

Okinawan priestesses

Okinawa, located southwest of the main islands of Japan, was once the independent kingdom of Ryukyus. Although the language, culture, and religious beliefs are very similar to those of Japan, there are considerable differences as well. Okinawa's indigenous religion was based on animism and shamanism, but has been heavily influenced by Shinto, Buddhism, and Taoism entering from Japan and China. Like Shinto, Okinawan religion sees the world as inhabited by a myriad of supernatural beings referred to as *kami*. By placating and pleasing the *kami* through rituals, misfortune can be avoided and blessings gained.

There are a variety of religious specialists, all of whom are women (Figure 6.2). Okinawa is the only known society in which women lead a mainstream, official, publicly funded religion that is practiced by both sexes. The two main specialists are priestesses, *kaminchu,* and shamanlike practitioners called *yuta*. The *yuta* mediate between the villagers and the supernatural by communicating with the ancestors and the *kami*. They practice divination as well as healing rituals. Whereas each *yuta* has one or more *kami* that she communicates with regularly, the *kaminchu* is believed to actually embody a

particular *kami* associated with the clan.

Kaminchu rituals are funded by the village council or clan and take place at the village prayer house in the village square, in clan houses, or in sacred groves. On these occasions the priestesses wear elaborate five-piece white outfits and crowns of leaves. This is the conventional clothing for the *kami* as well. The significance of the *kaminchu* is in their presence; they actually do very little at a ritual. They sit in certain places on certain days and receive food offerings from the villagers. They do not preach, perform rites of passage, or heal—they sit and eat. However, like the *kami* themselves, they are believed to emit good spiritual energy. The villagers also like to have the *kaminchu* around at events such as housewarmings and agricultural festivals.



Figure 6.2 Okinawan Priestesses. Priestesses perform during a ceremony at Shuri Castle Festival, Okinawa.

The role of *kaminchu* is semihereditary. Each clan has a certain number of *kaminchu* positions that can only be filled by female members of the clan. Within some clans, certain positions can only be filled by women of certain families. The role of chief *kaminchu* for a village is traditionally passed from

mother to daughter.

Susan Sered compared the stories told by *kaminchu* (priestesses) and *yuta* (shamans) of how they attained their positions.[8] Both types of religious practitioners told of illnesses, but Sered found significant differences between the two. The *kaminchu* reported minor illnesses that generally involved some sort of bleeding or other bodily rupture. The Okinawan worldview sees the body as whole and sealed and this illness event was seen as opening the path for the embodiment of the *kami*. However, the illness is small and symbolic. It does not make the woman into a *kaminchu* but is considered a sign or reminder of what she was born to be.

In contrast, the illnesses reported by the *yuta* involved serious psychological, physical, or social dysfunction. After a long illness that made them social outcasts, they were able to heal themselves both physically and socially through becoming *yuta*. Overcoming the illness was seen as proof that the *yuta* would be effective in her role and also had the ability to understand the suffering of others. The status of *yuta* is more ambiguous and the question being answered in the stories they told was why a person would take on such a role.

Eastern Orthodox priests

Religious organizations associated with nation-states or multistate organizations are characterized by many types of priests organized in complex hierarchical organizations, such as those of the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches consist of a series of independent religious organizations. Some are associated with particular nations, such as the Greek Orthodox Church, but others are not. Within the church are many religious specialists who fall within our definition of priest. These specialists are organized into a complex religious hierarchy. The head of a region is the bishop. Each bishop is independent of other bishops, although bishops at several levels will form various councils. The specialists who are called priests are usually assigned to particular churches and are responsible for the performance of rituals. Finally there are the deacons who assist the priests in the performance of rituals and work

under their direction.

The Orthodox Church has a strong tradition of asceticism where individuals separate themselves from the everyday world and spend their lives as monks and nuns. Monks are ordained priests, but instead of functioning in the outside world they live in various types of isolated communities, such as monasteries or small villages; some live a semi-solitary life as hermits associated with a nearby monastery. Bishops are normally selected from among the monks and most Orthodox seminaries are associated with monasteries. Bishops are celibate but men who are already married may become priests and deacons, although upon the death of their spouse they cannot remarry.

Orthodox priests participate in a wide variety of activities including education and counseling, but the focus of their responsibilities is the performance of rituals. They are primarily involved with the performance of social rites of intensification that center around the Divine Liturgy or communion service. The priest also performs rites of passage associated with birth, baptism, marriage, and death. This knowledge and authority comes from the church.

Other specialists

While shamans and priests are major and well-studied types of religious specialists, many other specialists practice in various limited ways. The labels that are used to refer to these specialists often overlap extensively and are not used in any consistent manner. Some of their functions overlap those of shamans and priests. In this section we will look at healers, herbalists, diviners, and prophets.

Healers and diviners

The term *healer* is often used to refer to a priest or shaman, especially when

the individual is focused on the curing of illness or injury. However, more specialized **healers** also exist. Many activities of healers are similar to those of U.S. medical practitioners. For example, they may set bones, treat sprains with cold, or administer drugs made from native plants and other materials. Many governments have used traditional healers as conduits for the introduction of new practices in nutrition and public health (Box 6.2).

Box 6.2 African healers meet Western medicine

Traditionally, healers have played important roles in the lives of people in sub-Saharan Africa, providing simple health services as they worked in consort with the spirit world. Today Western medicine also plays an important role. A great many native Africans are doctors, nurses, and other health practitioners, and large hospitals have been built in urban centers. Yet the majority of the population has little access to Western medicine. The World Health Organization estimates that that is 1 doctor for every 40,000 people.[9] Hospitals and clinics are often not available in rural areas, and the cost of medical services and medicines is often prohibitive.

On the other hand, the ratio of traditional healers to people in Africa is about 1 in 500.[10] A solution to the problems of making basic health education and services available to rural communities is to recognize the importance and effectiveness of healers in many medical situations. In addition, healers can be trained in many aspects of Western medicine, thus forming a partnership between traditional healing and medicine. Healers are available and trusted members of the community and therefore can have a major impact on the general state of health in these areas.

Many programs have been developed in Africa to train native healers in medical techniques. One such group is Prometra, the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Medicine. The organization provides medical training to healers while at the same time promoting native healing methods. Experiences between native populations and European powers fostered a deep mistrust between the medical establishments of

colonial governments and local healers. This mistrust is now being overcome. For example, traditional healers recognize symptoms of HIV/AIDS and can refer patients to medical facilities. They can also monitor infant health and practice infant oral rehydration; dehydration is a major cause of infant mortality.

Sources: Prometra (www.prometra.org); S. Faris, "Calling All Healers," *Time* (July 24, 2006), pp. 42–43.

One type of healer is the **herbalist**. Herbalists are specialists in the use of plant and other material as cures. The herbalist may prescribe the materials to be administered or may provide the material as prescribed by a healer or diviner. Various plant materials that are used in tribal societies actually do have medicinal properties. Herbalists are intimately familiar with the various plant materials in the habitat and gather, process, and administer various medicines made from these materials. However, much of the theory of curing is based on principles of magic to be discussed in Chapter 7.

A **diviner** is someone who practices divination, a series of techniques and activities that are used to obtain information about things that are not normally knowable. These may include things that will happen in the future, things that are occurring at the present time but at a distance, and things that touch the supernatural, such as the identification of witches. Some divination techniques involve the interpretation of natural phenomena or some activity, such as the turning over of cards. Other techniques involve the diviner entering an altered state of consciousness and, while in that state, obtaining the requested information.

Diviners usually focus on very practical questions: What is a good time to plant my crop? Will my investment pay off? Whom should I marry? What is an auspicious day for a marriage? A very important type of information that diviners provide is the cause of illness. The diviner often provides the diagnosis, and the healer provides the cure. Diviners usually, but not always, work for private clients and are paid for their services. Divination is discussed in Chapter 7.

Prophets

A **prophet** is a mouthpiece of the gods. It is the role of a prophet to communicate the words and will of the gods to his or her community and to act as an intermediary between the gods and the people. Although shamans may occasionally function as prophets, in many cases the role of prophet is a separate one. Prophets are found in a wide variety of cultures and include the familiar examples of Moses and Mohammad.

Handsome Lake was a prophet of the Seneca tribe (Eastern Woodlands culture area) during the time when the reservation system was first imposed. In 1799 Handsome Lake became ill and appeared to have died. His body was prepared for burial, but he revived. He said that he had had a vision of three messengers who had revealed to him God's will and told him that he was to carry this message back to his people. Later the same year he received a second revelation in which he was shown heaven and hell and was given moral instructions, which were very similar to Christian ideas. Handsome Lake received further revelations in subsequent years. On the basis of his visions, he preached a revitalization of traditional seasonal ceremonies, a strengthening of the family, and a prohibition against alcohol. Handsome Lake's teachings continued to spread after his death in 1815 and ultimately became the foundation for the Longhouse religion.

The Nuer, a cattle-herding people living in the Eastern Sudan culture area, have a history of prophets. One example is Ngundeng, a nineteenth-century Nuer prophet. He was born in the late 1830s. Of course, there are no historical records of his life, but there are many stories, especially those told by his family. According to tradition, he was conceived after his mother was past menopause and was born after a twelve-month pregnancy. Ngundeng is said to have spoken to his mother at birth and to possess a number of physical characteristics that were attributed to divine influence. Unlike some prophets who make contact with supernatural power later on in life, Ngundeng was born with that power.

As a young man he had seizures, or altered states of consciousness. He also showed very strange behaviors such as wandering alone in the bush, fasting, and drinking nothing but water for long periods of time. As he began to eat tobacco, mud, grass, and human feces, he became very thin, and his hair grew

long and matted. Then he was possessed by a god, who revealed himself to be Deng. Ngundeng, as Deng's prophet, began to make prophecies and developed a reputation as a peacemaker.

The Nuer believe that prophets are chosen by a god and are then able to predict the future, cure the sick, ensure the fertility of women and cows, influence the growth of a good crop, and so forth. Stories began to circulate about Ngundeng's further ability to take a life through words or even thoughts. The ability to kill was the other side of the coin of controlling life. The god Deng was a lifegiver, controlling rain and the procreation of cattle and children, but he was also a god of death. Ngundeng gained a wide reputation for making barren women fertile and halting epidemic disease. He died in 1906.

Over 100 years later, the prophet Ngundeng played an important role in the movement for an independent state in southern Sudan. Ngundeng had a *dang* or ceremonial rod which was inherited by Ngundeng's son. When the son was killed in battle in the resistance against British colonial rule, the *dang* was taken as a souvenir to England. Years later, the *dang* was sold at auction to a British scholar, Douglas Johnson, who has studied the Nuer. Douglas returned it to the Nuer in 2009. The rod had become a symbol of the Nuer's drive for independence from Sudan.

Conclusion

So far in this book, we have discussed many of the basic concepts and components of religious systems, such as narratives, worldview, symbols, rituals, altered states of consciousness, and ritual specialists. Religious specialists often are the main repositories of religious knowledge, retelling key narratives, manipulating religious symbols, and entering into altered states of consciousness through their ritual practices. Specialists play a key role as mediators between the natural and supernatural worlds. As we move into the next section of the book, we will shift our attention to those supernatural forces and beings. Again, all of these topics are tied together. For example, the conceptions people have of the nature of the gods influence the character of

the rituals that will be directed toward the gods. An important factor in a culture's worldview is how and in what ways supernatural phenomena and powers manifest themselves.

Summary

Most religious systems identify specialists to carry out specific religious functions. Two of the most frequently found specialists are shamans and priests.

A shaman receives his or her power directly from the spirit world and acquires the ability to do sacred things through personal communication with the supernatural. Shamans are part-time independent contractors whose authority lies in their charisma and ability to heal. A Siberian shaman works with a spirit familiar or animal soul that helps the shaman in his or her work of dispelling a disease-causing spirit or retrieving a lost soul.

Priests are full-time religious specialists who are associated with formalized religious institutions and tend to be found in more complex food-producing societies. The priest acts as a representative of the community to the deity or deities and is responsible for the performance of prescribed rituals. The skill of a priest is based on the learning of ritual knowledge and sacred narratives and on knowledge of how to perform these rituals for the benefit of the community. Priestly rituals usually take place in a space that is set aside for ceremonial activities, such as a temple or shrine.

Other kinds of religious specialists include herbalists, diviners, and prophets. A prophet is a mouthpiece of the gods. It is the role of the prophet to communicate the words and will of the gods to his or her community and act as an intermediary between the people and the gods.

Study questions

1. Religious specialists in U.S. society are often set apart by particular modes of dress, grooming, and general behavior. Some specialists are subject to special rules, such as celibacy in Catholicism. What is the function of setting religious specialists apart from other members of the community? How does this help the individual in his or her function as a religious specialist?
2. Although most religious specialists in U.S. society are priests, some do, on occasion, carry out functions that are more apt to be classified as shamanism. What are some of these?
3. In cases of illness, most Westerners visit a physician rather than a religious specialist. In what ways does the behavior of a physician resemble that of a religious specialist?
4. How is neoshamanism different from classic shamanism? Do you think the term *shaman* is appropriate to use in Western societies?
5. Although we talk about shamans and priests typically appearing in different kinds of societies, there are cases such as Korea and Okinawa in which both types of practitioners are present. How does this work? How do their roles and functions both overlap and differ?

Suggested readings

Nicholas Black Elk (as told through John G. Neihardt), *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Press, 2014).
[The story of a Lakota shaman living during the years of white settlement at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.]

Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991).
[Autobiography of Buechner's childhood, finding Christ, and becoming a minister.]

Thomas Merton, *The Seven Story Mountain: Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998).
[Merton discusses his early doubts, his conversion to Catholicism, and his

decision to take life vows as a Trappist monk.]

John K. Nelson, *A Year in the Life of a Shinto Shrine* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).
[Includes description of the role of Shinto priests and the story of how several men became priests.]

Fiction

Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1990).
[The account of an anthropologist learning the ways of a shaman. Presented as fact but believed to be fictional.]

Suggested websites

www.shamanism.org
The Foundation for Shamanic Studies (Michael Harner).

www.castaneda.com
Carlos Castaneda's Magical Passes.

www.mnh.si.edu/arctic/index.html
Arctic Studies Center (Smithsonian).

Notes

1 T. Yamada, "Through Dialogue with Contemporary Yakut Shamans: How They Revive Their Worldview," *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 7 (1996), pp. 4–5.

2 M. M. Balzar, "Healing Failed Faith? Contemporary Siberian Shamanism," *Anthropology*

and Humanism, 26 (2002), pp. 134–149.

3 Y. K. Harvey, *Six Korean Women: The Socialization of Shamans*, American Ethnological Society Monograph No. 65 (1979), pp. 31–32.

4 M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (new edn) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

5 C. Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

6 M. Harner, *The Foundation for Shamanic Studies*, www.shamanism.org.

7 M. Harner, *The Way of the Shaman* (10th anniv. edn) (New York: HarperOne, 1990).

8 S. Sered, "Symbolic Illnesses, Real Handprints, and Other Bodily Marks: Autobiographies of Okinawan Priestesses and Shamans," *Ethos*, 25 (1997), pp. 408–427.

9 World Health Organization, *WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy: 2014–2023* (Geneva: WHO, 2013), p. 27.

10 Ibid.

Chapter 7
Magic and divination

When most people hear the word *magic,* they most likely picture a rabbit being pulled out of a hat or an elephant disappearing before their eyes. What is popularly called *magic* we will call *illusion,* because magic in this sense refers to acts that rely on some sort of trickery and deception. Entertainers who perform such illusions freely admit that they are manipulating not the supernatural world, but rather human perception. Magic, as anthropologists use the term, refers to rituals by which a person can compel the supernatural to behave in certain ways. Closely related to magic are supernatural ways of gaining information about the unknown, be it what will happen in the future, what is happening in some faraway place, or the cause of an illness. These techniques are aspects of divination.

The nature of magic

Life is full of surprises—some good, some bad. One way of dealing with adverse situations is through science, an important methodology for coming to an understanding of our world through objective observations, experimentation, and the development of hypotheses and theories. Scientific explanations are limited since they deal only with observations that are made through our senses, such as using vision to examine animal tissue under a microscope or distant galaxies through a telescope. And science demands a natural explanation consistent with the laws of nature. All peoples, from small-scale communities to large industrial societies, make detailed

observations about their world and manipulate objects in their environment in order to come to some understanding of their world. All societies have systems of technology that use rational and practical methods to achieve certain objectives.

Consider a subsistence farmer in a small-scale society who is growing crops to feed his family. A subsistence farmer is very knowledgeable about his craft. He is familiar with various types of soils, knows the best time to plant, and knows how to build a fence to keep out wild animals. A lot is riding on his success. Failure to produce an adequate crop could lead to malnutrition or starvation for his family.

Yet some situations are beyond the explanatory power and control of science and technology. No matter how carefully and skillfully the farmer performs his task, bad things can and do happen. Rains fail to come, or an infestation of insect pests destroys his plants. He probably wonders, "Why is this happening to me? What can I do to prevent these things from happening?" These questions cannot be addressed through scientific investigation.

To answer such questions, our farmer might turn to religious ritual to invoke the influence of a deity. Perhaps he will present an offering to a god and ask the god for help, perhaps to bring rain. Or he might build a small spirit house in the corner of his field and by presenting the spirit with food offerings, try to persuade the spirit to take up residence and guard the fields.

In these examples our farmer is accessing supernatural power through the intercession of a supernatural anthropomorphic causal agent such as a god or spirit. He brings this supernatural power to bear upon his problems through rituals in which he attempts to persuade a deity to intercede in his life to bring about desired outcomes, such as a good crop. However, the success of this enterprise lies in the hands of the god or spirit who might or might not be inclined to do as the farmer asks.

Supernatural power also exists in other, more diffuse forms. (For example, we examined supernatural power called *mana* in Chapter 4.) Instead of relying on the good will of a supernatural being, our farmer can manipulate supernatural power as a more direct means of achieving his ends. All he needs is the correct ritual. Ritual is seen as a key. And if the right key fits into the right lock, then the wielder of that key is able to "unlock" that power to directly achieve his objective. This is what we mean by the term **magic**.

Magic and religion

Early anthropologists were quite ethnocentric when it came to the study of magic, often placing it in a separate category from religion. Today most anthropologists consider magic to be a part of religion because it is associated with supernatural mechanisms, but many early anthropologists (and some contemporary ones) have used other criteria to place magic in a separate category.

Edward Tylor, who discussed magic in his book *Primitive Cultures,* published in 1871, wrote that magic is a logical way of thinking.[1] The problem is that the logic is based on bad premises. Tylor believed that in tribal cultures the magician takes the same approach as a scientist, but the magician makes the mistake of assuming a causal relationship simply because things appear to be similar, when this relationship does not exist. In addition, Tylor did not include magic in the realm of religion because no spirits are involved, which he considered necessary for inclusion in his definition of religion.

James Frazer, like Tylor, believed that magic was a pseudoscience, based on direct action.[2] Frazer was a part of the evolutionary school (Chapter 1) and thought that magic was an early stage that would be replaced by religion. Religion was seen as different from magic because it is based on persuasion of supernatural beings rather than manipulation of supernatural forces. Some evolutionary school thinkers believed that ultimately religion itself would give way to science. Of course, none of this has happened; in most societies magic, religion, and science coexist.

Émile Durkheim also thought that magic could be distinguished from religion, but he focused on the social context.[3] Unlike religious rituals that tend to involve the whole of the community, magic is often centered on the needs and desires of an individual. A farmer wants rain, a young man wants a wife, a woman needs a cure for her child's illness. In contrast to religious rituals that are carried out for the good of the community, magic is directed at very practical ends as articulated by an individual. Durkheim wrote, "In all history, we do not find a single religion without a church … There is no church of magic."[4] However, generalizations are just that. Magic is frequently

used in community-wide public rituals to bring rain or defend the community against an enemy.

Another related difference is seen in the purpose of the magic or religious ritual. Religion is seen as "an end in itself." Bronislaw Malinowski wrote: "While in the magical act the underlying idea and aim is always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed toward a subsequent event."[5] Some nonmagical rituals certainly have very specific goals—coming-of-age ceremonies, for example—but many rituals are more generalized, especially social rites of intensification.

When Malinowski studied the Trobriand Islanders, he noted that they did not use magic in lagoon fishing because it is not dangerous. However, open-sea fishing is dangerous and is accompanied by extensive rituals designed to assure safety and success. He writes: "We do not find magic wherever the pursuit is certain, reliable, and well under the control of rational methods and technological processes. Further, we find magic where the element of danger is conspicuous."[6]

However, Annette Weiner notes that although lagoon fishing is relatively safe, there are other reasons to perform magic in the lagoon environment. She writes:

> They "turn" to magic, not out of psychological distress over a physical environment out of control, but when it is essential that they produce a large catch that must be used for an important exchange that has social and political consequences. To control the actions of the wind and the fish is ultimately proof of one's ability to control an exchange, thereby providing a measure of control over others.[7]

The issue of whether or not magic is part of religion or a separate category altogether is largely a function of how religion itself is defined (Chapter 1). Here we are using a very broad definition of religion that easily accommodates magic as it is used in this text.

Rules of magic

Magic tends to follow certain principles. These were first described by James Frazer in his book *The Golden Bough* originally published in 1890.[8] Frazer

articulated the **Law of Sympathy**, which states that magic depends on the apparent association or agreement between things. There are two parts to the Law of Sympathy. The first is the **Law of Similarity**, which states that things that are alike are the same. The second is the **Law of Contagion**, which states that things that were once in contact continue to be connected after the connection is severed. The Law of Similarity gives rise to **homeopathic**, or **imitative**, **magic** and the Law of Contagion gives rise to **contagious magic**.

Homeopathic magic

Homeopathic or imitative magic assumes that there is a causal relationship between things that appear to be similar. The similarity can be physical or behavioral. The most familiar kind of homeopathic magic is **image magic**. This is the practice of making an image to represent a living person or animal, which can then be killed or injured through doing things to the image, such as sticking pins into the image or burning it. The first may cause pain in the body of the victim that corresponds to the place on the image where the pin was stuck; burning the image might bring about a high fever. Animals drawn on the walls of caves with arrows through them might be an example of image magic. Here the artist is creating the hunt in art. Depicting a successful hunt will bring about a similar outcome in the real hunt.

There are many examples of behaviors that imitate a desired end, causing the end to occur. Sometimes these are found embedded within rituals that are not specifically seen as magic rituals. An example is the **increase rite** of the Australian Aborigines. These are essentially fertility rituals that function to facilitate the successful reproduction of the totem animal (Chapter 3). They are performed annually and are seen as essential parts of the animals' life cycle. The men who perform the ritual draw sacred designs on their bodies and place various objects on their persons. In this way the men become the totem animal in a magical sense. Their behavior, which is often expressed in dance, brings about a sympathetic behavior in the actual animal. For example, the acting out of the copulation and birth of an animal species will translate into reproductive success for those animals.

The principle of sympathy explains many folk customs, including those in

American society. Folklorist Wayland D. Hand has collected many examples, such as walnuts being good for the brain.[9] After all, does not the shell resemble a skull and the meat inside resemble the brain?

Many of the practices that are labeled "alternative medicine" or "homeopathic medicine" in American society are based on the Law of Similarity. Traditional herbal medicine is often based on the **doctrine of signatures**. This is the belief that signs telling of a plant's medical use are somehow embedded within the structure and nature of the plant itself. Some believe that God provided these signatures so that people could ascertain the use of particular plants in healing. For example, red cloverhead is used to treat problems of the blood, as is the red sap of the bloodroot. Indigestion is treated by several yellow plants associated with the yellow color of the bile that is often vomited up. The fused leaves of the boneset plant are used, as the plant's name suggests, to heal broken bones.

Similar analogies appear to be the basis of many food prohibitions observed by pregnant women among the Beng of the Ivory Coast, West Africa. A pregnant woman is told not to eat meat from the bushbuck antelope, which has a striped coat. If she does, her child will be born with striped skin. During pregnancy a women should give herself enemas using a particular vine that has slippery leaves; then the infant will move quickly through the birth canal during birth. The soon-to-be new mother is also told that her behavior during her pregnancy will be reflected in her child, especially negative behaviors. A pregnant woman who steals will have a child with the long arm of a thief. Some in the United States think that if the mother is anxious or nervous during pregnancy, the baby will be nervous and fussy.

Contagious magic

Contagious magic is based on the premise that things that were once in contact always maintain a connection. An example of contagious magic from our own culture is the rabbit's foot. The rabbit is a successful animal, but not because it is intelligent. It is a prey animal for a wide variety of other animals, but there are numerous rabbits. This must mean that the predators are not always successful. Because rabbits are not smart, they must be lucky. If we

carry a part of this lucky animal, the luck will rub off on us.

Wayland Hand notes that there are many examples of folk medicine in the United States that are based on the principle of contagion. Many of these involve transference of the disease into some object. The object could then be disposed of, thus curing the illness. Warts could be cured by rubbing a penny on the wart and then burying the coin. One cure for whooping cough was to tie a caterpillar in a band around the neck of the child. The illness disappeared as the caterpillar died, the disease having been successfully transferred to the animal.

We also see the principle of contagion in modern society with the collection of, and prices paid for, anything used by a celebrity. A sweaty shirt worn by one of your professors in the classroom would get a very different reaction than would a shirt that had been worn by your favorite rock star or actor.

The following example comes from New Guinea. If a man has been hit in battle by an arrow, his friends will bind up the wound and put a cool poultice on it to keep the fever down and make him comfortable. They will also put a poultice on the arrow, which they have taken out of the wound, because it was connected with the wound, and this too will help with the cure. The enemy who fired the arrow, however, is likely to be practicing counter-magic. Back in his camp he will keep the bow near the fire and twang the string from time to time because the bow fired the arrow that made the wound, and through this connection he can send twinges of pain.

Anything connected with the person can be used in contagious magic. If you can get hair, a nail cutting, or even one of their belongings (such as clothes), you can do your worst to the person it came from. In fact, a hair from your enemy's head is likely to be the first thing any sorcerer would ask you for before taking on a contract to liquidate the enemy. You can attack someone through his or her footprint, name, shadow, or reflection (although a few of these also involve soul beliefs).

Magic in society

Magic plays an important role in a society's religious practices. We will

examine the operation of magic in three societies, the Trobriand Islanders, the Azande, and the Fore. We will also look at the role of magic in Wicca, a Neo-Pagan religion.

Magic in the Trobriand Islands

The Trobriand Islanders, who live off the western coast of New Guinea, distinguish among three types of knowledge. First there is knowledge of things in the everyday world, which is shared by all or a large group of adult members of the society. This is what children learn from their parents: boys learn how to garden and girls learn how to weave mats.

A second form of knowledge is more specialized and is shared with a limited number of individuals. This includes expert knowledge that is necessary for task specializations, such as sailing or woodcarving. This form also includes knowledge of particular magical rituals that tend to be learned by many members of the society.

The highest level includes knowledge of the most complex and valued technological skills, such as canoe building, as well as knowledge of myths, songs, and dances. These skills are important to the community, and a person who has such skills is called *tokabitam,* "man with knowledge." This level of knowledge includes knowledge of important magic, such as rain and garden magic. This knowledge is of great importance to the community, and the relatively few people who possess such knowledge are very important people, in terms of both prestige and wealth, because the services of such people are paid for.

Learning magic

Although many forms of magic are well known among adult members of a community, much magical lore is the private property of individuals. The most common way to obtain magic is to learn it from one's parents, grandparents, or other kin. Thus certain types of magic become associated with particular family lines. Sometimes the magic is owned by a more remote

relative or a nonrelative. In this case the person who desires the magic will purchase it from its owner.

A Trobriand Islander who wants to learn particular magic will present a series of gifts over time to the owner as a way of convincing the individual to bestow that knowledge. It is to the advantage of the owner of the magic to spread the learning process over a long period of time, thus maximizing the number of gifts given. If the owner dies before all of the magic has been transferred to the student, the magic might not be effective because the transfer of the magic is incomplete.

Sometimes the owner of the magic dies before beginning the transfer process or, for some reason, does not want to share the knowledge. This is how magic disappears from the community. On the other hand, important magic can be purchased from more remote Trobriand communities. Today many young men travel to the capital of Papua New Guinea to find work. After several years they return, bringing gifts of manufactured goods as well as magic purchased from tribes living on the large island.

In learning magic one must learn the words that are spoken—the **spell**. The spell is an oral text that is transmitted without change. The slightest deviation from its traditional form would invalidate the magic. Because spells usually are passed down unchanged from generation to generation, they often come to be recited in an archaic form of the language and might include words that no longer have meaning. If the magic comes from a different cultural group, the spell may even be recited in a foreign language. In the Trobriand Islands the ritual must be performed exactly. The slightest slip in the ritual, such as a minute omission in its performance or a seemingly insignificant change in its sequence, invalidates the magic. This is not the case in all societies. Among the Azande of the Sudan, described in the following section, magical rituals are variable, and the spell is unformulated.

Trobriand garden magic

Despite all the knowledge, skills, and hard work that a Trobriand farmer puts into gardening, bad things can happen. Rain might fail to come, or insect pests might destroy a crop. To deal with these seemingly uncontrollable problems,

the farmer turns to magic.

In farming, good fertility and a good crop are attributed to the skill and knowledge of the farmer and the superiority of his magic. There is a clear distinction between work that must be performed manually and work performed through magic. Together, they make up a complex gardening system.

The Trobriand Islanders recognize many types of soils; they discriminate between many varieties of yams; they build fences to keep out pigs. The islanders are very clear about what tasks are considered work and what are considered magic. The construction of a spirit house is strictly magic, but weeding is work. Work and magic are essential to the success of a garden. Good luck, a better-than-expected result, is confirmation of the strength of the magic; bad luck, a poor crop, points out a deficiency in the magic.

Malinowski describes many garden rituals. For example, this is part of a ritual that occurs before a field is cleared of brush: in the morning the men gather together around the magician, a religious specialist, who fasts until the completion of the ritual. The men, dressed and bodies painted for the special occasion, pick up their axes, which have been magically prepared. They march to the garden, where the magician takes his hereditary wand of office in his left hand and his axe in his right hand and enters the garden. He cuts a small sapling and recites a spell:

> This is our bad wood, O ancestral spirits! O bush-pig, who fightest, O bush-pig from the great stone in the rayboag, O bush-pig of the garden stakes, O bush-pig drawn by evil smells, O bush-pig of the narrow face, O bush-pig of the ugly countenance, O fierce bush-pig. Thy sail, O bush-pig, is in thy ear, thy steering-oar is in thy tail. I kick thee from behind, I despatch thee. Go away. Go to Ulawola. Return whence you have come. It burns your eyes, it turns your stomach.[10]

The sapling, which is then thrown into the forest, stands for evil influences and the bush-pig, which causes damage by digging up gardens. This ritual is followed by others, creating a cycle of rituals that parallels the work that must be accomplished to secure a bountiful harvest.

Magic among the Azande

One of the most detailed studies of the religious system of a small-scale society is that of the Azande conducted by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in the 1920s and 1930s.[11] The Azande live in the southern Sudan, Congo culture area, which at the time Evans-Pritchard worked was a British colony. Here we will examine Zande magic; later in this chapter we will look at Zande divination. We will return to the Azande in Chapter 10 when we discuss witchcraft.

Among the Azande magic involves the use of objects, usually of plant material, called *medicines.* A medicine is an object in which supernatural power resides. To access this power, to change a piece of wood or plant material into medicine, requires ritual. The object, which may be consumed in the ritual or kept intact for long periods of time, then becomes the center of magical rituals.

There are large numbers of plants from which medicines are derived. Sometimes the association between the nature of the plant and its use is clearly based on the doctrine of signatures. This is recognized by the Azande, who point out that a particular plant is used because of its resemblance to something that is associated with the purpose of the magic. A good example is a particular fruit that is full of a milky sap. The fruit resembles the breast of a woman with a young child. A drink is made from the root of the plant and is given to a mother who is having difficulty producing enough milk for her infant.

The thousands of available medicines can be placed in a series of categories based on their purposes. There are those that control nature, such as rain. One is used to delay sunset so that the person will have time to reach home before dark. Many medicines are associated with horticulture and hunting. For example, medicines are used to direct the flight of a spear or an arrow into the prey and to protect the hunter from dangerous animals. Craftsmen, such as blacksmiths, have their own magic to aid in their task. Some medicines are used against witches and sorcerers. Magic is used to bring about success in love and to guarantee a safe journey. An important function of magic is to avenge murder, theft, and adultery. Finally, diseases are cured by using specific medicines.

There are several ways in which the medicine is used. For example, plant material may be burned and, using oil, made into a paste that is then rubbed into incisions made on the face or torso; or the medicine may be made into an

infusion that is drunk. A man may make a whistle out of a particular variety of wood and keep this whistle tied around his waist. He blows it in the morning soon after waking up as a protection against misfortune. This very simple type of ritual is very common. But even more important rituals tend to be performed privately so that an enemy will not know that it is being performed and use other magic to interfere with the effects of the ritual. In some cases a man might not want others to know that he owns a particular medicine. He does not want to be pestered by people to perform the magic for them.

Zande magic rites are not very formal, nor are they usually public. Although there are some public rituals, such as war magic performed by a chief, most magic is performed by a single individual for his or her immediate need. There are a number of ritual actions that need to be performed; yet the order of their performance will vary.

The ritual itself is usually quite simple. It involves manipulating the medicine and reciting a spell. The spell is not formal. The individual simply addresses the medicine and tells it what he or she wants done. Unlike magical spells in other societies, power does not reside in the spell. Rather the power resides in the medicine, and the spell is simply a way of waking up the power and giving the power instructions. The manner is quite informal; the only requirement is that the instructions be clear. If the medicine is handled correctly and the instructions are clear, the magic will work. Another requirement is the observation of a number of tabus, although which tabus are observed varies widely. Commonly, they include abstention from sexual activity and the avoidance of certain foods. If the tabu is not observed, the magic will fail.

Whether or not a particular medicine is good or bad often depends on context. For example, magic that is worked to kill someone out of spite is bad. It is worked in secret in the dead of night. If a person who works bad magic is discovered, he or she will be killed. On the other hand, lethal magic that is legally sanctioned is good magic. This includes magic used to kill witches and sorcerers. Sorcery also can be dealt with by counter-magic and antidotes.

Sorcery among the Fore

Although magic is used for a variety of reasons to increase the probability of success and control the uncertainties of life, magic can also be used in antisocial ways to interfere with the economic activities of others and to bring about illness and even death. Antisocial magic is often referred to as **sorcery**.

The Fore of New Guinea believe that the disease *kuru* is caused by sorcery (Chapter 1). The sorcerer steals food remnants, hair, nail clippings, or excrement from the victim. He makes a bundle with leaves and some sorcerer's stones and places the bundle in cold, muddy ground. He then beats the bundle with a stick and calls the victim's name, reciting the following spell: "I break the bones of your arms, I break the bones of your hands, I break the bones of your legs, and finally I make you die."[12] The location of the bundle in cold, muddy ground suggests the deep chill felt by *kuru* patients. The use of something from the victim, such as hair, is an example of contagious magic. The Fore attempt to prevent *kuru* by attempting to deprive the sorcerer of the materials he needs. Much day-to-day behavior involves the hiding of hair clippings, parings, feces, and food scraps.

The Fore recognize many diseases, some of which correspond to diseases recognized by Western medicine. They are usually seen as the result of sorcery. Many magical techniques use materials that were once in contact with the victim, as in *kuru,* but many use special poisons that are placed where the victim will make contact with them, such as on a trail. In *nankili,* or pleurisy (a lung condition), the sorcerer makes bone needles out of the bones of pigs, cassowary, or possums. He blows smoke on the bone needles to make the needles fly into the victim's body.

Wiccan magic

Wicca is a **Neo-Pagan** religion, meaning that it is a perceived revival of pre-Christian religious practices (Chapter 11). Although there is great variation within the Wiccan religion, magic is often a central element of ritual. Practitioners see their magic knowledge and rituals as a continuation of thousands of years of folk magic, which was often lost or pushed underground by the spread of Christianity. Wiccans also borrow freely from the magic traditions of various cultures around the world.

The magic ritual usually consists of a stated goal, the manipulation of specific objects, and the observation of special conditions, such as place and time. However, the core of the ritual, what is often considered the "real magic," is movement of energy, which takes place within the practitioner. The magician builds up this energy within herself or himself, and it is released at the right time to bring about the goal of the spell.

Wiccan magic is based on the worldview that there is a power that exists in all things. Through rituals (involving such things as music, dance, visualizations, and the manipulation of objects) this power can be awakened and concentrated and can be set to effect a particular goal, which is the purpose of the spell. The power can also be moved from one person to another or between humans, places, and objects. As this power moves to its intended target, it will have an effect on that target.

Popular objects used in Wiccan spells include crystals, herbs, oils, candles, images, runes, and specific foods. The symbolism of color is also used, as are chanting and creative visualization. The religion is closely connected to nature, and the working of magic spells might require a consideration of the weather, season, lunar phase, and/or time of day. The goal of such magic is often very practical and meant to help with everyday challenges such as relationships, health, protection, money, and employment. Magic is to be used when all else fails and in conjunction with more mundane efforts. For example, the belief is that just doing magic to get a job will not help unless you also take practical measures, such as sending out resumes. Because each individual's personal power is limited, it should not be used lightly.

As we will see in Chapter 11, Wiccan moral rules are such that magic is to be used only for positive purposes. Wiccans often say that they respect life, respect the earth, and respect the power too much to do magic for evil.

Divination

In the previous section we examined the subject of magic, techniques for directly and automatically bringing about desired results through supernatural mechanisms. People use magic for a variety of purposes, such as bringing rain,

curing illness, and ensuring fertility. Another way of dealing with the uncertainties of life is to anticipate them. As the saying goes, "Knowledge is power." If we only knew what the future holds for us or what is happening at the present time in places and situations that are hidden from us, decision making would certainly be easier. We could see the consequences of our actions and learn about unknown variables that affect our lives.

Techniques for obtaining information about things unknown, including events that will occur in the future, is known as **divination**. The word *divination* comes from the same root as the word *divinity.* This implies that divination has to do with the supernatural.

The nature of many forms of divination is magical. Such magical rituals are used to manipulate the supernatural world in order to provide information. In other words, the ends of a magical ritual can be a physical occurrence, such as the coming of rain, or information, such as who will win the Super Bowl. Of course, supernatural beings—ancestors, spirits, and gods—also may have access to unknown information. Many divination techniques involve contact with such supernatural entities, as when a medium contacts the spirit of a deceased individual or when a shaman falls into a trance.

Other forms of divination are based on the idea that the world consists of things and events that are interconnected with one another. We saw this same worldview for the workings of magic. Magic is based on the manipulation of perceived connections between things; divination is based on observing these connections. For example, many people believe that the movements of the planets, sun, and moon are in some way ultimately connected with a person's life and that an understanding of these movements enables one to learn about the future.

Forms of divination

There are many ways of accomplishing an act of divination. To understand these methods better, we can classify various techniques into a number of categories.

A basic characteristic of divination techniques is that some are **inspirational** and others are **noninspirational**. Inspirational forms of

divination involve some type of spiritual experience such as a direct contact with a supernatural being through an altered state of consciousness, usually possession. Noninspirational forms are more magical ways of doing divination and include the reading of natural events as well as the manipulation of oracular devices. (The term **oracle** usually refers to a specific device that is used for divination and can refer to inspirational or noninspirational forms. Examples are the poison oracle of the Azande, to be described shortly, and a contemporary toy called the Magic 8 Ball.)

Table 7.1 A classification of methods of divination with examples

	Noninspirational	*Inspirational*
Fortuitous	Apantomancy	Necromancy
	Omens	Oneiromancy
	Ornithomancy	Possession Presentiments
Deliberate	Aleuromancy	Prophecy
	Astrology	Medium
	Dowsing	
	Flipping a coin	
	Graphology	
	Haruspication	
	Magic 8 Ball	
	Ordeals	
	Ouija board	
	Palmistry	
	Phrenology	
	Scapulamancy	
	Tarot cards	
	Tasseography	

We also can divide divination techniques into **fortuitous** and **deliberate**

types. Fortuitous forms happen without any conscious effort on the part of the individual. One sees a flight of birds overhead or unexpectedly falls into a trance and has a vision. Deliberate forms are those that someone sets out to do, such as reading tarot cards or examining the liver of a sacrificed animal.

Using these two ways of classifying divination techniques, we can create four categories: fortuitous noninspirational, deliberate noninspirational, fortuitous inspirational and deliberate inspirational, as shown in Table 7.1.

A survey of divination techniques

There is a wide variety of divination methods. We will review a number of these, but, of course, this cannot be an exhaustive list.

Presentiments are feelings that a person experiences. They suggest that something is about to happen, such as a feeling of dread or an impending disaster. In some societies a warrior on a raid will return to the camp or village on feeling a presentiment that is thought to be an omen of his impending death on the raid. The warrior will be thought of not as a coward, but as a prudent individual.

Body actions include such things as sneezing, twitching, and hiccupping. Such activities can be interpreted in many ways, and interpretations of the same action differ from culture to culture. Some examples from the United States are as follows: If you sneeze before breakfast, you will receive a letter that day. If you sneeze six times, you will go on a journey. If you hiccup or your ears are burning, someone is talking about you.

The term **necromancy** is used in various ways. Generally, it refers to divination through contact with the dead or ancestors. In ancient Greek society, when a person died under suspicious circumstances, the body was brought into the temple for close examination. It was believed that signs on the body were attempts of the spirit of the dead to communicate what happened and who did it. In most cases a diviner enters a trance in an attempt to communicate with the dead.

Knowledge can be derived from the observation of living or dead animals. This includes **omens**, fortuitous happenings, or conditions that provide information. There are a large number of examples as well as a very extensive

vocabulary that describes them. Here are only a few.

One can gain information from the observed behavior of animals. **Ornithomancy** involves reading the path and form of a flight of birds, and **apantomancy** refers to a chance meeting with an animal, such as a black cat crossing one's path. (Many cultures attribute good and bad fortune to various animals that one comes upon. Among the Nandi of East Africa, if a rat crosses one's path, that is good, but if it is a snake, that is bad.)

An animal does not have to be alive to be used for divination, and it is sometimes a sacrificed animal or part of an animal that is examined for answers to questions. **Haruspication**, the examination of the entrails of sacrificed animals, was part of the ceremonies opening a session of the Senate in ancient Rome. In another technique a scapula or shoulder blade from an animal skeleton, such as a sheep, or even from a human is dried. Sometimes the question is written on the bone. The scapula is then placed in a fire, and the pattern of burns and cracks is read by a specialist to determine the response. This is called **scapulamancy**.

Many physical entities of the natural world are "read" for information. **Astrology** is based on the belief that all of the stars and planets, as well as the sun and moon, influence the destiny of people. Other techniques observe the winds and the movement of water. Infrequent appearances of natural events, such as earthquakes and comets, are said to portend evil events.

There are many other forms of divination that you may find familiar. These include **aleuromancy**, the use of flour (as in fortune cookies); **dowsing**, in which a forked stick is used to locate water underground; **graphology**, handwriting analysis; **palmistry**, the reading of the lines of the palm of the hand; **phrenology**, the study of the shape and structure of the head; and **tasseography**, the reading of tea leaves. Other familiar forms of divinations are mechanical types that include the manipulation of objects (see Box 7.1). A good example is flipping a coin. Mechanical divination is common in many societies and includes familiar forms such the Ouija board, Magic 8 Ball, and tarot cards. Other types of mechanical devices are used in other societies. For example, in many divination systems a series of objects, such as shells and bones, are thrown and the pattern formed by these objects is read (Figure 7.1).

Box 7.1 I Ching: The Book of Changes

The *I Ching,* or *The Book of Changes,* is a Chinese divination text that is thousands of years old. The methods described provide much more than just yes/no answers and are seen not so much as foretelling the future, but rather as revealing what the person needs to do to live in harmony with the forces of the universe that control the future.

In Chapter 3 we discussed the concepts of *yin* and *yang,* the two interacting forces in the universe. *Yin* is the female element and is associated with coldness, darkness, softness, and the earth. *Yang* is the male element and is associated with warmth, light, hardness, and the heavens. The two elements are mutually dependent and need to be in equilibrium.

In the *I Ching, yang* is represented by a single line (———), and *yin* is represented by a broken line (— —). A set of three lines produces eight patterns or trigrams. Each is named and is associated with nature: heaven, earth, fire, water, thunder, wind, mountain, and lake. In addition, each is associated with a number of characteristics. For example, K'un, represented by three broken lines, is the earth and is associated with the color black and an animal (the cow). K'un is gentle, passive, and nurturing. Two sets of trigrams are then put together to form each of the sixty-four hexagrams.

There are many techniques of casting a hexagram. Some methods are quite complicated and involve much ritual. One commonly used method involves the throwing of three coins. The outcomes of six throws identify the six lines in the hexagram. A more elaborate method of casting the hexagram is to use a set of yarrow stalks.

Each hexagram can be read on several levels. First, each of the six lines, which can be *yin* or *yang,* has meaning. Second, one can examine the pair of trigrams. However, most important are the meanings assigned to each of the sixty-four hexagrams.

In some techniques of casting, there are four types of lines: old *yin*, young *yin*, old *yang*, and young *yang*. Old *yin* and old *yang* are changing lines. The original hexagram is used to provide insight into the present; when the changing lines change to the opposite form, information is provided about the future. Thus if the top two lines are

old *yin*, they will change into *yang* creating a second hexagram.

As examples, here are brief descriptions of three hexagrams. The hexagram that is composed of six solid lines (*yang*) is named Heaven. "This hexagram is a good omen for an important occasion of state, an imperial sacrificial rite." The hexagram named Small Castle is composed of five solid lines and one broken line third from the top. "The image of heavy clouds promising rain that has not yet arrived conveys a mood of expectation and anxiety. There is a sense of impending storm." Finally, the hexagram named Peace consists of three broken lines on top and three solid lines at the bottom. "Some small sacrifices may be called for in order to attain your larger goal. Generally favorable."

Source: K. Huang and R. Huang, *I Ching* (New York: Workman, 1987).



Figure 7.1 Divination. Divination is practiced in South Africa by throwing objects, including pieces of bone, on a mat.

Inspirational forms of divination

Inspirational divination is a form in which an individual has direct contact with a supernatural being, be it an ancestor, a ghost, a spirit, or a god. This is usually accomplished through an altered state of consciousness. **Possession** can be either fortuitous or deliberate. **Prophecy** is fortuitous in that the prophet receives information through a vision unexpectedly, without any

necessary overt action on the part of the individual.

A familiar example of prophecy is Moses. The book of Exodus tells that Moses was tending his father-in-law's flock and one day led them to the edge of the desert. An angel of God appeared to Moses from within a burning bush. God told Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, but Moses at first did not want to go. He replied, "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" God replied, "I will be with thee" (Exodus 3:11, 12).

Box 7.2 Spiritualism and séances

In the Spiritualism religion, it is believed that the dead continue to evolve in the spirit world and can communicate with the living to share their wisdom. This is done through séances in which individuals gather together and with the help of a spirit medium attempt to get messages from the spirit world.

Mediums enter into an altered state of consciousness and communicate with the supernatural in a variety of ways. This may be mental, as when one senses the presence of the spirits, or physical, as when the spirit manipulates energy to make a knocking sound or ring a bell. Mediums also frequently use a variety of divination techniques such as tarot cards, crystal balls, and Ouija boards. The medium may also become possessed by the spirit who then speaks through her, a phenomena called **channeling**.

Spiritualism was very popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Mary Todd Lincoln held séances in the White House in 1862 after the death of her 11-year-old son from a fever. In 1891 the Ouija Board was patented to help make communication with the dead more efficient. However, widespread fraud led to the loss of credibility for the movement and its influence declined. In the 1920s for example, Harry Houdini spent much time debunking spirit mediums by showing that many used the same techniques as stage magicians. Before he died Houdini and his wife agreed that if possible he would communicate a secret code to her from the afterlife. For ten years after his death, she held yearly séances on

Halloween to attempt to contact him, a tradition that continues with many magicians around the world.

Deliberate possession involves an overt action whereby the individual falls into a trance. Such people would be called **mediums**. Communication from the deities through possession, usually of a priest, is a very common feature of many religious systems. One example is the Oracle at Delphi, discussed later in this chapter.

The interpretation of dreams is a common form of divination. Dreams are often thought of as visits from spirits or visions of journeys taken by one's soul during sleep. Either way, an individual establishes a connection with the supernatural world. All you have to do is to be able to interpret what you experience in the dream. Much of the dream experience is symbolic, which often makes dreams difficult to interpret. Sometimes the interpretation is something you can do on your own, but at other times it requires a specialist. The interpretation of dreams is termed **oneiromancy**.

Instead of consulting a specialist you may purchase a book to help you interpret your dreams. One such book lists the following examples of the meanings associated with the presence of animals in dreams.[13] Dreams of bats flying during the day are a sign of reassurance and calm, but bats flying during the night signify a problem. A bull is a sign of tough competition. Riding a horse is a sign of happiness, but a black horse signifies grief. Dreaming about monkeys is a warning that you are surrounded by lies and deceit. And so it goes for thousands of dream experiences that are interpreted as signs telling of what is to be.

These interpretations of dream content are based on Euro-American dream symbolism. However, dreams may be interpreted differently in non-Euro-American cultures. Some scholars see two basic categories of dreams. One is the individual dream, which is the type familiar to us, the kind that comes from inside of the dreamer. In some societies, however, the source of the dream may lie outside of the dreamer. These are the culturally patterned dreams that often are deliberately sought—in a coming-of-age ritual, for example. Sometimes the individual simply waits for the appropriate, culturally demanded dream to occur, often encouraged by a shaman or parent.

Whatever the source of the dreams, they often are a source of information,

which classifies them as a divination method. Often an ancestor will appear in a dream and prescribe for the dreamer a cure for illness or a warning of what is to come. Guardian spirits and totemic spirits may let themselves be known through dreams. Or a spirit may appear in a dream informing the individual what his lot in life is, such as a call to a career as a shaman or priest. Or a dream may be a visit from the soul of a recently deceased relative informing the dreamer of a particular desire of the soul. Failure to meet this desire might result in illness and perhaps death.

Ordeals

Ordeals are painful and often life-threatening tests that a person who is suspected of guilt may be forced to undergo, such as dipping a hand into hot oil, swallowing poison, or having a red-hot knife blade pressed against some part of the body. Ordeals can be thought of as a trial by divination performed on the body of the accused. In some cultures, including past European and American cultures, ordeals were an important part of criminal trials.

Among the Kpelle of Liberia, trials are conducted through the use of the hot knife ordeal. The ordeal is conducted by a specialist, who is licensed by the government. The specialist will heat a knife in a fire and first pass the knife over his own body to show that the ordeal is valid because he himself is not burned. Then the knife is stroked over the body of the accused. If the individual is burned, he is guilty.

A European trial conducted between the ninth and thirteenth centuries might include an ordeal, especially when other kinds of evidence were inconclusive. There were essentially two types of ordeals. The first involved the handling of a hot object by the accused, usually a piece of metal or stone removed from a cauldron of boiling water or carrying a piece of red-hot metal removed from a fire by the bare hand and carried nine paces. Three days following the handling of the hot object the hand of the accused would be examined for signs of burns that would signify guilt. The other type of ordeal involves tying up and throwing the accused into a lake or river. Water, being pure, would reject the guilty who would float to the surface. Water, however, would accept the innocent, who would sink.

In actuality these ordeals were seldom performed. People believed in the efficacy of these trials, especially when they were carried out by a priest in the context of a church-sanctioned activity. Faced with an ordeal, the guilty would usually confess before it could be carried out. More often than not the truly innocent were glad to participate in the ordeal. It has been suggested that if the priest in charge of the process, after spending time with the accused preparing him or her for the ordeal, was convinced of his or her innocence, would see to it that the hot water was not as hot as it could be so that the innocent were able to survive the process.

Astrology

Quite likely the most popular divination technique practiced in the United States today is astrology which actually has a history stretching back thousands of years. The basis of astrology is the assumption of a causal relationship between celestial phenomena and terrestrial ones and the influence that the stars and planets have on the lives of human beings. Astrology can be used to examine the life of a specific individual or to divine events of importance to the whole community.

The origins of astrology appear to have been in Babylonia, where it was the most common form of divination. However it was not conducted on an individual basis, but rather for the well-being of the entire community. The casting of horoscopes did not occur until the fifth century BCE, rather late in the history of Babylonian astrology. Other important innovations included dividing the ecliptic of the sun's orbit around the earth into twelve zones of thirty degrees each.

Crucial to Babylonian astrology was the idea that the movements of the celestial bodies represented the will of the gods. Therefore, by reading the signs in the heavens, the future could be divined. The sky was seen as containing the "mansions" of the three principal gods: Anu, Enlil, and Ea. These gods governed the "celestial paths" or three belts that ran along the equator, the Tropic of Cancer, and the Tropic of Capricorn. Each of the planets was also identified with a specific deity. For example, the planet Jupiter was associated with Marduk, and Venus was associated with the

goddess Ishtar. Ultimately, a god was linked to, and was seen to rule over, each month. Importantly, this was closely linked with the activities of the agricultural cycle.

From Babylonia, astrology spread to Greece, Rome, and Egypt, where it was developed far beyond what the Babylonians had achieved. Hipparchus is credited with discovering the position of the equinoxes around 130 BCE, thus laying the foundation for the horoscope as we now know it. One of the most significant contributions to astrology on the part of the Greeks is this attempt to chart an individual's destiny by looking at the position of the stars and planets. From the Greeks we also get the fully developed zodiac. Each of the twelve zones was linked to a particular animal (e.g., Saturn with a goat, Mars with a ram, Venus with a bull). From Greece astrology spread to India and Iran and throughout much of Asia.

In Europe, Greek astrological knowledge was revived only with the translation of Arabic texts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There was a large renewal of interest in the subject in Western Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Up until the rise of modern science in the sixteenth century, astrology and astronomy were intertwined. With the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, astrology lost any scientific basis and became separate from astronomy.

Astrology is extremely popular in the United States today. Even people who do not believe in its divinatory abilities generally still know what their sign is and at least a little of what is associated with that sign. For example, both of the authors of this book are Geminis, one born in late May and the other in early June, albeit a generation apart. Gemini is ruled by Mercury and symbolized by the twins. The twin symbolism is supposed to relate to the dual, creative, versatile, and complex nature of those born under this sign. Less flattering descriptions include unpredictable, restless, and confusing to others. Gemini is also considered to be a masculine, outer-directed, and active sign. One of three air signs, Gemini is associated with being free-thinking, intellectual, and communicative. Of course, an individual horoscope could be done for each of us that would also take into account the specific day and time of our respective births.

Fore divination

We have already discussed the Fore of New Guinea and the effects of the disease *kuru* in their lives (see Chapter 1). The Fore believe that sorcery is the cause of the disease. Therefore an essential element in dealing with *kuru* is the identification of the sorcerer. The most common divination technique uses a possum as a vehicle for supernatural revelation. The victim's husband, brothers, and husband's age mates place some of the victim's hair clippings in one small bamboo tube. In another tube they insert the body of a freshly killed possum. Striking one bamboo against the other, they call the name of the supposed sorcerer and then place the bamboo containing the animal in the fire. The guilt of the accused is established if the possum's liver, the locus of its consciousness, remains uncooked. After divination they do not openly accuse a specific person of sorcery, but the suspected sorcerer is subjected to further tests or death magic.

The Fore also consult healers, who usually belong to distant communities and even non-Fore groups. These "dream men," whom we would label mediums, enter altered states of consciousness through the rapid inhaling of tobacco and the use of other plant materials that produce trances and hallucinations. Information is also gleaned from dreams. Such diviners are then able to identify sorcerers.

Oracles of the Azande

Zande oracles have been described in great detail by E. E. Evans-Pritchard. The best known are *iwa,* the rubbing-board oracle; *dakpa,* the termite oracle; and *benge,* the poison oracle.

The oracle that is most often used is *iwa,* or the rubbing-board oracle. This is a relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use oracle that can be consulted very quickly. There are many situations in which some answer is urgently needed, such as the sudden onset of an illness, decisions about going on a journey, questions about interpersonal relationships, and a myriad of minor questions. Many older men carry *iwa* on their persons, ready to consult it at a moment's notice. If a man has not acquired or learned to use the oracle, it is quite easy

to find a friend or relative who has.

The rubbing-board oracle takes many shapes, but it is relatively small and is always made of wood with a flat, round or oval "female" surface and a "male" piece or lid that fits on top. After being carved, the object becomes an oracle only after it has been rubbed with medicines and buried in the ground for a few days to permit the medicines to work. The female surface is treated with plant juices, and the male lid is moistened with water. As the lid is moved back and forth, it will either move smoothly or stick to the female surface. The sticking is usually interpreted as a yes answer; moving smoothly is interpreted as a no answer.

Iwa is manufactured and used by humans and therefore is thought to be prone to error. Although it is sometimes inaccurate, this fact is balanced against the ease of use and the fact that a large number of questions can be asked of this oracle within a very short period of time. It often serves as the first step in the process that leads to the use of more reliable, albeit more expensive and complex, oracles.

A greater level of reliability is given by *dakpa,* the termite oracle. Just about any man, and sometimes a woman, can consult *dakpa.* All one has to do is to find a termite mound and then take two branches from two different trees and place them into the mound. The next day one removes the two to see which one (or both) has been eaten by the termites. Of course, the process is slow—one has to wait overnight—and because only a few questions can be asked at any one time, its use is quite limited. However, it is considered to be reliable, primarily because it is not manufactured by humans, the agents of the oracle being termites that are not influenced by the same things that influence a person.

Without question the most important Zande oracle is *benge.* When it is consulted or sanctioned by a chief, the results may be used as evidence in legal proceedings. It is used in all important legal and social situations and directs the Azande on what to do in major crisis situations.

The poison used is a red powder manufactured from a forest creeper and mixed with water to become a paste. The liquid is squeezed out of the paste into the beaks of small chickens, which are compelled to swallow it. Generally violent spasms follow. The doses sometimes prove fatal, but just as often the chickens recover, and sometimes they are even completely unaffected by the poison. From the behavior of the chickens, especially by their death or

survival, Azande receive answers to the questions they place before the oracle.

The creeper does not grow in Zandeland. It takes a long, difficult journey through the territory of other tribes to procure the poison. This, in part, accounts for the high value the Azande place on the poison oracle. The oracular consultation takes place away from the homesteads where the oracle can be consulted in secrecy without interference from witches. The equipment includes the poison and a basket of chickens. The Azande raise chickens but do not regularly slaughter them for food except on very special occasions. Eggs are not consumed but are permitted to hatch.

It takes experience and skill to become a good operator of the oracle, to judge the amount of poison to be given the chickens, and to observe and interpret the behavior of the chickens. At the start of a consultation the operator, who has observed a number of tabus, prepares the poison. A second man will pose the questions. The operator twirls a grass brush in the liquid poison and squeezes the brush so that the poison runs into the throat of the chicken. Then the questioner begins to address the poison for several minutes, and more poison is given to the chicken. Then the operator takes the chicken in his hand, jerks it back and forth, and finally places it on the ground. The operator and questioner watch as the animal dies or survives. Depending on the way in which the question was phrased and the instructions that are given to the poison, the death or survival of the chicken provides a yes/no answer to the question. We will discuss *benge* further when we discuss Zande witchcraft in Chapter 10, because the poison oracle is the principle method of determining the identity of a witch.

Divination in Ancient Greece: the oracle at Delphi

Many divination techniques were popular in ancient Greece including oneiromancy (interpretation of dreams), ornithomancy (reading the flight of birds), haruspication (examining the entrails of dead animals), cleromancy (casting lots), and the consultation of professional mediums, such as those at Siwah, Didyma, Dodona, and Delphi.

The Temple of Apollo at Delphi was the most important religious site in ancient Greece. The site dates back to 1400 BCE and was built around a sacred

spring. The Greeks considered Delphi to be the center (literally the navel) of the world. The oracle at Delphi was consulted for many matters, large and small, by people from all over Greece and beyond. Battles to be fought, voyages to be undertaken, investments to be made were all brought before the oracle, whose answers were often cryptic. It was the oracle at Delphi that warned Oedipus in myth that he would kill his father and marry his mother.

The oracle spoke the word of the god Apollo through the Pythia, a woman who would enter an altered state of consciousness and become possessed by Apollo. Many ancient accounts exist that describe how this divination took place. A person wishing to consult the oracle would first sacrifice an animal and observe whether or not it was a good day to consult the oracle. If the omens were good, the petitioner would wait outside the Adyton, the inner chamber only entered by the Pythia.



Figure 7.2 Painting of the Pythia. Painting on a drinking cup, ca. 440–430 BCE. Aegeus, the mythical king of Athens, consults the Pythia, who sits on a tripod. This is the only contemporary image of the Pythia.

Prior to actual consultation with the god Apollo, the Pythia would cleanse herself in the spring, drink water from another sacred spring, and chew on a laurel leaf (a symbol of Apollo). She would seat herself on a tripod which was located over a chasm in the earth (Figure 7.2). Inhaling a pneuma, or sweet-smelling gas, which came from the chasm, she would enter into an altered state of consciousness. Questions, written on lead tablets, were passed in to the Pythia and she would answer. A priest or poet located nearby would then interpret what she had said and record it in verse.

Scholars disagree on how incoherent or how lucid the Pythia's speech was and how much interpreting was done by the priest. Regardless, her answers, in the way of oracles, were not direct. They were often ambiguous, filled with double meanings, or plainly misleading. For example, the story is told of King Croesus of Lydia, who asked the Pythia if he should make war on the Persians. She answered that if he did, he would destroy a great realm. Croesus went to war, not realizing that the realm he would destroy would be his own.

Although descriptions from Plutarch and others had described the Pythia breathing in gases from the chasm, attempts in the early 1900s to find an actual source of these gases failed. For many years the idea that such a thing had actually taken place was dismissed. Then in the 1980s, a United Nations Development Project began a survey in Greece of active faults. At that time a geologist, Jelle de Boer, found signs that indicated a fault line running along the south slope of Mount Parnassus and under the site of the oracle.[14] Gases and spring water could have reached the surface through cracks created by the fault in the ground below the temple. De Boer began working with an interdisciplinary team including an archaeologist, a chemist, and a toxicologist. This team has suggested that inhaling the gas ethylene could account for the various descriptions of the effects on the Pythia of inhaling the pneuma at Delphi.

Magical behavior and the human mind

Magic and divination exist because of how the human brain considers cause and effect. An action—perhaps the recitation of a spell—is followed by a result.

For example, a ritual designed to bring rain performed in the morning may be followed by a rainstorm that afternoon. Now there are two explanations for this. The first is that the ritual caused it to rain; the other is that the appearance of a rainstorm that afternoon was simply a coincidence. It appears that the default setting of the human brain is to think of a temporal sequence —ritual followed by rain—in terms of cause and effect rather than coincidence. In fact, the brain has a very difficult time thinking in terms of coincidence at all. This view of cause and effect is what we mean by magic. We can define magic as methods (rituals) that somehow interface with the supernatural by which people can bring about particular outcomes.

Not all magic is directed or purposeful. It is possible to set something in motion without being aware of it, without deliberately performing a ritual. For example, if you break a mirror, you set in motion events that will result in bad luck. This is why many people are careful not to step on a crack in the sidewalk and not to let a black cat cross their paths. You have not offended a deity who is extracting punishment. You have unwittingly pressed the wrong button and the result—bad luck—will automatically happen.

Magical thinking

This perceived relationship between doing something and what appears to be a result of that action is the basis of much behavior in all societies, including our own. I find a coin on the sidewalk that I place in my pocket. The next day something good happens—I unexpectedly receive a raise. Attributing this to the good luck I got from picking up the coin is an example of magical thinking.

Simple examples of magical thinking can be found in behaviors that are frequently referred to as **superstitions**. Superstitions are relatively simple forms of magical thinking. They represent simple behaviors that directly bring about a simple result, such as carrying a good luck charm. While the term *superstition* is frequently used to describe such simple magical behaviors, the term is highly problematic. A superstition is frequently thought of as being silly and the hallmark of an uncritical mind. Perhaps it is better to refer to such behaviors simply as examples of magical thinking.

Magical behaviors frequently arise in situations that are difficult to control and in which negative outcomes are frequent. Examples abound in gambling behavior. Let's take a very simple gambling situation, a flip of a coin. If you flip a coin it will land either heads or tails. The odds of either of these occurring are 50:50. The odds of winning at any number of games in which no skill is involved can be easily described mathematically whether it is a flip of a coin, the throw of a pair of dice, or the dealing of a hand of cards. And yet gamblers worldwide sincerely believe that the behavior of coins, dice, and cards are not random but can be influenced by outside forces. Thus a gambler will wear a lucky shirt, carry a good luck charm, blow on the dice before throwing, or any number of magical behaviors.

A similar connection between magic and uncertainty can be found in athletics. Of course, skill and practice play a major role in athletic prowess, but poor athletes sometimes do exceptionally well, whereas great athletics will hit a patch of "bad luck." Because much is riding on performance, athletes frequently attempt to control "luck" through magical behavior.

Anthropologist and former professional baseball player George Gmelch describes magical behavior among athletes:

> On each pitching day for the first three months of a winning season, Dennis Grossini, a pitcher on the Detroit Tiger farm team, arose from bed at exactly 10:00 A.M. At 1:00 P.M. he went to the nearest restaurant for two glasses of iced tea and a tuna fish sandwich. Although the afternoon was free, he changed into the sweatshirt and supporter he wore during his last winning game, and one hour before the game he chewed a wad of Beech-Nut chewing tobacco. After each pitch during the game he touched the letters on his uniform and straightened his cap after each ball. Before the start of each inning he replaced the pitcher's rosin bag next to the spot where it was the inning before. And after every inning in which he gave up a run, he washed his hands.
>
> When asked which part of the ritual was most important, he said, "You can't really tell what's most important so it all becomes important. I'd be afraid to change anything. As long as I'm winning, I do everything the same."[15]

Where do these ritual behaviors come from? They come from what appears to be an association between an activity and a result. The juxtaposition of a behavior with a desired result—the eating of a tuna sandwich before a game in which the pitcher pitches a perfect game, for example—is seen in terms of one causing the other. The pitcher will from that point on religiously eat a tuna sandwich before each game as a method of ensuring success. Gmelch notes

that such rituals are found most frequently in those areas that are most difficult to control and are therefore most influenced by random fluctuations of success, such as pitching. This behavior among baseball players closely resembles the behavior of our small-scale subsistence farmer attempting to control the problems that beset his crops.

Why magic works

Edward B. Tylor addressed the question of why people believe that magic works. The answer is because magic appears never to fail. There are several reasons for this. First, magic often attempts to bring about events that will occur naturally. Rain magic works because it will eventually rain. Rain magic often is performed at the end of the dry season, when rain is badly needed. Of course, the onset of rains normally follows the end of the dry season. However, the practitioners of such magic do not see it that way. The rain comes not naturally, but as a result of the ritual. The proof is very simple: you perform the ritual, and it rains. We could perform an experiment and try to convince a community not to perform rain magic to see what would happen, but to people who depend on their crops for survival this would be a very foolish thing to do. In addition, humans are very resistant to changing their beliefs, even when presented with evidence to the contrary.

This observation is important in understanding the use of magic and other healing rituals in curing illness. In our society over 90 percent of all illnesses, including colds and fevers, will eventually disappear, with or without treatment. Therefore in the vast majority of illnesses a cure will naturally follow the ritual. Again we have to assess the juxtaposition of the ritual and the end of the illness—a case of cause and effect.

People do not generally ask impossible things of magic. Magic to bring rain at the end of the dry season or to make a garden grow is likely to work. Magic to enable a student to pass an exam without studying or to be able to fly off the roof of a building is likely to fail. No one tries to grow his or her garden by magic alone. There is a natural world that demands a natural response (you must weed and water your garden), and there is a supernatural world that demands a supernatural response (you must make sure no supernatural

harm comes to your garden and try to gain supernatural help for its success).

Of course, if you do not get the expected results, it could be because you did not do it right; the failure is with the magician, not the magic. In fact, if the belief is that the ritual must be performed without error for it to succeed, failure of the ritual is direct evidence that the magician made an error. Also, someone else could be doing counter-magic; one person's failure is another person's success. Magic might be performed by two opposing entities, and the more powerful will prevail over the weaker. For example, one village might be using magic to kill members of another village, whereas people in the latter village might be performing magic to prevent illness and death. Thus warfare is being conducted on a supernatural plane.

Finally, there is the issue of selective memory. We do not remember everything that happens to us. Some things are etched in our memories; other things are quickly forgotten. Successes, even if infrequent, are remembered and are thought of as proof that something works. Memories of failures, even if common, quickly fade with time.

There are documented cases of magic working, especially death magic (i.e., magic is worked against someone who then dies). These are often referred to as anti-therapy rituals (see the example in Chapter 4). Is there a physiological basis for such deaths? This issue is discussed by Harry D. Eastwell among the Australian Aborigines of Arnhem Land.[16] Eastwell notes that the basis of such death by magic often is the result of an extreme state of fear. Such fear gives rise to many symptoms, such as agitation, sleeplessness, and sweating. This is further exacerbated by the belief on the part of the victim and his or her family that death is inevitable. Thus as symptoms increase in intensity, the family withdraws support because the patient is seen as socially dead. Because the individual is socially dead, the family will not provide food and water and will often begin funeral rituals before death has occurred.

Conclusion

In Chapter 1 we saw that the human brain extends the theory of mind into the minds of animals and other living and nonliving entities. The human mind

sees intension in the nonhuman world and the ability to directly interact with it. This gives rise to the seeming ability to directly influence and, to some degree, control the nonhuman world through ritual activity. This is the basis of magical thinking.

Although magic at first appears to be an exotic topic, practiced by those in foreign places, in reality magical thinking is a very human way of thinking and is practiced at some time or another by every one of us. The logic of magic not only is the result of our normal mental processes, but also answers our need to have some control over our lives. Magic gives us control and divination gives us knowledge—two of the major functions of religion.

Magic deals with supernatural forces and thus is a religious phenomenon. In the next two chapters we will turn to what may be a more familiar domain of religion: anthropomorphic supernatural beings.

Summary

Magic refers to activities by which a person can compel the supernatural to behave in certain ways. Key components of magical acts are the words that are spoken or the spell and objects that are manipulated in set ways. Magical rituals usually can be performed only at special places and at special times. The performer must often observe certain restrictions such as abstention from sexual intercourse and avoidance of certain foods. A magician is usually a worker in the kind of magic that is on the whole public and good, whereas a sorcerer deals in matters that are evil and antisocial.

Frazer articulated the Law of Sympathy, which states that magic depends on the apparent association or agreement between things. There are two parts to the Law of Sympathy. The first is the Law of Similarity, which states that things that are alike are the same. The second is the Law of Contagion, which states that things that were once in contact continue to be connected after the connection is severed. The Law of Similarity gives rise to homeopathic or imitative magic, and the Law of Contagion to contagious magic.

Techniques for obtaining information about things unknown, including events that will occur in the future, is known as divination. Inspirational

forms of divination involve some type of spiritual experience, such as a direct contact with a supernatural being through an altered state of consciousness. Noninspirational forms are more magical ways of doing divination and include the reading of natural events as well as the manipulation of oracular devices. Fortuitous forms simply happen without any conscious effort on the part of the individual; deliberate forms are those that someone sets out to do. Examples of divination include omens, presentiments, possession, prophecy, ornithomancy, oneiromancy, necromancy, astrology, dowsing, flipping a coin, ordeals, palmistry, phrenology, and reading tarot cards.

Magic and divination are based on magical thinking, or how the human brain perceives cause and effect. This leads to simple magical acts, sometimes called superstitions, based on presumed correlations. Tylor addressed the question of why people believe that magic works. The answer is because magic appears to never fail. There are several reasons for this. Because magic always works, failure must be due to the inadequacies of the magician. Magic usually attempts to bring about events that will naturally occur; people do not generally ask impossible things of magic. Finally, there is the issue of selective memory.

Study questions

1. In gambling, we know that the result of throwing a pair of dice is a random event, yet gamblers believe that various behaviors can influence the results. This is an example of magical thinking. What does this mean?
2. Someone gives you a "lucky charm" that you place in your pocket, and soon afterward something very good happens that you attribute to the charm. Is this an example of magic? Explain.
3. Can you think of any examples of magical thinking in your own life?
4. "Magic always works." Is this statement true? Explain.
5. There are two major types of magic: homeopathic magic and contagious magic. How are they similar and how are they different? Provide some examples of each type as used in the area of healing.

6. What are some of the divination devices that one can buy in a toy store? Classify each and explain how it works.
7. One could argue that the use of divination—astrology, for example—is harmless entertainment. Are there negative consequences of living one's life relying on astrology and fortune telling?

Suggested readings

William J. Broad, *The Oracle: The Lost Secrets and Hidden Messages of Ancient Delphi* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).
[A discussion of the oracle in ancient Greek society and the story of the search for a scientific explanation.]

Thomas E. Kida, *Don't Believe Everything You Think: The 6 Basic Mistakes We Make in Thinking* (Amhurst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006).
[Discusses the psychology of belief and the thought patterns that often lead people to accept false beliefs.]

Tahir Shah, *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (New York: Time Warner, 2002).
[Shah's travels across southern India to find and learn the art of magic from one of India's greatest practitioners.]

Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, *In Sorcery's Shadow* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).
[The story of Stoller's work with sorcerers in the Republic of Niger.]

Stuart Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[Examines the psychological and cognitive reasons behind magical thinking.]

Fiction

Ursula K. LeGuin, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Emeryville, CA: Parnassus Press, 1968).
[The life story of a powerful wizard growing up in the fantasy world of Earthsea.]

Gregory Maguire, *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).
[The story of the Wizard of Oz focusing on the life of the Wicked Witch of the West.]

Suggested websites

www.bartleby.com/196
An online copy of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough.*

www.era.anthropology.ac.uk
Spider divination of the Mambila people of West Africa, including simulation.

http://skepdic.com/divinati.html
Discussion of divination methods from *The Skeptic's Dictionary.*

www.lib.umich.edu/traditions-magic-late-antiquity
Traditions of Magic in Late Antiquity exhibit from the University of Michigan.

Notes

1 E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Cultures: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871), p. 1.

2 J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1922).

3 É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books,

1961), first published in 1913.

4 Ibid., p. 60.

5 B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), p. 38.

6 Ibid., p. 17.

7 A. B. Weiner, *The Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1988), p. 8.

8 Frazer, op. cit.

9 W. D. Hand, "Folk Medical Magic and Symbolism in the West," in A. Fife et al. (eds.), *Forms upon the Frontier,* Utah State University Monograph Series 16, no. 2 (1969), pp. 103–118.

10 Ibid., p. 100.

11 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1937).

12 S. Lindenbaum, *Kuru Sorcery: Disease and Danger in the New Guinea Highlands* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1979), p. 65.

13 R. Grant, *The Illustrated Dream Dictionary* (New York: Sterling, 1995).

14 J. Z. de Boer, J. R. Hale, and J. Chanton, "New Evidence for the Geological Origins of the Ancient Delphic Oracle (Greece)," *Geology*, 29 (2001), pp. 707–710.

15 G. Gmelch, "Baseball Magic," *Transaction,* 8 (1971), pp. 39–41, 54. Courtesy of G. Gmelch.

16 H. D. Eastwell, "Voodoo Death and the Mechanism for Dispatch of the Dying in East Arnhem, Australia," *American Anthropologist,* 84 (1982), pp. 5–17.

Chapter 8
Souls, ghosts, and death

The late-nineteenth-century anthropologist Edward Tylor introduced the concept of animism, a belief in spirit beings that animate all living things (see Chapter 1). Although the spiritual nature of living things can be thought of as a generalized supernatural power, it is seen most frequently as supernatural beings of various kinds. Some supernatural beings live within animals, plants, and natural physical features; others live as independent beings. Some supernatural entities are closely associated with humans, being human in origin; others, like gods and spirits, are usually separate from humans in origin.

This chapter will study supernatural beings that are thought to be the supernatural mirror of animate beings, primarily humans, or are transformed human beings. Important among these are souls and ghosts, which are supernatural manifestations of individuals living and dead. We will conclude with an examination of death rituals that frequently interface with the supernatural entities that are discussed in this chapter.

Souls and ancestors

The belief in the existence of a spirit entity residing within a person appears to be a natural one that grows out of simple observations about life. A human being does certain things, interacts with people in certain ways, and has a distinct personality. On the other hand, a person temporarily ceases to be an active being during sleep or when in a faint or coma; during sleep a person

dreams; during ritual a person enters a trance. A person permanently ceases to be an animated being in death. What is responsible for all this?

The term **soul** is used to label the noncorporeal, spiritual component of an individual. Although many people are familiar with the presence of spirits within nonhuman animals, most scholars reserve the term *soul* for the spirits that inhabit the human body. Usually, each individual possesses a soul that takes on the personality of the individual (or perhaps the individual takes on the personality of the soul). The soul usually has an existence after death, at least for some period of time.

When one dreams, it is as if one's soul leaves the body and travels rapidly through space and time. It meets up with all sorts of people, including the souls of relatives who have died. In some groups it is considered dangerous to wake someone up suddenly, for there might not be enough time for the soul to return from its travels, and the soul might be lost. On the other hand, it is not a good idea to murder someone in his or her sleep because the person's soul is absent. It is better to wait until the victim is awake and the soul has returned.

We see a person sleeping, lying inert, devoid of activity and personality. We make the same observation when one faints or goes into a coma. Some believe that when a shaman enters a trance, the shaman's soul has left the shaman's body to travel to a supernatural world. Illness may be caused by the soul having left the body. Death is the permanent withdrawal of the soul from the body. The existence of a soul that survives death is reinforced when a loved one feels the presence of the deceased or experiences visits from the deceased in dreams.

Variation in the concept of the soul

Although the concept of a soul can be found in all cultures, the soul takes on a great many forms. The soul may be envisioned as a full-sized duplicate of the living individual, or it may be small and reside somewhere in the body. Where? Perhaps in the liver, the chest, the heart, or the brain. The soul may exist as a person's shadow, so one must be careful where one's shadow falls. Or the soul may be reflected in a mirror, which is why beings without souls, such as vampires, have no reflection. When seeing a photograph for the first

time, some people see the image as the soul that has been captured by the photographer.

Many people think of different kinds of souls that reside within the body. One soul might be responsible for a person's animation and will disappear at death. This soul, or life force, may be reincarnated into other living beings. Another soul might be a spirit that is that individual's personality. Different souls may be associated with different parts of the body, or one soul may come from the father's family and another from the mother's.

For example, in Haitian Vodou (Chapter 11), there are three spiritual components associated with the physical being. One of these is a spirit known as the *mét-tét,* or "Master of the Head." Its identity is discovered through divination. The *mét-tét* may possess the individual. The other two spiritual components can be seen as souls. The *ti-bonanj,* or "little angel," is a person's consciousness and ego. When the body dies, the *ti-bonanj* stays nearby for a while and then moves on to heaven, where it has little more to do with the living. The *gwo-bonanj,* or "big angel," comes from the ancestral spirits and is returned after death. It is a part of Bondye, the "High God," and is a person's life force that determines, in part, his or her character and intelligence. If a person has lived a good life, the person's memory will be kept for many generations, and his or her *gwo-bonanj* may be prayed to.

You may be born with souls, but other souls may be acquired during your lifetime. The Jivaro of Ecuador (Amazon culture area) believe that a person has three souls. Every person is born with a *nekas,* or the soul that is the life force. The second soul, the *aruntam,* has to be acquired through a vision. The Jivaro see this life as false and the spiritual world as real. Only by acquiring an *aruntam* can a person enter into the real, spiritual world. Acquiring this soul is also believed to give a person power, intelligence, and self-confidence. The third soul, the *miusak,* is the "avenging soul." If a person's *aruntam* is killed, the *miusak* will avenge the death. It is this belief that gives rise to the practice of headhunting. The *miusak* is believed to reside in the head; capturing and ritually shrinking the head are believed to neutralize the *miusak* of the enemy.

Box 8.1 How do you get to heaven?

According to a 2015 Pew Research Center study, 72 percent of Americans believe there is a heaven.[1] Perhaps the more interesting questions are how they think one gets to heaven and whether or not they believe that their path is the only one. The main divide in opinions on how one gets to heaven is the works versus grace debate. On the works side is a belief that it is one's actions or deeds that allow one to get into heaven. Of course, the question remains of just which deeds and how many need to be performed. In the late fifteenth century, an emphasis on deeds as the path to salvation led to the selling of indulgences by the Catholic Church, which was one of the major issues in the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther and others reacted to the idea that one could buy one's way into heaven by proposing the alternative grace argument that it is only through belief in God that one enters heaven. The belief position also has its issues, mainly concerned with ethics and personal responsibility. Is a last-minute acceptance of God enough to make up for any act, no matter how heinous? When the Pew Research Center asked respondents which they believed, it was fairly evenly divided with a third citing actions and another third citing belief. The responses varied somewhat along religious lines with evangelicals more likely to cite belief and Catholics more likely to cite acts.[2]

Another question asked by the Pew survey was whether the person believed that his or her path was the only path to heaven.[3] A surprising majority (67 percent, including 52 percent of evangelicals) stated that there are other paths. Of the 66 percent of Christians who held this belief, most included at least one non-Christian religion in their answer. In the 2007 study, there was an association between how a person answered the faith versus acts question and whether they felt theirs was the only path. For example, those who believe faith is crucial were less likely to see other valid paths to heaven.[4]

While the majority of Christians surveyed said other paths could lead to heaven, the number who did so has decreased since earlier surveys in 2002 and 2007. White evangelical Protestants and black Protestants in particular have become noticeably more strict on this question.

In some cultures the soul is created anew for each child. Beliefs differ as to when and how the soul enters into the child. For example, the Roman Catholic belief that the soul enters the child at conception has influenced their position on such issues as cloning and abortion. In other cultures the soul may have a previous existence before it starts a new life.

Souls, death, and the afterlife

The concept of a soul is very closely tied to ideas about death. As Nigel Barley writes, "notions of what it means to be dead are always part of a more general idea of what it means to be a living human being in the first place and funerary behaviour and beliefs around the world read like an extended discussion of the notion of the person."[5]

As far as anthropologists are aware, there are no cultures that do not have a soul-like concept and no cultures that do not believe that this soul survives the death of the body, at least for some period of time. Where there is a belief in multiple souls, the different souls may have different destinations after death, including surviving for different lengths of time. In most cultures the idea of the soul after death is based more on continuity with life than with immortality, as is common in the West.

Souls that live after death may spend some time near their family, often until the funeral is completed, and then may travel someplace else or be reincarnated. One of the functions of funeral rituals is to aid the soul in its journey. Sometimes these journeys are dangerous and difficult, and a soul might perish on the journey or might end up in a not-so-nice place. In some religious systems the duration of a soul's residence after death is finite, and the soul is reborn in another individual or, in the case of **transmigration**, into the body of an animal.

The ability of a soul to survive its journey to the land of the dead may depend on the quality of the person's life. In such societies the life is judged, and the threat of failing to "pass the test" to enter paradise can act as a means of social control. On the other hand, in many groups all souls make it to wherever souls go after death, or only those who have memorized particular rituals or who have had elaborate funeral rituals. It is not always the good

that successfully make the journey; often it is the wealthy and powerful.

Where is the land of the dead, and what is it like? The final destination of the soul is usually at some distance from the place where the person lived. It is often located at a known geographic place, such as a mountaintop or island, or a place that is "over the horizon." Often it is located in a place that is not considered a part of the normal physical world, such as in the sky or underground. Although we in the West tend to think of the physical afterlife as a paradise, in many cultures it is surprisingly similar to the physical community on earth. In the afterlife the dead socialize, hunt, and have sex. However, there is no illness, and the dead interact with their ancestors.

Not all souls go to the same afterlife. Many people have special places for souls depending on certain attributes. For example, warriors who have died in battle, women who have died in childbirth, or persons who have died by suicide might go to special places. There may be special places for the souls of certain social classes or occupational groups, such as shamans. For example, Valhalla was the special place for Viking warriors who died a good death, that is, died in battle. In this case both social status and manner of death were important.

Examples of concepts of the soul

In this section we will examine soul beliefs in several societies, including the Yup'ik of Alaska, the Yanomamö of South America, and the Hmong of Southeast Asia, as well as Roman Catholic, Hindu, and Buddhist beliefs.

Yup'ik souls

Many religious systems believe in the recycling of souls. Among the Yup'ik of western Alaska, a newborn has the soul of someone who has recently died in the grandparental generation, after whom the child is named. After death, the soul remains nearby for a period of time and then leaves to await rebirth. Thus the immortal soul recycles through time from the beginning of the earth.

In Yup'ik culture, animals also possess immortal souls that are a part of a

cycle of birth and rebirth. However, this cycle is based on a reciprocal relationship between humans and animals that is based on how each treats the other. For example, if a seal perceives that the hunter is adhering to the rules of Yup'ik society and its relationship to the animal world, the seal will permit itself to be killed. Its flesh will provide food for the hunter and his family, and the seal's soul will, if treated properly by the hunter, return to the sea to be reborn again.

On death, the soul of the seal retracts to its bladder. The Yup'ik collect all of the bladders from the seals killed during the year. They are inflated and hung throughout a five-day festival and then are shoved through a hole in the ice into the water, where the souls are eventually reborn.

Yanomamö spirits and souls

The Yanomamö (Tropical Forest culture area) believe in a complex of souls. The main part of the soul becomes a *no borebö* at death. The Yanomamö cosmos is composed of four layers. The living Yanomamö live on the third layer, and on death the *no borebö* moves up to the second layer, where it moves down a trail until it encounters a spirit named Wadawadariwä. The spirit asks the soul whether it has been stingy or generous. If the soul replies that it has been stingy, it is sent to a place of fire, but if it has been generous, it joins the ancestors. One would assume that the possibility of being sent to a place of fire would act as a constraint on negative behavior during life, but Wadawadariwä is thought to be somewhat stupid and will accept what the soul tells him, which is why everyone is generous and is sent to the village of the ancestors.

Another aspect of the soul is the *bore,* which is released during cremation. It remains on earth and lives in the jungle. Some *bore* possess bright glowing eyes and will attack people who are traveling through the jungle at night.

The third aspect of the soul is the *möamo,* which lies within the body near the liver. Shamans will use their powers to remove the *möamo* from the body of their enemies, who will become sick and die. Much of the activity of shamans is divided between stealing the souls of enemies and recovering the souls of members of their own community.

In addition, everyone has a *noreshi,* or animal, which is born each time a human child is born and will develop and grow along with the child. The animal is the person's double, and what happens to one will happen to the other. When either the person or his or her *noreshi* dies, the other dies. The most common *noreshi* for males are large birds, and for females are land animals.

A person's *noreshi* lives far away. Therefore a person has no physical contact with his or her own *noreshi.* Still it is possible for someone else living where the *noreshi* lives to kill the *noreshi,* usually by accident, then the person associated with it dies. If possible, the dead person's relatives will seek vengeance by killing the murderer. Every once in a while, hunters will encounter an animal that shows unusual behavior. Such an animal is either an evil spirit or someone's *noreshi.* It is never killed.

Hmong souls

The Hmong are a people living in the mountainous regions of Southeast Asia. Large numbers of Hmong from Laos immigrated to the United States after the end of the Vietnam War.

The Hmong believe that a person possesses a number of souls—some sources say as many as thirty. Health is the result of a balance between the physical body and its souls. When one or more of the souls are lost or stolen, the person falls ill.

A soul may be frightened out of the body by a traumatic event, or it may be stolen by a spirit. Anne Fadiman, in her book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down,* tells the story of a Hmong family living in Merced, California.[6] The story centers on a little girl, Lia. One day Lia's sister came into the house and slammed the door, frightening Lia's soul out of her body. The loss of the soul resulted in an illness, which the Hmong call by a phrase that translates as "the spirit catches you and you fall down." The spirit being referred to is a soul-stealing spirit. This illness is diagnosed as epilepsy in Western medicine.

Curing such illnesses falls to the shaman. The shaman enters an altered state of consciousness to search for the lost soul and, if it is found, will return it to the patient's body. If the soul was stolen by a spirit, the shaman will

negotiate with the spirit for the return of the soul. Gifts will be offered, and the soul of a sacrificed animal will be offered in exchange for the soul of the sick individual.

After the birth of a child its placenta (afterbirth) is buried under the dirt floor of the house. The word used by the Hmong for the placenta can be translated as "jacket," and it is thought of as a piece of clothing. At death the soul travels back to the place where the person's placenta was buried and puts on its placenta jacket. This allows the soul to travel on the dangerous path to the place where the ancestors live. If the soul fails to locate its placenta jacket, it will wander for eternity, never to be reunited with its ancestors.

The soul in Roman Catholicism

The doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church states that after death the destiny of each soul is determined by God, based primarily on the person's behavior during life. The main issue is the presence of sin, which is defined as a moral evil. People who are free of sin and are perfectly pure will go to Heaven, where they will be with God and will experience perfect happiness. Although God is considered to be omnipresent, Heaven is considered to be His home; in general it is conceived of as being in the sky.

Souls that are in a state of grace but in need of purification go to **Purgatory**. The word *Purgatory* comes from the Latin *purgare,* meaning to make clean or to purify. Purgatory exists for those souls who die with lesser faults for which the person had not repented or for which the penalty was not entirely paid during life. For example, venial sins are considered a consequence of human frailty and are considered pardonable, requiring only temporary punishment. These sins can be dealt with by time spent in Purgatory. This is necessary because nothing less than the perfectly pure can enter Heaven.

People who die in mortal sin or with original sin are relegated to eternal punishment in Hell. A mortal sin is an act that is contrary to Divine law and separates the sinner from God; original sin is the sin of Adam in Genesis, which is washed away by baptism. Hell is a place of punishment and eternal torment for the damned, including both humans and demons. Hell is usually

conceived of as being within the earth. In the Bible it is described as an abyss and a place to which the wicked descend. Because its inhabitants are estranged from God, they are placed as far away from Him as possible.

The soul in Hinduism and Buddhism

In Hinduism there is a belief in an immortal, eternal soul that is born again and again in different bodies, a process called **reincarnation**. Although the bodies differ each time, the self—its distinct personality—remains unchanged. A rebirth might not be into a human body, and birth as a human is seen as a precious and rare opportunity.

The Hindu idea of reincarnation is closely tied to the concept of **karma**. Karma concerns an individual's actions and the consequences of those actions. One's life is what one has made it, and every action, thought, and desire—be they good or bad—will affect one's next life. The life one lives now is the consequence of past actions. This cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in this world is known as Samsara. The ultimate goal is to escape from Samsara and achieve *moksha,* or liberation from the limitations of space, time, and matter. Because the achievement of salvation is difficult and complex, an individual will require multiple lifetimes to achieve it. Although there is no mobility within a single lifetime, how the individual accepts and lives during that life will determine the level for the next reincarnation.

Buddhist concepts of the soul, reincarnation, and karma differ in important ways. Buddhists do not believe in an immortal soul or a conscious personality that continues on. What is referred to as a soul, Buddhism conceives of as a combination of five mental and physical aggregates: the physical body, feelings, understandings, will, and consciousness. These make up the human personality, and this is what is caught up in the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

The Four Noble Truths state that life is imperfect and inevitably involves suffering. This suffering originates in our desires but will cease if all desires cease. The way to do this and to achieve release from the cycle is to follow the Eightfold Path, which consists of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right

meditation. A person who does this can achieve Nirvana. The goal of Buddhism is not to go to some blissful heaven, but to extinguish desire and craving and escape from the suffering of this life.

Buddhists also have the concept of karma, the belief that all of one's actions, good or bad, help create one's personality. This process continues even after death. Rebirth is seen as the transmission of karma. Buddha compared this process to a flame that passes from one candle to the next. However, it is only the flame of karma that is passed on, not a continuous personality. The Wheel of Life (Figure 8.1) shows the thirty-one planes of existence, conceived of by some Buddhists as psychological metaphors and by others as reality. These planes of existence include hells, hungry ghosts (beings tormented by unsatisfied desires), animals, humans, and gods. Humans proceed around and around this wheel, repeatedly experiencing suffering, unless we are freed into Nirvana. Following on the flame metaphor, *Nirvana* means to extinguish, or to put out the flame of the candle.



Figure 8.1 The Wheel of Life. A painting of the Wheel of Life on a monastery wall in Tibet.

Ancestors

One possible fate for a soul is that it becomes part of the group of supernatural beings that are important to the living: **ancestors**. Writers have often used the term *ancestor worship* to describe the beliefs and behaviors surrounding the veneration of ancestors. However, the use of the term *worship* is falling out of favor because a number of researchers think that the ancestors are respected and attended to but not really "worshipped."

The importance of ancestors to a culture is a reflection of the importance of kinship, generally kinship beyond the immediate family. Even after death a person is still a valued member of the kinship group, one who reinforces ideas

of social roles and contributes to social harmony and social solidarity. In some cultures the ancestors act as a moral force, punishing their descendants for misbehavior.

However, not all souls become ancestors—or at least not ancestors who receive any ritual attention. For example, in societies in which descent is figured through men, mainly males may become ancestors. If a woman in such a culture were to become an ancestor, this would be determined by her relationship to a man, for example, by marriage or through her children. Although most ritual activity concerning ancestors is a family matter, in Africa it is common for the ancestors of chiefs or kings to be considered responsible for things that concern the entire community, such as rain, and therefore will be recognized by everyone.

Yoruba ancestors

Among the Yoruba of West Africa, ancestors play very important roles in the continued welfare of their descendants, and much of their religious practice, including the maintenance of shrines and the performance of rituals, are centered on them.

The Yoruba identify two broad classes of ancestors: family ancestors and deified ancestors. Of those who die, only a limited number become family ancestors. Ancestors are individuals who led noteworthy lives while alive. They lived to an old age and lived a good life, and their descendants are willing to perform the required rituals. It is one of the most important tasks of the family head to perform proper rituals for the family ancestors. The maintenance of good relations with the ancestors is important for the continued well-being of the family, for the ancestors possess power to bring good or ill to their descendants. The ancestors provide guidance and protection for the family but will punish family members who do not behave as they should and do not fulfill their obligations to the dead. Deified ancestors are those with great powers and are worshipped at shrines throughout the region. In fact, such ancestors may be thought of as gods with human origins.

The *egungun* are spirits who have traveled from the land of the dead to

visit the living. In ritual the ancestors are often represented by the *egungun* dancers, who become conduits between the living and the ancestors. An *egungun* dancer is a man who wears a long grass robe and a wood mask with a human or animal face. Several days after a funeral, the *egungun* goes to the house in which the person has died and tells the relatives that the deceased has arrived in the land of the dead. Food is then given to the *egungun* and his followers.

On death an individual travels to the land of the dead. If the person has been good in life, he or she will lead a pleasant existence, but those who behaved badly will suffer. One of the rewards of living a good life is to be remembered. As long as they are remembered, dead people are able to act as intermediaries between the gods and the family. The ancestors often contact their living family in dreams or through the aid of the *egungun. Egungun* may appear at times when the family needs advice and at the annual festival.

Beng ancestors and reincarnation

In some societies the soul travels to a new home; in others the soul is recycled into another being. When a person dies among the Beng of West Africa, the soul becomes a spirit that travels to *wrugbe,* one of many invisible spirit villages. After a while, the spirit is reborn as a human baby, although the spirit continues to exist as an ancestor. The individual exists both as a reincarnated being on earth and, at the same time, as an ancestral spirit.

Every individual born is a reincarnation of an ancestor. Sometimes the identity of the ancestor is known. In the case of a child born on the same day a family member dies, the newborn is thought to be an instant reincarnation of the deceased. Knowing which ancestor has been reincarnated in a particular newborn has important consequences, because it is assumed that the child has the same personality traits of the ancestor and is treated as such. Most often, however, the identity of the ancestor remains unknown.

People are able to travel to *wrugbe* in their dreams to consult with ancestors. The ancestors also live with the family. At night a bowl of food is prepared for the ancestors and the family and the ancestors sleep together. They return to *wrugbe* during the day.

When a baby is born, the spirit does not move from *wrugbe* to this world all at once, but emerges over a period of several years. This emergence does not even begin until the umbilical cord falls off. A mixture of herbs is placed on the cord to dry it out so it will fall off sooner and the infant can begin to move from *wrugbe* into the living world. If an infant should die before the cord falls off, there is no funeral or public recognition of the death because the child's spirit had never entered the world of the living.

During early childhood, the child's consciousness is sometimes in this life and sometimes in *wrugbe.* The parents do not want the child's soul to return to *wrugbe,* so they do what they can to make the child's life as attractive as possible. If a child is crying or uncomfortable, the child is thought to be homesick for *wrugbe.* The child attempts to communicate with the parents, but the parents do not understand the babbling. So a diviner is called. Usually the diviner suggests that a cowry shell, coin, or other piece of jewelry be given to the child.

Tana Toraja ancestors

The Tana Toraja are a horticultural people living in small villages growing rice and raising water buffalo and pigs in the mountains of Sulawesi, Indonesia. Ritually, their world is divided into the smoke-ascending part and the smoke-descending part. This division exists in both the physical and supernatural worlds. The smoke-ascending part is associated with the rising sun in the east, the *deata,* and health and fertility rituals. The *deata* are gods and spirits that are associated with nature. They are found in mountains and rivers, trees and animals, and the roofs of houses; they exist in the stars, clouds, rain, and mist. The smoke-descending dominion includes the *nene* or ancestors and the *bombo* or souls of people who have recently died. This realm is associated with the setting sun in the west and with death rituals. Through ritual the *bombo* are transformed into *nene*, and the *nene* can be transformed into *deata*.

The smoke-ascending and smoke-descending realms must be kept separate, and this requirement lies at the heart of much of Torajan ritual. Ritual also includes the offering of food, such as rice, and the sacrifice of animals. This

ritual activity is known as "feeding the gods." It pleases the gods, and they will, in turn, come to the aid of the people.

The Torajans clearly separate physical death from social death. The definition of the moment of death in a modern industrial society has been made difficult because of life-prolonging machines (Box 8.2). For example, the brain might cease functioning, but the heart is kept artificially beating. In Torajan society physical death is associated with the cessation of breathing and heartbeat. Yet it is not as simple as that because when breathing and heartbeat cease, when physical death has occurred, social death has not, for death is stretched out over an extended period of time. This is a good example of how culture reinterprets natural events—in this case, death. When a person is physically dead, the individual is not said to have died, but is said to have a fever or to be sleeping. This knowledge is important because at this point, all smoke-ascending rituals are forbidden. To the Tana Toraja, the act of dying is a process whereby the *bombo* (soul) begins to separate from the physical body.

Box 8.2 Determining death

Determining when a person is dead is not as simple as it seems. Such a determination is a cultural interpretation of a series of biological events. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many people feared that they would be declared dead when they in fact were not. Some coffins of the time were outfitted with pull cords attached to outside bells so that if a person was buried alive, they could signal those on the outside by pulling on the cord. This fear of being buried alive lessened with the development of new technologies, such as the stethoscope.

The modern debate on the determination of death has focused on the heart versus the brain. Are you dead if you have no brain activity but your heart is still beating? This debate has been influenced by the question "Which is the seat of the soul: the heart or the brain?" Modern medicine has defined death as the cessation of brain activity, leading to the existence of "beating-heart cadavers" from which organs can be procured for transplantation into another individual. However, many families still deny consent for organ donation, fearing that the person is

not really dead yet. Although the EEG prevents misdiagnosis of brain death, people have difficulty seeing someone whose heart is beating as really being dead. Thousands of people are on waiting lists for organ donation, and many die each year while waiting for organs to become available.

Another interesting phenomenon associated with organ donation is the claim by some heart transplant recipients that they take on some of the qualities or personality traits of the donor. Such a belief is clearly rooted in cultural beliefs about the soul.

The social pronouncement of death does not take place for weeks and, in the case of very important people, even years. The dead body is wrapped in a cloth or put in a wood coffin and placed along the south wall of the house with the head to the west, which is the direction that is associated with smoke-descending rituals. The corpse, which may or may not be partially embalmed, is said to be asleep. During this time the decaying body is still referred to as a person with a fever. Offerings of food and drink are made to the dead person. People greet the dead person when they enter the house, and they converse with the dead, keeping him or her up to date about what is happening to the family and the community. During this time the *bombo* of the deceased stays close by and watches the preparations for its funeral. Soon the *bombo* has the power to cause trouble or to bring blessings to the family.

Torajan funeral rites are complex and important smoke-descending rituals that move the *bombo* into the next world, where it is transformed into a *nene* (ancestor). At the start of the funeral the sound of a gong formally announces the death. Sacrifices are made, and the body is moved to the west wall with its head pointing south, which is the direction in which it will travel to the afterlife.

The next day, the body is wrapped in cloth, and an effigy is made on which the family hangs the personal possessions of the deceased. A few weeks later the body leaves the house along with a water buffalo, household items, and provisions for the soul's journey. The body is moved toward the burial site along with the effigy, which is usually a frame of bamboo but is carved of wood for an important person. Now the rituals begin that will separate the physical corpse from the *bombo.* The buffalo is sacrificed, and the corpse is

buried in a limestone cliff. If the effigy is carved of wood, it is placed on a ledge in the cliff along with other effigy figures.

The soul has now become an ancestor, and it begins its journey southward to Puya with the guardian buffalo. However, suicides, lepers, and people who did not play according to the rules of society are not allowed to enter Puya. The life of a *nene* in Puya is very much like one's life while breathing. The *nene* has the same social rank as in life and is still wealthy or poor. The *nene* keeps an eye on the family to be sure that the family is being properly honored. The *nene* has the power to bring aid and blessings as well as harm.

Sometime after the funeral the descendants perform the rituals to transform the *nene* into a *deata* (god). Whereas the *nene* lives in the smoke-descending realm, the *deata* moves to the smoke-ascending realm. The *deata* joins the other spirits in the trees, mists, and sky and continues to watch over its descendants, who continue to offer sacrifices.

Ancestors and the departed in Japan

In Japan, household-level religious activities have been the main means of contacting the supernatural. Understanding the structure and importance of the household is essential to understanding relationships between the living and the dead. The household is a corporate group that ideally will exist perpetually from the time of its founding. One becomes a member of a household through kinship, but an individual may be rejected if they are seen as unsuitable. There are four key household roles for the living: the master and mistress of the house, the heir and his bride. If any of these roles are empty, the household is essentially incomplete and the roles should ideally be filled, often by recruiting someone from the outside. Marriage alone does not create a new line. For example, if the mistress dies before the birth of an heir, her soul is believed to return to the household in which she was born.

On death, the body is disposed of within a few days and the soul enters a period of uncertainty. As in many other cultures, the soul is polluted by death and becomes potentially dangerous. The soul may wander for many weeks before it is purified and made safe by a series of rituals. These rituals usually end forty-nine days after the death, although occasionally the living feel it

necessary to do additional rituals after this time. The soul then enters the clean and peaceful world of the deceased and the ancestors.

David Plath made a distinction for Japanese souls between the departed and the ancestors.[7] The departed are generally household members who died in recent memory. When a person dies, a tablet is prepared and is preserved and displayed in the house on a shelf or cabinet reserved for that use. The deceased is remembered as an individual and the anniversary of the person's death date will be celebrated until no one is left who knew that person alive. At this time, the departed person will be retired to the ranks of the ancestors and the personal tablet is destroyed.

Ancestors are thus dead regular household members that are not in living memory. Included in this category are the founder of the household and people who were regular members of the household at death. Any people born into the household, but who married out, were adopted out, or left to start a new household are not included. The ancestors usually share a single generic tablet, remembered more as a collective than as individuals.

As in other cultures, the dead in Japan are seen as a moral force. However, they operate as moral authorities, not moral agents. The living strive to do well in life so they will not be ashamed to stand before the dead. Although the dead do sometimes intervene in the affairs of the living, this intervention is usually mild. In case of family misfortune, the family usually turns first to divination, suspecting something wrong with the physical structure of the house. Only if the misfortune continues are the dead suspected. The dead, though, are also a source of security and comfort. They are seen as generally friendly and supportive, and the relationship between the living and dead is ideally one of mutual affection and gratitude.

The souls in the category of the departed are interacted with as individuals and are treated as though they were alive. For example, the living will prepare favorite foods or gather favorite flowers. This is done at any time but is most common on the departed person's death-day anniversary. The souls are seen as being close by and accessible to the living. They can be contacted at the household shelf of tablets, the graveyard, and other places. However, they also return for a Midsummer holiday that is seen as a reunion for the living and dead. At the end of the holiday they are believed to be going off on a great journey. They are always present, but also are seen as coming and going from

periodic household gatherings.

Although the dead in some cultures are seen as a conservative force, this is not the case in Japan. The emphasis is not on behaving in very specific ways that existed in the past, but on behaving in ways that will help continue the household line.

Bodies and souls

As we have seen, the concept of the soul is intimately connected with death. Although the soul animates the living body, the soul also has a life beyond that of the physical. In this section we will look at cases in which the soul and body are disconnected but one or the other remains closely connected with the world of the living. These include ghosts, vampires, and zombies.

Ghosts

The distinction between a soul and a **ghost** is not always a clear one. They are both manifestations of an individual after death. A soul is essentially good. It might hover around its corpse and the family after death, but eventually it goes somewhere else or is reincarnated. However, souls can bring misfortunate to the family if they are neglected or the family fails to perform the appropriate funeral rituals. By contrast, a ghost is essentially a negative force and tends to remain in the vicinity of the community. Ghosts can bring about illness and other misfortune; therefore, they have to be dealt with.

Dani ghosts

When someone among the Dani of New Guinea dies, a supernatural element called the *mogat* leaves the body. The *mogat* remains near the community and the family and becomes a ghost.

Dani ghosts will alert the community to enemy raids, thereby performing a service. However, ghosts are generally troublesome, and they are held responsible for a wide range of misfortunes, including accidents and illnesses of both people and pigs. The Dani are reluctant to travel in the dark for fear of being accosted by ghosts. However, these problems can be dealt with by rituals designed to placate the ghost, and, in truth, the Dani show more fear of ghosts in stories than they do in their everyday activities.

A major function of a funeral is to make the ghost happy and to keep it away from the community. The ghost of a person who has been killed in war is especially dangerous. It must be given a "fresh-blood" funeral, which is much more elaborate than the regular funeral given for a person who dies in other ways. The ghost of a person who is killed in war is also placated by the killing of an enemy.

There are many ways to keep ghosts happy and to control the negative influence of ghosts. An essential element in Dani ceremonies is the killing of pigs during feasts, and food is always given to the ghosts. (Although the food, especially pork, is set aside for the ghosts, eventually someone will eat the ghosts' share.) The Dani build small structures called ghost houses in several locations both within and outside the village as places where the ghosts can live.

Bunyoro ghosts

The Bunyoro live in the East Africa Cattle culture area and many of their religious activities center on relationships with ghosts. Ghosts are one of three significant causes of illness, the others being sorcery and the activities of spirits. When illness strikes, a Bunyoro will use the services of a diviner to determine the cause of the illness. If the misfortune is due to a ghost, the diviner will then proceed to identify the ghost. Generally, a ghost causes trouble for someone who is close to it and who has offended it in some way. A ghost will bring misfortune to that individual's relatives and descendants as well.

The Bunyoro ghost is the disembodied spirit of a person who has died. It is a transformation of the soul. It is seen as being left by a deceased person but

not being the deceased person per se. Unlike ghosts in Western cultures, Bunyoro ghosts are never seen except in dreams. Ghosts are essentially evil and are associated with the underworld as well as with specific places, such as their graves. However, on the positive side, a ghost of a man may come to the aid of his son and descendants.

There are many ways in which a person can deal with ghosts. For example, there are techniques for capturing ghosts, and once captured, the ghost can be destroyed or removed from the community. Other rituals keep the ghost away from the family. However, many ghosts remain in the community and will periodically possess a victim or a close relative, thereby entering into direct communication with the living. Often the ghost will form a relationship with a living person, who will periodically sacrifice a goat to it and build a special ghost hut for it to live in.

The belief in ghosts plays an important role in Bunyoro society. It gives the Bunyoro an explanation for things that happen, such as illness, as well as methods, through ritual, of dealing with these problems. The Bunyoro also believe that a ghost will cause trouble if it was treated poorly while living. This belief encourages people to behave properly toward family members so as to avoid problems after that person dies.

Japanese ghosts

Japanese religious practice is a complex mixture of folk beliefs, Buddhist, Shinto, and Taoist influences and influences from cultures outside of Japan, especially China. Throughout Japan, there is a belief in a variety of supernatural beings, the less savory ones including what Western writers call ghosts, demons, and goblins, among others. Not only are these spirits found among the peasants of the countryside, but they also appear in urban centers and have been immortalized in plays and art.

Many Japanese believe that at death an individual is transformed into an impure spirit. At specified intervals over the next seven years the family performs various rituals of purification as the spirit becomes an ancestral spirit. As an ancestral spirit, it watches over the family and helps in time of crisis. However, during the seven-year period the impure spirit floats between

the land of the living and the land of the dead. During this time it is important that the family perform the required rituals and make offerings; if this is not done, the spirit will hover close to the living, often in the form of a ghost, and cause misfortune. Also, if an individual dies under conditions of great emotional stress, the spirit will remain in the world of the living as a ghost and haunt the individuals who are responsible for its anguish. Many folktales tell of murder victims and unrequited lovers who are so distraught at the moment of death that they remain on earth as ghosts.

Ghosts are frequently depicted in traditional Japanese art. For example, some drawings show a female ghost:

> with long straight hair and waving or beckoning hands. Pale clothing with long, flowing sleeves was draped loosely about the seemingly fragile figure, and the head and upper part of the body were strongly delineated. From the waist down, however, the form was misty and tapered into nothingness.[8]

The living dead: vampires and zombies

Stories of resurrection from death are found in the mythology of many religious traditions. From the Egyptian god Osiris, the Hebrew prophet Elijah, who could raise the dead and is himself expected to return, to Lazarus and Jesus, stories are told of those who die but later return to life. In these examples the individual is seen as special and the resurrection has great religious significance. In other cases, the dead returning to life is more ordinary. The resurrection can be seen as positive, as when a person is allowed to return to life to comfort her family. Or it can be seen as negative, as when a person returns to life to bring about death and destruction. In this section we will look at examples of the latter, namely vampires and zombies. Both are familiar creatures in the United States where countless books, movies, television shows, and video games feature vampires and zombies as their main characters. However, the folk beliefs that underlie these creatures are often quite different from popular renditions.

Vampires

Much of Western vampire lore is largely based on Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula,* published in 1897. Stoker based his book loosely on the historical figure of Vlad Tepes, or Vlad the Impaler, but made numerous changes. Tepes was a Romanian prince, not a count, who ruled in Walachia, not Transylvania, and who was never viewed as a vampire by the local population. In fact, Tepes is a local hero to many in Romania. More recently, vampires have been the focus of many popular books and movies, including the Twilight and Sookie Stackhouse series that portray vampires as dangerous but romantic figures.

The **vampire** is a creature that was considered to be real throughout much of Europe, primarily in parts of Eastern Europe, and they bear little resemblance to the depictions in these novels. Vampires were more likely to be shabbily dressed peasants than elegant counts and were certainly not seen as romantic in any way. So who or what is a vampire? A vampire was believed to be someone who had recently died but who had returned to bring death to others.

The interest in vampires and the documentation of cases of vampirism began in the eighteenth century when parts of Serbia and Walachia were turned over to Austria. Austrian patrol officials began recording the local custom of exhuming dead bodies and "killing" them. An important case comes from the Serbian village of Medvegia in the 1730s. The following is a translated report of the case:

> [A] local haiduk [a type of soldier] named Arnold Paole broke his neck in a fall from a hay wagon. This man had, during his lifetime, often revealed that, near Gossowa in Turkish Serbia, he had been troubled by a vampire, wherefore he had eaten from the earth of the vampire's grave and smeared himself with the vampire's blood, in order to be free of the vexation he had suffered. In twenty or thirty days after his death some people complained they were being bothered by this same Arnold Paole; and in fact four people were killed by him. In order to end this evil, they dug up this Arnold Paole forty days after his death … and they found that he was quite complete and undecayed, and that fresh blood had flowed from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears; that the shirt, the covering, and the coffin were completely bloody; that the old nails on his hands and feet, along with the skin, had fallen off, and that new ones had grown; and since they saw from this that he was a true vampire, they drove a stake through his heart, according to their custom, whereby he gave an audible groan and bled copiously.[9]

In reality, much of the evidence for the return of Paole and others as vampires can be easily explained by anyone with knowledge of how corpses

decompose. For example, as the corpse decays, it becomes bloated with gas. This results in a red coloration of the skin and the appearance of a full abdomen. The gas also pushes blood into the mouth. When the villagers staked Paole and reported that he groaned, what they most likely heard was the release of this gas. Although his corpse appeared not to have decomposed, this also is not unusual. Corpses actually decay at varying rates, and burial itself delays decomposition. In fact, all decomposing bodies would show these "vampire" features. However, only the bodies of those suspected of vampirism were ever dug up and "killed."

Paul Barber points out that the people who were most likely to be labeled vampires were those who were considered difficult, unpopular, or great sinners during their lifetime.[10] He suggests that a belief in vampires provided an explanation for unexplained deaths, especially from epidemic diseases and other unfortunate events. Even better than just an explanation, the attribution of misfortune to vampirism also provided a course of action: the vampire could be "killed."

Vampires in New England

Vampire beliefs were fairly widespread throughout Europe and came with early settlers to North America. Folklorist Michael Bell in his book *Food for the Dead* has documented several cases of vampire beliefs in New England, dating from 1793 to as late as the 1890s.[11]

New England vampire beliefs revolved around consumption, the old name for tuberculosis. The term *consumption* comes from the observation that those who were ill appeared to "waste away," yet at the same time they showed a fierce will to live. This is reflected in the folk belief that the vampire's desire for sustenance drives it to feed off of its living relatives causing the wasting away.

The death of a family member from tuberculosis was frequently followed by further deaths within the family. The disease is readily transmitted among people living under crowded conditions such as was common in rural New England farms in the nineteenth century. One of the first to die was thought to return to cause illness and death in family members. Something had to be

done to stop it.

One strategy was to dig up the body of the supposed vampire and destroy it, usually by burning. In 1854 in Connecticut, a man was dying following the death of his father and two older brothers. Friends exhumed the bodies of the deceased brothers and burned the bodies next to their graves. Sometimes the smoke from the burning was used as a medicine. In 1827 in Rhode Island the remains of a young girl were exhumed and her body burned while members of the family gathered around and inhaled the smoke to prevent further illness. Drinking a mixture of ashes from the burning and water was sometimes seen as a cure.

Archaeological evidence of vampires in Poland

An important source of information about the lives of people living in the past is found in the archaeological analysis of cemeteries. Skeletons provide much information about the people and the cultural practices associated with burial. Many burial customs have been interpreted as shielding the community from evil influenced associated with the dead. Such practices are referred to as **apotropaic practices**.

Between 2008 and 2012 archaeologists recovered 285 skeletons from a seventeenth-and eighteenth-century cemetery located near the village of Drawsko in northwestern Poland.[12] Five skeletons were found with a sickle placed across the throat or abdomen (Figure 8.2). If the body were to rise from the grave, the sickle would decapitate or eviscerate it. Two skeletons had large stones beneath their chins, thought to prevent the dead from biting others or to feed on the living. These folk customs are associated with beliefs in vampires.



Figure 8.2 Vampire burial. Skeleton of a 30–39-year-old female buried at Drawsko, Poland, in the seventeenth to eighteenth century. A sickle was placed across the throat of the body at the time of burial, an example of an apotropaic practice.

The six skeletons were not segregated from the other burials. Biochemical analysis confirms that they were not outsiders but members of the community. We do not know why these practices were associated with these particular individuals.

In Poland a small minority of souls were thought to become transformed into vampires. These would be individuals who were somehow different from the typical member of the community. Perhaps they possessed some unusual physical feature, committed suicide, were unbaptized, or were born out of wedlock. Also at risk of becoming a vampire was the first person to die in an epidemic, as they were seen as the cause of the epidemic. During the time that the cemetery was in use there was a series of cholera epidemics in the region. The use of apotropaics was thought to prevent reanimation of the corpse.

Similar practices have been found in burial sites from as early as the tenth

century in many areas including the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Italy, Slovakia, and Greece. Other customs associated with vampire burials include decapitation, dismemberment, hammering a stake or nails into the body, placing stones on the body, binding limbs, and the burning of the body.

Haitian zombies

Although **zombies** are known from other cultures, they are most closely associated with Haiti and the religion of Vodou (Chapter 11). In contrast to vampires, who are believed to bring death and are therefore feared, Haitian zombies themselves are not to be feared. The fear associated with zombies is the fear of being made into one. Zombies are seen as soulless creatures, animated for a life of slavery on a plantation.

There are a few documented cases that, although controversial, seem to show that zombification actually occurs. These involve people whose death and burial were documented and who were then observed to return. On the basis of these cases a Haitian psychiatrist named Dr. Lamarque Douyon requested the help of an ethnobotanist to track down the zombie powder. Dr. Douyon thought that the victim was given a drug that made him or her appear to be dead. After the burial the person who had administered the powder would dig up and revive the victim. Dr. Douyon received help from Wade Davis, then a graduate student at Harvard University. Davis's account of his research was published in 1985 in the book *The Serpent and the Rainbow,* which was later made into a movie.[13]

Davis claims that he was able to acquire some of the zombie powder and analyze it. The key ingredient turned out to be pieces of dried puffer fish. Puffer fish is considered a delicacy in Japan, where only specially licensed chefs are allowed to prepare it owing to the poisonous nature of the fish. A small amount of the poison is considered exhilarating. It causes tingling of the spine, prickling of the lips and tongue, and euphoria. Still, several dozen Japanese people every year get tetrodotoxin poisoning from eating puffer fish, and some die. A victim of this kind of poisoning is likely to make a full recovery if he or she survives the first few hours. So why do Haitian poisoning victims end up zombies but Japanese victims do not?

Davis pointed out the importance of cultural context and expectations. Haitians who practice Vodou believe that it is possible for a powerful priest to control the part of the soul known as *ti-bonaj*, discussed earlier. This soul is associated with a person's personality and individuality. When the person's *ti-bonaj* is captured, the person is deprived of will, and his or her body can be held as a slave. These beliefs are necessary underpinnings to the zombification phenomenon. Davis also suggested that the threat of zombification is used as a social control mechanism.

Davis's theory is very controversial, as are some of his research methods. Some question whether he paid for the zombie powder and participated in the exhumation of the corpse. Even more damaging is the inability of others to find tetrodotoxin in samples of the powder or to verify how the powder would work. In all, Davis's work remains unproven but provides an interesting hypothesis.

Zombies in contemporary culture

The U.S. military occupation of Haiti (1915–1934) brought an awareness of Haitian culture and Vodou. By 1932 the first American zombie horror movie, *White Zombie*, had been released. The movie with the largest impact on portrayals of zombies though is George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Romero portrayed zombies not as driven by a Vodou priest to work but instead as driven to eat flesh, starting the popular cultural association of zombies and eating brains.

Supernatural figures reflect our contemporary fears and anxieties. With zombies, we see both a fear of losing our individuality to become part of the zombie horde and apocalyptic themes based on anxieties about the government and large corporations. Zombies are often said to have been created due to radiation or government or corporate experiments gone awry, such as in the movie and games *Resident Evil*. The general movie or video game scenario pits a small group of heroes against the encroaching zombie horde, often part of a larger societal collapse or conflict. The classic video game *Wolfenstein 3D,* for example, pits the player against zombie Nazis during World War II. Unlike Haitian zombies, the modern zombie is a

monster who can be killed guilt-free. In 2016, the South Korean zombie movie *Train to Busan* broke numerous box office records. In the film, the crew does what a businessman tells them to rather than rescue passengers, and the government covers up the truth. The theme of corporate callousness reflects cultural concerns in South Korea, particularly following the incident in 2014 when a ferry boat overturned killing 300 people, mainly teenagers, a tragedy blamed on corporate greed.

Zombies have seen a cultural resurgence in recent years, surpassing even vampires in their popularity. Unlike vampires who only threaten one individual at a time and have often been cast as romantic figures, zombies menace the entire human race and are portrayed as mindless, shambling, and decaying. An element of comedy is also often present in modern zombie portrayals. Many movies, such as *Shaun of the Dead*, combine comedy and horror into what Bruce Campbell, star of the movie *Evil Dead*, termed "splatstick." The popularity of the mash-up novel *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies* and the game *Plants vs. Zombies* are further examples.

Death rituals

Death rituals or funerals can be thought of as rites of passage whereby an individual moves from the status of living to that of dead (or another post-death state such as ancestor). The loss of a member of the community, especially an important member, can be very traumatic. We can think of a death as a disruption of the social fabric of the family and community that needs to be mended. Death rituals also provide a way of channeling behavior in what can be a highly emotional state. Funeral rituals provide explanations for death and for what happens after death. In these functions, funerals are acting very much like social rites of intensification.

However, death rituals differ in many ways from other rites of passage. One of the most striking features is the presence of the body of the deceased. Even if the body does not play a role in the ritual itself, it is present, and something must be done with it.

Funeral rituals

Funerals permit and channel expressions of grief. All people feel grief, but it can be manifested in many ways. In some societies there are specific times when it is appropriate to express grief and times when it is not. Some societies, including British and U.S. societies, emphasize control of one's emotions. Grieving is often done privately, not in public, even at the funeral service. The length of time that is set aside for grieving is often limited, and after a period of time, the close relatives are expected to once again take up their lives. Even when grieving is publicly conducted and is very boisterous, it is still limited in time, and its expression is culturally channeled.

Among the Murngin of Australia funeral rituals actually begin before death. The family and community gather around the dying person and begin to wail and sing song cycles to comfort the dying. The songs also provide instructions to the soul so that it will make it to the totemic well and not cause difficulties for the family. Although some of the emotional energy of the men is directed toward revenge for the death (death is usually caused by sorcery or fighting), grief is more explicitly expressed by the women, who take sharp sticks or stone knives and cut their heads so that they bleed.

Earlier, we described the funeral rituals of the Torajans of Indonesia as part of the discussion of ancestors. Here we have a good example of the cultural expression of grief and how the outward expression of grief does not always coincide with the internal emotion of grief. In Tana Toraja there is a strong cultural pressure not to show one's emotions and to keep sadness and anger hidden from others. The Torajans believe that such emotions are bad for one's health and are disruptive to interpersonal relationships. However, in the context of death, Torajans can and are expected to express grief.

When the corpse is kept in the house between the time the person physically dies and the beginning of the funeral, wailing does not occur, and the family remains calm. When the funeral finally begins, which might be several months later, there are particular times when it is appropriate to cry and wail. Wailing is loud and expresses both grief and sympathy for the family of the deceased. Wailing occurs when people are near the body or an effigy figure, and they sometimes cover their faces and touch the body.

Funerals are for both the living and the dead. Frequently, the fate of the

soul depends on the proper rituals being performed correctly by the family. Thus while rituals may comfort the living, they may explicitly function to move the soul out of the community to some other place, such as a "land of the dead."

Often the most important issues are to protect the living by separating the living from the dead and to move the soul away from the living community so that it cannot cause harm. There are many ways in which living and dead are separated. Often the personal property of the deceased is destroyed. This eliminates anything that might attract the soul and encourage it to stay. The Nuer, a pastoralist group in East Africa, quickly bury the body and obliterate the grave so that the soul cannot find its body and therefore will leave. Other ways of moving the soul are to frighten it with firecrackers, as was done in China, or to build some type of barrier that ghosts will not cross.

The need to protect the community from ghosts is made very explicit in funeral rituals of the Dani of New Guinea. Karl Heider describes a Dani funeral and writes: "In every way, explicit as well as implicit, the funeral acts shout out to the ghosts: 'See this! See what we do for you!' And then, although this part is not so often said in words: 'Now go away and leave us in peace!'"[14]

Disposal of the body

The focal point of most funeral rituals is the corpse, and one of the most important activities in a funeral is the process of disposing of it. In some societies it is truly a disposal, for it is thought that as long as the body is intact, the soul will not leave. In some cultures burial takes place quickly, often within twenty-four hours; in others the body may be kept for several days or even longer before burial. This is especially true if some type of preservation is practiced and the body plays an integral part in the ritual.

Burial

Perhaps the most common means of disposing of a body is burial. In analyzing

burials, there are many variables that we can look at, such as where the body is buried. Often there is a sacred place for burials, such as a cemetery or cave. A cemetery may be restricted to a particular ethnic group or social class or people characterized by a particular cultural feature such as occupation or cause of death. Warriors who die in battle or women who die in childbirth are often buried in special areas. (Many modern cultures provide special cemeteries for members of the military, for example, or for those who died in a specific war, such as World War II cemeteries.) Some cemeteries contain unmarked graves; others contain very elaborate tombs. However, bodies are not always placed in special places. Often they are buried near the house or even under the floor of the house. This occurs frequently when the soul becomes an ancestor and the family wishes to keep the ancestor close by.

The body can be simply wrapped in a blanket or cloth, and sometimes the blanket or cloth has special designs and may be prepared early in life. The body can be placed in a wood coffin of various shapes and designs or in a pottery vessel. The position of the body may be influenced by the size and shape of the container. A body can be stretched out in a coffin (most frequently on its back but sometimes on its side or stomach) but would be bound in a fetal position if placed in a pottery vessel. Sometimes the body is oriented in a particular direction with the head often positioned in the direction of some sacred place.

Often the body is prepared in some way before being placed in a container or in the ground. The body may be decorated or clad in special clothing. Sometimes the body is painted. Grave goods may be placed in the grave, ranging from simple mementos to elaborate grave goods. And the grave goods may include sacrificed animals or sacrificed people.

The African Burial Ground

Much of our knowledge of history comes from written documents. Written records, however, document only a few segments of society, usually the important and literate, and those activities, such as shipping, that require that careful records be kept. Answering specific historical questions will send the researcher to archives, genealogical records, and old newspapers. But what

about the uneducated, the poor, and the disenfranchised? Although they might have played important roles in society, their very existence remains poorly documented.

For example, we normally do not think of slavery in northern cities, yet slaves in New York City in the eighteenth century made up a significant portion of the population at that time. And people died and needed to be buried. People of European ancestry built churches with adjacent cemeteries within the city limits, but those on the fringes of society, such as slaves, had to bury their dead on land outside of the city limits that was set aside for this purpose.

A cemetery containing the remains of slaves was discovered in New York City in 1991 when contractors started to excavate a lot for a new government office building in lower Manhattan. Located at Broadway and Reade Street, it is known today as the African Burial Ground. This cemetery dates from the eighteenth century and was in use until 1795. At this time it was located several miles outside the limits of a city that was considerably smaller than it is today. Over 400 skeletons were removed for analysis and later reburied.

Besides the skeletons themselves, there is much evidence of cultural practices. Many of the teeth have been filed and modified in some way, a custom that was common in western and central African cultures. Most, but not all, of the bodies were buried in wooden coffins. The most common artifacts recovered were shroud pins, which held together the cloth used to wrap the bodies. Some cultural items were placed into the coffin with the body, including jewelry, glass beads, and coins.

The coffins were oriented with the heads to the west. We do not know exactly what this means, but several explanations have been suggested, including a belief that on the Day of Judgment the bodies would sit upright in their graves with their eyes to the east, the direction of the rising sun and the direction of Africa, their homeland. Although only about 400 graves were excavated, it has been estimated that as many as 10,000 people were buried in the cemetery throughout the eighteenth century. The government office building was never constructed on the site, and the lot has been turned into a memorial park.

Secondary burials

Funeral rituals sometimes include two burials. The first takes place at death and involves burial or some other disposition of the body. The **secondary burial** takes place at a later time, perhaps months or years later. This second phase often marks the end of the mourning period and commonly involves digging up, processing, and reburying the body in some way. This is sometimes related to conceptions of the soul and the idea that what happens to the body mirrors or in some way affects what happens to the soul after death.

Among the Murngin of Australia, each kin group is associated with one or more sacred water holes, where totemic spirits live (Chapter 3). The spirit comes out of the water hole, often in a father's dream, and asks the father to point out its mother; the spirit then enters its mother's womb. If a baby dies, its spirit returns to the water hole, becomes a spirit once again, and waits to be reborn. When an adult dies, the spirit returns to the totemic well, where it will always remain a spirit, never again to be reborn.

After death has occurred, totemic designs are painted on the body, which becomes the centerpiece of singing and dancing. It is then carried to the grave. The grave is a symbol of the sacred well, and the body is placed into the grave, laid out straight with the face down. Then the grave is filled in.

After two or three months or more, the body is exhumed. Any remaining flesh is then removed from the bones, and the bones are washed. Some of the small bones, such as finger bones, are kept as **relics** by close relatives. The cleaned bones are placed on bark paper and made into a bundle. The bones are watched over for several months. A coffin is then made from a tree trunk that has been hollowed out by termites that is carved into its proper shape. The bones are broken up with a stone and placed into the log. The log is left to rot, and the bones are left to decay.

Cremation

Cremation is not as common as burial, yet many cultures practice cremation for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is a reaction against the process of

decay, which is thought to be a highly dangerous process. It is also a way to destroy the corpse so that the soul is cut off from its former body. In modern industrial societies cremation is becoming more popular as land becomes more and more valuable and crowded and less land is available for cemeteries. Also, cremation is more economical than burial, and cremation becomes more popular as the cost of burial increases.

Among the Yanomamö, after a person has died, the body is decorated. It is then brought to a pile of firewood that has been set up in the open area in the middle of the community, and the body is burned. The smoke from the fire is thought to be contaminating, and bows and arrows are washed afterward. Children and the ill leave the village while the body is being cremated to avoid contamination from the smoke. After cooling, bits of unburned bones and teeth are removed from the ashes and saved in a hollow log.

The Yanomamö are **endocannibalistic anthropophagers**. The term *endocannibalism* refers to the eating of one's own people, and *anthropophagers* refers to the eating of human bodies. (We have already seen the example of ritual eating of noncremated bodies among the Fore, described in Chapter 1.) The cremated bones are pulverized and placed into several small gourds. Later a series of memorial rituals will be performed in which the ground ashes from the gourds will be added to a plantain soup and consumed. The Yanomamö say they do this so that the dead will find a home in the bodies of the living. They are horrified by our unfeeling practice of leaving the dead to rot in the ground—a good example of cultural relativism.

Mummification

In some cultures, such as those that practice cremation, it is important to destroy the body to release the soul. Other cultures stress the importance of maintaining the integrity of the body after death. The practice of embalming is not intended so much to preserve the body for all time as to prevent decay during the funeral period and to permit the display of a lifelike body. Other peoples, however, stress the need to prevent decay of the flesh for all time. Besides embalming, some peoples smoke the body or preserve the body in salt or oil.

To the ancient Egyptians, death was the next step in a continuation of life. To participate in this new life, the body had to be preserved. The Egyptians developed a process of **mummification** that by New Kingdom times (ca. 1570–1070 BCE) was able to thoroughly preserve the body.

The process of mummification was complex and time-consuming and could be practiced in its complete form only for the important and wealthy. The first step was to thoroughly remove as much of the water in the body as possible by burying it in the mineral natron for seventy days. The internal organs were removed and preserved in jars, and the body cavity was filled with resin-soaked linen. The body was then wrapped in additional linen, and hot resin was painted on the wrapping to form a hard layer. Finally, the entire body was wrapped in a cast made of linen and plaster.

While mummification is usually associated with ancient Egypt, it appears that mummification was widely practiced in Britain during the Bronze Age (2200 to 750 BCE). However, this practice was quite crude when compared to the elaborate technology practiced in Egypt. While this kind of mummification delayed decomposition, eventually the flesh decayed away leaving only the skeleton. In a normal burial, bacteria from the gut create tiny holes in the bone. Microscopic analysis of mummified bones lack such holes since mummification prevented or slowed down this process. Analysis shows that only a small percentage of Bronze Age bodies were processed. Techniques included removal of the internal organs, smoking the body over a fire, or burial for a time in a peat bog, an environment very hostile to bacteria.

Exposure

Another possibility is to expose the body to the elements or to be consumed by animals. This very effectively and quickly reduces the body to just bones. In some cases the bones would then be collected for further processing or burial. Again the disposal method may reflect soul beliefs—in this case the belief that once the soul has departed the body, the physical body itself is unimportant. Among the Inuit, who live in the Arctic, exposure was largely done out of necessity, because the ground was unsuitable for burial and fuel was unavailable for cremation.

Some Native American societies placed the body up in a tree or on a high platform, where it would be exposed to the elements. Sometimes the body would be placed in a cave, and in the hot, arid climate of the American Southwest the body would become a natural mummy. In Tibet we find sky burials, in which the body was consumed by birds. Perhaps this type of body disposal developed because of the difficulty of digging a grave in the hard ground and the scarcity of fuel for cremation. For Tibetan Buddhists the practice is related to important concepts such as the impermanence of life and, through providing food for living creatures, generosity, compassion and the interrelatedness of all life.

U.S. death rituals in the nineteenth century

In the United States in the early nineteenth century a person would most likely die at home, especially in rural areas, surrounded by family, friends, clergy, and perhaps a physician. Death often was a public affair, and the "audience" showed concern about the medical and religious condition of the dying person.

Once death occurred, the close members of the family took responsibility for the preparation of the body for burial. This was done primarily by female family members rather than by a professional undertaker. The body was ritually washed and groomed, and a cloth or shroud was wrapped around the body. Finally, the corpse was placed in a coffin. The coffin was most likely made after death to the measurements of the person, although some people prepared shrouds and coffins for themselves before their death.

The body stayed in the home for one to three days in the parlor. Furniture was removed, mirrors were covered, and black crepe was hung. If the weather was warm, ice was often placed around the body to slow decay. Family members would keep a vigil by the body, and people would come to the house to view the body, recite sections from the Bible, socialize, and eat.

Finally, after a brief service the family and friends formed a procession, and the coffin was carried to the gravesite. Early in the century, especially in rural areas, the body would be buried on family land. However, as communities grew, burials more frequently occurred in cemeteries. If the distance between

the home and the cemetery was short, the coffin would be carried; later this was replaced by the hearse, a horse-drawn carriage specially built for this purpose that could be rented from a livery stable. Sometimes the procession stopped at a church for a public funeral service and perhaps a final viewing of the body before continuing on to the graveyard. The body would finally be buried in the ground or placed into an aboveground tomb.

Things changed during the Civil War, during which more than 600,000 men died. (This is a very large number, especially when compared with the 57,777 who died during the Vietnam War and the 405,399 who died in World War II.) After a battle there were so many corpses that it was not possible to give them the respectful treatment that was expected during other times. However, attempts were made to give the bodies a proper burial if at all possible and to mark the graves so that relatives could locate the bodies later. Moreover, many families wanted the remains shipped home to be buried with proper ceremony in the family plots, and they would provide money for this purpose. In 1862, Congress authorized the establishment of military cemeteries, and twelve were created during that year near major battlefields, forts, and hospitals. These included Arlington National Cemetery across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., on the estate that had belonged to the Confederate General, Robert E. Lee.

Sometimes a family member would find a grave that was located near a battlefield, remove the remains, and ship them home. A thriving business developed in metal, cement, and marble coffins that would preserve the remains for a time. However, the most significant development in the area of corpse preservation was the increasing use of embalming, a process that did not occur in the local funeral when a person died in his or her own bed.

Embalming was first practiced in the U.S. in the 1840s to preserve medical cadavers. It was not until the Civil War that this process became widely used in the general population to preserve the bodies of those who had died in battle so that they could be shipped home for proper burial. Undertakers who specialized in embalming set up shops near hospitals and army camps and in tents next to battlefields. Thus a new form of burial practice was introduced into U.S. culture.

U.S. funeral rituals today

U.S. society is very heterogeneous, and we must take note of the tremendous variation in funeral practices, especially among recent immigrants. However, we can describe what might be called a "traditional U.S. funeral."

Today most people in the United States die in hospitals or nursing homes. When the individual is formally pronounced dead, the care of the body passes from the medical to the ritual specialists: the clergy and the funeral director. The death is announced in the obituary section of the local newspaper as word spreads by mouth throughout the network of family and friends. The body is then removed to the funeral home, where it is prepared by embalming to preserve the body for viewing. (Not all bodies are embalmed. Orthodox Judaism, for example, prohibits embalming; the bodies are refrigerated, and burial takes place soon after death.)

People feel that it is necessary to view the body to demonstrate that the individual is indeed dead. This makes the death seem real. They will go to great lengths to recover bodies for this purpose. In the case of major disasters, expensive recovery operations are mounted for the purpose of recovering remains, which then become the focal point of death rituals.

Before the funeral ritual there is often a viewing, at which the body is put on display. There is little formal ritual at a viewing, yet there are what appear to be standards in the objects that are displayed (such as flowers and photographs), people dressing in somber colors, and words that are said to the survivors. People often sit or stand around and tell stories of the deceased.

People in the United States have relatively little experience with death compared with members of other societies and are often ill at ease in its presence. Commonly, a person will not attend his or her first funeral until adulthood. In other societies children would be present throughout a person's illness, death, and funeral. There is also a special vocabulary for things associated with U.S. funerals that is thought to be more acceptable than more traditional terms—*funeral director* for undertaker and *casket* for coffin, for example.

The viewing is followed by the funeral ritual, which may be religious or secular. U.S. funeral rituals are relatively short, usually lasting a half hour to a full hour. Typically, friends, neighbors, and coworkers will take a few hours

off of a normal working day to attend the funeral before returning home or back to work. These rituals are relatively quiet; there is little outward expression of grief. The casket is then taken in procession to the gravesite, where there is usually a short graveside ritual. Often the mourners leave the gravesite before the grave is filled in. This is followed by an informal gathering of family and friends at a family member's home that includes informal feasting and conversation, usually with little or no ritual.

In recent times some changes have been seen in U.S. practices around death. Cremation has become a popular alternative to burial, and the growth of grief recovery therapy shows a new recognition that funerals and U.S. culture do not always provide the best means of coping with such events. Even modern technology has had an impact, with announcements of deaths, condolences, and memorials taking place through social media. (See Box 8.3 for a discussion of roadside memorials.)

Days of death

Festivals that emphasize death and frame it as a concept are found cross-culturally. The one most familiar in the United States is probably Halloween, although few know much about the origins and religious underpinnings of what has become a secular day of costumes and candy.

Box 8.3 Roadside memorials

Unlike a formal, structured funeral that takes place in a space designated for death and mourning, roadside memorials are informal and mark the spot where the death occurred rather than the final resting place for the body. These memorials can be found not just all over the United States, but all over the world. The memorials vary but generally consist of a cross and flowers, pictures of the deceased, and other personal items.

These public markers of private grief are most commonly found at sites of traffic accidents and usually appear quite quickly after the incident. Some are temporary, but some last for years and may be tended

to and added to during that time. The memorials tend to mark deaths that are sudden and unexpected. In addition to those found at sites of traffic accidents, such impromptu memorials were seen at Columbine High School following the shootings there, at Buckingham Palace after the death of Princess Diana, and near the sites of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon after September 11, 2001.

Roadside memorials in the United States are not uncontroversial. For some they involve the issue of freedom of speech; for others they violate the separation of church and state (an overwhelming majority of the memorials contain crosses). There is no federal law governing the memorials, and states have dealt with the issue in different ways. Here the concern is generally one of traffic safety, as the displays might interfere with traffic or distract drivers. Some states ban roadside memorials; others allow them, but may remove them if they are thought to interfere with traffic; other states have official memorials that can be purchased from the appropriate governmental agency.

Halloween

In essence, the holiday of Halloween has its origins as a case of culture contact, a theme that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 11. The basis of this holiday is an ancient Celtic festival called Samhain. Samhain was New Year's Day and was celebrated on November 1. The Celts believed that during Samhain the gates that normally separate the worlds of the living and the dead were opened, and the souls of those who had died during the past year could then move into the otherworld. To celebrate the day, special foods were prepared as offerings, and people dressed up as spirits and wild animals.

With the conversion of Ireland to Christianity in 300–400 CE many local religious beliefs and practices were redefined. In a practice that continues to this day, Christian missionaries were encouraged to reframe local customs in Christian terms. November 1 was soon declared All Saints Day, as a day to honor the Christian saints, particularly those who did not otherwise have a feast day. The day before All Saints Day, October 31, became known as the

Eve of All Saints, or the Even of All Hallows, which was shortened to Hallow Even or Halloween. However, the meaning of All Saints Day was not at all related to the original Celtic holiday, and it was not very successful in replacing it.

Around 900 CE the Christian Church added the holiday of All Souls Day on November 2. This holiday honors all of the people who have died during the past year and is much closer in meaning to Samhain. Many of the traditional beliefs and customs of Samhain were preserved, including the idea that night was a time for the wandering dead, the offering of food and drink to masked revelers, and the lighting of bonfires. Stylized representations of death, including skeletons, are common.

Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos)

The Mexican Day of the Dead is also associated with the Catholic holidays of All Saints Day and All Souls Day on November 1 and 2. Much like Halloween, the Day of the Dead is associated with cultural contact. This time the influence comes from the Aztec culture. The Aztecs set aside a month (which would correspond to the end of July and early August in our calendar) to honor the dead. The festivities were overseen by Mictecacihuatl, or the "Lady of the Dead." Later, Spanish priests moved the celebration to coincide with All Saints Day and All Souls Day.

In what is often referred to as the "folk Catholicism" of Mexico, the dead are seen as intermediaries between the living and God. The Day of the Dead is a time of family reunion, for all family members living and dead, and is an expression of family continuity. This is not seen as macabre or as a solemn event but as a celebration. During the first week in November, shops offer many special items for this celebration. Included are many representations of skeletons, elaborate wreaths and crosses, and *papal picado,* or tissue paper cutouts. Food items are also popular, including special bread called *pan de muerto* and skulls and coffins made out of sugar.

An altar is set up in the home with pictures of saints, candles, incense, vases of flowers, and portraits of the deceased. Offerings of food and drink are made to the dead, especially food that was a favorite of that person while he or she

was alive. Gravesites are decorated, and a feast takes place in the graveyard (Figure 8.3). The souls of children return first and then those of adults. The souls do not physically consume the food but are believed to absorb its essence.

Conclusion

Issues of life and death are of central concern for the domain of religion. What makes us alive? What happens to us when we die? Can my soul exist without my body? Can my body exist without my soul? Although cultures will answer these questions differently, humans must universally come to some sort of understanding and explanation of these phenomena. The belief in some sort of soul, for example, appears to be universal, as is the idea that the soul survives the death of the body, at least for some time. A belief in a soul explains many things for us, such as an individual's life force and unique personality and what happens to that personality when all that remains is a corpse. So important to us are the souls of other people that they often remain a part of the world of the living, numbered among the beings that populate the supernatural world.

Our unease about death manifests itself in supernatural creatures such as ghosts, vampires, and zombies. Through these beings the divisions between life and death become less clear and many other cultural anxieties come into play. In the next chapter we will turn our attention to other supernatural beings more commonly associated with religion: gods and spirit beings.



Figure 8.3 The Day of the Dead. A woman in Michoacan, Mexico, decorates a grave during *Día de los Muertos.*

Summary

The belief in the existence of a spirit entity residing within a person appears to have grown out of observations of sleep, coma, and death. A soul is the noncorporeal, spiritual component of an individual. Usually, each individual possesses a soul that takes on the personality of the individual and has an existence after death. During life the soul may leave the body. Dreams are seen as adventures of the soul, and illness may be caused by an absence of a soul that must be retrieved by a shaman. Death is the permanent withdrawal of the soul. How the soul is perceived varies widely, including the number of souls, the size of the soul, and where the soul is located in the body. The soul may retain its identity after death for a limited time or eternity. The destination of the soul after death may depend on the behavior of the person

during life, the social status of the individual, or perhaps the way in which the person died. Funeral rituals may assist the soul on its journey to the land of the dead and serve to protect the living from any negative influences of the soul. Sometimes the soul returns and animates another individual, a concept termed reincarnation.

One possible fate for a soul is that it becomes part of the group of supernatural beings known as ancestors. Even after death, a person is still a valued member of the kinship group and reinforces ideas of social roles, contributes to social harmony and social solidarity, and punishes descendants for misbehavior.

Ghosts are negative forces that remain in the vicinity of the community after death. They can bring about illness and other misfortune, although their role is sometimes ambiguous. In contrast, vampires and zombies are creatures that have no souls. Vampires are believed to be individuals who have recently died, usually before their time, and have returned to bring death to others. The body of an alleged vampire will be exhumed and "killed" or destroyed in some way. Zombies are corpses that have been raised from their graves and animated.

Death rituals or funerals are rites of passage that move the individual from the status of living person to that of ancestor or other post-death status. Funerals vary among cultures in a number of ways: the form of the expression of grief, the role of the ritual in terms of what will happen to the individual in the afterlife, the ritual ways in which the family and community separate themselves from the dead to avoid contamination or illness, how the living are reorganized in society to accommodate for the absence of the deceased, and the method of disposal of the corpse.

Many cultures allow for the return of the spirits of the dead at special times of the year. A familiar example is Halloween, which is based on an old Celtic holiday when the gates that normally separate the worlds of the living and the dead were opened and the souls of those who had died during the past year could then move into the otherworld. The early Church transformed this celebration into All Saints Day and All Souls Day on November 1 and 2, respectively. The Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) in Mexico is also associated with these Catholic holidays. The family, including both the living and the dead, gather together for celebration.

Study questions

1. With the growth of urban centers, U.S. funerals have moved out of the family context into the commercial world. As in any commercial venture, a special vocabulary develops that replaces many familiar terms. Look up some websites for funeral homes and cemeteries and examine the vocabulary that is used. What terms are used today in place of older terms such as *undertaker, coffin, corpse,* and *death*? What other examples can you find?
2. We can divide methods for disposing of the body into two main categories: those that preserve the body or part of the body and those that result in the complete disappearance of the body. Is there any correlation between these two categories and how a religion views death and the afterlife?
3. Discuss the practice of cryogenics as a method of handling a body after death. How is cryogenics similar to mummification?
4. Describe the customs surrounding the festival of Halloween in contemporary U.S. society. Do you see any religious elements in this festival today? What elements that are secular today are derived from religious elements in the past?
5. Many Hollywood movies show images of ghosts, vampires, and zombies. How do these images resemble or differ from these entities as they appear in actual religious systems?

Suggested readings

Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burials and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).
[Looks at European folklore about vampires and the scientific explanations for some of the phenomena.]

Nigel Barley, *Grave Matters: A Lively History of Death around the World*

(Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2005).
[A look at how different cultures define and react to death.]

Alma Gottlieb, *The Afterlife Is Where We Come From: The Culture of Infancy in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
[An exploration of how religious ideology impacts Beng child-rearing practices.]

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
[A cross-cultural study of the rituals that accompany death.]

Lisa Miller, *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).
[Looks at the historical roots of the concept of heaven and how and why it has changed over time.]

Heather Pringle, *The Mummy Congress: Science, Obsession and the Everlasting Dead* (New York: Hyperion, 2002).
[A look at mummies and the people who study them.]

Fiction

Piers Anthony, *On a Pale Horse* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983).
[Book 1 of the Incarnations of Immortality series. The main character kills the Incarnation of Death and is forced to fill the position.]

Margot Livesey, *Eva Moves the Furniture* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001).
[Eva grows up with two companions whom no one else can see.]

Alice Sebold, *Lovely Bones* (New York: Little Brown, 2002).
[Narrated by a 14-year-old girl who has been murdered and is now in heaven, watching her family.]

John Richard Stephens, Editor. *Vampires, Wine and Roses* (New York: Metro Books, 2008).
[A collection of short stories, excerpts, and poems about vampires by many

authors, including William Shakespeare, Arthur Conan Doyle, Lord Byron, Voltaire, Woody Allen, and Bram Stoker.]

Suggested websites

www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm
Official website of The African Burial Ground National Monument, National Park Service.

www.ancientegypt.co.uk/mummies/home.html
A site that explores mummification from the British Museum.

www.loc.gov/folklife/halloween.html
A discussion of Halloween from the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.

australianmuseum.net.au/death-the-last-taboo
An Australian Museum online exhibit on death.

www.grief-recovery.com
The Grief Recovery Institute website.

Notes

1 "Chapter 1: Importance of Religion and Religious Beliefs," November 3, 2015 (www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/chapter-1-importance-of-religion-and-religious-beliefs/).

2 "Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life," December 18, 2008 (www.pewresearch.org/pubs/1062/many-americans-say-other-faiths-can-lead-to-eternal-life).

3 "Chapter 1: Importance of Religion and Religious Beliefs," November 3, 2015 (www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/chapter-1-importance-of-religion-and-religious-beliefs/).

4 "Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life," December 18, 2008 (http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1062/many-americans-say-other-faiths-can-lead-to-eternal-life).

5 N. Barley, *Grave Matters: A Lively History of Death around the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), p. 27.

6 A. Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: Noonday, 1997).

7 D. W. Plath, "Where the Family of God Is in the Family: The Role of the Dead in Japanese Households," *American Anthropologist*, 66 (April 1964), pp. 300–317.

8 B. Jordan, "Yurei: Tales of Females Ghosts," in S. Addiss (Ed.), *Japanese Ghosts and Demons: Art of the Supernatural* (New York: George Braziller, 1985), p. 25.

9 P. Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 16.

10 Ibid.

11 M. E. Bell, *Food for the Dead: On the Trail of New England's Vampires* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

12 L. A. Gregoricka, et al., "Apotropaic Practices and the Undead: A Biogeochemical Assessment of Deviant Burials in Post-Medieval Poland," *PLoS ONE,* 9(11):e113564 (2014).

13 W. Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Touchstone, 1985).

14 K. Heider, *Grand Valley Dani: Peaceful Warriors* (3rd edn) (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1997), p. 132.

Chapter 9
Gods and spirits

Ghosts, ancestors, and vampires are transformed human beings. However, there are many supernatural beings that generally do not have human origins. These supernatural beings include **gods** and **spirits**. Although we recognize these as two separate types of supernatural entities, this division is to some degree arbitrary. Generally speaking, gods are individualized supernatural beings, each with a distinctive name, personality, and sphere of influence that encompasses the life of an entire community or a major segment of the community. Spirits are generally less powerful than gods and usually are more localized. Frequently, they are collections of nonindividualized supernatural beings that are not given specific names and identities.

Supernatural beings are usually a crucial aspect of a religious system; many anthropologists have defined religion by the presence of such beings. Myths describe their actions and their behaviors may be seen as a model for human behavior. Rituals are often directed toward superhuman beings—to placate, praise, or make requests.

Spirits

Nonindividualized spirits include the leprechauns of Ireland, the jinn of the Middle East, and the kami of Japan. There are also spirits that are individually recognized, such as a guardian spirit, an ancestral spirit, and a shaman's spirit helper. In contrast with gods, spirits are less powerful and are more focused on particular individuals, families, or groups of specialists.

Whereas gods may live in a remote location, such as Mount Olympus, the home of the Greek gods, spirits live in the human world, interacting with humans and concerned about what humans are up to. Spirits often exhibit complex personalities. They may be friendly or harmful. They provide protection, success, and luck but also are blamed for minor mishaps. One can ask for their assistance because they are closely connected to people and are involved in everyday human affairs. Offerings, entertainment, and attention will promote the development of a beneficial relationship between people and the spirit world. But ignoring their presence or, worse yet, doing something to harm or offend them can have negative consequences, such as the loss of a crop, infertility, illness, or the death of a child.

Because spirits live in the human world, they often reside in various physical objects—some natural, others human-made. Places of special beauty or unusual characteristics, such as a sacred grove or a waterfall, are said to be inhabited by spirits. Such places may also be considered dangerous. They may be venerated, and people will often travel to such places to ask favors of the spirits. Unusual natural objects—such as a remarkable or strange stone or plant—may contain a spirit, as might a human-made object such as a statue or a **shrine**. Sometimes special structures are built and spirits are enticed to take up residence in them to provide protection or good luck to the builder.

The Dani view of the supernatural

The Dani live in the highlands of New Guinea, in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya. This description of spirits is based on a study of the Mulia Valley Dani.

Because the Dani themselves seldom articulate their belief system, it becomes exceedingly difficult for an outsider to learn about Dani religious practices from an insider, or emic, perspective. As is the case with many religions, to the outsider, Dani religion appears to be confusing and illogical. Questions about rituals and beliefs are greeted either by silence or by the familiar "That is just the way we do things" or "This is the way our fathers did it." Sometimes the question elicits a specific myth.

An anthropologist, using an outsider or etic perspective, can attempt to

understand the underlying structure and logic of Dani beliefs and practices, although the Dani themselves might not understand or accept this structure and logic. For example, anthropologist Douglas James Hayward notes that the Dani appear to organize their world into complementary pairs.[1] Their physical landscape is divided into cultivated and noncultivated land, and animals are divided into those that live in association with people and those that do not. Their society is organized in terms of a system in which all individuals are placed into one of two social groups that intermarry with one another. Using the principle of complementary pairs, Hayward divides the Dani supernatural world into several categories by using three criteria: Are the beings physical or spirit? Are they beneficent or malevolent? Are they close or far away?

Table 9.1 The supernatural world of the Daniw

	Beneficent	*Malevolent*
	Spirits and gods	
Close	Ghosts* Personal guardian spirits Forest spirits Spirits that control rains God who controls flooding	Ghosts* Male and female forest spirits Swamp spirits Sorcery spirits Spirits associated with illness
Remote	God who shaped the surface of the Earth Guardians of the Dani	Spirits from neighboring territories
	Non-spirit life forms	
Close	–	Enemies
Remote	The sun (female) The moon (male, husband of sun)	Inhabitants of the sky

* Ghosts are malevolent in that they cause misfortune and illness. They are also beneficent in that they warn the village of enemy raiding parties.

The beings that inhabit the Dani world are either spirit or physical (“truly present”). Physical beings are mortal and are subject to the laws of nature.

They include people, animals, and plants. Spirit beings are immortal and are not subject to the laws of nature. However, this classification does not necessarily correspond to our dichotomy between spirit and physical. For example, the sun is believed to be a real woman and thus a physical being, albeit one with unusual abilities.

The identification of a being as beneficent or malevolent also is not as easy as it first appears, because this categorization often depends on context. For example, ghosts are spirits of the recently deceased that linger near the village in which they once lived, reluctant to leave. If the community fails to perform funeral rituals in a satisfactory manner, the ghost becomes disappointed and may cause trouble for the community. Although ghosts have a negative influence on Dani life, they also can be beneficent. Ghosts are consulted in divination ceremonies. They also warn the community of the approach of an enemy raiding party.

The focus of Dani rituals is aimed at those spirit beings that live close by and play significant roles in their lives. This includes close beneficent spirits such as guardian spirits. An important group of close beneficent spirits is spirits associated with nature. These include forest spirits, rain spirits, and flood spirits. The *weya* spirits control the rains. When they become violent, they send lightning storms, and trees that have been struck by lightning are evidence of their presence and power. However, they are classified as benevolent beings because they bring the rain.

Included among the close malevolent spirits are forest spirits and swamp spirits. In the forest lurk male forest spirits who seduce women traveling alone through the forest. The forest also contains female forest spirits, who seduce men by taking the form of their wives and girlfriends. Sexual intercourse with such a spirit brings about death for the man (unless a pig has been sacrificed) as well as the birth of a child that looks exactly like a human child but only has half a human soul.

Many close malevolent spirits are associated with illnesses. These spirits often are identified with particular animals. For example, a spirit associated with frogs causes illnesses characterized by cold, clammy hands and feet; a spirit associated with owls brings about sore throats; and a spirit associated with lizards is responsible for the swelling of the limbs and joints.

Remote malevolent spirits live in other people's territories. They are a danger only when someone brings a spirit with him into one's home territory.

When returning home from a journey, the traveler closes the trail behind him by placing a "spirit restrainer," composed of clumps of grass on sticks. The spirit cannot go beyond or around the restrainer and therefore cannot follow the traveler home.

Apart from the enemy, the only other malevolent non-spirit beings are a community of little people who live in the sky. Being lazy, they stole food from their neighbors' gardens rather than growing it themselves. They were finally driven out by the Dani and climbed into the sky. Eventually, they learned how to farm. However, these little people like to urinate on their former enemies during rains. Men do not like to go out of doors on days when it is raining or misty.

Guardian spirits and the Native American vision quest

An important element in many Native American cultures is direct contact with supernatural beings and supernatural power. An example is the vision quest, in which the individual enters into an altered state of consciousness, makes contact with the world of spirit beings, and receives a gift of supernatural power. The spirit beings that are encountered in these visions are often referred to as guardian spirits. An individual, usually male, may attempt to make contact with a guardian spirit either as part of a coming-of-age ritual or continually throughout his adult life, as a means of attaining protection, guidance, and identity. According to their worldview, it is only through the attainment of this connection with the supernatural and the receipt of supernatural power that a person can be successful in life.

Among the Ojibwa of the Great Lakes area, the vision quest is carried out at puberty. However, children begin preparing early in life with periodic fasting. They are given instruction in how to induce a vision and how to recognize and reject a bad vision. At the appropriate time the boy is led into the forest to a platform that has been constructed in a tall pine tree. He is left there alone to fast until he receives his vision. The vision is interpreted as a journey into the supernatural world. The boy is shown the path his life should take and the spirit beings who will be his guardian spirits. He is also told of

certain objects that he can acquire that will serve as physical symbols of his relationship with the guardian spirits. After a successful vision quest the boy assumes the status of an adult man.

Among the Wind River Shoshoni of Wyoming, vision quests are undertaken not just at puberty, but throughout life. Supernatural power can be attained from guardian spirits in visions and in dreams. In the vision quest the supplicant, usually male, rides to a place with rock drawings in the foothills. After cleansing himself in a creek or lake, he goes to the rock ledge beneath the drawings. Naked except for a blanket, he waits for the vision. The vision is brought on by a combination of fasting, enduring the cold, sleep deprivation, and smoking tobacco. What is actually seen varies but commonly includes trials to be overcome before the spirit appears, often as an animal, to bestow supernatural power. The spirit frequently gives the man specific instructions, such as wearing a special item or avoiding certain people or behaviors. For example, a deer spirit that gives the gift of speed while running might instruct the man to wear a deer tail sewn on his clothes or on a ribbon around his neck. Among the Shoshoni, a man can acquire several guardian spirits to aid him.

Jinn

The Qur'an tells of God's creation of three types of conscious beings: humans made from clay, **angels** made from light, and **jinn** made from fire without smoke. Jinn are normally invisible, but they can make themselves visible, and in doing so, they often take the form of a human or an animal. Once visible, they can alter their shape and features at will. Jinn are born, live, and die; they marry, mate, and have families. Some have great powers; others do not. Many are specifically known and named; others occur as a part of an unnamed collective of spirits. Like people, jinn have different personalities, some good and some bad. They may lie and deceive people; they enjoy playing tricks and kidnapping people; and they often tempt humans into sexual intercourse.

Sometimes a person can forge a special relationship with a jinn, and then the jinn becomes a source of special powers. For example, a person can enter into an alliance with a jinn and become a powerful magician. The Genii of the

Aladdin story is a jinn, and the stories of the *Arabian Nights* are largely stories involving jinn. But generally, people try to keep a distance between themselves and jinn because, more often than not, jinn are troublemakers. People will frequently recite verses from the Qur'an or avoid situations that attract the attention of jinn. This is the origin of many tabus surrounding blood, childbirth, and marriage, because these are situations that are very attractive to jinn. The very existence of jinn causes people to be careful, yet they also provide an explanation for illness and bad luck.

Spirit possession in the Sudan

Anthropologist Janice Boddy describes the presence of jinn in the small Arabic-speaking village of Hofriyat in the northern Sudan.[2] The Hofriyati recognize three types of jinn. White jinn have little effect on humans, whereas black jinn, or devils, are dangerous, and possession by black jinn often leads to serious illness and death. However, the most frequently encountered are red jinn called *zairan* (singular: *zar*). The red color symbolizes an association with blood and fertility. *Zairan* are capable of causing illness. Such illnesses must be dealt with, but they are seldom fatal.

The world of the *zairan* parallels the world of humans. *Zairan* belong to different religions, occupations, and ethnic groups, and they exhibit a range of behaviors, some good and some bad. In other words, they are very much like humans, mixing both good and bad traits, but generally they tend to be amoral and capricious. The Hofriyati recognize jinn that are identified as representing diverse ethnic and social groups. Some are Europeans, West Africans, Ethiopians, Arabs, and so forth, representing outside groups with which they have had contact in the past. Yet there are no *zairan* who resemble the Hofriyati themselves.

Spirit possession occurs when a *zar* enters the body of a woman. Most possession occurs in women of childbearing age, and close to half of the adult women in the community are possessed. In these communities the life of a woman is very restricted. Physically, she remains within the high walls of the family compound, where she is segregated from the men, eating and even sleeping in separate quarters. Her worth and happiness depend on her fertility

and her ability to produce sons. The production of sons and their survival are women's tasks, and men are not to blame in the case of failure. A woman who does not have children, miscarries, or has only daughters or whose children die young is accorded a very low position in the society. She may be divorced by her husband or may have to accept a co-wife in the marriage.

Therefore there is a great deal of anxiety in marriage, and this anxiety often leads to depression. In this case a woman may be possessed by a *zar.* However, it also is possible that the *zar* is responsible for the misfortune surrounding her reproductive life. Once the *zar* has entered her body, she will continue to be possessed from that time on.

Although *zar* possession is a lifelong condition, it would not be accurate to describe this possession as an illness. During ceremonies each *zar* is drummed into each woman in turn; the woman then goes into a trance. Through this relationship the woman regains a measure of well-being, although she must constantly pay attention to the wishes of the spirit by attending possession ceremonies on a regular basis. The possessed woman must also meet certain demands of the spirit. She must eat certain foods, wear gold and clean clothing, avoid anger, and manifest other ideal feminine behaviors. As long as the relationship continues, the woman will maintain a "cure." From the spirit's point of view, this relationship gives it access to the human world. Once it possesses its host, the *zar* will be entertained and can engage in various activities.

When she is not possessed, a woman will participate in singing and drumming. Such all-female rituals provide an important outlet for otherwise isolated women. They are much more than curing rituals and are also enjoyable social events in a world where such social activities are relatively rare.

Christian angels and demons

Angels and demons are spirit beings that appear in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In these monotheistic religions angels act as mediators between God and human beings. Angels are often represented as agents of revelation, executors of divine will, or as witnesses to divine activity. Angels appear in

both Greek and Jewish writings but tend to play a limited role. In the New Testament of Christianity, angels are frequently mentioned. ("And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him" [Luke 22:43].)

However, much of the popular Christian belief about angels comes not from the Bible, but from the sixth-century writings of Saint Dionysus. In his work *The Celestial Hierarchy,* he established a rank order of angels that included, in descending order, seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and angels. Belief in angels is widespread in modern U.S. society. A poll conducted in 2011 found that 77 percent of those surveyed believe that angels and demons are active in the world.[3] Despite these numbers, there is little consensus on exactly what angels are or how they look. Descriptions range from a glowing light to a very human appearance, or perhaps the presence of the angel is felt but not seen. In general, angels are said to appear to help people in need, often as workers or messengers of God.

At the other end of the spectrum are **demons**. Although frequent mention is made of demons in the Christian Bible, no one passage gives a full account of their creation or workings. However, several Church writings have been published that clarify the subject, such as the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council from the Catholic Church in 1215. Here it says that both the Devil and the demons were originally angelic creatures, created by God as good, innocent beings. They became evil by their own actions. Satan and his minions rebelled against God and, after a battle with the good angels, were cast from heaven. Satan and the demons are believed to be closely associated with human evil, including the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden and their dominion over hell.

One common activity of demons, as described in the New Testament, is demonic possession. This was considered a major cause of strange behaviors by humans and much of Jesus' healing ministry involved performing demonic exorcism.

In the period roughly between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, Christian demonology reached its peak. Beliefs about demons were elaborated and had much social influence. Ornate doctrines were produced detailing the hierarchies, invocation, methods, and exorcism of demons. This was the era of the infamous Witchcraze (see Chapter 10), during which there was a particular interest in **incubi** and **succubae**. Incubi and succubae are,

respectively, male and female demons who have sex with humans while they sleep. Sex with an incubus was said to be responsible for the birth of demons, witches, and deformed children.

The belief in demonic possession is still common today among conservative Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. For many of these groups a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible requires a belief in demons and demonic exorcism, because they are mentioned so frequently in the New Testament. See Box 9.1 for a discussion of Christian exorcism.

Box 9.1 Christian demonic exorcism in the United States

The Christian belief in demons and demonic exorcism is taken directly from the New Testament. There we learn that Satan and his demons harass, torment, and possess humans. This possession sometimes is shown in new skills or strength that the person then has (by virtue of the demon). In general, possession was described as an illness, and much of Jesus' healing ministry involved performing demonic exorcism. In the New Testament, Jesus is able to perform exorcisms by merely demanding that the demons leave; his disciples do the same in the name of Jesus. ("And in the synagogue there was a man, which had a spirit of an unclean devil, and cried out with a loud voice, Saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art; the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the devil had thrown him in the midst, he came out of him, and hurt him not" [Luke 4:33–35]).

In his book *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty,* Michael Cuneo argues that the phenomenon of Christian demonic exorcism is both influenced by and reflects the wider culture in the United States. For example, he cites the great influence of the book and later film *The Exorcist* in the early 1970s. Following the release of *The Exorcist* and other popular books, the reported incidence of demonic possession and requests for exorcism greatly increased. The film depicted

a specifically Catholic event. However, official Catholic exorcisms were—and are—difficult to come by. Although the Catholic Church does believe in demonic possession and the need for exorcisms, these are seen as rare events. The priest is advised to be skeptical and look for other causes first, such as mental illness. The exorcism ritual can be officially performed only with permission of a bishop.

However, some exorcisms were available through unofficial channels, particularly priests who do not agree with the modernization of the church following the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s and among charismatic Catholics. In the 1970s and 1980s, exorcism rituals also became popular in other Christian religions, particularly among people belonging to a religious movement called neo-Pentecostalism or the charismatic renewal. In general, members of this movement were seeking a more personal and dramatic religious experience. This experience was called baptism in the Holy Spirit and was believed to be associated with various spiritual gifts (or charisms), such as speaking in tongues, prophesy, and healing. Part of this healing was exorcisms—or deliverance ministries, as they were often called. The demons involved were often personal demons such as demons of lust, anger, resentment, and addiction, as well as demons of specific illnesses, such as cancer.

Exorcism also became popular with certain groups of evangelical Protestants, particularly in the early 1980s. Cuneo estimates that there are at least 500–600 evangelical exorcism ministries today and that the number might even be two or three times this amount.

Cuneo points out that the exorcism movement fits in very well with other cultural ideas that were popular in the late twentieth century in the United States. Like other self-help regimens and therapies of the era, the exorcism movement teaches that people are victims and not responsible for the bad things in their lives. Demons are to blame in much the same way that more mainstream therapies blame the ubiquitous "dysfunctional family." Cuneo writes:

> Exorcism may be a strange therapy, it may be the crazy uncle of therapies, but it's therapy nonetheless. And no less than any of the countless other therapies in the therapy-mad culture of post-sixties America, it promises liberation for the addicted, hope for the forlorn, solace for the brokenhearted. It promises a new and redeemed self, a self freed from the accumulated debris of a life badly lived or a

life sadly endured.[4]

Gods

Generally speaking, gods are more powerful than spirits. They possess great supernatural power and control or influence major forces of nature, such as the wind, rain, and fertility. Gods are personalized individuals with names, origins, and specific attributes. Some gods are associated with social and political units such as clans and villages. The number of gods found within a religious system varies from one to more than a thousand.

Gods are **anthropomorphic**; that is, they resemble people in their physical appearance and personalities. They are born, marry, and sometimes die. They love and lust, are wise and dull, loving and hateful, generous and miserly. Some are sympathetic to human beings; others are hostile. And like humans, gods can be influenced by gifts in the form of offerings and sacrifices and by praise and flattery, and sometimes they can be tricked.

The behavior of humans on earth reflects the orders and commandments of the gods. Gods set up codes of behavior and punish people who do not observe them. They may prescribe that certain ritual activities be performed and bring down misfortune when they are not. Some gods are very concerned about the fate of human beings and will establish close relationships with them and have a great influence in human lives.

Types of gods

Within a particular religious system, the gods as a collective make up a **pantheon**. Usually, the gods within the pantheon form a hierarchy with a **supreme god** at the top. They are related to one another in various ways, often making up a large family unit characterized by family relationships, such as those seen in the Greek pantheon (Figure 9.1). The community of the

gods often mirrors human society. If the human society is highly hierarchical and warlike, so is the society of the gods.

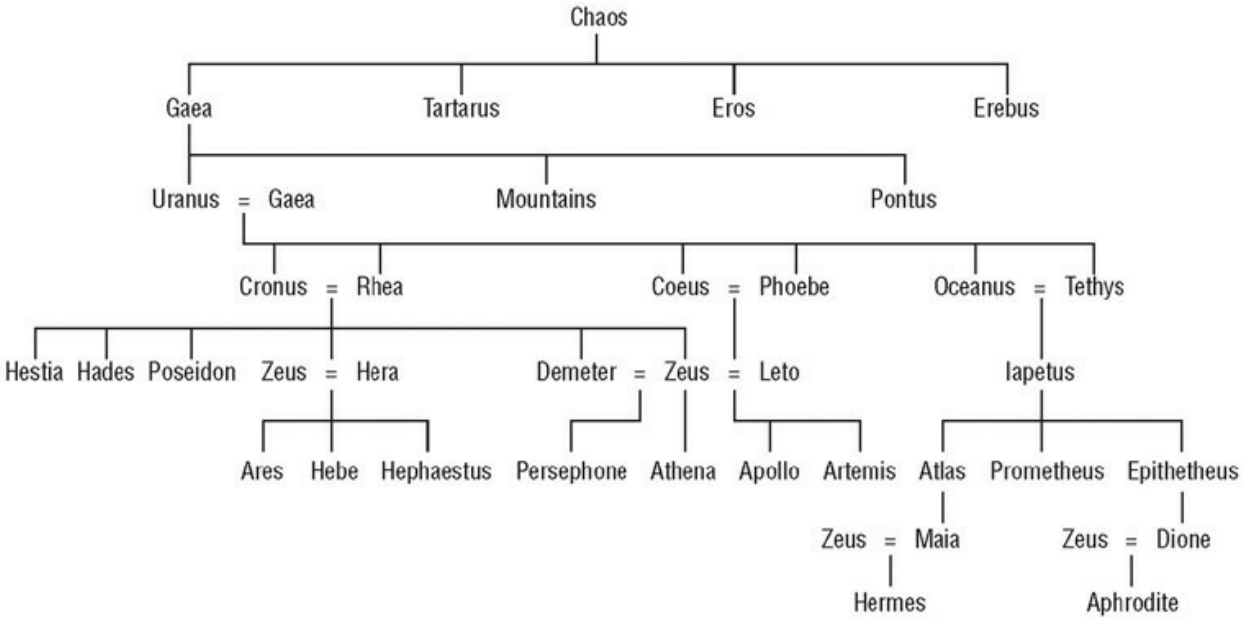


Figure 9.1 The Greek pantheon. This diagram portrays the relationships among the better-known gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon. Unlike human families, gods and goddesses are able to marry brother to sister and to produce children without a mate.

Specific gods are associated with the forces of nature, human fertility and the human life cycle, economic activities, and war. Specialized deities are called **attribute gods**. The relative importance of such gods depends largely on the importance of various activities within human society. For example, if a society is very warlike, the war gods may be featured prominently in religious rituals.

The gods within a pantheon have specific spheres of influence and control. Sometimes there is a relatively small number of gods, each controlling a rather large slice of human activity. Sometimes there are a great many gods, each highly specialized. For example, instead of a single god associated with agriculture, the Roman pantheon had a rather lengthy list of gods who were responsible for very specific activities within the farming cycle (Table 9.2).

Although there is a tremendous variety of gods that can be listed, certain types seem to appear over and over as we move from society to society. **Creator gods** are responsible for the creation of the physical earth and the plants and animals that live on it. Creator gods can be very powerful deities

and often occupy the top rung of a pantheon. Creation is not necessarily the work of a single god. Often various aspects of creation are divided among several gods, or, usually after the creation of the physical earth, different gods are responsible for the creation of specific types of plants and animals or the plants and animals that occupy a particular area. This includes the creation of people.

Sometimes the creator god creates the world and then withdraws from active interactions with the world. These **otiose gods** are too remote and too uninterested in human activities to participate in the activities and fate of humans. Therefore rituals are seldom performed to influence and to ask favors from such gods. Sometimes these gods maintain interest in humans through lesser, intermediary deities.

Table 9.2 The Roman gods and goddesses of agriculture

Deity	*Responsibility*
Seia	The sprouting of the seed
Segesta	The shoots coming through the soil
Proserpina	Forms the stalks
Nodotus	Forms sections of the stem
Volutina	Forms protective sheath around the seeds
Patelana	Later removes sheath around the seeds
Lacturnus and Matuta	Ripening of grain (at two stages)
Flora	Makes the plant blossom

A common form of supernatural being found in cultures in many diverse areas is the **trickster**. Ambiguity is one of its major characteristics, which often makes it difficult to define. Most often male, the trickster is able to transform himself into a series of beings—human, animal, and deity. The various parts of his body may detach themselves or be severed from the body. In some trickster stories he is seemingly destroyed by being burned, crushed, or disemboweled—yet he is able to reassemble himself. Often the trickster is a creator who is responsible for bringing many technologies, customs, and

activities into the world, such as fire, healing, and magic. Although on the one hand he is powerful, courageous, and creative, he is also vindictive, selfish, cowardly, and destructive. Perhaps his two most frequently mentioned characteristics are gluttony and lust; he has a voracious appetite for food and sex. He is always finding ways to find and steal food and is never sexually satisfied. Among the best-known tricksters are those of North America, such as Raven, Coyote, and Hare.

The trickster figure plays a number of roles in human societies. The stories point out human frailties through satire, because the trickster represents the antithesis of what it is to be human and places human society in its position in an environment that is not always stable and predictable. Sam Gill writes,

> In Trickster is embodied the human struggle against the confinement felt by being bound to place, even with the obvious necessity of such definition in order to prevent chaos. In many of his adventures, Trickster permits people to experience the vicarious thrills and freedoms of a utopian existence. But his folly reveals the very meaning of the boundaries that give order to human life.[5]

The trickster may also find a place in situations of contact and social conflict. In !Kung San society (Khoisan culture area) the trickster is frequently seen as a participant in society who flouts society's rules. In many stories the trickster finds himself interacting with the nonnative, dominant population, in which case the stories become protest and resistance stories in which social situations are reversed and the trickster outwits the dominant individual.

Gods and society

Émile Durkheim first proposed the idea that religious symbolism marks as sacred important institutions of human society that are necessary for the group's survival.[6] Durkheim's approach is a functionalist one, seeing religious and other cultural phenomena as serving some essential purpose in maintaining the society. In his analysis of gods, he points out that the powers commonly attributed to gods are similar to those of society: creating sacred times and spaces, designating moral rules and punishing offenders, existing above all individuals, requiring sacrifice. Values that we learn in society, such

as obligation, loyalty, respect, and hierarchy, are mirrored in our relationship with supernatural beings.

The imagery that is used for gods, such as their anthropomorphic nature, is taken from social categories and statuses. Gods are rulers, fathers, mothers, daughters, and sons. We relate to them through social interactions in ways learned in society. Whatever the themes are in a particular culture will be reflected in the nature and domains of the gods. The values and concerns of a culture are projected onto the gods themselves, and the behavior of humans toward the gods is an expression of the social behaviors valued by that culture.

Gods reflect human behavior

In a similar vein, British anthropologist Robin Horton suggests that supernatural beings function to extend the realm of social relations.[7] Again, the focus is on gods as anthropomorphic beings who reflect human behavior. Horton suggests that the behavior of the gods provides a model for humans. He explored his ideas by looking at various African religions. Although a high god is found in almost all of these religions, the nature of this god ranges from an otiose god to one who is in active control of the universe. Horton thought that two variables explain much of this variation.

The first variable is how often people in that society encounter other peoples and the world in general outside their own local community. Horton thinks that lesser gods are associated with the interpretation of events occurring in the immediate area while a high god is more important for interpreting that immediate world in relation to the greater world beyond the local area. With this greater level of contact, issues that people face are more likely to be seen as being part of just being human. Thus the greater the contact a society has with the larger world, the greater the need for a high god who has universal features and is associated with humanity in general rather than just with a local group.

The second variable proposed by Horton was the degree to which an individual's status in the society is **ascribed** or **achieved**. An ascribed status is one that is given to an individual based on attributes over which they have no

control, such as gender and family line. Horton proposed that because an individual's status is determined solely by the community, ideas will focus on lesser gods who themselves are focused on local issues. In contrast, if status is based on an individual's personal achievements, the individual is, at least in part, independent from the community. Therefore explanations of personal success and failure are more likely to reference a high god who rules over a wider realm.

Horton suggests that these variables help to explain the openness of Africa to Islam and Christianity. He correlates the arrival of missionaries in Africa with the opening up of local communities to the wider world and an increase in emphasis on achieved versus ascribed status.

The number and nature of supernatural beings

The functionalist perspective was also tested in a 1974 study by Guy Swanson.[8] In the study, Swanson looked at fifty different societies to see whether social characteristics of a group are predictive of their religious beliefs. Here we will look at two of the predictions he tested that concern the number and nature of supernatural beings.

Box 9.2 Games and gods

Among the many expressions of a culture's worldview are the games that are played. For example, are games of chance favored over games of strategy? Do games rely on physical skills or on mental skills? The characteristics of games are associated with particular features of a culture. Here we will look at the connection between games and religion.

John Roberts, Malcolm Arth, and Robert Rush classified games into three categories: games of strategy, games of chance, and games of physical skill. They found that games of chance, such as dice games, are associated with religious activities. On the simplest level, success at a game of chance may be attributed to aid received from the supernatural, either magical in nature or through supernatural beings. The authors

argue that games of chance are "exercises in relationships with the supernatural." They tested this idea by looking at the nature of supernatural beings in societies where games of chance were the most prevalent type of game played. The dimensions they explored included how aggressive or how benevolent supernatural forces were seen to be and how easy it was to coerce these beings. They hypothesized that gods in these societies would be seen as more benevolent than aggressive and as being relatively easy to coerce. The hypothesis was upheld in their sample of societies. As an interesting side note, the lack of reference to games of chance in the Hebrew Bible suggests that this God was more aggressive than benevolent and not easily coerced.

The study concluded that "games of strategy may be related to mastery of the social system; games of chance may be linked with mastery of the supernatural; and games of physical skill are possibly associated with the mastery both of self and of environment."

Source: John M. Roberts, Malcolm J. Arth, and Robert R. Rush, "Games in Culture," *American Anthropologist,* 61 (1959), pp. 597–605.

First, Swanson looked at religious systems in which there is a high or supreme god who is higher than all other supernatural beings. In Swanson's study, this could be either the only god in the system or the ruler of a pantheon of gods. The essential element was that this god rules over a hierarchy with at least two levels of supernatural beings below it. Swanson reasoned that, on the basis of Durkheim's work, such a religious hierarchy was more likely to be found in a society that also had a decision-making hierarchy that contained at least three different levels. In a kin-based society, for example, this could include families, lineages, and clans (a lineage contains many families, and a clan contains two or more lineages). His study supported this hypothesis. The belief in a supreme god was found in 78 percent of societies with three levels and 91 percent of those with four or more levels but in only 11 percent with only one or two levels.

Swanson also looked at polytheistic systems in which no one god is considered to be supreme. Although they are superior to spirits, each god rules over a particular domain, and none is superior to another. Because these gods

are attribute gods, Swanson realized that the presence of this type of god would be connected to the degree of specialization in a society. He found that the number of specialists is positively correlated with the number of such gods.

Sigmund Freud (Chapter 1) and psychosocial anthropologists have a similar perspective. For example, Freud thought that religion as a whole can be seen as a symbolic expression of relationships between children and their parents.[9] This can especially be seen in the nature of gods. We think about nature anthropomorphically, and so there is a god of thunder, a god of the mountains, a god of the river, and so on. We then project human qualities, particularly those of parents, onto them. For example, if parents are punitive, so are the gods; if parents are indulgent, so are the gods.

Big Gods

Many anthropologists have pointed out differences between living in small communities and large urban societies. Looking at the two ends of what is unquestionably a continuum of community size and complexity, people in small communities pretty much know one another, often share biological relationships, and are aware of what everyone is doing. It is difficult to hide antisocial behaviors in small societies, and transgressions against societal norms are usually handled informally within the community, where the social standing of individuals is often based on issues of trust.

On the other hand, large societies are essentially communities of anonymous strangers. Informal methods of social control do not work well since it is easy for strangers to hide moral transgressions from each other. This may explain the development of complex political institutions, such as court and police systems, in such societies.

Psychologist Ara Norenzayan notes that gods are usually not concerned with issues of morality in small societies.[10] While gods may interact with humans and demand attention in the form of rituals and sacrifices, they are usually not involved with rewarding and punishing humans for their behaviors. This is in marked contrast with large, complex societies where gods, or the God of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)

are very concerned with defining moral behavior and punishing transgressions of the divine moral code. Norenzayan calls such gods "Big Gods."

What bonds strangers in large societies is the mutual acceptance of a moral code that is an important aspect of their religious system. God is seen as all-knowing, judging, rewarding, and punishing individual behaviors. People who accept the same belief system, perform the same rituals, and follow the same moral rules form the basis of cooperative behavior among strangers. Individuals are judged on the strength of their support of their religion. Of course people who do not accept the same belief system are treated with suspicion. This often forms the basis of conflict between different segments of large societies.

The gods of the Yoruba

The Yoruba live in the southwestern region of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin in West Africa. Through the slave trade and more recently immigration, Yoruba culture has spread into the New World. Theirs is an ancient culture, and their religious concepts are found throughout a number of city-states, each associated with a particular urban center. The urban center of Ife is of special importance, for it was here that the first acts of creation were performed. It was here that Olodumare sent the gods to create the earth.

The Yoruba cosmos is divided into two realms: Orun, heaven or sky, and Aiye, the earth, the realm of the living. Residing in Orun is the Creator Olodumare, gods known as the *orisha,* and the ancestors. Olorun is the high god and the source of all supernatural power, but he is remote from the people and is not approached in rituals, an example of an otiose god. He is contacted through the intermediaries, the *orisha.*

There are a large number of *orisha.* Some are acknowledged throughout the Yoruba region; others are associated with a particular region, village, or even family group. The *orisha* are anthropomorphic and display human emotions. They are not inherently good or evil, but manifest complex behaviors and can act in a good or evil way, depending on the situation and the context. The *orisha* make themselves known through possessing a devotee, who then

moves and talks in a characteristic manner associated with the god. The person will also wear special clothing and hold certain objects. Worship of particular deities is associated with shrines and altars that contain objects that are placed there to please the gods and to show one's devotion. The *orisha* are examples of attribute gods. Each is approached in ritual because of a particular problem. Table 9.3 lists some of the best known of the *orisha.*

Table 9.3 Some of the Yoruba *orisha*

Orisha	*Domain*	*Characteristics*	*Symbolic representation*
Esu-Elegba	"Guardian of the Threshold," first god to be addressed in ritual; intermediary between people, their ancestors, and the gods	Unpredictable, trickster	Hooked beaded stick; red and black
Obatala	King of the orisha	Ethical, merciful, patient, composed	White sheet, white beaded cane; white
Ogun	Rules over metal, technology, and war	Aggressive, bold	Beaded machete, metal implements; green and dark blue
Orisa Oko	Agricultural deity, judges antisocial behavior, disease, and poverty, interprets Ifa divination		Iron beaded staffs, flutes
Osanyin	Forest deity and god of herbalistic medicine		Represented as a puppet with a squeaky voice, iron staff topped with birds; colors of the forest

Osoosi	Hunter god	Quick, strong, aggressive, intellectual	Hunter's hat, powder horns, bow and arrow; green and blue
Osun	Goddess of freshwater streams; sustains life	Youngest orisha, beautiful and vain, deceitful	Round fan, crown and beaded apron; crystal yellow gold to opaque chartreuse
Sango	God of thunder and lightning	Proud, aggressive, quick-tempered	Double-bladed axe, gourd rattle, zigzag motif representing lightning
Yemoja	Ruler of the river Ogun, mother of many orisha, symbol of motherhood	Calm, serious, dignified	Round fan, crown; crystal white and crystal blue or green

The gods of the Ifugao

The Ifugao are a mountain-dwelling people living in the western mountains of Luzon in the Philippines (Southeast Asia culture area). They were studied by R. F. Barton in the early part of the twentieth century.[11] The Ifugao are well known as a culture with a large pantheon of gods. Barton listed 1,240 deities but believed that there were as many as 1,500. These deities are grouped into forty classes, although the classification is quite inconsistent. Yet the Ifugao have no supreme or creator deity. Like most supernatural beings, Ifugao deities are immortal; they are often invisible; they are able to change their shape; and they can transport themselves instantly through space. Although the deities can be grouped by their characteristics and powers, each does have its own specific place in the pantheon. Just as in the world of humans, the best way to get along with the gods is to bribe them. A prayer without a sacrifice is useless because the sacrifice is treated as a payment.

As an example, one of the classes is translated as the "Paybackables." The name is derived from a word used for a payment in an economic exchange.

The Ifugao believe that they used to have trading relations with these deities in the past and have received from the deities a great deal of their culture. This is the largest of the classes and includes a rather broad range of deities, including nature gods, deified heroes and ancestors, and technological gods. An important god in this class is Lidum, a deity who taught the Ifugao many of their rituals.

Barton lists 168 "Paybackables." An example is the deities that are involved with the activity of weaving. They include "Separator of Seeds from Cotton," "Separator of Defective, Lumped Fibers," "Fluffer," "Spinner," "Draw Out of Thread on Spindle Bob," "Black Dyer," "Red Dyer," "Yellow Dyer," "Winder into Ball," "Weaver's First Helper Who Receives the Ball and Passes It Back and Forth," "Second Helper Who Passes Ball around the End Stick," "Scrutinizer (who sees that the job of setting up the loom is done right)," and—well, you get the general idea.

A rather interesting class of deities is the "Convincers." These gods bend a person's will to that of the person who invokes them. This process is called by English-speaking Ifugao *convincing*. To fulfill religious obligations, an Ifugao must borrow things to sacrifice. The loan is often very difficult to get repaid, and the Ifugao have developed many behaviors, including bullying and bluffing, to get the loan repaid. For example, if a debtor has publicly refused to pay a debt and therefore cannot pay it without losing face, the one to whom the debt is owed will call on the god Amobok, who will weaken the debtor's resolve and get him to pay back the debt in secret, thereby saving face.

There are many other important classes of deities. These include gods of reproduction, messenger deities, gods associated with various illnesses, gods associated with death, divination deities, gods of war, guardians of property, and many, many more.

Goddesses

Goddesses have been important figures in many religious systems. Some scholars believe that early human religions centered on fertility, a lunar cycle as opposed to a solar one, and the worship of a goddess. This is largely speculative and based on findings of small carvings of female figures with

exaggerated characteristics thought to be connected to fertility (Figure 9.2).

Some believe that goddess worship continued in Europe until a few thousand years before the Common Era. At this time the Indo-Europeans invaded from the East and brought with them a belief in male gods and the exploitation of nature. Some argue that goddess worship and the new god worship gradually combined to produce the polytheistic pagan religions of the Romans, Greeks, and Celts.

With the development of the monotheistic religions, discussed later in the chapter, the goddess was further suppressed, as these latter religions conceived of god in largely male terms. Although all three of the monotheistic religions contained some egalitarian sentiments in their origins and texts, all have also been interpreted at one time or another in very misogynistic terms.

Three important goddesses are Ishtar of the ancient Near East, Isis of ancient Egypt, and Kali in Hinduism. We will also discuss the Virgin Mary in Catholicism, although her classification as a goddess is certainly debatable and comes entirely from an etic perspective. Goddess worship has also seen a resurgence with the growth of the Wiccan religion, which will be discussed in Chapter 11.

Ishtar (Ancient Near East)

The goddess Ishtar was worshipped for thousands of years in Mesopotamia. Seen as both invincible in battle and a source of fertility, Ishtar was one of the paramount national deities.

In the natural environment of Mesopotamia, winds, rain, drought, and flood were all common. This contributed to a worldview in which these inconsistencies in nature were seen as being a reflection of violent conflicts among the gods; both the environment and the gods were seen as being unpredictable. The only way to ensure adequate food, victory in warfare, health, and so on was proper performance of rituals and sacrifices for the gods and goddesses.



Figure 9.2 Venus of Willendorf. A prehistoric female fertility figure from an archaeological site near the town of Willendorf, Austria, dated between 24,000 and 22,000 years ago. Figure is 11.1 centimeters (4 inches) high.

Among the gods and goddesses in the pantheon, Ishtar is supreme in her power over fate, as recounted in the Epic of Gilgamesh. In this story Ishtar made sexual advances toward King Gilgamesh, which he rejected. In response, Ishtar asked the supreme god, An, to send the bull of heaven to destroy Gilgamesh and his city, Uruk. Ishtar threatened that if she did not get her way, she would release the dead from the netherworld. In her role as a fertility goddess, she also promised that she would ensure that there would be enough food to eat after the bull's destruction.

Sexuality was an important aspect of Ishtar, as seen in the sacred marriage rites. The rites took place between the king and an **avatar** of Ishtar, probably

her high priestess. Unlike the Egyptian pharaohs, who were themselves seen as divine, this king was seen as a mortal who was the intermediary between the community and the gods. His relationship with Ishtar was seen as the source of his power and the guarantee of his success. This union was explicitly sexual, although it resulted not in offspring, but in the fertility of the land and success in battle.

Isis (Ancient Egypt)

Women occupied a relatively favorable position in ancient Egyptian society. The pharaoh was seen as the son of the sun god, and his queen was not only consort to the divine king but the mother of the divine prince. Women were also important in the religious realm, the pantheon containing a number of prominent goddesses.

Isis was probably the most important deity of the Egyptian pantheon for the average Egyptian. She was called the "Great Mother" and the "Queen of Heaven" and was associated with family. Her most common representation was as a mother, seated, suckling her son Horus on her lap. It is as the devoted wife and sister of Osiris and mother of Horus that she was best known.

Although Isis was originally closely associated with the royalty, she became associated with nature as her significance grew and became diversified. Her influence spread; she was present in Rome and Greece. Around 300 BCE the religion of Isis had developed into a **mystery religion** that involved secret and sacred rites. One had to be initiated into the religion to gain the wisdom and salvation that the goddess could offer. The influence of Isis peaked during the third century CE, when her popularity made her a serious competitor to the Christian church.

Kali (Hinduism)

The worship of a feminine aspect of the divine has a long history in India, probably dating back to pre-Vedic ancient peoples. (The Vedas are religious

texts that are the foundation of much of modern Hinduism. They were written down by the middle of the first millennium BCE, although they had existed in oral form much earlier.) The goddess remains important today. She is often associated with creativity and nature, in particular great trees and rivers.

The goddess is worshipped in many forms, including Durga, associated with ultimate light and benevolent power, and Kali, who is the divine in its fierce form. Kali means the "Black One," and she is depicted as dark-skinned and naked, standing on a corpse, dripping with blood, and carrying a sword and a severed head. She wears a girdle of severed hands and a necklace of skulls (Figure 9.3). Kali is said to have an insatiable thirst for blood, and at her temples animals are beheaded as a sacrifice to her.

Despite this fierce appearance, Kali is not evil. Although she is a fearsome destroyer to those who do evil, she is the loving and compassionate mother to her devotees. In Hinduism the divine is seen as encompassing both creation and destruction. Death and birth are linked together in an endless cycle.

Kali symbolizes transformation. The sword that she carries is used to cut away impediments to the realization of truth. Her garland consists of fifty severed heads to represent the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. Thus the garland represents knowledge and wisdom. The hands are the principal means by which work is done and therefore symbolize the action of karma. The hands have been severed, showing that the binding effects of karma have been overcome. Kali blesses the devotee by cutting him or her free from the cycle of karma.

Kali is often depicted as dancing wildly with the god Shiva. Shiva is sometimes known as the Lord of the Dance and, like Kali, is known as destructive and horrific. Some stories describe their dancing as threatening to destroy the world with its savage power. Gradually, Kali became known as one of Shiva's chief spouses. In art she is often shown standing or dancing on his naked and prostrate body. As she dances, her energy flows into him and brings him life. This image of Shiva and Kali shows Shiva as the passive potential of creation and Kali as his Shakti, or feminine creative principle.



Figure 9.3 The Hindu goddess Kali. A fierce goddess, Kali destroys those who do evil, but also brings wisdom and transformation to her devotees.

Mary (Roman Catholic)

Christianity is a monotheistic religion and, as such, cannot be said from an emic perspective to have a goddess. However, throughout Christian history, Mary has played an important role, and devotion to her has developed in different ways.

The height of devotion to Mary occurred during the medieval and baroque

periods in the modern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. Although Mary was never described as a goddess, she was held in such high esteem that she was certainly seen as more than merely a woman. She was set above the saints and, as the mother of God's son, was seen as only a little lower than God. She played an important role as an intermediary between people and God and Jesus. This was not true of the Protestant religions, which have tended to minimize the place of Mary. In fact, devotion to Mary was one of the major issues of the Protestant Reformation.

In the book of Revelation a passage that is interpreted as referring to Mary describes her as "a woman, clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars" (Revelation 12:1). This woman is also said to be stepping on a serpent, which is seen as symbolic of Mary overcoming the curse brought on humans by the first woman, Eve. In the language of Revelation, Mary is the "Queen of Heaven."

The importance of Mary is shown in many different ways. First is the celebration, not only of the Annunciation when the Archangel Gabriel told Mary she would bear the Son of God, but also of Mary's birth and death. She is shown in countless works of art, and many churches have been dedicated in her name. Shrines and pilgrimage sites associated with Mary were found not only in medieval Christianity, but in modern times. Examples are pilgrimage sites at Lourdes in France, Guadalupe in Mexico, and Fatima in Portugal, at each of which an apparition of Mary occurred (Figure 4.2 in Chapter 4).

Similarities between Mary and some of the Near Eastern pagan goddesses have also been noted. (For example, Isis is also referred to as "Great Mother" and "Queen of Heaven" and is depicted seated and holding her son.) Mary fits nicely into the role of these goddesses as protectors and sustainers. Some researchers think that devotion to Mary is actually derived from earlier worship of the Mother Goddess. Despite the fact that technically all Mary can do is offer intercession for the protection of God, she is often directly addressed for protection. If not a goddess, Mary certainly plays an important role in the Christian understanding of God.

Monotheism: conceptions of god in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Most of the religions that we have discussed and most religions that have existed in the world have been **polytheistic**; that is, they recognize many deities. However, many people in the world today belong to one of the large **monotheistic** (a belief in one god) religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These three religions share some of the same history in addition to the concept of a single God. We will now examine a little of the history of these three religions and how they have conceived of the nature of God.[12]

Judaism

The ultimate theme of Judaism is monotheism. Judaism believes that the Jews have been chosen by God to enter into a special relationship with Him, much like that of child to parent. However, many scholars argue that we should not assume that the earliest Jews—for example, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—were in fact monotheists.

The patriarchs appear to have shared many of the religious beliefs of their pagan neighbors in Canaan and might not have even shared the same god among themselves. Many different names are used for God in the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh). Some scholars argue that these were actually names of different gods. For example, the god of Abraham might have been El, the high god of Canaan. The name *Yahweh* is also used, and he is called the "God of our Fathers" by the Israelites. However, Yahweh might have been a different God from El.

When Moses made the **covenant** with God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites agreed to worship Yahweh alone. The covenant did not say that Yahweh is the only god who exists, although that concept developed later. Even the Ten Commandments take the existence of other gods for granted, such as in the commandment that "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

Worship of a single god while ignoring the others was an unusual step in a polytheistic world, in which it was dangerous to ignore possible sources of supernatural power and the Israelites were often reluctant to make this move, despite the covenant. It appears that Yahweh had been a warrior god and was very helpful in such matters, but He was not seen as a specialist in other areas, such as fertility. When the Israelites settled in Canaan, they turned to the cult

of Baal, the Canaanite fertility god, for such matters. It was difficult for the masculine Yahweh to replace goddesses such as Ishtar and Asherah, who still had a great following among the Israelites, especially among the women.

The Tanakh tells that the people had become so corrupt and idolatrous that God permitted the King of Assyria to successfully invade the country. Later, Jerusalem was captured, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people were taken to exile in Babylonia. This was an important turning point in Jewish history as they came to realize that they could practice their religion away from the Temple. From this grew the idea of a more pure monotheism, that Yahweh is the only God. In many ways the monotheism of the Jews was different from the pagan religions around it. The other gods of the ancient Middle East, such as Baal and Marduk, were not involved in the everyday lives of the people. The God of Israel, however, was an important power in human lives and was intimately involved in the ongoing history of the Jewish people. The pagan religions were generally tribal, limited to a specific people and a specific place. The God of Israel promised that he would protect Jacob and his people when they left Canaan and traveled to a strange new land. This conception of God was very pragmatic.

The way in which God is characterized changes over time in the Tanakh. In the story of Abraham, God, described in a very anthropomorphic way, visited Abraham in his tent and shared a meal with him. Later in time, God appeared to Moses in the much more dramatic form of a burning bush and insisted on distance. Later prophets were visited by angelic messengers, or sometimes they heard a divine inner voice. In the later rabbinic tradition God was presented as even more transcendent and even less anthropomorphic.

The early stories of God depict Him as a very partisan tribal deity, often cruel and violent. He demanded the sacrifice of Abraham's son Isaac, and He visited horrific plagues on the Egyptians. Later He was transformed into a symbol of transcendence and compassion, and in all three of the monotheistic religions discussed in this section, God became an inspiration for social justice.

In the years after the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 CE, the rabbis described God as an essentially subjective experience. To this day, Judaism considers theological ideas about God to be a private matter for the individual, for any official doctrine would limit the essential mystery of

God. The rabbis also began the important tradition of interpretation and commentaries on religious texts. Thus there is a fair amount of room in Judaism for individual opinions on such important matters as the nature of God.

Christianity

Out of Judaism came the new religion of Christianity. Jews at the time of Jesus, under Roman rule, were expecting a Messiah. However, as now passionate monotheists, they expected this Messiah to be human, a descendant of King David, not divine. The term *son of God* had been used previously in Jewish stories and expressed intimacy with God; it was not to be taken literally. Although few Jews of the time accepted Jesus as the Messiah, many other people ultimately would.

The story of Christianity is essentially the story of Jesus. The Gospel of John describes Jesus as the eternal Son of God and the word of God made flesh. Jesus himself never claimed to be divine, and it was only after his death that his followers seem to have come to this conclusion. This did not happen immediately. It was not until the fourth century CE that the doctrine that Jesus had been God in human form (the Incarnation) was established.

For Christians Jesus became the mediator between humans and God. They believed that the reason God had become human, in the form of Jesus, was to lead people back to God. Salvation had been won for humans by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Therefore, salvation was to be found through faith in Jesus. Through this faith, Christians believed that they would be cleansed of their sins, made righteous, and that they would be sanctified and glorified by God in the life to come.

Ultimately, an understanding of the Christian conception of God requires an understanding of the Trinity. The Trinity begins with God, the Father, who is the creator of heaven and earth. God became immanent in Jesus, who is God, the Son, the divine in human form. The Son is an incarnation of the Father, who returned after his physical death on earth to live with the Father, although he remains fully present in and to his believers. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to his followers after his death. The Holy Spirit, or Holy

Ghost, is the spirit of God, guiding and sustaining the faithful.

The concept of the Trinity caused many problems for the ostensibly monotheistic Christians. Under pressure from a hostile Roman world to explain how Christians could worship three divine beings but still consider themselves monotheistic, Christians settled on an interpretation of a single divine substance manifested in three personas. This view is expressed in the Athanasian Creed: "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods, but one God." In Western Christianity, however, the three distinct personas have generally been stressed over the unifying substance.

Islam

The story of Islam begins with the story of Mohammad, a member of the Quraysh tribe, which in the seventh century CE had recently settled in Mecca after having previously lived as nomadic herdsmen on the Arabian steppes. This act of settling in one place drastically altered their lifestyle, and new values started replacing the old. Mecca was also the location of the Kaaba, an ancient and massive cube-shaped shrine. Most Arabs believed that the Kaaba was originally dedicated to al-Lah (Allah), the High God of the ancient Arabian pantheon.

Allah was believed to be identical to the God of the Jews and Christians. Although Judaism and Christianity are also monotheistic, both were seen as having strayed from the authentic monotheism of Abraham, which Islam would seek to restore. Abraham lived before God had sent either the Torah or the Gospel and was therefore seen as neither a Jew nor a Christian. In the story of Abraham he has a son, Ishmael, by his concubine Hagar. When Abraham's wife, Sarah, becomes pregnant with Isaac, she demands that Hagar and Ishmael leave. God consoles Abraham by telling him that both of his sons will be the fathers of great nations. Abraham and Ishmael are said to have together built the Kabah for God in Mecca.

Muslims believe that the original religion was monotheism but that it has occasionally decayed into polytheism. At these times God would send prophets, including Moses and Jesus, to renew the message of monotheism.

Each prophet brought the message in a way that was appropriate to his particular time and place. The last prophet was Mohammad, and he received messages meant for all people and all times.

Mohammad was visited by an angel, who gave him the command to recite. The Word of God was revealed to Mohammad little by little over a period of twenty-three years and would be compiled into what is called the Qur'an. The power of the Qur'an is based partly on the extraordinary beauty of the language. Muslims believe that to hear the Qur'an recited is to experience the divine.

The early verses of the Qur'an encourage people to look for signs of God's goodness and power in the world and to realize how much they owe to God. Muslims believe that God is **omniscient** and has created everything for a divine purpose. The world is governed by fixed laws that ensure the harmonious working of all things. Humans can find peace by knowing and living by these laws. People must reproduce God's benevolence in their own society in order to be in touch with the true nature of things. To believe in this is to surrender totally to God. An essential act in Islam is bowing down in prayer (*salat*), a gesture of this surrender. In practice, these ideas mean that Muslims have a duty to create a society that is just and equitable, in which the poor and vulnerable are treated well.

The God of Islam is more impersonal than the God of Judaism. Muslims believe that God can only be glimpsed in the signs of nature and is so transcendent that He can be talked about only in parables. In contrast to Christianity there are no obligatory doctrines about God. Theological speculation is dismissed as self-indulgent guesses. No one could possibly know or prove the nature of God.

Atheism

Just as the statement "I believe in God" has meaning only in context, so does the concept of **atheism**. For example, early Christians and Muslims were considered atheists by the larger society in which they lived for refusing to recognize the existing pantheon of gods. In the Qur'an an unbeliever is somebody who is ungrateful to God and refuses to honor Him. Atheism has

historically meant not accepting the current conception of God.

In Europe it was only at the end of the sixteenth century that the term *atheist* began to be widely used. It was the time of great conflicts between Protestants and Catholics and the proliferation of many Christian sects. Rumors abounded of people—atheists—who denied the existence of God. These were much like the rumors of witchcraft, which we will discuss in Chapter 10.

In reality atheism, as we conceive of it today, was highly unlikely—perhaps even impossible—for people of the time. In sixteenth-century life, religion and the Church were ubiquitous. They dominated life and were part of nearly every activity. In these conditions it is hard to imagine someone gaining enough of an outsider perspective to question God and religion. Even if someone had managed to do so, this person would have found no support for this perspective in the science or philosophy of the time. The term *atheist* was used as an insult, to describe someone who did not agree with you about the nature of God. No one would actually use the term to describe himself or herself. It would not be until the end of the eighteenth century that a few Europeans would find it possible to deny the existence of God.

The scientific developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were important to the development of atheism. By the start of the seventeenth century, leading theologians argued the existence of God on entirely rational grounds. When these arguments did not hold up well under the new science, the existence of God began to be questioned. In large part it was the way in which people conceived of the nature of God that made Him vulnerable to this attack. God was seen as a fact of life that could be examined in much the same way that the natural world was.

Another issue was a new emphasis on a literal understanding of the Bible in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. Again, these literal interpretations made the texts vulnerable to questioning from the new scientific perspective. The heliocentric theory of Copernicus and Galileo was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church not because the theory endangered belief in God, but because it contradicted the scriptures. Many years later, the discoveries of Lyell and Darwin would call into question the biblical account of creation.

With the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment came new ideas of science and progress. Enlightenment was seen as achievable by people on their own, without relying on the traditions of the Church or revelation from

God. However, most of the philosophers of the Enlightenment did not reject the idea of God outright, just the conceptions of a cruel God who threatens people with eternal damnation. They believed in a god, but not the God of the Bible. However, a few people truly were beginning the trend away from God, and by the end of the century there were philosophers who were proud to call themselves atheists. There was also an idea that science, which was the foundation for questioning God, would ultimately replace religion.

Science has not been the only factor in the growth of atheism. The challenge of horrific historical events such as the Holocaust has also played a role. Some people believe that growing atheism is just the natural result of living in a more secular society.

Just as there are different kinds of beliefs in god, there are different kinds of atheists. Some distinguish between weak atheism (disbelief in any specific god) and strong atheism (denial of the existence of any god). Another approach is **agnosticism**, which is the idea that the question of the existence of a god is unsolvable, unprovable.

While the numbers of people with no belief in a god have grown dramatically in Europe over the years, it is interesting to note that the same phenomenon has not occurred in the United States. Although church attendance and membership in traditional religious denominations have fallen, the vast majority of people in the United States still say that they believe in God, whatever they mean by that.

Conclusion

The functioning of the human mind leads us into seeing the world as being the result of the actions of various types of beings. Our world is populated with actors whom we see as responsible for the events in our lives, especially those that cause us pain and misery. Some of these actors are humans with supernatural powers—magicians and witches, for example. Others are not human, but are anthropomorphic supernatural beings—spirits and gods. The actions of these supernatural beings explain the operation of our world. They provide us with an explanation for what befalls us and provide the basis of

action to counter such negative events through ritual activity.

The similarity between gods and people is striking. Gods resemble us in appearance, thoughts, and actions. They have human emotions and display the best and worst of human behavior. The structure of human society is a model for that of the gods in ways that are both simple and complex. Of course, the powers possessed by supernatural beings go far beyond those of humans. Gods are creators and destroyers. As such, gods are part of the explanatory system for how the world works. The existence of gods answers many of the big questions in life: How did the world begin? Why are we here? The existence of spirit beings answers many of the smaller ones: Why do we get sick? What goes bump in the night?

Summary

Gods and spirits are supernatural beings that generally do not have human origins. The distinction between gods and spirits is to some degree arbitrary. Spirits are less powerful than gods, are more localized, and are frequently collections of nonindividualized supernatural beings that are not given specific names and identities. Examples include the leprechauns of Ireland, the jinn of the Middle East, and the angels and demons of the monotheistic religions. Spirits include guardian spirits, ancestral spirits, and shamans' spirit helpers. Spirits live in the human world, interacting with humans. They may provide protection, success, and luck but also are blamed for minor mishaps. Spirits often reside in natural and human-made objects. Places of special beauty or unusual character may be inhabited by spirits.

Gods are more powerful than spirits. They control major forces of nature, such as the wind, rain, and fertility. Gods are anthropomorphic, with names, origins, and specific attributes. They are born, marry, and sometimes die; they love and lust; they are wise and dull, loving and hateful, generous and miserly; some are sympathetic to human beings, others are hostile. A hierarchy of gods makes up a pantheon, usually with a supreme god at the top. Many types of gods can be recognized, including creator gods, otiose gods, trickster gods, and attribute gods.

Theorists have proposed that the nature of the gods in a society mirrors important cultural elements, such as that group's social structure. Horton proposed that the importance of a high god in African religions was related to increased contact with the outside world and the importance of achieved status over ascribed status. Swanson tested the functionalist ideas of Durkheim and found that religious hierarchy was more likely to be found in a society that also had a decision-making hierarchy that contained at least three different levels. He also found that the number of attribute gods related to the amount of specialization. Psychosocial anthropologists believe that humans project qualities of important figures such as parents onto the gods. Psychologists also note that while gods are usually not concerned with issues of morality in small societies, gods in large, complex societies are very concerned with defining moral behavior and punishing transgressions of the divine moral code. Such gods are called "Big Gods."

Some scholars believe that the earliest human religions centered on fertility, a lunar cycle as opposed to a solar one, and the worship of a goddess. Examples of goddesses are Ishtar of the ancient Near East, Isis of ancient Egypt, and Kali from Hinduism. From an etic viewpoint, the role of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism has some characteristics of a goddess. With the development of the monotheistic religions the goddess was suppressed, as these religions conceived of God in largely male terms.

Polytheistic religions recognize many deities. The more familiar monotheistic religions believe in a single omnipotent and omniscient God. Judaism believes that the Jews have been chosen to enter into a special relationship with God. Out of Judaism came Christianity. The story of Christianity is essentially the story of Jesus—God who became human to lead people back to God. In Islam, Allah was believed to be identical to the God of the Jews and Christians, religions that were seen as having strayed from the authentic monotheism of Abraham, which Islam would seek to restore.

Atheism has historically meant not accepting the conception of the divine that is found in a particular society at a particular time. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that atheism took on its present meaning of denying the existence of God.

Study questions

1. The world is full of examples of supernatural beings. We can categorize many of them as gods and spirits. What are the definitions of gods and spirits given in this chapter? Is this always an easy distinction to make? Why or why not? What does this tell us about systems of classification?
2. As we learned in Chapter 1, the functional approach to the study of religion looks at the role that religious practices play in the functioning of a society. Apply this approach to *zar* possession in the northern Sudan.
3. Gods are supernatural anthropomorphic beings. What exactly does this mean?
4. In what ways does the concept of a monotheistic God appear in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?
5. The terms *atheism* and *agnosticism* are often used in U.S. culture. What exactly do these terms mean? Why do you think it is more common for people in Europe to say that they are atheists than people in the United States?

Suggested readings

Michael Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).
[A look at exorcism, largely Christian evangelical, in the United States.]

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008).
[Dawkins presents his arguments for atheism.]

Felicitas D. Goodman, *How about Demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
[A look at possession in different cultures, including a discussion of the role of altered states of consciousness.]

Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).
[An examination of the relationship of "big gods" and large, complex societies.]

Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in the Age of Science* (2nd edn) (New York: Holt, 2003).
[A look at reasons why people say they believe in God.]

Fiction

Peter Blue Cloud, *Elderberry Flute Songs: Contemporary Coyote Tales* (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 2002).
[A series of contemporary stories involving the trickster Coyote written by a Mohawk.]

Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
[A story of murder and conspiracy that focuses on the importance of the feminine divine.]

Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (New York: William Morrow, 2011).
[Old gods battle new ones for control in America.]

Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).
[Set in South Carolina in the 1960s, a young girl's life is influenced by three beekeeping sisters and a Black Madonna.]

Suggested websites

http://godchecker.com
A database of all known gods.

www.atheists.org
The website of the American Atheists.

www.religioustolerance.org/god_devel.htm
Various ideas about God from Ontario consultants on religious tolerance.

www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm
Catholic beliefs about God.

www.marypages.com/
Apparitions of the Virgin Mary.

Notes

1 D. J. Hayward, *Vernacular Christianity among the Mulia Dani* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997).

2 J. Boddy, "Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance," *American Ethnologist,* 15 (1988), pp. 4–27.

3 AP-GfK Poll, December, 2011, www.ap-gfkpoll.com.

4 M. Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 273.

5 S. D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982), pp. 28–29.

6 É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) (reprint edn) (New York: Free Press, 1995).

7 R. Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

8 G. E. Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods: The Origin of Primitive Beliefs* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960).

9 S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) (reissue edn) (New York: Norton, 1989).

10 A. Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

11 R. F. Barton, "The Religion of the Ifugao," *American Anthropological Association Memoirs*, no. 65, (1946), pp. 1–244.

12 The following discussion is based on the work of Karen Armstrong in *A History of God:*

The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).

Chapter 10
Witchcraft

One of the most interesting topics in the anthropology of religion is **witchcraft**. However, witchcraft is not a single, unified concept. When anthropologists speak of witchcraft, they generally refer to individuals who have an innate ability to do evil. A witch does not depend on ritual to achieve his or her evil ends but simply wills misfortune to occur. In this sense witchcraft is clearly different from sorcery. (Of course, there is nothing to prevent a witch from using magic, but this would lie outside the definition of witchcraft.) In some cultures witchcraft can be unconscious and unintentional; one can be a witch and not even know it.

Although in our culture we tend to think of witches as females, traditionally both sexes have been accused of witchcraft. Witchcraft accusations reflect underlying social tensions in a society. Individuals who exhibit antisocial behavior and people in relationships characterized by conflict are likely targets. Along these lines, cultures in which witches are considered primarily to be women will tend to exhibit tension between the sexes.

The concept of individuals with such propensities for evil is found in a wide variety of areas, including New Guinea, Southeast Asia, the Americas, and Europe. However, the best-developed discussions of witchcraft in the anthropological literature describing witchcraft in small-scale societies are those of witchcraft in African societies. In these societies witchcraft is a very common belief and refers to the ability of a person to cause harm by means of a personal power that resides within the body of the witch.

The term *witchcraft,* however, is also used to refer to other religious phenomena. Witchcraft, encompassing many of the features found in African witchcraft, was found in peasant communities in Europe from medieval to

early modern times. Because the people in these communities believed that only God could heal, individuals who practiced healing arts and midwifery were often stigmatized and thought of as being witches. When witchcraft became of interest to various Christian churches, the idea of witchcraft changed to reflect an association with Satan. This led to the famous witchcraft executions in Europe and colonial America. We should also mention that Wicca uses the term *witch* in a vastly different way. The Wiccan religion will be discussed in the next chapter.

The concept of witchcraft in small-scale societies

The idea of witchcraft as an evil force bringing misfortune to members of a community is found in a great number of societies throughout the world. In these societies witchcraft is evil; there are no good witches. Unlike sorcerers, who perform magic rituals to achieve their evil ends, witches simply will death and destruction.

The power of a witch is clearly a supernatural power. Some witches fly through the air. Others can change their outward physical appearance to that of an animal. Witches have personal characteristics that are the antithesis of those that characterize a good, moral person. Witches might practice cannibalism and incest; they show hatred, jealousy, and greed. Thus they become personifications of all that is evil in a society. Witchcraft beliefs become a way of objectifying antisocial behavioral traits.

Witchcraft among the Azande

The Azande are a large cultural group living in southern Sudan and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Between 1926 and 1930 the British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard made three expeditions to Zandeland which were the basis for his ethnography

Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande.[1] Among the Azande, witchcraft is an everyday topic of conversation, and people will discuss witchcraft in great detail with an outside observer. Therefore Evans-Pritchard had access to a great deal of information.

The Zande belief in witchcraft

As with many African peoples, the Azande believe that witchcraft, or *mangu,* is something that exists within the body of a witch. The Azande actually describe this something as a physical substance. It is described in many ways. For example, it might be "an oval blackish swelling … in which various small objects are sometimes found."[2] It appears to be associated with the intestines or perhaps the liver. And how are the Azande able to describe witchcraft substances? It is because in the days before the British established control over the area, an autopsy was performed on people who had been accused of witchcraft when alive, to determine whether they were truly witches or not.

However, because witchcraft is inherited, an autopsy of an accused witch would also prove that a particular living person, related to the deceased, was or was not a witch. *Mangu* is thought to be passed down from parent to child of the same sex—from father to son and from mother to daughter. Therefore if a man were proven to possess witchcraft substance, this conclusion would extend to that man's father, sons, brothers, and so on. However, the Azande rarely have a theoretical interest in witchcraft. What is important is whether a person at a particular point in time is acting as a witch toward a specific person. A person can possess *mangu* and yet not act as a witch. (As we shall see shortly, the identification of witches is more commonly done through divination.)

Although witchcraft is contained within the physical body, its action is psychic. The psychic aspect of *mangu* is the soul of witchcraft. It usually, but not always, leaves the physical body of the witch at night, when the victim is asleep, and is directed by the witch into the body of the victim. As it moves, it shines with a bright light that can be seen by anyone during the nighttime. However, during the day it can be seen only by religious specialists.

All types of misfortune that are not clearly caused by some other factor are

attributed to witchcraft. This includes accident, illness, and death but also economic misfortunes such as the loss of a crop or the failure of some technological operation. Although there are methods for dealing with witchcraft, it is only in the case of death that there is a demand for compensation from the witch, the killing of the witch, often through sorcery, or the execution of the witch by the legal authority. These latter consequences occurred only for witches who had been held responsible for many deaths.

Witchcraft accusations are based on real social tensions that exist in Zande society. Witches are never strangers. Accusations grow out of negative emotions and behavior, such as greed, envy, and hatred. Certain social relationships within Zande society are common breeding grounds for such emotions, and this is reflected in the pattern of witchcraft accusations. For example, the Azande practice plural marriage, and the relationship between co-wives is often cordial. Yet tension may develop between them, especially if the husband favors one wife over another or one wife is jealous of the other for other reasons.

The role of divination

Zande oracles were described in Chapter 7. The best known are *dakpa,* the termite oracle; *iwa,* the rubbing-board oracle; and *benge,* the poison oracle.

A case of suspected witchcraft might begin by consulting *dakpa* because it is a relatively simple and inexpensive form of divination that can be performed by non-specialists. If *dakpa* suggests that witchcraft is responsible, a specialist would be consulted to use *iwa,* the rubbing-board oracle. Not only do these oracles provide information and suggest courses of action (including herbal remedies and the performance of therapy rituals), but it is thought that if the witch learns that someone is trying to determine the cause of the illness, the witch might stop so as not to risk being accused.

If all of the steps fail to stem the tide of the illness, however, *benge* will be consulted. If there is confirmation that witchcraft is indeed the cause, the operator of the oracle must identify the witch. A witch is always someone known to the victim, and the cause of a witchcraft attack is usually associated with greed, envy, hatred, or some other antisocial behavior. In placing names

before the oracle, one would select those people in the community who exhibit antisocial behavior, because there is a probability that one of them is the witch. Because antisocial behavior tends to occur frequently in stressful social relationships, among people one knows, accusations tend to be associated with particular relationships.

Once the witch has been identified through the poison oracle, a neutral intermediary confronts the witch, who invariably claims innocence. However, according to Zande witchcraft belief, it is possible to possess *mangu* (witchcraft substance), which might be acting up without the accused person's conscious knowledge. This gives the accused person a way out. She can perform a simple ritual in which she takes water into her mouth and spits it out, thereby "cooling" her witchcraft. If the victim gets better, then *benge* is praised for identifying the witch. The witch does not suffer any stigma. If the victim continues to be ill, then either the accused person was not sincere in cooling down her witchcraft or she did indeed stop but some other witch started.

An analysis of Zande witchcraft beliefs

Evans-Pritchard wrote that:

> the concept of witchcraft … provides [the Azande] with a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events. Witchcraft beliefs also embrace a system of values, which regulate human conduct.[3]

All peoples seek explanations for things that happen in the world, especially misfortune. It is in this arena that people frequently turn to supernatural causes, such as spirits, sorcery, or witchcraft. The Azande think of all misfortune as being due to some supernatural agency.

Evans-Pritchard describes the case of a fallen granary. These structures are built on stilts to keep wild animals from getting in and eating the grain. The shade of the granary is an important meeting place where people congregate during the heat of midday. After the harvest, the weight of the grain stored in the granaries is great. Zandeland is home to a great many termites. Although

the men carefully examine the pillars and replace damaged ones before each harvest, it is still possible that termites will weaken the stilts and the granary will fall. If people are sitting under the structure when it falls, they may be seriously injured.

The immediate explanation for the accident is quite simple: termite-weakened wood stilts could not bear the weight of the grain, and the granary collapsed. Yet the Azande explain this course of events as an example of witchcraft. The key question here is not, "Why did the granary collapse?" but "Why were these particular individuals sitting under this particular granary when it collapsed?" The answer is witchcraft. To most Westerners the fact that these two events occurred at the same time—certain people sitting under the granary and the collapse of the granary—is simply coincidence or bad luck. However, the Azande do not accept the concept of coincidence. The fact that these specific individuals were injured was due to witchcraft.

Because of this way of thinking about cause and effect, witchcraft becomes a good explanation for misfortune. Anti-witchcraft rituals and the identification of the witch provide a plan of action, or what Evans-Pritchard called "a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events." However, witchcraft cannot be used as an excuse for incompetence or simply bad behavior. If a particular activity fails because the person is not skilled, then it is not witchcraft.

Witchcraft among the Navaho

Whereas Zande witches are born with *mangu,* in other cultures the power of witchcraft is one that is sought. Again, immoral and antisocial behavioral traits are associated with witchcraft. They drive the individual to do whatever he or she must do to gain power that eventually will satisfy this emotional need. As our example we will examine witchcraft beliefs among the Navaho of the American Southwest. (It should be noted that although we are using the ethnographic present, it has been many decades since the last documented case of witch killing among the Navaho.)

In contrast with the Azande, the Navaho are very reluctant to discuss witchcraft. Many deny its existence, although this might be because admitting

to knowledge of witchcraft is seen as suspicious. Yet witchcraft beliefs are found throughout Navaho society. In contrast with the Azande, Navaho witches are individuals who seek to be initiated into the Witchery Way. Witchcraft is usually learned from a parent, grandparent, or spouse. Part of the initiation is believed to involve the killing of a relative, usually a sibling.

Witches are usually active at night, assuming the form of an animal, most often a wolf or coyote that move about at great speed. They visit graveyards and prepare a powder from the flesh of corpses. The powder may be dropped on the sleeping body of the victim through the smoke hole in the roof of the hogan (traditional house) or blown into the face of the victim in a crowd. Symptoms of corpse poisoning may be dramatic, but usually involve a slow wasting away that cannot be halted by healing rituals.

Witchcraft is generally associated with immoral and antisocial behavior such as greed, vengeance, and envy. Greedy witches obtain wealth by robbing graves. Another method is to pair up with another witch. One witch causes the illness, and the other witch attempts to "cure" the victim; the fee is then split between the two witches. Witches are thought to meet in caves at night, where they practice incest and cannibalism, have intercourse with the dead, and perform rituals to kill victims. Witchcraft beliefs act in many ways to enforce social norms. For example, if you do not care for your parents properly, they can become witches.

Witchcraft reflects human culture

The study of Zande witchcraft demonstrated that witchcraft beliefs and accusation reflect interpersonal behavior between people in stressful situations and that stressful behavior is frequently a recurring situation in particular social relationships. This point is clearly illustrated when we compare the systems of witchcraft belief in two different but related societies: the Nupe and Gwari of West Africa.

The Nupe and the Gwari are neighboring societies in the Guinea Coast culture area. They live in similar habitats and interact socially and economically with one another. Their social organizations are very similar; they even speak closely related languages. And many aspects of their religious

practices are similar or identical.

These two societies accept the existence of witchcraft, and the details of this belief are similar except for the sex of the witch. Among the Gwari, witches are both men and women; among the Nupe they are always women, although the operation of a woman's witchcraft activities must be aided by a man. There are ways of countering and preventing the operation of witchcraft. Among the Gwari, it is through rituals that rid the entire community of witchcraft. Witches are identified through divination, and the victims are both men and women. The pattern among the Nupe is different. Here the witchcraft of women is controlled through secret activities of the men.

According to our hypothesis that witchcraft accusations are signs of difficult social relationships, we might want to examine differences in interpersonal relationships in the two groups. Among the Nupe, the general picture is one of antagonism between men and women, reflected in the fact that witches are always women and men have the ability to control the activity of female witches. Further study reveals a major difference in marriage relationships in the two groups. Among the Gwari, marriage is generally free of tension, but this is not the case with the Nupe. This is likely due to differences in the economic systems. Among the Nupe, married women can become itinerant traders and have the potential of economic success. Their husbands are often in debt to their wives, and wives take over certain economic tasks that usually fall within the sphere of activity of men. These include paying for feasts and gathering together the bridewealth for sons. Men are angry and resentful over the situation but really cannot do anything about it. In addition, among the Nupe, itinerant traders can be married women who leave young children in the care of extended family, and even refuse to have children, to be free to ply their trade. Although men condemn this activity as immoral, once again they are helpless to do anything about it. It is this anger and hostility that are projected into the world of witchcraft, in which witches —interestingly, visualized as itinerant traders—are women who can be controlled by the men. Thus men have power over women in the realm of witchcraft but not in the real world.

Witchcraft and AIDS

In the previous section we saw how witchcraft beliefs functioned to provide explanations for misfortune and a means of actively dealing with the perceived cause. In the case of illness, the emphasis in modern medical theory is on discovering the cause of the illness—perhaps a malfunction of the body organs or the invasion of an infectious agent. Once the cause is determined, an appropriate response is made to cure the illness through surgery, medication, and other therapies. In many societies, the cause of illness and other misfortunes may be attributed to some supernatural causal agent such as a ghost or a spirit or a human agent engaged in sorcery or witchcraft. In the latter case the emphasis is on the identification of the person responsible through divination and other means followed by appropriate action, including the identification and possible execution of the individual responsible.

Adam Ashforth studied witchcraft in Soweto, South Africa, in the 1990s.[4] Here witchcraft can be seen as a manipulation of power that is found most commonly in various substances. Since the motive for witchcraft is most often jealousy and envy, the witch is usually someone close to the victim, a family member or a neighbor. One form of witchcraft involves *isidliso,* which can be loosely translated as "poison." This poison is associated with a variety of symptoms, including those that affect the stomach and digestive tract and the lungs. It is thought to frequently lead to a slow wasting illness ending in the death of the victim. Some people visualize *isidliso* as a small creature that looks like a crab, frog, or lizard that becomes lodged in the throat of the victim. It can even take on a human form and devour the victim from the inside. As the illness progresses, the victim becomes thin, vomits blood, loses appetite, and coughs continuously. *Isidliso* is also seen as causing many social ills, such as divorce and unemployment.

Isidliso is sent to the victim through a mixture of herbs and magic substances in food and drink. It can also be sent into the victim through dreams. But unlike a chemical poison, intension is critical, and the poison will only affect the intended victim.

One of the most devastating diseases to be introduced into traditional communities has been AIDS. The nature of AIDS lends itself to interpretations of witchcraft and sorcery. It is a complex disease that is not very well understood. The victim suffers over a long period of time, appearing to get better and then decline again. Outwardly it often parallels traditional beliefs

in illnesses caused by witchcraft. The available medical technology is essentially ineffective. It appears to strike randomly and is especially seen among the poor. In Soweto, as in other African communities, the presence of AIDS quite often leads to accusations of witchcraft, often within the family, with the subsequent tragedy of homicide of the alleged witch.

Euro-American witchcraft beliefs

Although Euro-American ideas about witchcraft show some similarities to those of small-scale societies, there are many important differences. Both cultures see witches as evildoers, but ideas of witchcraft in Europe were influenced by Christian ideas about the nature of evil. As was discussed in Chapter 9, one of the theological challenges facing Christianity (as well as Judaism and Islam) is how to explain the existence of evil when God has been described as unique, all-powerful, and all-good. One answer to this problem posits the existence of an evil spirit of great power. In Hebrew this spirit was called Satan, the adversary. This was translated in Greek as *diabolos* and in English as the devil. Satan is not a major figure in the Hebrew Bible; however, he did receive a great deal of attention in Judaism during the Apocalyptic period (200 BCE to 150 CE), a time during which Jews were focused on the idea of an imminent apocalypse and the coming of the messiah. However, from that time on, the rabbis came to dominate Judaism, and Satan received very little attention.

One important event during the apocalyptic period was the origin of Christianity; the New Testament prominently features Satan. The message of the New Testament is that Jesus Christ saves us from the power of the Devil. Part of the new definition of the evil of witchcraft is that witches are individuals who have made a pact with the Devil.

The connection with pagan religions

We said earlier that in small-scale societies the concepts of witchcraft and sorcery are quite distinct. This changes with European witchcraft beliefs, in which sorcery gets bound up with witchcraft—thus our common perception of witches doing spells. There were also important changes in the conception of sorcery. Previously, sorcery had been seen as largely mechanical, a manipulation of the supernatural. Now sorcery became associated with the invocation of spirits. Although sorcery had always been an antisocial behavior and seen as a hostile act, sorcery was now defined as also being hostile to God. The spirits of sorcery were defined as demons. Therefore, anyone doing sorcery, or for the most part any magic, was seen as calling upon the servants of Satan.

Some have argued that this was part of the larger persecution of pagan religious practices. Christians were arguing that Jesus was the Son of God, and a large part of their argument was based on the miracles that he performed. Skeptics of the day were likely to counter with the argument that Jesus was merely another sorcerer, performing magic. So for Christians the only legitimate magic became the magic performed by Jesus; all other magic was the work of the Devil. Magic and witchcraft became not just crimes against society, but **heresy**—crimes against God.

The Christian theology of the time argued that pagan magic and religion were all the work of the Devil, part of his plan to lure people away from the truth of Christianity. The pagan gods and goddesses were thus redefined by Christians as servants of Satan. However, at the level of popular religion many of the pagan beliefs and gods were absorbed into the Christian religion.

The nature of the Catholic Church's response to heresy underwent dramatic changes during this time. Beginning in the twelfth century, laws dealing with heresy became more severe. A factor in this state of affairs was the revival of Roman law. Under Roman law, people are seen as part of the corporation that is the state and therefore must follow its principles. In the late Roman Empire several codes had declared that crimes against God were worthy of punishment by death. The revival of Roman law encouraged the imposition of harsher penalties for heresy. For example, burning became the punishment of choice for relapsed heretics and was increasing in frequency. Witches, as heretics, were burned as well. However, from the fifteenth century onward, witches were treated even more harshly than other heretics. Most heretics were burned only in the case of relapse; witches were burned on a first

conviction.

Before the thirteenth century, the only way for a heretic to be brought to trial was if an individual made an accusation against that person. It was not long, though, before bishops began holding **Inquisitions**, or formal investigations. Instead of waiting for an accusation, the authorities began to actively go looking for heretics, particularly witches. By the end of the thirteenth century, inquisitors were assigned to most areas of continental Europe.

At the beginning, most sentences appear to have been penances such as wearing a cross sewn to one's clothes or going on a pilgrimage. The goal of the inquisitor was primarily to identify the guilty and get them to confess and repent in order to restore them to the fold. Only a small number of the cases resulted in execution. These were generally reserved for relapsed heretics or for obstinate heretics (those who refused to repent). In time, though, the punishments, especially for witches, became more severe.

Inquisitions were a powerful means of enforcing sanctions against heretics and witches. At first individual bishops were encouraged in their efforts, but between 1227 and 1235 the papal Inquisition was established. The power of the Inquisition was constantly being corroborated and expanded. For example, in 1252, Innocent IV issued the papal bull *Ad Extirpanda.* This bull authorized the imprisonment of heretics, the seizure of their possessions, and their imprisonment, torture, and execution. All of this was done on what was usually minimal evidence. The procedures of the Inquisition were such that guilt was easy to establish and innocence was difficult to defend. It should be noted that although the Inquisition was a Catholic institution, Protestants were also involved in the conviction and execution of witches during this time.

The Witchcraze in Europe

At the end of the Middle Ages, witches were believed to be individuals, both male and female, who had formally repudiated Christianity and made a pact with the Devil. Witches were believed to ride by night and to have secret nocturnal meetings. As we saw with witchcraft in small-scale societies,

witches generally represent all that is evil and antisocial. In this case, witches were believed to have orgies, to engage in sacrificial infanticide and cannibalism, and to desecrate Christian holy objects such as the crucifix and the **Eucharist**.

The period known as the Witchcraze began at the end of the Middle Ages (around 1450) and lasted for about 200 years. Many scholars date the start of the Witchcraze to the time at which the Inquisition began actively seeking out witches. Although people associate this with the "Dark Ages," it actually was a product of the Renaissance and Reformation. The Witchcraze was a time in which many people were accused, convicted, and executed as witches. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but estimates range from a few thousand to several million people.

One invention in the 1450s in particular helped to spread these ideas: the printing press. One of the most important books published during this time was the *Malleus Maleficarum,* or the *Hammer against Witches,* which was published by the Catholic Church in 1486. The *Malleus* spells out the Church's beliefs about witches at the time. Witches were people who renounced the Catholic faith and devoted themselves, body and soul, to the service of evil. Witches offered unbaptized children to the Devil and engaged in orgies that included having intercourse with the Devil himself. Witches were also typically believed to shift shapes, fly through the air, and make magical ointments. The *Malleus* also stated that witches were more likely to be women than men, something we will return to later. The *Malleus* spelled out what to do with a witch: All witches must be arrested, convicted, and executed. It is important to note that even people who spoke out against the Witchcraze did not challenge the actual existence of witches. To do so at this time would have been tantamount to declaring oneself an atheist.

People who were accused of witchcraft were interrogated to obtain a confession. The questions they were asked presumed their guilt. For example, common questions included where and when they met with the Devil. The question of whether or not they had done such a thing was never asked. Torture was a common means of gaining a confession. In 1628 a man named Johannes Junius was executed as a witch. What is unusual about this case is that he was able to smuggle a letter out of prison to his daughter before he died. What follows is a portion of that letter:

> Many hundred thousand good-nights, dearly beloved daughter Veronica. Innocent have I come into prison, innocent have I been tortured, innocent must I die. For whoever comes into the witch prison must … be tortured until he invents something out of his head … When I was the first time put to the torture, Dr. Braun, Dr. Kötzendörffer, and two strange doctors were there. The Dr. Braun asks me, "Kinsman, how come you here?" I answer, "Through falsehood, through misfortune." "Hear you," he retorts, "you are a witch; will you confess it voluntarily? If not, we'll bring in witnesses and the executioner for you." I said, "I am no witch, I have a pure conscience in the matter; if there are a thousand witnesses, I am not anxious." [The witnesses were brought forward.] And then came also—God in the highest heaven have mercy—the executioner, and put the thumb-screws on me, both hands bound together, so that the blood ran out at the nails and everywhere, so that for four weeks I could not use my hands, as you can see from the writing … Thereafter, they first stripped me, bound my hands behind me, and drew me up in the [strappado]. Then I thought heaven and earth were at an end; eight times did they draw me up and let me fall again, so that I suffered terrible agony … And so I made my confession … but it was all a lie.[5]

As the sixteenth century progressed, the Witchcraze only increased in intensity. Religious conflict, popular movements, and wars during the Reformation exacerbated social tensions, which were then reflected in witchcraft accusations. The Witchcraze did not decline until the late 1600s and early 1700s.

The Witchcraze in England and the United States

The Witchcraze in England was at first somewhat different from that in continental Europe. England had no Inquisition, no Roman law, and only a weak tradition of heresy—all of which had contributed to the Witchcraze elsewhere. There was no English translation of the *Malleus Maleficarum* until modern times. English witchcraft remained closer to the idea of sorcery, with an emphasis on the power of witches to place hexes and curses. In the 1500s, English witches were not believed to fly, conduct orgies, or make pacts with the Devil. Instead, they harmed livestock, caused diseases, and hurt infants and children. The first statutes against witchcraft in England were not passed until the mid-1500s. Even then, witches were prosecuted under civil, not religious, law. This is why witches in England, and later the United States, were hanged and not burned (Figure 10.1). Burning was the punishment for

heretics.

Ideas more like those on the European continent eventually made their way into England through Scotland and King James I, who was a major proponent of the Witchcraze. The height of the Witchcraze in England occurred during the 1640s. The English Civil War at the time was producing even greater anxieties and insecurities. America lagged even farther behind; the first hanging of a witch in New England did not occur until 1647.

By far the most famous of the witch trials in the Americas occurred in Salem in 1692. This trial is well documented and has been extensively studied. The immediate cause of the trials appears to have been two young girls (ages nine and eleven) who were experimenting with divination techniques in an attempt to discover who their future husbands would be. In the process, they managed to scare themselves and began exhibiting nervous symptoms. They thrashed around and assumed odd postures. The father of one of the girls was Samuel Parris, the local minister. He called in a physician to examine the girls, but the doctor was unable to find anything wrong. It was this physician who first suggested that the girls might be victims of a witch's spell.

The girls' behavior became worse, and soon other young girls and young women also began to suffer from fits and convulsions. The girls were questioned and named three women as witches: Sarah Goode, Sarah Osborne, and a West Indian slave named Tituba. Soon more were accused. The fits increased in intensity. The girls screeched, howled, reported visions, and suffered from mysterious tooth marks. The trials themselves were dramatic affairs at which the girls exhibited these symptoms. In all, nineteen people were executed, and more than 100 were jailed.

Most of the commentaries on the Salem trials focus on what, from an outsider's perspective, was really going on here. Early suggestions included the girls being delusional and the whole thing being a vicious prank. Perhaps they enjoyed the attention, or maybe they were overcome by the power of suggestion. More recent research has suggested a possible biological component in the form of ergot poisoning. Ergot poisoning comes from eating a particular mold found in the grain rye, and among its symptoms are hallucinations.

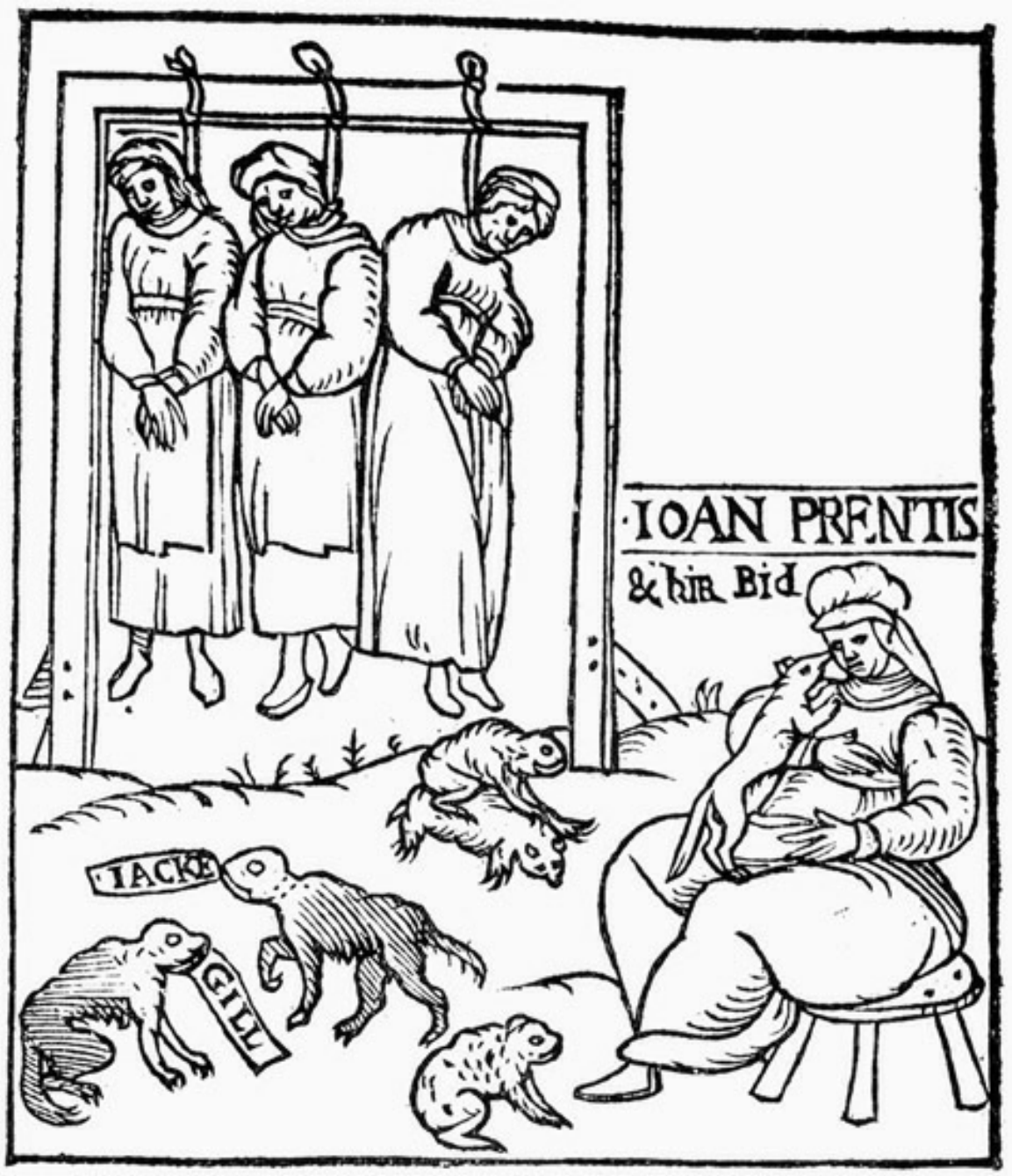


Figure 10.1 Execution of English witches. Three English witches are seen hanging in this woodcut from a contemporary pamphlet on the third Chelmsford witch trial of 1589.

The events that took place in Salem, like many cases of witchcraft, resulted from the ebb and flow of everyday activities of people that characterize living in a com-munity. Witchcraft accusations were the end result of stressful social relationships as well as situations arising from the politics, economics, and

religious practices of the community.

Salem was not a single community. It was a farming society at the edge of the settled world at that time. In the not too distant past, before the period of the witchcraft trials, Salem had experienced conflict with the local native population and felt the need to defend itself. By the time of the trials, Salem was a rapidly growing community, one that included an extensive hinterland, and as the population grew, so did pressures on the land. In fact, many neighborhoods of the town were petitioning the colonial government for status as independent villages.

As is common in many societies throughout the world, those accused of witchcraft were primarily people living on the fringes of society. Many were marginalized and powerless women without husbands, brothers, or sons to protect their interests. Others were those who dealt with folk remedies and midwifery. "When such remedies went bad, and when face-to-face dispute resolution failed, the customers who paid for the cures or the potions might conclude that the purveyor was at fault. Thus premodern malpractice became witchcraft."[6]

Box 10.1 The evil eye

Although not usually thought of as witchcraft, belief in the evil eye has many of the characteristics associated with witchcraft. The power of the evil eye, like that of witchcraft, lies within the body of the individual, who might or might not be aware of it. This belief is found primarily in India, the Middle East, parts of Europe, and Mexico.

A person with the evil eye is able to cause illness or some other type of misfortune simply by looking at or praising someone or something. This is especially the case with babies, and in many societies it is considered bad form to praise or say something complimentary about a child, or the child could become ill and perhaps die. The concept is associated with envy, and people with the evil eye are jealous over the success or good luck of others.

One can avoid the evil eye by wearing charms that ward away the danger and by the recitation of certain formulas. When complimenting a

person or praising a person, one makes sure to begin and end the compliment with a special formula. Spitting or particular hand gestures are also used to protect one against the malignant power of the evil eye. Another strategy is to conceal one's good fortune and avoid looking prosperous.

The idea of the evil eye varies from society to society. In the Mayan region of Mexico, illness may be caused by *ojo,* or the evil eye, by a man or animal simply looking at a child.[7] People with the evil eye are dangerous, and one must deal with them with great care. One can recognize these individuals by a mole, a prominent vein, or a mark between the eyebrows. Cures may be affected by some type of contact with the person who has the evil eye. For example, a man who has brought about sickness in a child might be asked to place the child's finger in his mouth or rub some of his saliva on the child's mouth.

Functions of Euro-American witchcraft beliefs

Many of the functions that we discussed for small-scale societies are applicable here. Witches define all that is wrong and immoral. People who exhibit antisocial behavior or who stand out in any way are the most likely targets of witchcraft accusations. In the European example, witches helped to define the boundaries of Christianity and the cohesion of the Christian community. Witches were people who turned their backs on Christianity and made a pact with the Devil. They were heretics—people who sinned against God.

Witches also fulfill our unconscious need to blame someone for the misfortunes that we experience in our daily lives. It is more psychologically satisfying to have an identifiable individual who can be blamed and punished than to shrug our shoulders and attribute misfortune to bad luck. In general, patterns of witchcraft accusations also reflect deeply felt conflicts and divisions in a culture. The studies have shown this to be true for Salem, for example. Deeply felt moral divisions over the governance of the church, along with neighborhood and family conflicts, were showcased in the Salem witch

trials.

Witches as women

Although both men and women were tried and executed as witches during the Witchcraze, many more women were killed than men. There are many reasons for this. First, the *Malleus Maleficarum* itself says that women are more likely to be witches. This is because, according to the *Malleus,* women are weaker, stupider, more superstitious, and more sensual than men. The *Malleus* tells us:

> All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman … What else is a woman but a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted in fair colours … The word woman is used to mean the lust of the flesh, as it is said: I have found a woman more bitter than death, and a good woman more subject to carnal lust … There are more superstitious women found than men. And the first is, that they are more credulous; and since the chief aim of the devil is to corrupt faith, therefore he rather attacks them [than men] … Women are naturally more impressionable, and more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit … They have slippery tongues, and are unable to conceal from their fellow-women those things by which evil arts they know … [T]hey are feebler both in mind and body … Women are intellectually like children … She is more carnal than a man as is clear from her many carnal abominations … She is an imperfect animal, she always deceives … And indeed, just as through the first defect in their intelligence they are more prone to abjure the faith; so through their second defect of inordinate affections and passions they search for, brood over, and inflict various vengeances, either by witchcraft, or by some other means. Wherefore it is no wonder that so great a number of witches exist in this sex.[8]

Beliefs about witches included intercourse with the Devil. During a witch's interrogation, she was asked to name demons that had been her lovers and to describe the Devil's phallus. The fact that the Devil is almost universally perceived as male might have been a factor in labeling women as witches.

Sixteenth-century Europe was unusually misogynistic. Some historians have suggested that this was due to demographic changes. More men than women died from the plague and from warfare. As a result, there was a demographic imbalance, with more women living alone than usual. The social position of a woman living alone in a patriarchal society, in which women

were defined in relation to men, would have been difficult. The weaker social position of women made it easier for them to be accused. Another demographic change that likely had an impact was the increasing movement from the countryside to life in the city, with the accompanying increase in insecurities.

Among women, midwives appear to have been a particular target. Infant and maternal mortality rates were both high at the time and these deaths, along with any deformity or illness, were likely to be blamed on the midwife. Some researchers have also noted the connection between the persecution of midwives as witches and the rise of the profession of male doctors.

Modern-day witch hunts

At the height of the McCarthy era, Arthur Miller wrote the play *The Crucible*, which used the Salem trials as an allegory for McCarthyism. The term *witch hunt* is often used to describe modern events, but how similar are these to the historical and cross-cultural events that we have discussed so far in this chapter?

The McCarthy era took place in the United States in the early 1950s. Beginning with "loyalty" programs under President Truman and extending to investigations by the House Committee on Un-American Activities that resulted in blacklists and jail terms, the overwhelming concern was that "radicals" and communists were part of a vast conspiracy to destroy American democracy.

How similar were the events of the McCarthy era to the European witch hunts? Both began with strong emotions fueling a "scare" of a vast secret conspiracy whose purpose was purely subversive and potentially apocalyptic. The focus in both cases was identification of the adversaries of society, with investigations spiraling as those identified were pressured to implicate others. Both focused on purity and unity and showed an intense preoccupation with loyalty (to Christianity during the European Witchcraze, to American democracy during the McCarthy era).

The most obvious difference is the lack of a supernatural, religious element to McCarthyism. However, both certainly showed extraordinary levels of

exaggeration and misperception. The ideas about communists and subversives during the McCarthy era reached beyond reality into outright fantasy. For a modern witch hunt case that includes more direct religious elements, we can look at the child sex abuse crisis in the United States in the 1980s.

During the 1960s and 1970s, much about modern family life had changed, including shifting gender roles and a rise in divorce rates. The 1960s also saw the "discovery" of child battering and in 1974 the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was passed. Adding to the cultural mix was a growth in religious cults, and growing fears of Satanism and the **occult** (see Chapter 11). Many in American society believed that Satanic cults were sexually abusing children. The general mood was one of fearfulness about the family and children specifically; the family was seen as disintegrating and children were being put in peril. The mix of emotions (fear, guilt, outrage) set the stage for our next example of a witch hunt.

Beginning in California in the early 1980s, authorities thought they had discovered Satanic "sex rings" that were sexually abusing children and engaging in various acts of Devil worship. Perhaps the most famous case is that of the McMartin Preschool, but there were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of investigations. Evidence to support the allegations of Satanic activity was never found and the methods used by investigators have largely been discredited. Although favoring the prosecution perspective at first, even the media at the time eventually labeled these cases as witch hunts.

Box 10.2 Satanism

Most modern Satanists do not conform to the conceptions that many people have about them. We must distinguish between people who have been labeled Satan worshippers by others, which for some conservative Christian groups would include any non-Christian religion, and those who label themselves as Satanists.

Very few people actually worship Satan as the personification of evil, although some do claim to worship a Lucifer or Satan whom they believe is an ancient deity mistakenly identified as the Devil by Christians. The view these Satanists have of Satan is a pagan image that focuses on

power, virility, and sexuality. To most Satanists, though, Satan is more like a force of nature than a deity. Their Satan is not the Christian Devil and has nothing to do with the Christian Hell, demons, buying people's souls, human sacrifice, or truly evil deeds. Satanists do not even believe that Heaven and Hell exist.

Although there is much variety in the beliefs of Satanists, we can describe some of the more common beliefs. Satanists generally believe that each person is fully responsible for his or her own life, and the emphasis is on the individual, not on a god or goddess. Life itself is respected and valued; despite common misconceptions, Satanists do not advocate or practice animal or human sacrifices.

The largest of the many religious traditions within Satanism is the Church of Satan, founded by Anton Szandor La Vey in 1966. In the forward to *The Satanic Bible* (1969), Burton Wolfe states, "Satanism is a blatantly selfish, brutal philosophy. It is based on the belief that human beings are inherently selfish, violent creatures."[9] La Vey believed that the Judeo-Christian traditions have taught us to suppress our true feelings, which has resulted in nothing but misery. The Church of Satan could be described as a form of **hedonism**. Satanists believe in the gratification of all of one's desires. Instead of abstinence, Satanists believe in indulgence. The behaviors that the Catholic Church labels as sin are seen as virtuous. The Church of Satan does recognize sins, but they are entirely different ones, including stupidity, pretentiousness, self-deceit, and conformity. The Church of Satan says that although it is important to be kind to those who deserve it, one should not waste love on those who do not deserve it. Do not turn the other cheek; instead, seek vengeance.

Rituals are conducted and generally are one of three types: ones that involve sex magic, ones that are focused on healing or happiness, and destruction rituals focused on a specific victim. (Satanists believe that if a person is targeted by a destruction ritual but does not deserve it, that person will not be harmed.) The use of magic in Satanism does resemble somewhat the magical practices of Wicca (Chapter 7). However, many Satanists think that the Wiccans are hypocrites because they limit their magic to positive uses. In contrast, although Satanists use magic to benefit themselves and their friends, they also use the magic and rituals

to harm their enemies.

The most important symbol of the Church of Satan is the Sigil of Baphomet, which is a goat's head drawn within an inverted pentagram (Figure 3.2c in Chapter 3). At the time *The Satanic Bible* was written (1969), it was common for Satanists to use a naked woman as an altar, symbolizing that Satanism is a religion of the flesh, not the spirit. This is now rarely used. Although Satanists have been blamed for kidnapping and the sacrifice of people and animals, this is urban legend.

Conclusion

Fear of the existence of supernaturally evil individuals appears to be universal. And who should we fear most as potential evildoers? People who stand out, people with whom we have existing conflicts. If my neighbor is jealous of my success, might she

not want to bring me down and cause me harm? Of course, she might well think the same of me. The witch is the enemy within—the member of the community who rejects, subverts, and betrays. As with many religious phenomena, witchcraft accusations are closely tied to other social phenomena—in this case, reflecting existing tensions and fears. In reality the most common way to become a witch is to be accused of being one.

Witchcraft is a fascinating subject within the realm of religious beliefs and behaviors. Studying this phenomenon is made more complicated by the different ways in which the term has been used in small-scale, European, and modern Neo-Pagan communities, discussed in the next chapter. Our continuing interest in the subjects of magic and witchcraft can be seen in popular media representations such as the television shows *Bewitched, Charmed, Sabrina the Teenage Witch,* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and of course the extremely popular Harry Potter book series. However, these fantasy representations differ significantly from the real phenomena. First, these sources show magic and witchcraft as very similar phenomena, if not

one and the same. Second, witches are portrayed in a very positive light, which fits only the Wiccan definition (Chapter 11). In small-scale societies, practicing witchcraft is by definition antisocial behavior. Even Wiccans would argue with many of the representations of the powers of witches, which are shown as being far beyond those that are actually claimed.

The rise of the Neo-Pagan religions and their redefinition of witchcraft are but one example of how religions rise and fall and change over time. This topic is one that we will explore in greater detail in the next chapter.

Summary

The idea of witchcraft as an evil force bringing misfortune to members of a community is found in a great number of societies throughout the world. Unlike sorcerers, who perform magic rituals to achieve their evil ends, witches simply will death and destruction and it happens, for the source of this evil is a supernatural power that lies within the body of the witch. Witches possess personal characteristics that are the antithesis of those that characterize a good, moral person. The concept of witchcraft in small-scale societies is largely based on the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard among the Azande of the Sudan. Evans-Pritchard concluded that a belief in witchcraft serves three functions: it provides an explanation for the unexplainable; it provides a set of cultural behaviors for dealing with misfortune; and it serves to define morality.

Ideas of witchcraft in Europe were influenced by Christian ideas about the nature of evil. Christianity accepts the existence of an evil spirit, known as Satan or the Devil. In this belief system, witches are individuals whose evil power originates with a pact with the Devil. In Europe, witchcraft beliefs were merged with sorcery. Sorcery became associated with the invocation of spirits, which was defined as being hostile to God. Anyone doing any form of magic was seen as calling on the servants of Satan. Magic and witchcraft became not just crimes against society, but heresy—crimes against God. The period known as the Witchcraze began at the end of the Middle Ages (around 1450) and lasted for about 200 years. In Euro-American witchcraft beliefs, witches define

all that is wrong and immoral. People who exhibit antisocial behavior are the most likely targets of witchcraft accusations. Witches also fulfill our unconscious need to blame someone for the misfortunes that we experience in our daily lives. In general, patterns of witchcraft accusations reflect deeply felt conflicts and divisions in a society.

Study questions

1. Discussion about witchcraft is made difficult by the several meanings of the term. To what different phenomena has the term *witchcraft* been applied?
2. How does the concept of witchcraft in Zande religion aid the Azande in coping with the stresses of their lives?
3. What are the major differences between witchcraft belief among the Azande and the Navaho?
4. The gender of witches differs from society to society. Among the Azande witches are male and female, but in the European and American Witchcraze, witches were most often female. Why? What does this tell us about the function of witchcraft beliefs in human societies?
5. Magic and witchcraft have become popular subjects in U.S. culture in recent years. In what ways do these popular depictions differ from anthropological descriptions of magic and witchcraft?
6. The term *witch hunt* is often used in contemporary society, such as during the communist scare following World War II. How is this usage similar to the use of the term *witch* as discussed in this chapter?

Suggested readings

Adam Ashforth, *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
[Based on his work in Soweto, South Africa, Ashforth describes the struggle of his friend Madumo who is accused of using witchcraft to kill his mother.]

John Demos, *The Enemy Within: A Short History of Witch-Hunting* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).
[A look at witch hunts in Europe, early America and modern America]

Alan Dundes (Ed.), *The Evil Eye: A Casebook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).
[Description of the evil eye in different cultures.]

Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
[A detailed analysis of the Salem witchcraft trials.]

Ulinka Rublack, *The Astronomer and the Witch: Johannes Kepler's Fight for His Mother* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[Detailed history of the witchcraft accusations and subsequent trial in 1620 of Katharina Kepler, the mother of the noted astronomer Johannes Kepler, who played an active role in defending his mother during her trial.]

Jeffrey Russell, *The History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans* (2nd edn) (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007).
[A look at witchcraft in tribal societies, historical Europe, and modern times.]

Fiction

Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2012).
[The story of a young boy growing up in New Mexico in the 1940s dealing with conflicts between religious traditions including the presence of witches.]

Elenore Smith Bowen, *Return to Laughter* (New York: Anchor, 1964).
[An anthropological novel tracing the adventures of a female anthropologist working in West Africa written under a pen name by Laura Bohannan based on work among the Tiv of Nigeria.]

Suggested websites

www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/salem.htm
The Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692.

www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/witches1.html
Medieval Sourcebook: Fifteenth-Century Witchcraft Documents.

www.malleusmaleficarum.org
The text of the *Malleus Maleficarum.*

www.churchofsatan.org
The Church of Satan website.

Notes

1 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1937).

2 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, op. cit., p. 22.

3 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, op. cit., p. 63.

4 A. Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

5 G. L. Burr (Ed.), *The Witch Persecution in Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History,* vol. 3, no. 4 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1898–1912), pp. 26–27.

6 P. C. Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 75.

7 R. Redfield and A. Villa Rojas, *Chan Kom: A Maya Village* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1962).

8 *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger,* unabridged online reproduction of the 1928 edn, Part I, Question VI, www.malleusmaleficarum.org.

9 Burton H. Wolfe, introduction to A. S. La Vey, *The Satanic Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1969), p. 18.

Chapter 11
The search for new meaning

Small-scale societies are being drawn more and more into the larger, often more complex, world. In doing so, they are exposed to many influences that result in change—both positive and negative. We have much to learn from these societies, including the effects of culture contact, how cultures change over time, and how new religions come into being. This is a starting point from which to look at cultural and religious change in the larger-scale cultures in which we live. Our comparative study of various religious systems and our understanding of basic anthropological principles now place us in a position to analyze aspects of our own culture from an entirely new perspective. This is what we will attempt to do in this chapter.

This chapter discusses several topics. We will begin with a study of the process of culture change, especially in the context of outside influence resulting from economic, political, and social exploitation. We will see how the processes of change can lead to the demise of a culture or adjustments for survival. In many contact situations, the dominated culture reacts with the formation of new religious movements that frequently combine cultural elements from both the dominant and dominated societies. Such revitalization movements not only are found among tribal peoples but also form the basis of today's Western religions, including many new religious movements. Such movements are always affected by existing cultural ideologies and raise many questions, including how new religions will be perceived by the society at large.

Adaptation and change

Throughout this book we have seen examples of how religion reinforces a society's culture and worldview. Religious institutions also provide mechanisms for dealing with the inevitable stresses that are part of living. In general, religious practices tend to be very conservative. This conservatism is derived from their sacred nature and the fact that a society's belief system is usually considered to be ancient—that is, it was practiced in the old time by the ancestors.

However, change does occur. In fact, change must occur if a society is to endure. The world does not exist in a steady state. Changes happen in the climate, in the availability of food and water, in the presence of hostile peoples on one's borders. If the society is to survive, it must adapt and change to meet the challenges brought about by this changing world.

However, we should not think of a society as a perfectly tuned machine meeting stress and change in its stride. Sometimes changes occur too slowly or too quickly to be effective, or change does not occur at all. Sometimes changes appear that are maladaptive. Yet in the long run, if a society is to survive, it must adapt to some degree to the world as it exists.

Mechanisms of culture change

Generally speaking, societies that are technologically simple tend to be relatively isolated from outside influences and tend to change slowly over time. Internal change occurs through the processes of **discovery** and **invention**. A discovery is a new awareness of something that exists in the environment. An invention occurs when a person, using the technology at hand, comes up with a solution to a particular problem.

Societies do not exist in isolation; people are aware of the existence of other communities beyond their boundaries. The mere existence of other cultures with different technologies, social organizations, and religious practices exposes a society to new ideas and new technologies. When two groups, such as those within a culture area, face similar problems, solutions that are

developed in one group through discovery and invention might be adopted by the other. This apparent movement of cultural traits from one society to another is called **diffusion**. Technological traits are more likely to diffuse than are social and religious traits. Sometimes it is only the idea that moves from one culture to another, and stimulated by that idea, the receiving society invents a new trait, a process called **stimulus diffusion**.

When a trait diffuses from one culture to another, it is often altered to a greater or lesser degree to become consistent with the rest of the receiving culture. Perhaps the use of a hallucinogenic drug is introduced into a society from a neighboring group. Yet how that drug is used in ritual might differ. Differences will occur in which rituals the drug is used, who uses it, and what it means. An introduced trait has to be altered to fit into the cultural system and to reflect the worldview of the culture.

Acculturation

Sometimes, however, the influence of one culture on another is more intense. Rather than sporadic contact through trade and other joint activities, one society might assume political and/or economic control over another. If both societies are fairly equal politically and economically, both societies will borrow traits from one another; over time, the societies will become more and more similar. However, when one society is able to dominate the other the dominant culture undergoes far less change than does the subordinate one. The dominant society is the one that, usually because of a more developed technology and wealth, is able to establish control over the subordinate one. In this case the subordinate culture experiences change as traits are accepted, often at a rate that is too rapid to properly integrate the traits into the culture.

This process is referred to as **acculturation**. A society that has undergone change of this type is said to be acculturated. Thus an anthropologist who enters a tribal village and sees cans of soda, metal knives, pots and pans, and a radio knows that this is an acculturated community. When the dominated society has changed so much that it has ceased to have its own distinct identity, we say that it has become **assimilated**.

The ability of one group to establish control over another is usually due to

technological, economic, and political factors. However, once this control has been established, it is possible for features of other parts of the culture to flow from one society to the other. Religion may play an especially important role because a dominated culture might look for religious explanations for what is occurring and the dominating group might use religious justifications for its actions.

Some societies are very receptive to new religious ideas and are able to graft them onto their own religion. Why not add what appears to be a powerful foreign god to the existing pantheon? It can't hurt. For example, the Christian God often becomes yet another god in the pantheon, and selected elements of Christian ritual may be incorporated into traditional rituals.

To those living in the Western world this incorporation of elements from one religion into another might seem strange. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are exclusionary in that members of these religions are excluded from practicing rituals of other religions. When a person converts, he or she gives up all former religious beliefs. However, we saw in Chapter 9 how even these religions adopted some beliefs of the surrounding cultures during their development.

In many societies, people practice rituals from different religious systems more on the basis of need that anything else. For example, in Japan someone might travel to a Shinto shrine to ask for blessings on the family, be married in a Christian ritual, and be buried in a Buddhist ritual. Small-scale societies often are able to assimilate new religious practices with a degree of ease. However, Christian missionaries, for example, demand exclusion. One of the most stressful aspects of the presence of missionary activity is the pressure to give up one's former religion.

Syncretism

The process of acculturation does not always involve the complete replacement of one trait by another or the complete acceptance of a new trait. There often is a reworking of the trait through a process known as syncretism. **Syncretism** is a fusing of traits from two cultures to form something new and yet, at the same time, permit the retention of the old by subsuming the old

into a new form.

Previously in this text we have seen several examples of syncretism, such as the origins of Halloween and the Day of the Dead. Other examples include the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism in Japan and that of Christianity and indigenous religions in Africa. In this section we will be looking at two religious systems that were formed through the process of syncretism.

Haitian Vodou

Vodou is a religion that is found in the country of Haiti and in the Haitian **diaspora**. It is a religion that is extremely rich in symbolism, with art and dance playing central roles in ritual. Vodou grew out of several religions indigenous to West Africa, especially the religions of the Fon, Kongo, and Yoruba peoples. The term *vodou* comes from the Fon language of Dahomey (now Benin) and means "spirit" or "deity." However, the term is used largely by outsiders to describe this religion. Practitioners merely say that they "serve the spirits."

History of Vodou

The country of Haiti occupies the western third of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, which was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492. In 1697, Haiti became a French colony. (The rest of Hispaniola today is the Spanish-speaking country of the Dominican Republic.)

The French colony of Haiti eventually became one of the richest colonies in the Caribbean, largely because of plantation agriculture dedicated to sugar cultivation and activities related to sugar, such as the production of molasses and rum. Sugarcane cultivation is very labor intensive, and large numbers of slaves were brought from West Africa.

The slaves soon outnumbered the French colonists, who lived in constant fear of slave rebellions. In the late seventeenth century, the French government decreed that all slaves had to be baptized and instructed in the Catholic religion. Yet, other than a baptism ceremony, slaves were given little

or no religious instruction, because few landowners allowed priests on their land for this purpose. Over time the slaves became vaguely aware of the most basic tenets of Catholicism, but they continued to practice their African religions.

In 1790 the feared slave revolt came to pass. After a prolonged struggle Haiti, the first black republic in the New World, declared its independence in 1804. The establishment of a republic formed of ex-slaves was not popular with its neighbors, and diplomatic recognition was withheld for some time. As a result Haiti became isolated from the rest of the world. The Vatican recalled its priests in 1804 and broke off relations with Haiti; Catholic clergy did not return until 1860. It was during this period of isolation that Vodou developed. Today Haiti is nominally a Catholic country, although many Protestant churches have been established. Yet Vodou remains strong, and the majority of professed Catholics also practice Vodou.

Vodou beliefs

Vodou is in many ways a West African religion. It worships many of the same deities, and Vodou rituals closely resemble West African rituals. Haitian Vodou has a pantheon of deities called *lwa,* which are similar to the *orisha* of the Yoruba (see Chapter 9). Altars are constructed containing objects that are infused with spirits, and offerings and sacrifices are made to appease the *lwa* (Figure 11.1). Dance and music play major roles in Vodou ritual.

The *lwa* can be divided into several pantheons. The two most important are the Rada and the Petwo *nanchon,* or nations. The Rada *nanchon* consists of deities that would be very familiar to a Yoruba. These are African deities and are thought to be very ancient. In contrast are the Petwo *lwas.* They are aggressive and assertive, born out of the slave experience. Many first appeared during the period of isolation in the early nineteenth century. Another important group of *lwas* are those associated with death.

Table 11.1 lists some of the more important *lwa.* However, the situation is much more complicated than is shown in the table, because many deities appear in different manifestations. Each deity has a particular personality, domains over which he or she rules, and particular symbols. These symbols

include not only physical objects and artistic motifs, but also particular ways of speaking and music and dance movements. Each *lwa* is known to be partial to certain foods that are used as offerings. In general, the Rada *lwa* like things that are "cool," such as candies and sweet drinks; the Petwo *lwa* like things that are "hot," such as strong drinks like rum and spicy foods.

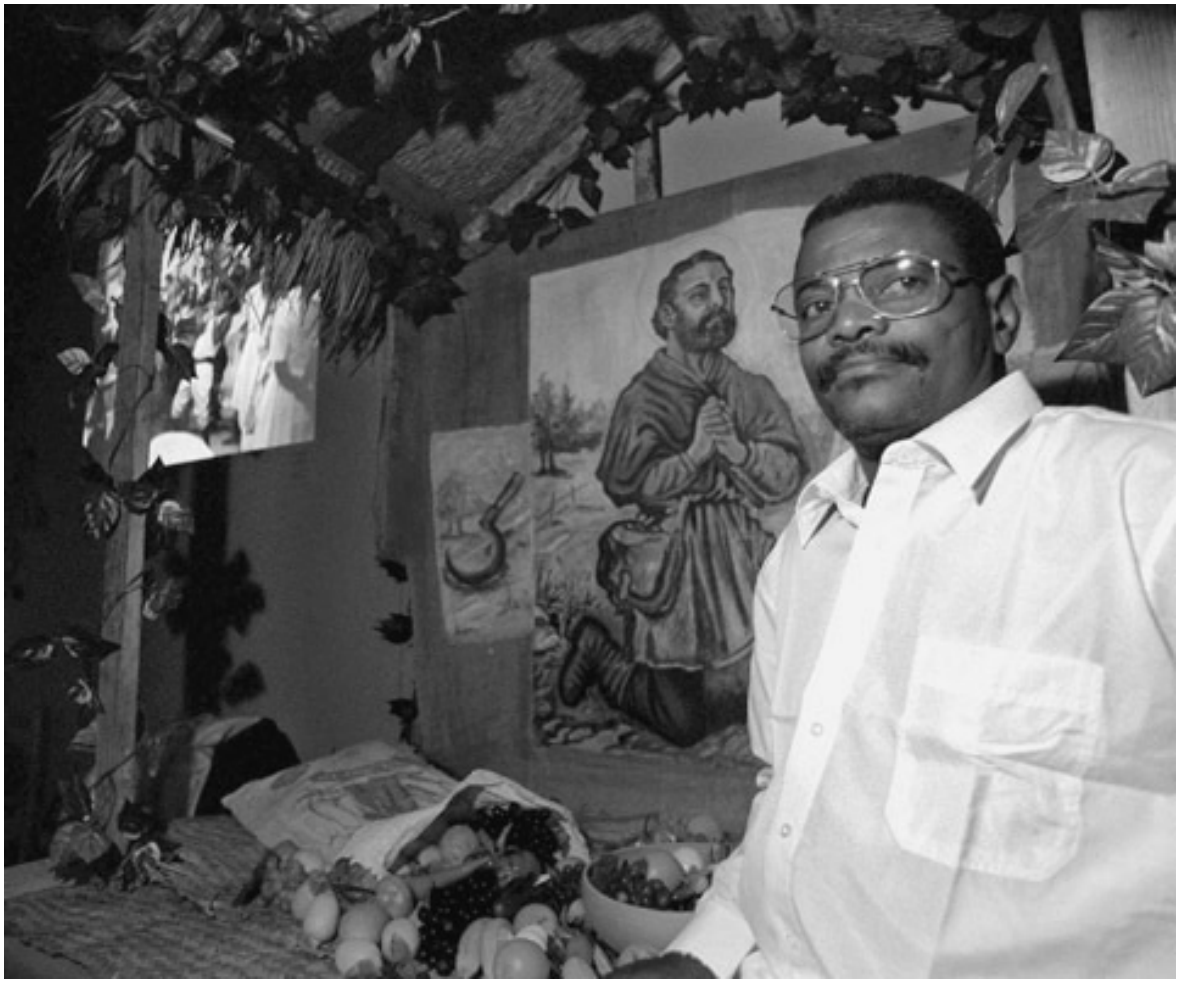


Figure 11.1 Vodou altar. This replica of a Vodou altar was set up as part of the exhibit "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Vodou priest Sauveur St. Cyr is seen in front of a painting of the *lwa* Azaka/St. Isidore, the *lwa* of agriculture.

An example of syncretism is the association of particular *lwa* with Catholic saints and manifestations of the Virgin. Symbolism in the **chromolithographs** (colored posters) used by early priests who attempted to bring Christianity to the slaves was seen as symbolic of the deities. Perhaps the oldest and most

venerated of the deities is Danbala, the Rada serpent deity. His domain is rain, fecundity, and wisdom. Danbala is depicted as Saint Patrick, who is pictured on the chromolithographs with snakes at his feet. In Vodou art, Danbala is often seen with his wife Ayida Wèdo, the rainbow serpent.

Santeria

Other religious movements, similar in form and function to Vodou, developed throughout the Caribbean, Brazil, and other parts of the New World where slaves were imported to work the large plantations. Santeria developed in Cuba from a fusion of West African religions, primarily Yoruba, and Spanish Catholicism.

Table 11.1 The *lwa* of Haitian Vodou

Lwa	*Role*	*Symbols*	*Seen as*	*Colors*
Legba	As the guardian of the threshold between humans and the supernatural, Legba is the first lwa to be greeted in ritual	Crutches, pipe, rooster	St. Peter	Orange, yellow, red
Danbala and Ayida Wèdo	Lwa of rainfall and fertility, Danbala is the oldest of the lwa; his wife is the rainbow spirit	Serpent, rainbow, lightning bolts, bishop's attire	St. Patrick	White
Agwe	Protector of ships at sea	Ritual boat, shells, admiral's attire	St. Ulrich holding a fish	Green
Ezili Dantò	Lwa of fertility and motherhood; protector of mothers	Heart, knife, black pig	The Black Madonna	Multicolor
			Madonna	

Ezili Freda	Lwa of love and luxury	Hearts, flowers, doves	of Sorrows	Pink, white
Gede	Lwa of death; healer, trickster deity	Cross, skull and cross bones, top hat, sun glasses missing one lens	St. Gabriel	Black, purple
Azaka	Lwa of agriculture	Straw hat, straw bag, pipe	St. Isidore	Green, white, denim
Lasirèn	Female lwa of the sea; brings luck and money; patron deity of musicians	Mermaids, fish, mirror	St. Martha with a dragon	Blue, white
Ogou	Lwa of war and military might; protector of cars	Fire, iron, swords	St. James	Red and blue of Haitian flag

Slavery lasted longer in Cuba than in Haiti. Independence of this last Spanish colony in the New World occurred in 1898. By this time, there were a large number of freed slaves as well as communities of freed slaves in remote mountainous areas and various mutual aid societies and social clubs in urban areas. Santeria developed out of these societies, and today it has spread to other areas in the New World, including the United States. In the United States in areas with large Hispanic populations, such as Los Angeles, the religion is most often seen in the context of Botanicas, or stores that sell charms, herbs, and other materials used by followers of the religion.

Santeria deities, called by the Yoruba name *orisha* (Chapter 9), show the same syncretism as the Haitian *lwa.* The *orisha,* known by their Yoruba names, are associated with particular saints: Ogun is Saint Peter, Obatala is Saint Mercedes, and Shango is Saint Barbara.

Although *Santeria* is the name by which this religion is now most commonly known, the name was originally pejorative, used by the Spanish to note what they saw as an unusual amount of attention being paid to the

Catholic saints as opposed to Jesus Christ. The proper name for the religion is *Regla de Ocha,* or Rule of the Orisha, although Santeria is used as well. The religion is also known for being secretive. Relatively little information about beliefs, rituals, and symbols is released to the general public.

One reason for the secrecy is the use of animal sacrifice in ritual, which has led to conflict between practitioners of Santeria and political authorities in the United States. The issue is whether animal sacrifice should be permitted as part of the First Amendment protection of the free exercise of religion or whether it should be banned under statutes preventing cruelty to animals. The matter has not been resolved, but most U.S. police organizations have become more understanding and permissive about this practice, and the courts have generally upheld the right to practice animal sacrifice.

Revitalization movements

Societies that are situated next to each other experience diffusion, the flow of culture traits that are then adjusted to fit into the receiving culture. This is especially true if the two societies are roughly equal in terms of technology and economy. However, the situation often arises in which one culture is able to establish economic and political dominance and superimpose itself on another. The situation can be a direct takeover, as when one society conquers another and maintains economic, political, and military control, or it can be indirect, as when a missionary or an economic enterprise—a shoe factory, for example—shows up in a community. A missionary or factory manager might not have the political power of a conquering state but still represents a more technologically advanced society with things that people come to want and need.

The flow of events differs in each situation, but generally speaking, a massive introduction of items from a dominant culture can have a dramatic effect on the receiving culture. The end result could be the destruction of a culture. The people might survive, but they end up becoming a mere reflection of the dominant culture, living on the fringes of that culture. Moreover, demoralization manifests itself in many maladaptive behaviors.

One society might be totally assimilated into another, it might simply disappear as an entity, or it might exert itself and become a viable subculture within the larger culture. Frequently, however, there is a reaction that often manifests itself as a religious or secular movement known as a **revitalization movement**.

A revitalization movement is one that forms in an attempt to deliberately bring about change in a society. The change is perceived as more bearable and satisfactory to those under pressure. The movement may be secular, but they are very frequently religious movements, complete with mythology, ritual, and symbolism, and may result in the formation of a new religion. These are deliberate activities, frequently initiated by an individual or a small group that promises better times and solutions to the problems that besiege the community or are perceived as a threat to the community.

Revitalization movements arise from a number of perceived stressful and often traumatic situations. These situations include political and economic marginalization (loss of effective political participation), economic deprivation and poverty, and malnutrition and high levels of chronic or epidemic diseases. There may also be less tangible stresses within the social structure that arise when a culture is discriminated against by the dominant society and when there is a perception that the values of the community are being threatened.

The origins of revitalization movements

Anthony Wallace describes several stages in the development of a revitalization movement.[1] In the early stages of contact or other stressors, change is occurring, but at an acceptable rate, within relatively normal levels. Over time, the stress levels become intolerable to some people. This phase is characterized by an increase in illness, alcoholism and drug use, and crime. Although these behaviors are dysfunctional, they serve as a temporary adjustment to change for many individuals.

Increasing exposure to the dominant society and the increasing influx of new traits, many of which cannot easily be integrated into the existing culture, increase the amount of stress on the individual. Means of livelihood may be restricted, and new economic patterns may emerge that are not

consistent with the ideals of the culture. For example, individualized wage labor may replace family-based economic activities with the effect of tearing families apart and increasing the isolation of individuals. Alcoholism, drug use, and crime may become endemic as normal social relationships within the society break down. Sometimes the dominant culture deliberately attempts to destroy the indigenous religious pattern (often by ridicule and destruction of sacred objects and sacred spaces), and attempts may be made to substitute the religious practices of the dominant culture for those of the subordinate one. However, not all such movements are religious. They can be political, such as many of the elements of the Celtic revival in Ireland or the Communist movements in many countries.

At this stage the society may disintegrate and cease to exist as a separate unit, with the members of the society assimilating into the dominant social group (often at the margins of that group). However, another possibility is revitalization. Revitalization begins when an individual or a small group constructs a new, utopian image of society and takes steps to make it a reality. At the same time the dominant social group becomes contrasted as evil. The founder of the movement may be a charismatic leader or prophet, and the story that establishes the legitimacy of the movement is often thought of as supernatural.

People who join the movement think of themselves as being elected to a special status, and attempts are made to bring more people into the fold. Although somewhat flexible at first, over time the philosophy and rules may become set, and the group may sets itself off, often with great hostility, from the main society. At this point, the movement, if successful, becomes firmly established and relatively stable. The movement can become part of the mainstream, having successfully brought about a change in the culture. Or the movement may remain an isolated one that either persists or eventually disappears, often in a dramatic and terrible way.

Types of revitalization movements

We can recognize several types of revitalization movements. **Nativistic movements** develop in societies in which the cultural gap between the

dominant and subordinate cultures is vast. These movements stress the elimination of the dominant culture and a return to the past, keeping the desirable elements of the dominant culture to which the society has been exposed, but with these elements now under the control of the subordinate culture.

Revivalistic movements attempt to revive what is often perceived as a past golden age in which ancient customs come to symbolize the noble features and legitimacy of the repressed culture. For example, the Celtic revival in Ireland stressed the revival of ancient Celtic customs and provided symbols of rebellion against the occupying British. Once the Irish Republic gained independence, many items from the past became symbols of a new national identity, such as the revival of the Celtic language, arts and crafts, and place names. In addition to these secular examples, some Neo-Pagan groups have also attempted to revive ancient Celtic religious practices. Many of the Neo-Pagan movements discussed later in this chapter would be considered revivalistic.

Millenarian movements are based on a vision of change through an apocalyptic transformation; **messianic movements** believe that a divine savior in human form will bring about the solution to the problems that exist within the society. Of course, these four types are not always clearly differentiated from one another, and elements of one may appear in another. We will look at some examples of these types in the following sections.

Cargo cults

A well-known example of nativistic movements is the **cargo cults** of New Guinea. The term *cargo cult* comes from the word *cargo,* which in the **pidgin** English spoken in New Guinea and the islands of Melanesia means "trade goods." These movements began along the coast in the late nineteenth century but reached their peak during and after World War II, when the U.S. military brought in large quantities of manufactured goods.

When the first outsiders entered this region, explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators brought with them a wealth of manufactured goods that sparked the imaginations of the native peoples and became highly

desirable items. The newcomers were seen as conduits for the goods, and the outsiders were perceived as being very powerful. In the context of the native culture, power comes from knowledge of the supernatural. Thus the activities of the missionaries resonated with the population, and much of the interest in the newly introduced Christianity was an interest in discovering the ritual secrets that the missionaries used to bring the *cargo* from over the sea from the Land of the Dead.

Soon it became clear to the local peoples that the key to controlling the *cargo* was not to be discovered through Christian rituals because the missionaries refused to share the magical secrets with them. Other negative factors included the Europeans' unwillingness to share many of their goods with the natives, the condescending way the Europeans treated the natives, and the strange appearance and behavior of the Europeans.

This disillusionment led to the emergence of a number of stories that explained what the local people were experiencing. The main puzzles were the origin and control of the *cargo* and the power of the outsiders. The Europeans did no obvious work and engaged in a number of very strange activities. The manufactured goods must have been made in the Land of the Dead by the ancestors of the Melanesians. The Europeans, through ritual, intercepted the ships and airplanes and stole the *cargo* that was meant for the local people.

The solution to the problem was to discover and learn the Europeans' magic. Then the people could rid the land of the outsiders and permit the ancestors to land the planes and bring the *cargo* directly to their descendants. This would also usher in a period of paradise on earth and, in some cases, the return of the ancestors. To accomplish this goal, the Melanesians carefully examined the behavior of the Europeans to find a clue to their powerful magic.

Several cargo cults emerged over the years. They often appeared in response to a prophet who had dreams or who had otherwise discovered the secret used by the Europeans in controlling the *cargo.* These movements utilized activities of the Europeans as the basis of ritual, but these European behaviors were terribly misunderstood. The activities, seen as magic rituals, varied from place to place. They included making marks on paper, running flags up poles, marching with sticks over their shoulders, and dressing up in European-style clothes and sitting around a table with a vase of flowers in the center. One group cleared a long strip of land in imitation of a landing strip,

complete with a control tower.

As sad as these things are, they are overshadowed by another aspect of the cargo cults. In some movements the prophet announced that the ancestors and the manufactured goods would not appear until the people destroyed their traditional sacred objects or exposed these objects to people who were not supposed to see them, such as women and uninitiated boys. In other movements success would not happen as long as the people had adequate food, so pigs and crops were destroyed. The results were tragic.

One of the best known of the early cargo cults was the Vailala Madness, which occurred between 1919 and 1923. It centered on divination trances. Old rituals were set aside, and new rituals, containing many Christian elements and military-style activities, appeared. For example, messages from the dead could be received through flagpoles. In 1932 and 1933 another cargo cult emerged among the Buka people. They believed that steamships would arrive with *cargo,* and a large warehouse was built to store these manufactured goods. However, the steamship would not arrive as long as the people had food, so they destroyed their farms.

The Naked Cult of 1944 through 1948 featured the cult members going around naked and fornicating in public. Other elements included the destruction of villages and things received from the Europeans. People stopped working for the Europeans and waited for the arrival of the Americans, which would mark the beginning of the period when the followers of the prophet would receive the *cargo.* A modern cargo cult is described in Box 11.1.

Box 11.1 The John Frum cult

Cargo cults are small-scale religious movements that have been associated with culture contact in New Guinea and many of the islands of the southwestern Pacific. While we can look at these cults as historical religious movements, at least one is quite active today and has been for over 70 years. Every February 15, the people of the island of Tanna celebrate John Frum Day. Tanna is a part of the nation of Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides, in the western Pacific.

The John Frum cult is based upon a prophet who is said to have

appeared in the 1930s. It is not known if John Frum was a real person or not, or whether he was a native or a European. However, he is said to have predicted the Japanese invasion and the subsequent arrival of the American military in World War II.

John Frum is said to have prophesized the good age in which the white man, including the missionaries, would disappear followed by an influx of manufactured goods. In order to bring about this new era, in the early 1940s the people of Tanna rejected European customs such as European money and Christianity, and returned to the traditional Tannese *kastom* (customs). Then the American army arrived. The people of Tanna were astonished by the wealth and power of the Americans and saw the United States as a source of *cargo*. Today, on John Frum Day, men march in military fashion—as they comprehend it—and raise American flags. They carry bamboo rifles and use a red cross as a sacred symbol. It is believed that on some future February 15, John Frum will return bringing with him manufactured goods or *cargo* that rightly belongs to them.

The Ghost Dance of 1890

The policies of the U.S. government toward Native Americans in the late nineteenth century were those of forced assimilation. This was facilitated by the destruction of traditional food resources, restriction of communities to small tracts of land and reservations, and forced education at boarding schools for children, where they were forbidden to speak their language or practice their culture. Many communities were moved great distances onto land that was insufficient in amount and fertility to feed the community. The results were poverty, starvation, crime, alcoholism, and the breakup of the family and other traditional social patterns. It is not surprising that one of the ways in which the people reacted to these activities was through the development of nativistic movements.

Early in 1889 a Paiute named Wovoka (1858?–1932), who lived in Nevada, had a vision. Wovoka was illiterate and never kept a journal or wrote letters and, after December 1890, never gave interviews. What follows is the essence

of what occurred.

Wovoka received a "Great Revelation" on New Year's Day in 1889. He moved into an altered state of consciousness for a period of time, awakening during an eclipse of the sun. (This was interpreted by some as death followed by rebirth.) Wovoka then told the people that he had been to Heaven and talked with God. He had visited with his dead ancestors, who were once again young and healthy. God had told Wovoka that the Indians were no longer to lie, steal, fight, or drink alcohol. Wovoka had then been given a traditional dance that lasted three (or five) nights. If people followed the rules and faithfully performed the dance, they would go to Heaven, where they would once again be young.

Although this aspect of the vision appears to be a positive adaptation to the changes that were occurring, there was a great deal more to the vision. Wovoka told of an apocalypse during which new earth would cover the world, burying the Whites, followed by a return of the land and animals, including the buffalo, to their original condition. The Native Americans would inherit this land, and the dead would return to the earth—hence the name the Ghost Dance.

Although the new religion incorporated many Native American traditions, such as meditation, prayer, and ritual cleansing, it also incorporated many Christian elements. The vision itself took place in a Christian Heaven. Wovoka had spent time as a young man on the Wilson ranch. The Wilsons were devout Christians—specifically, Presbyterians—and they undoubtedly exposed the young Wovoka, or Jack Wilson, as he was also known, to Christianity. The Ghost Dance religion included many examples of syncretism.

In the fall of 1890, news of Wovoka's vision had spread eastward and had reached the reservations of the Lakota living on the northern Plains. A delegation traveled to Nevada, where they joined hundreds of native people who had traveled from many different tribes to see Wovoka. Wovoka met with the delegations and told them of his visions and taught them the dance.

The Lakota delegation returned to their reservations and told the people what they had seen and what they had been told. On receiving the news, the Lakota began to congregate in large numbers to dance the Ghost Dance. These gatherings alarmed the local government agents. Finally, the militia was called out to break up the dancing, and the Lakota fled into the countryside,

where they were rounded up and returned to the reservations.

As part of these operations, the militia found and surrounded a large group camped by a creek in South Dakota called Wounded Knee. On December 29, 1890, while tensions were high, the shaman Yellow Bird urged the people to resist the soldiers. He reminded the warriors that the Ghost Dance religion preached that the bullets from the enemy would not penetrate the "ghost shirts" that they wore. A young warrior then drew his rifle from under a blanket and fired on the soldiers. Immediately, the militia opened fire on the group, using bullets and two-pound shells; within a few minutes more than 200 men, women, and children lay dead. Even today, over 120 years later, this event colors the relationship between Native American groups and the U.S. government.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism)

Many new religious movements emerged in the United States in the early nineteenth century. It was a time of great stress and crisis for a country that was heading into a Civil War. The Industrial Revolution was bringing with it many changes in traditional lifestyles, including the movement of many people to cities and the subsequent breakdown of old ideas of community. The proliferation of many different Christian **sects**, or new branches of a mainstream religion, led to **choice fatigue**, as a single dominant church was replaced by numerous options. Out of this stress grew many revitalization movements, including the Shakers, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Today, LDS is the fastest-growing faith group in U.S. history and claims to have more than fifteen million members worldwide.

The LDS Church was founded by Joseph Smith (1805–1844). He grew up in New York, where his family were "seekers"—what we might call nondenominational Christians. Smith was very troubled by the number of Christian sects that existed at the time and wanted to know which was the true Christianity. Smith received his first vision at the age of 14. In this vision God and Jesus came to him and told him that all of the various sects were in

error and that he should not join any of them.

A few years later, when Smith was 17, he had three visitations from the angel Moroni to prepare Smith, as a prophet, to restore the true Christian Church. Moroni revealed to him the location of golden tablets on which was written additional biblical history. Smith was able to use special stones buried with the tablets to translate them into what is now known as the *Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ.* This book did not replace the Christian Bible but rather supplemented it. The book is named after Mormon, an ancient prophet who compiled the sacred record, and is the source of the name *Mormons* for members of the LDS Church.

The early LDS Church was heavily persecuted. In 1844, Smith was jailed for his destruction of an opposition printing press in Illinois. While he was in jail, a mob attacked the jail and killed Smith and his brother. His death provoked a crisis in the group. However, God sent a revelation that Brigham Young would be the next leader of the group. It was Young who led them to what became Salt Lake City, Utah. There, the LDS Church encountered difficulties with both the Native Americans who were already living in the area and the U.S. government, which refused Utah recognition as a state because of the LDS practice of polygamy. Utah finally received statehood after an 1890 church revelation from God that disallowed plural marriages.

In some ways LDS beliefs are similar to those of evangelical Christianity, including the literal truthfulness of the Bible, **atonement**, **resurrection**, and **tithing**. However, there are also significant differences. For example, while most conservative Christians believe that salvation is based on faith alone, Mormons believe that salvation also requires good works. In Chapter 9 we discussed the difficulties of the concept of the Trinity for monotheistic Christianity. Here, too, the LDS Church differs. The deity is seen as being Trinitarian; God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are seen as three separate entities, God and Jesus being separate deities of flesh and bone. Smith described God as self-made, as finite, and as having a material body. The Holy Spirit is seen as a Spirit Personage.

Another obvious difference is the additional biblical texts in the *Book of Mormon.* The history related there says that a group of Israelites departed from the Middle East around 600 BCE, before the time of the Babylonian captivity, and came to North America. This included a patriarch, Lehi, and his

two sons, Nephi and Laman. Two tribes, the Nephites and Lamanites, are descended from the sons. The two groups lived in a state of continual feuding, and eventually, the Lamanites killed off the Nephites (around 385 CE). The Book also says that after his resurrection, Jesus came to North America, where he performed miracles and delivered sermons. He also selected twelve disciples from among the Nephite tribe.

The Mormons believe that these are the same doctrines that were held by the very early Christian Church. They believe that they are restoring the original church of the apostles to how it was in the first century of the Common Era.

Neo-Paganism and revival

The term **Neo-Pagan** refers to pre-Christian religious traditions that have been revived and are practiced in contemporary times, an example of revivalistic movements. One of the best known of the Neo-Pagan religions is the Wiccan religion.

The Wiccan movement

The beginnings of the Wiccan religion can be traced to the publication of several important books. The first was *The Witch Cult in Western Europe,* written by anthropologist Margaret Murray in 1921. In this book Murray examined the Witchcraze, which is referred to by Wiccans as "the Burning Times." She focused on what she believed to be the connection of the Witchcraze to the persecution of practitioners of pre-Christian religions. She believed that there was an unbroken line between pre-Christian goddess-based religions and women who were labeled as witches. This claim is very controversial, and most Wiccan practitioners today see their religion as a reconstruction, not a continuation, of earlier practices. The timing of the publication of the book importantly coincided with the suffragist movement

in the United States, an early feminist movement that centered on gaining for women the right to vote. The idea of a pre-Christian religion that valued and worshipped women was appealing, and a return to such religious practices fits in well with ideas of female empowerment.

The Wiccan movement took off in the 1950s. This was largely due to the work of Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), who wrote *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959). Gardner was an amateur anthropologist who, in 1908, studied the Dyaks of Borneo. Gardner continued Margaret Murray's idea that witchcraft was a pre-Christian religion in Britain. Gardner then went on to say that he had found and joined a coven of witches whom he believed to be among the last remnants of this old religion.

Wiccan beliefs and rituals

There is much variety in Wiccan beliefs and practices. Here we will discuss some of the most common features. Wicca is a polytheistic religion, although which of the pagan gods and goddesses are named varies. Gender equality—the god and the goddess—are stressed, as is nature as a manifestation of deity.

The religion is in many ways nature-based and includes a ritual calendar. One set of rituals is performed at full moons and is associated with the goddess. There are also eight Sabbats, or solar festivals, related to the god. The Sabbats happen seasonally and are related to such events as times of planting and harvesting. They also are seen as symbolic of events in the life of the god and goddess. The Sabbats include Samhain (the New Year festival discussed in Chapter 8, the death of the god), Yule (the Winter Solstice, rebirth of the god through the goddess), Imbolc (February 1, associated with purification and fertility), Ostara (the Spring Solstice), Beltane (April 30, when the young god becomes a man), Midsummer (when powers of nature are seen as being at their peak), Lughnasadh (beginning of the harvest), and Mabon (the second harvest, the waning of the god).

The rituals themselves are varied but often begin with the casting of a circle to create a sacred space. After the circle is cast, invocations are recited to the four cardinal directions (Figure 11.2). As part of this, or after this, the gods and goddesses are invoked to observe the ritual. From this point, the ritual will

vary according to its purpose. Common elements include singing and chanting, the manipulation of symbols, and a ritual meal.



Figure 11.2 Wiccan ritual. Saluting the four cardinal points during a Wiccan ritual.

Common Wiccan symbols include images or candles to represent the god and goddess. The **athame**, or ritual knife, and wand are commonly used to cast the circle. Cauldrons and cups are symbolic of the goddess. A broom may be used to sweep and thus purify an area. The pentacle is another Wiccan symbol (Chapter 3).

The use of magic is also characteristic of Wiccan religion. This includes both folk magic and ritual magic. Contrary to common misperceptions, all magic in Wicca is to be used for good and never for evil. This can be seen in the Wiccan Law of Return. A karma-like idea, this law says that whatever good you do will return to you, as will any evil. There are several variations on this, such as the Three-fold Law, which says good and evil will return threefold, and the Ten-fold Law, which says that good and evil will return

tenfold. Wiccans also have a moral rule known as the Wiccan *rede.* In essence, this rule says that you can do whatever you want as long as it does not harm anyone.

The growing popularity—and persecution—of Wicca

Although exact numbers of adherents are difficult to come by, Wicca has expanded rapidly, primarily in North America and Europe. The religion has also recently gained important official recognition. The U.S. Armed Forces chaplain's handbook now contains a section on Wicca, and Wiccan practitioners have won court cases affirming the right to practice the religion in jail.

Wicca has many features that make it appealing, especially to young women. These include the lack of sexist beliefs and discrimination in general and a focus on the female aspects, or the goddess. A concern for nature and the environment also fits in well with modern ideas. Whereas for some the morality of traditional religions seems excessively restrictive, Wicca has a single moral rule (the Wiccan rede). The practice of Wicca is very flexible and allows for personal involvement. Individuals can practice the religion alone or within a group and are free to add their own symbols and rituals as they see fit.

Wicca has also appeared in many popular media presentations in recent years. However, despite the growing numbers of Wiccan practitioners and the increasing media exposure, Wicca remains a religion that is largely misunderstood. Practitioners are often persecuted and the subjects of hate crimes. Some of this misunderstanding comes from the Wiccan use of the term *witch* and symbols such as the pentacle, which for most North Americans and Europeans have strong negative connotations; they see these as signs of devil worship. For Wiccans the idea of a devil is a Christian notion, and so they have no connection with it. (See Box 10.2 for a discussion of Satanism.)

Wiccans choose to use the term *witch* because for them it has a different but important meaning and connotations. For them, *witch* was a term that was unfairly applied to pagans, healers, and people who practiced an age-old

tradition of folk magic. To call themselves witches is seen as reclaiming the term and reaffirming their heritage.

High demand religions

New religious movements have generally branched off of older, more established religions and thus have many features in common with the older, mainstream religion. If the new group is still considered mainstream and differs on just a few points from the mainstream religion, it is referred to as a **denomination**. Examples of Christian denominations are Baptist and Lutheran; Islamic denominations would include Sunni and Shi'a. A sect is even more different from the older religion than a denomination is. Although still connected to the mainstream religion, sects are generally associated with a founder or leader and new revelations. Examples of Christian sects include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, discussed earlier. There are real challenges with the term **cult**. This word has several different meanings, and it is used in different ways by different people.

The "cult" question

Historically, a cult is a particular form or system of religious worship. This includes specific devotion to a particular person or thing. Thus the Catholic Church speaks of the cult of Mary. However, very few people use the term *cult* with this meaning. Although there are some neutral definitions—such as considering a cult to be a small, recently created, and spiritually innovative group—most definitions are associated with more negative imagery.

Even those who use the term *cult* with negative meanings do not agree on what a cult is. For example, evangelical Christian groups, such as the Counter-Cult Movement, label as a cult any religious group that accepts some, but not all, of what evangelicals accept as Christian doctrines. Thus, the LDS Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Unification Church (discussed later) are all

considered to be cults. However, a group such as the Wiccans does not get attention from this group because they are not a Christian-derived religion. This highlights the gate-keeping issue that often presents itself when a new group splinters off. Who gets to decide who can call themselves Christian? Some fundamentalist Christian groups carry this even farther and define any religion that deviates from their beliefs—be it Judaism, Buddhism, or a UFO religion—to be a cult.

On the other side is the Anti-Cult Movement. Largely composed of mental health professionals, this group targets what they consider to be dangerous and authoritarian mind control ("brainwashing") and doomsday cults. They are most concerned with what they see as deceptive recruitment techniques and psychological techniques used to control members. The media also play a large part in how religious groups are perceived. When the term *cult* is employed by the media, it is most often used to refer to a small religious group with a charismatic leader who is brainwashing his followers and is in total control of them. The group is seen as evil and usually as believing that the end of the world is imminent.

Because of this confusion and the often negative connotations of the term, many researchers avoid the term *cult* altogether and instead prefer the term **new religious movement**. However, this debate points to another area of disagreement about how some of the more extreme new religious movements are perceived. In one point of view there is a continuum from mainstream religions to denominations and sects. **High demand religions** are at the far end of this continuum but otherwise are no different from other religious groups and should be regarded as such. Others argue that these high demand groups cross the line and perhaps should not be considered religions at all, but rather something that masquerades as religion. Some believe that these groups are so far removed from the mainstream culture that they become dangerous —the normal controls no longer are operating. Of course, the problem with this latter point of view is who gets to decide. As it involves judging the beliefs and practices of a religious group, it is one that we will avoid in this book. Instead, we will focus on the perspective that high demand religious groups are just one end of the continuum of religious expression while acknowledging the challenges and dilemmas these groups present for the larger society.

Characteristics of high demand religions

All religious groups require their members to believe certain things and to behave in certain ways. All groups require some degree of conformity from their members. However, groups do vary in the level of this demand and the degree of control they attempt to exert over members. Here we will examine groups that are at the high end of this continuum.

An example of a higher-end demand situation that very few would label a cult is a Roman Catholic monastery. Monks must follow a strict schedule of sleep, work, and prayer. Their diet is limited, and they often take oaths of celibacy and even silence. They must accept without question the decisions of those in authority. These are traits that are commonly associated with high demand groups.

In high demand groups the beliefs and behaviors of group members are strictly controlled. Common methods used to control beliefs include long hours of work with little or no free time, a restricted sleep schedule, strict control of access to outside information, and creation of a view of the outside world as unsafe and threatening. Behavior also may be controlled by public shaming and humiliation and isolation from outside contacts. Communal living is common, and members may be given new names and identities to signify their break with their past lives and their affiliation with, and devotion to, the new group.

Some researchers claim that the endless repetition of prayers and other techniques are in actuality autohypnotic techniques. For example, a person might be taught that when faced with criticism of the group, he or she should repeat a certain phrase over and over. Another area of concern for some observers is the deceptive recruitment techniques that some groups use. Of course, some of these techniques are found in groups that are not considered to be high demand, and quite a few of them are used by organizations that are generally not questioned, such as Army boot camps.

Mind control?

One of the major issues surrounding high demand religious groups is whether

or not mind control or brainwashing could or does take place. A proposition of the Anti-Cult Movement is that the pressures exerted by these groups move beyond normal social pressure and constitute a unique form of influence that can be all-controlling. However, many social scientists question this assertion. How is "brainwashing" different from other forms of social influence and normal socialization? Why do we not say that people converting to mainstream groups are being brainwashed? Were we all brainwashed by our parents to accept the beliefs of our cultures and our religions? Are advertising, military training, and schooling all examples of brainwashing?

An interesting study by Jeffrey Pfeifer looks at how we label these different areas of social influence differently. In this study, people were presented with a fictional paragraph describing a student named Bill. They were told that Bill left college to join a Catholic seminary, to join the Marines, or to join the Moonies. Several high-demand techniques were described:

> While at the facility, Bill is not allowed very much contact with his friends or family and he notices that he is seldom left alone. He also notices that he never seems to be able to talk to the other four people who signed up for the program and that he is continually surrounded by [Moonies, Marines, Priests] who make him feel guilty if he questions any of their actions or beliefs.[2]

When asked to describe Bill's experience, those who thought Bill joined a Catholic seminary labeled it as "resocialization"; those who thought he joined the Marines frequently labeled it as "conversion." Only those subjects who thought that Bill joined the Moonies used the term "brainwashing."

Many studies have failed to support the idea of brainwashing. Several of these have focused on the issue of recruitment, with the idea that if these groups did have some way to override free will and control a person's mind, then everyone, or at least almost everyone, who attends a recruitment meeting for one of these groups should in fact convert. This turns out not to be the case.

Sociologist Eileen Barker studied the Unification Church. She found that only a small percentage of people who attended Unification Church recruitment seminars actually joined the church. Another study by psychiatrist Saul Levine looked at over 800 people who had joined controversial religious movements. He found that more than 80 percent dropped out within two years. These are hardly the statistics one would

expect if the groups had mind control over their members.[3]

Genuinely dangerous religious groups

This is not to say no religious groups should be considered dangerous, either to their individual members or to the society at large. The question is how to identify these groups. Once we get past obvious features such as torture and murder, the criteria are not all clear. And not all of these groups will even be of the high demand variety.

However, there are a few characteristics that have been suggested as early warning signs of a dangerous group. One of these is the authority claimed by the leader of the group and what that person does with this authority. An example is when the leader sets up ethical rules that everyone must follow—except for the leader himself or herself. This can also extend to the leadership dictating important personal details in the lives of followers, such as whom a person can marry.

Another feature of a dangerous group is when the group sees itself as being above the law or as not having a social contract with the secular state. Although some people place apocalyptic ideology on the list, this is in and of itself not necessarily a danger sign. However, when the group believes they will be soldiers in God's army during this apocalypse and begin to stockpile weapons for this battle, the issues change.

Examples of high demand religions

Recent decades have seen the development of many new religious movements, including several that could be labeled as high demand. Many of these movements remain under the radar of cultural awareness, but some have come to our attention in dramatic, and often tragic, ways. This includes the Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate groups in the United States.

As was discussed previously, new religions do not come out of nowhere. They are derived from older religious traditions. In the United States these are

often Christian based. Many of the new religions, for example, derive important elements of their ideology from the Book of Revelation, which describes an apocalyptic world transformation.

Branch Davidians (Students of the Seven Seals)

The Students of the Seven Seals can be traced back to a group that broke off from the Seventh Day Adventists in the 1940s. Led by Victor Houteff, the new sect shared a number of the same beliefs as the Seventh Day Adventists, such as a belief in the imminent return of Jesus Christ. However, Houteff taught that Christ would return only when at least a small number of Christians had sufficiently purified themselves and that he himself was a messenger sent from God to conduct this necessary cleansing. The key to all of this was secret information contained in a scroll that is described in the Book of Revelation in the Christian New Testament, which is said to contain a description of the events that will occur when Christ returns and the world as we know it ends. The scroll is protected by seven seals, hence the name of the group. They are also known by the nickname *Branch Davidians.*

After Houteff's death, control of the group passed to his wife, who prophesied that the world would end in April 1959. When this did not come to pass, some people did leave the group, but the religion persisted, with several new leaders. A man named Vernon Howell joined the group as a handyman in 1981 and soon married the daughter of a prominent member of the community. There was a struggle for power, and Howell took control of the group in 1987. He later changed his name to David Koresh, after the biblical King David and the Babylonian King Cyrus. By the early 1990s the group had over 100 members.

Under David Koresh the group came to believe that the death of Christ had provided salvation only for those who died before Christ did, that is, before 32 CE. People who had died since that time could be saved only by the actions of the current prophet. The Book of Revelation says that the Lamb of God will open the seven seals and trigger the sequence that ends the world as we know it. Traditionally, Christians have made the interpretation that the Lamb of God is Jesus Christ. The Branch Davidians believed that the Lamb of God was

David Koresh himself. After the breaking of the seals, a battle would occur in which the Branch Davidians believed they would play a major role, hence the need for weapons. After the battle they alone would ascend to heaven to be with God.

The group's practices included many that are typical of high demand religious groups. The group lived communally and led a highly regulated, disciplined life. Koresh exerted control over such areas as sex and marriage. Couples were separated and marriages were dissolved, and Koresh persuaded women in the group to join him as his "spiritual wives," which included sexual access. Everyone else was expected to remain celibate. Members were not allowed to go to the movies or engage in competitive activities. The length of women's dresses and their hairstyles were regulated. Koresh himself had veto power over all decisions. The practice that brought them to the attention of the U.S. government, however, was the gathering of a large supply of weapons.

In 1993, in Waco, Texas, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) decided to arrest Koresh on firearms violations. When ATF agents attempted to arrest Koresh, a firefight erupted in which six Branch Davidians and four agents died. A fifty-one-day siege followed. Finally, federal agents fired tear gas grenades and used tanks to try to penetrate the building. Several fires had started in the compound, and Koresh and at least seventy-five of his followers, including twenty-one children, died.

Much has been written about the events of Waco, and much remains unclear. However, one factor is that the federal officials failed to take the Branch Davidians' religious beliefs seriously and to consider this as a factor in their strategy. Koresh apparently believed that the raid was the start of the war of Armageddon, which he believed was to begin with an attack on the Branch Davidians. This case points out the problems associated with the freedom of religion, especially when the group is armed and awaiting a millenarian battle. How do we balance religious freedom against the need for order and security?

The Branch Davidian movement has survived the death of Koresh and continues today. A small chapel was erected on the site of the siege and a group of about two dozen people still come to pray there every Sunday. The group anticipates that Koresh will return to earth. Based on the Book of Daniel, believers prophesized that Koresh would return in 1993 and 1999.

Although he failed to return on these predicted dates, the group is still waiting for him to lead them to the Promised Land. In 2004, Clive Doyle, the caretaker of the site, said in an interview:

> Our hopes are that God will intervene prior to the rest of us dying … But we do have to face facts: eventually everyone gets old and dies. We worry that we will go the way of the Shakers and other groups that didn't get new members or have children.
>
> If it was all a deception, and yet we were convinced it was right, then how can we ever know the difference between good and evil, and right and wrong? … If I was misled by God, then how would I ever believe anything ever again?[4]

Unification Church (Moonies)

The members of the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity are also known by the derogatory term *Moonies* after the founder of the movement, Reverend Sun Myung Moon. When Moon was 15 years old, Jesus Christ appeared to him in a vision and gave him the responsibility of completing the work that Jesus had begun. The Unification Church was founded in Seoul, Korea, in 1954, with the goal of uniting Christian denominations around the world and bringing unity among all major religions. Moon believed that this was necessary in preparation for the second coming of Christ. Missionaries were sent to Japan and the United States beginning in the 1950s, but the religion did not see significant development in the United States until Reverend Moon came to the country in the early 1970s.

The main beliefs of the church are contained in the text *Divine Principle,* which was published in 1973. The text tells of new truths or the new Principle that has been revealed through Reverend Moon. This text explicitly says that the time for the second coming of Christ is the present and focuses on the family as the purpose of creation.

The practice for which the Unification Church is best known is the large joint weddings presided over by Reverend and Mrs. Moon (Figure 11.3). Some have included thousands of people, and the couples are often matched up by Reverend Moon a month or less in advance.

The Unification Church teaches that before Adam and Eve were married in Eden, Eve had an affair with the Archangel Lucifer, which caused the spiritual

fall of mankind. Eve later had premarital sex with Adam, which caused the physical fall of mankind. Taken together, these two illicit sexual acts caused Adam and Eve to form an imperfect family. It was this sin that let Satan take control of the world. God's plan, by which Jesus would redeem humanity and undo the harm caused by Adam and Eve, was for Jesus to form a perfect marriage. However, Jesus was killed before he could do this. Through his subsequent spiritual resurrection Jesus would make spiritual salvation possible for those who believe in him. Unfortunately, physical salvation is not possible because Jesus did not complete his task.

Complete salvation, both spiritual and physical, will be possible only after the arrival of the "third Adam" (Jesus is seen as the second Adam) and his subsequent perfect marriage. The third Adam is seen as the second coming of Christ and the perfect man, who will marry the perfect woman. Together they will become the "true parents" or the spiritual parents of humankind. Although the Unification Church has never made this official claim, many members believe that Reverend Moon and his wife, Hak Ja Han, are the True Parents.



Figure 11.3 Mass wedding of the Unification Church. Reverend Moon performs a mass

wedding ceremony.

UFO religions

Some new religious movements have imported elements of modern technology, such as space travel and cloning, as a basis for a philosophy that, while not always seen as a religion to outsiders, clearly serves as such. Most scholars consider UFOs to be within the realm of the paranormal or supernatural, thus fitting in with our definition of religion (Chapter 1). The UFO groups describe extraterrestrial beings, or "ufonauts," in the same way that supernatural beings are described in more traditional religions. These beings are often seen as spiritual beings who have come to earth to help humans in some way. They are described as wise and as having powers beyond those of ordinary humans.

Another common religious theme is the idea of an imminent apocalypse. The world is seen as being on the verge of destruction. The "ufonauts" will somehow rescue the human race, usually preventing a nuclear war or selectively removing people from the planet to preserve the species. "Ufonauts" are often seen as having been involved in the original creation of humans or the planet.

As we saw in the previous section, many of the new religious movements in the United States are based in some part on the Christian religion. Even many of the UFO religions exhibit syncretism and contain significant Judeo-Christian elements.

Heaven's Gate

The Heaven's Gate movement was the last of three organizations founded by Marshall Applewhite, also known as "Do," and Bonnie Trusdale Nettles, also known as "Ti." Passages from the Christian Gospels and from the Book of Revelation were reinterpreted as referring to UFO visitations. They saw the earth as being in the control of evil forces. However, they saw themselves as being among the elite who would be saved from the evil on earth and taken to

the next level.

Members of the group lived communally in a house in San Diego, California. They dressed in unisex clothing and were all celibate. Eight of them, including Applewhite, had been voluntarily castrated. This was seen as preparation for the next life, in which there would be no sexual activity and no gender identity. Members were required to separate themselves from family and friends and to completely detach themselves from human emotion and material possessions. Their lives focused on following a disciplined regimen referred to as the *overcoming process,* through which they could overcome human weaknesses and prepare themselves for a physical transition to the next kingdom.

The group saw humans in a dualistic way: that the human soul was a superior entity that was only temporarily housed in a physical body. Much of the metaphor was that of gardening. The soul was seen as a plant in a container, but this container could be left behind, and the soul could be replanted in another container. The Heaven's Gate members believed that extraterrestrials had planted the seeds of current human beings millions of years ago and were coming to reap the harvest of this work by taking spiritually evolved individuals to join the ranks of spaceship crews. The members believed that by committing suicide together at the right time, they would leave their containers (or bodies) behind and be replanted into another container at a level above that of human existence.

The correct time was seen as March 1997, near Easter. They believed that a spaceship was hiding in the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet. Twenty-one women and eighteen men voluntarily committed suicide in three groups on three successive days.

Raelians

The Raelian Movement was founded in 1973 by French race car driver and journalist Claude Vorilhon, known as Rael to his followers. Vorilhon says that while walking in the mountains around France, he had an encounter with space aliens, during which he was given a message for humans about our true identity. He was told that a team of extraterrestrial scientists, the Elohim,

created humans in laboratories and then implanted them on earth. *Elohim* is a term found in the Hebrew Bible, where it is translated as "God." Rael says that the word means "those who came from the sky."

Over the next five days, Vorilhon continued to meet with the extraterrestrials, who gave him new interpretations of parts of the Bible. For example, the Elohim chose the earth as a place to conduct DNA experiments, and they built laboratories for this purpose in what is now known as the Holy Land. They first created plants, then animals, and finally humans "in their own image." The humans were at first housed in these laboratories, referred to in the Bible as the Garden of Eden, but they proved to be too aggressive and were forced out.

Vorilhon was also told that prophets, who are the offspring of the Elohim and human women, have been sent in the past. These prophets included Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammad, and Joseph Smith. Rael, as the extraterrestrials named Vorilhon, is the last of forty prophets, sent to warn humans that since the end of World War II we have entered the Age of Apocalypse. Instead of destroying themselves with nuclear weapons, humans can choose instead to change their consciousness. This change will enable humans to inherit the scientific knowledge of Elohim. Through science, 4 percent of humans will be able to clone themselves. After doing this, they will be able to travel through space and create life on other planets.

Rael focuses on cloning as the only hope for immortality. Four annual rituals are held so that the Elohim can fly overhead and record the DNA code of the Raelians. Most members are loosely affiliated with the group and acknowledge the Elohim as their fathers. The more committed members join the Structure. The Structure works to further the two main goals of the movement: to spread Rael's message and to build an intergalactic space embassy in Jerusalem to receive the Elohim when they arrive in the year 2025.

The Raelians have received the most attention from journalists through their organization CLONAID and their claims to have successfully achieved human cloning. However, they have been unwilling to offer any scientific proof that they have in fact cloned a human being, and most observers believe this to be highly unlikely.

Conclusion

Religions exist to answer questions, to show us a culturally defined correct path, to make us feel safe and secure in the world we live in. Any specific religion is strongly connected to the culture and circumstances in which it is found. But what happens when those conditions change? The religion no longer meets these needs, needs that we require to be fulfilled. A new religion, more suited to the new situation, is needed, and thus a revitalization movement is born. Revitalization movements are likely to be popular in periods of rapid social change, when the current ways of doing and thinking about things are no longer satisfying. They spell out a clear path, a new path (or the return to a former one) that they say will lead people out of despair and into a better future, which will answer questions and provide meaning to life. And in the end, isn't that the point of religion?

Summary

Culture change occurs through the processes of discovery, invention, and diffusion. Acculturation refers to the situation whereby a culture is significantly changed because of exposure to the influence of a politically and technologically dominant culture. Sometimes there is a reworking of the trait through a process known as syncretism, in which traits from two cultures fuse to form something new and yet, at the same time, permit the retention of the old by subsuming the old into a new form, such as Vodou in Haiti and Santeria in Cuba.

A revitalization movement is a movement that forms in an attempt to deliberately bring about change in a society. These are frequently initiated by an individual or a small group that promises better times. We can recognize several types of revitalization movements. Nativistic movements develop in tribal societies and stress the elimination of the dominant culture and a return to the past but with desirable elements of the dominant culture brought under the control of the subordinate culture. Examples are the cargo cults of New

Guinea and the Ghost Dance in the United States. Revivalistic movements attempt to revive what is perceived as a past golden age, and ancient customs come to symbolize the features and legitimacy of the repressed culture. For example, Wicca and other Neo-Pagan movements are attempts to revive pre-Christian religious traditions. Millenarian movements are based on a vision of change through an apocalyptic transformation. Messianic movements believe that a divine savior in human form will bring about the solution to the problems that exist within the society.

A new religious movement that has branched off from a more established religion and yet is still considered mainstream is referred to as a denomination. A sect is still connected to the mainstream religion but is generally associated with a founder or leader and new revelations. The term *cult* is used in many ways but usually in a negative sense. Many researchers today avoid the term *cult* and use the term *new religious movement.*

All religious groups require some degree of conformity from their members. However, groups do vary in the level of this demand and the degree of control the group attempts to exert over members. At one end of the spectrum are high demand groups, in which the beliefs and behaviors of group members are strictly controlled. Sometimes the activities of such groups become dangerous to its members and to society.

Study questions

1. Cultures are constantly changing and adapting to external change through discovery, invention, and diffusion. Define each of these terms, and provide an example of each from American culture.
2. While the intentions of missionaries might be good, the effects of their activities are often harmful to small-scale societies. Why? If you were a missionary trained in anthropology, how would you approach your mission?
3. Vodou and Santeria are practiced by immigrants from Haiti and Cuba in most large urban centers in the United States. Yet the members of these religions prefer to perform their rituals in secret, out of sight of

their neighbors. Why? What particular religious practices do you think would especially offend a typical American urban resident?

4. Although we tend to think of revitalization movements as occurring primarily in small-scale societies, can you make the argument that Christianity and Islam began as revitalization movements?
5. Why do high demand religions develop? Why do people join these religions?
6. Some anthropologists have argued that it would have been better if the government had dealt with the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas, as a religious group and had taken their beliefs seriously. How could this have been accomplished? Do you think that the destruction at Waco could have been avoided? Why or why not?

Suggested readings

Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[A person-centered ethnography of an immigrant woman practicing Vodou in New York City.]

Michael F. Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[An anthropological look at channeling in America, focusing on issues of identity and how channeling reflects American culture.]

Scott Cunningham, *The Truth about Witchcraft* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2002).

[A description of the basic beliefs, symbolism, and rituals of Wicca.]

Michael Hittman, *Wovoka and the Ghost Dance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

[A detailed description of the Ghost Dance religion with many original documents.]

Alex Mar, *Witches of America* (New York: Sarah Crichton, 2015).

[A study of Neo-Pagan religions in the United States.]

Loretta Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1995).
[An ethnography of Wiccans.]

Fiction

Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1988).
[An apocalyptic story that includes a small Caribbean nation in which a religion called Bokononism is practiced.]

Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: Berkeley, 1961).
[Valentine Michael Smith, raised by Martians, returns to earth and founds his own church.]

Suggested websites

www.unification.net
The website of the Unification Church.

http://web.archive.org/web/20060428083040/religiousmovements.lib.virginia.ed
Religious Movements home page at the University of Virginia.

www.religioustolerance.org/newage.htm
Discussions of New Age spirituality.

www.psywww.com/psyrelig/hg/index.html
Heaven's Gate website.

www.witchvox.com/xbasics.html
Information on Neo-Pagan religions from *The Witches' Voice.*

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/cult/cultmain.htm
"The Cult Question: Spiritual Quest or Mind Control" from *The Washington*

Post.

Notes

1 A. F. C. Wallace, *Culture and Personality* (New York: Random House, 1970).

2 Quoted in J. R. Lewis, "Overview," in J. R. Lewis (Ed.), *Odd Gods: New Religions and the Cult Controversy* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books, 2001), p. 41.

3 Ibid., pp. 32–33.

4 H. Witt, "Faith and Culture: Branch Davidian: Waco Sect Survives," *Chicago Tribune* (June 14, 2004).

Chapter 12
Religion, conflict, and peace

In our study of religion we have seen that religion has a great many functions. Among these is the fact that religion serves to bind people together into social groups, importantly people who are not related to one another and do not share bonds of kinship. Religion also spells out and emphasizes moral rules of human behavior that are essential for large numbers of people in a community to coexist in harmony.

Yet within these functions are the seeds of conflict. As effective as religions are in binding people together, they are equally effective at separating out the people outside the religious community, people whose behavior and moral code is often vilified and viewed as alien and incorrect. Religion may foster peacefulness and proper behavior but is also frequently the cause and facilitator of conflict and violence. This is the subject of this chapter.

Religion and conflict

Conflict is part of life and will always exist because different people have different worldviews, cultural beliefs and values, and individual interests and goals. We previously discussed conflicts arising from different uses of the same symbol, such as the swastika, or different interpretations of the same myth. Conflict in itself is not good or bad—it is how we deal with conflict.

Andrew Heywood argued that politics, and in particular democratic politics, is in essence a form of conflict resolution.[1] Our government is part of a complex system designed to deal with conflict over things such as the

distribution of resources. When the political system breaks down, individuals may resort to violence to try to address the conflict or to express their frustrations. Does this mean that conflicts resolved through political means are always nonviolent and those resolved through other means are always violent? That depends on how we define violence.

When we think of violence we usually think of people directly and physically harming other people. Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist, defines violence very broadly as whatever stops people and groups from achieving their full potential.[2] He distinguishes between **direct violence** and **indirect violence**, which he describes as structural violence and cultural violence. **Structural violence** is the result of societal conditions such as lowered life expectancy in lower socioeconomic classes. A society's way of justifying this kind of violence and making it seem natural is called **cultural violence**.

You may be thinking that by including indirect violence, the definition is too broad. Certainly with these definitions we would see violence everywhere and when most people think of violence they are thinking of direct, physical violence. However, it is useful to understand that violence can happen without a specific actor. Taking into account structural and cultural violence can help us understand the more direct violence of particular groups. For example, Islamic terrorist attacks on innocent Europeans can be understood as a reaction against structural violence both historically and currently that has led to war and instability in the Middle East.

Role of religion in conflict and violence

What is the role of religion in conflict and violence? Some theorists argue that conflict and violence are inherent to religion (the substantive view) while others argue that religious conflicts are always really about something else (the functional view). Those who think that religion has a built-in tendency to cause conflicts and violence point to specific characteristics or warning signs, including that religion is absolutist, divisive, and irrationalist. Others argue that these features are not unique to religion and can be found associated with such things as **nationalism (**Box 12.1**)**.

Box 12.1 Nationalism as religion

Nationalism refers to a sense of identification with and loyalty to one nation above all others. In this sense it is a purely secular phenomenon. However, nationalism and patriotism share many parallels with religions from an analytic and functional perspective. Nationalism and religion are both based on deep emotions and serve as sources of identification and for defining self and other. Both provide major themes for an individual's worldview, and include important stories, symbols, and rituals that people feel reverence for. Insiders who go against the nation or religion are seen as having committed a crime beyond that of a normal transgression and may be exiled or shunned. Individuals will give their lives for their nation in the same way that they will do so in the service of religious beliefs.

In the United States, the flag is the predominant symbol of nationalism. There are rituals around raising and lowering the flag and children pledge their allegiance to the flag every day in school. Songs, reminiscent of hymns, are sung that invoke the imagery of the flag and reverence for the nation. The constitution and declaration of independence are sacred texts and are quoted on important occasions. Relics of the nation are kept in the National Archives and places such as the Washington Memorial, Gettysburg, and Ground Zero are treated as sacred places to which individuals make pilgrimages. The founding fathers are rarely portrayed as complex human beings, flaws and all, but are treated as saints to be revered and never criticized. For many, any criticism against the country is a betrayal and shows a lack of loyalty. Historical traitors, such as Benedict Arnold, are seen as evil beings.

Religions are absolutist in that they claim to be the absolute truth, drawing sharp lines between good and evil. This allows for no dialogue or understanding of other viewpoints and offers no possibility of compromise. When social struggles get interpreted in terms of religion, they become larger than life, a cosmic battle between good and evil.

Religion suggests clear-cut distinctions not just between good and evil but

also between "us" and "them." Religious symbols, rituals, and worldviews create a strong sense of community and identity. They also often provide believers with a sense of sacred privilege; being the chosen ones elevates them above all others. This type of worldview is divisive, tending to cause disagreements with others.

Believers see the rules and directives of religion as going beyond the ordinary. Therefore, normal logic and judgments do not apply and religious beliefs and rules are beyond scientific and rational understanding, which can be termed *irrationalist.* Religion often calls for a blind obedience to the supernatural. Believers are taught that their personal desires are secondary to religious traditions. Because of this they can be persuaded to fight for religious battles even if it is not in their own best interest. Since the supernatural is more important than the natural world, it is possible to justify any means and fight against all odds to realize religious goals. It may not even matter if they are not winning the battle in the natural world since they will ultimately be rewarded in the afterlife.

Fundamentalism

Many of the features considered to link religion to conflict from the substantive viewpoint are also closely linked with fundamentalism. The term **fundamentalism** originated in the nineteenth century. At that time it was used to refer to the opponents of liberal Protestantism who were urging a return to the "fundamentals" of Christianity as a way to guide those whom they believed had lost their way. Among these fundamentals was a belief in the inerrancy of the scriptures and a resulting millenarianism based on the Book of Revelation.

The term *fundamentalism* was generalized to other religious traditions with a strong scriptural component, mainly Judaism and Islam. Judaism, in particular, has focused historically on debates, commentaries, and interpretations of scriptures, and differences in these interpretations led to different Jewish denominations. In Islam, however, the Qur'an is seen as the Word of God and is not seen as something that can be treated as a historic or

literary text. Therefore debates over meanings are not seen as challenging the foundations or sanctity of the scriptures—the fundamental always remains so there is no need to justify or rediscover them. Because of this, many Islamic and some Jewish groups question the use of the term fundamentalism to refer to non-Christian traditions. Some Islamic writers prefer the terms "absolutism" or "extremism" instead of "fundamentalism."

Over time, however, the use of the term *fundamentalism* has shifted from an emphasis on religious scriptures to being associated with religious and social movements that share certain features and worldview in common. It is that etic perspective that we will use here.

Characteristics of fundamentalist groups

In many ways fundamentalists groups are easier to define by what they are against than what they are for. These groups protest against, and fear, modernization in general and the secularization of society specifically. Society is no longer focused on the big questions of morality and salvation. Change is now prized over continuity. An emphasis on production and commerce has replaced more traditional values. Loyalty to and identification with the state have replaced loyalty to and identification with one's religious group. Fundamentalists express outrage at these trends.

The fundamentalist worldview is focused on finding certainty and simplicity in an otherwise complex and uncertain world. They tend to see issues in terms of black and white and reject the idea of relativism. Because of this mindset, they generally refuse to engage in dialogue and compromise or find common ground, an absolutist perspective.

Richard Antoun describes fundamentalism:

> as an orientation to the modern world, both cognitive and emotional, that focuses on protest and change and on certain consuming themes: the quest for purity, the search for authenticity, totalism and activism, the necessity for certainty (scripturalism), selective modernization, and the centering of the mythic past in the present.[3]

Totalism is a reaction to the increasing separation of religion from other domains of life. Fundamentalists believe that religion is relevant to, and

should be a part of, all parts of a society. Religious texts play an important role in fundamentalist beliefs. **Scripturalism** refers to the practice of justifying beliefs and actions by reference to the religious text. These texts are generally held to be inerrant and represent certainty and stability in a rapidly changing world. Another aspect of the importance of religious texts is the idea that these texts are relevant to life today, what Antoun calls **traditioning**.

Other important themes of fundamentalist groups include millenarianism and a focus on the perceived struggle between good and evil. These groups also are characterized by activism. Antoun points out that "Fundamentalism is inherently oppositional and minoritarian. It is the protest of those *not* in power."[4] It is important to note that he means political and cultural power, not necessarily economic power.

Although the themes of fundamentalist groups are very similar cross-culturally, individual movements obviously have arisen in response to very different cultural and historical circumstances. The growth of Christian fundamentalism in the United States was a reaction to the secular Protestant ideology that was very important in the early days of the country. A belief in secular progress and ideas such as manifest destiny served to elevate nationalism to the level of religion. In contrast, Islamic fundamentalism is largely a reaction to Western colonialism and the general outrage at the extent of Western cultural and economic infiltration into Islamic countries. And Jewish fundamentalism has its roots in reactions to the strong anti-Semitism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in eastern and central Europe.

Mormon fundamentalism

Joseph Smith, the prophet of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), received the revelation regarding marriage in the early 1830s. A few years later he made the revelation public. It is recorded as Section 132 of *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, The Prophet.* This revelation introduced the principle of plural marriage, based on the marriage customs of the patriarchs of the Bible, such as Abraham and Jacob, who had more than one wife. Among the Mormons, polygamy became an obligation; some

referred to it as a sacrifice. Joseph Smith and his successors were given divine authority to perform polygamous marriages.

Polygamy was actively practiced in secret by members of the church until 1852 when Brigham Young brought it out into the open. Knowledge of the practice of polygamy caused great concern among non-Mormons, and the Federal government passed a series of laws making its practice a crime. The government also actively prosecuted polygamists and plural marriage was an important factor in originally denying statehood to Utah. In 1890 the Mormons no longer entered polygamous marriages. The explanation given was that God accepted the sacrifice of plural marriage and removed the commandment. Although some polygamous marriages were authorized after 1890, all such marriages ceased in 1904. After 1904, church members were excommunicated for practicing polygamy.

Not all church members accepted the end of plural marriages, and some continued the practice after 1904. They continued to regard polygamy as a religious obligation based upon Joseph Smith's revelation. Because they could no longer marry within the Church, they found other ways of legitimizing polygamous unions. In the 1920s, Mormon fundamentalist groups began to accept the claim made by Lorin C. Woolley that he had the divine authority to solemnize polygamous marriages. He preached that he was the legitimate head of the Church holding the authority passed down from Joseph Smith.

Although the practice of polygamy has been the most publicized feature of fundamentalist Mormon groups, other concepts, which were articulated and practiced to a greater or lesser degree in the mid-nineteenth century, are also found and would fit with the practices of high demand groups that were discussed in the previous chapter. Three of these are controversial and have been repudiated by the LDS Church.

The first is known as the Law of Consecration. Consecration refers to individuals deeding their property to the Church. The Church in turn assigned a certain amount of property back to the individual to use. In the LDS Church, consecration has been replaced by tithing whereby a certain percentage of one's income is given to the Church. However, in many fundamentalist groups this principle is used to concentrate control of all property, including homes and farmland, in the hands of the leader who then allows people to use the property as he sees fit. The second is the prohibition against African Americans entering the priesthood. Although the LDS Church rejected this

policy in 1978, it is still practiced by fundamentalist groups.

Finally, there is the practice of blood atonement. Many historians believe that this was practiced by the early Church. Individuals were killed who committed one of many sins, including adultery, sexual intercourse between a white person and an African American, and leaving the Church. A series of murders in the 1970s and 1980s have been attributed to fundamentalist groups practicing blood atonement.

Today the fundamentalist movement has split into a number of small, self-contained, and highly secretive communities living in rural areas in the western United States, Mexico, and Canada. Each group is controlled by a leader who demands complete obedience. Polygamy is practiced, with girls as young as 12 and 13 being required to marry leaders of the community. Many of these groups have been accused of illegal practices such as forcing underage girls into marriage.

Case studies of religion and conflict

Disillusionment with secular models of geopolitics was key to how religion became prominent in conflicts in the last few decades. For example, the end of the Cold War, the ideological conflict between the capitalist democratic United States and the communist authoritarian Soviet Union, dominated the global political landscape for much of the twentieth century. The conflict is referred to as the Cold War because there was no actual direct violent conflict between the two countries. Instead the conflict was fought indirectly in smaller battles through their allies in various parts of the world, such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Many scholars argue that the impact of this global ideological conflict was that other sources of ideological and identity conflict (including religious) were subordinated to the broader conflict between capitalist democracy and communist authoritarianism. However, once this framework was no longer there, other sources of identity and conflict began to reemerge.

In the Middle East, disillusionment with secular governments started even

earlier. Secularism was strongly associated with authoritarianism, as in the case of the Shah in Iran and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. Under these authoritarian regimes, extreme poverty, deprivation of rights, and limited access to resources were common. For many, this represented not only a failure of secular nationalism but a failure of the state to provide for and protect its citizens, an important tenet of Islam. Another factor in the growing prominence of religion in conflicts is the function of religion to reduce ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity. In a rapidly changing and ever more complex world these would be expected to be a factor but even more so in situations of conflict.

The Iranian Revolution

Islamic fundamentalism is a movement grounded in social, religious, and economic stressors that exist in many Muslim countries. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s, world history has seen the political marginalization of these countries. The colonial context of political and economic domination is an important backdrop. In many areas of the Middle East the borders drawn by European colonial powers in the early twentieth century rarely coincided with boundaries of preexisting communities. Ethnic and regional diversities, as well as local loyalties to various tribes or religious sects, made it difficult to integrate people into one nation.

Even after Muslim countries gained independence, Western colonialism was still seen as a problem. Most Muslim countries were ruled by a Westernized elite, mass-produced Western goods were flooding in, and Western culture was coming in through mass media. Although great wealth came into the region in the 1970s as a result of OPEC oil price increases, this went only to the elite and only served to accentuate the relative deprivation of the majority of people. For many Muslims, this cultural and economic domination by the outside was seen as a sign of God's wrath and a call for a return to the Qur'an and strict adherence to its principles. Islamic fundamentalism illustrates many of Antoun's themes described earlier, including scripturalism and traditioning.

Perhaps the best example of the political activism aspect of fundamentalism

in Islam is the Iranian Revolution in 1979. This was a religious revolution against secular nationalism, led by religious leaders and using religious idioms. An exemplar of this was the use of the myth of the Imam Husayn. The Shi'a Muslims in Iran focus not on the Prophet (like Sunni Muslims do) but instead on his descendants. According to Shi'a tradition, almost all twelve of the imams, direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad, died by violent means and at the hands of the secular government in power at the time. The obvious message was that these governments could not be trusted. These stories form the backdrop for a worldview of alienation from society, and more particularly from the government, which is seen as unjust and illegitimate.

Of particular importance is the story of the third imam, Husayn, grandson of Mohammed. Before the revolution, religious devotion centered on Husayn, focused on his role as intercessor between humans and God. However, during the course of the revolution, a new interpretation and emphasis emerged. The story tells us that in the seventh century Husayn was on a pilgrimage to Mecca when he heard that his adherents in Iraq were surrounded by an army and needed his support. He broke off his pilgrimage, one of the five required pillars of Islam, to go to them. In Iraq, he, his family, and his followers were martyred. The focus shifted to Husayn as a revolutionary who believed that the struggle against oppression was more important than even the performance of basic Muslim worship obligations.

At the time of the revolution, Iran was a constitutional monarchy ruled by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The Shah ran a strict dictatorship, complete with censorship laws and the imprisonment of political activists. At the same time, some conditions in Iran had improved and some rights were established. The White Revolution in the 1960s had begun a series of social, economic, and political reforms that gave more freedom to women and emphasized secular over religious education. These attempts to modernize Iran were undertaken with the help of the United States who saw Iran as a potentially stabilizing force in the region. The Shah was opposed by many groups. Some disliked the Shah's autocratic rule and the corruption of the very wealthy royal family. Religious leaders saw his rule as overly secular and tied to the West, particularly to the United States.

The revolution against the Shah utilized the imagery of the story of Husayn. Demonstrators yelled that "Everywhere is Kerbala and every day is

Ashura" (Kerbala and Ashura being the place and time that Husayn was killed). The U.S. president at the time, Jimmy Carter, was identified as Yazid, the ruler of the army at Kerbala, and the Shah was seen as Shimr, the general sent by Yazid to kill Husayn. The United States was called the "Great Satan."

On December 10, 1978, on the Day of Ashura, the anniversary of the day that Husayn was killed, two million demonstrators marched for hours. They carried flags of green, red, and black, symbolizing Islam, martyrdom, and Shi'a. By the end, a resolution was passed and Ayatollah Khomeini, living in exile, was invited to become the new leader of Iran. He returned in February 1979 and formed the Islamic Republic. Islamic law was reestablished, religious instruction was reinstituted in the educational arena, and many new social norms were instituted, including the veiling of women, a ban on alcohol and gambling, and the censoring of all media for sexual content.

Box 12.2 The veil in Islam

Many religious systems prescribe standards of behavior. This includes standards of dress and grooming. Examples are the dress codes of the Amish and the Hasidic Jews. While the details and underlying theology may differ, these rules function to identify members of the group and to display one's commitment to the group's religious practices. In Muslim countries it is traditional for women to cover their head, and sometimes even their entire body in the presence of non-family males. This is seen as adherence to a level of modesty that is required by religious and social custom.

The nature of the covering varies from society to society. The most commonly worn garment is the *hijab,* a headscarf that covers the head and neck. Other forms of veiling includes the *niqab* that covers the entire body except for an opening for the eyes; the *chador*, a long shawl that covers the head and body but leaves the face uncovered; and the *burqa,* a full-body veil with the eye opening covered by mesh.

The wearing of such coverings is mandated by law in several countries such as Saudi Arabia; in other countries it is customary but optional. A survey by the Pew Research Center in 2011 of Muslim American women

showed that 36 percent wear the *hijab* all of the time, 24 percent wear it most or some of the time, and 40 percent never wear it.[5]

In some communities undergoing assimilation the *hijab* has become an important symbol not only of a religious system, but of one's cultural origins and identity. This has become a major issue in France, which maintains a strict separation between religion and the state in the education system. In 1989 this became a major issue when three teenage girls of North African descent wore headscarves to school. When asked they refused to remove them and were subsequently expelled. This became known as the "headscarf affair" and led to attempts to outlaw the wearing of headscarves in public schools.

In 2004 France passed a law banning the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in French public schools. The law does not single out the *hijab;* it refers instead to conspicuous religious objects. This means that each school must find its own interpretation. A cross and Star of David are usually allowed, but in one case a student was expelled simply for wearing a long dress that came to her ankles. Yarmulkes (Jewish skullcaps) are frequently allowed as cultural and social symbols rather than religious symbols.

The law is controversial. The many debates focus on the rights of minority groups and religious freedom. The *hijab* is also seen as an avoidance of assimilation by stressing one's ancestry and cultural heritage. However, the issue is not simply an academic one. France has been racked by several acts of terrorism, perpetrated by religious extremists. Anti-Muslim feelings have risen, and the *hijab* has become another type of symbol. It has become a symbol of the fear of the "other."

The debates have moved beyond the schools. On the Mediterranean coast of France many cities banned the *burkini,* a full-body swimsuit worn by Muslim women, in response to terrorist attacks there in 2016. City officials argued that the burkinis were associated with Islamic fundamentalism and would cause emotional distress following the attacks. In Nice, France, the human rights group Collective Against Islamophobia brought a court case saying it was discriminatory, Anti-Muslim, and unconstitutional. The court suspended the ban as no public risk was shown. Some have pointed out that full-body coverings worn by

Catholic nuns are permitted on the same beaches.

Iran under the new religious rule has been criticized for many human rights violations, including the imprisonment and murder of critics of the regime. Although women had gained many important rights under the Shah, these have all been lost. Patrols were formed to confront women for such violations as wearing lipstick or showing their hair.

The Arab Spring

The failure of the state to protect its citizens was a catalyst for many forms of open resistance, many of which were religiously based. The uprisings often called the "Arab Spring" are one of the most recent of these events. Beginning in Tunisia in 2011, it spread to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria. The term "Arab Spring" was coined by the Western media in response to the successful uprising in Tunisia and referenced the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, when most countries in the former Communist bloc adopted democratic political systems and a market economy in a very short time frame. The expectation that a similar thing would happen in the Middle East, with political systems collapsing in the face of popular uprisings, was misguided. As opposed to what happened in Eastern Europe, in the Middle East there was no consensus on what should replace the existing system.

Two conflicting principles were at play in the uprisings: the desire for more implementation of Islamic fundamentalism on one hand and the belief that secularism had to be defended on the other. This has resulted in the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Instead of political reform and social justice, there has been more war and more violence.

The Hobby Lobby case in the United States

In 2010, the Patient Protection Affordable Care Act (PPACA, otherwise known as "Obamacare") was introduced in the United States. The legislation required

businesses to provide health insurance coverage for their employees. The basis of the religious conflict, though, was a provision that this insurance would include all Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved contraceptive methods. Although regulations provided by the Department of Health and Human Services did make some exemptions for religious employers, some religious businesses felt that this was not enough.

In September of 2012, the Hobby Lobby stores sought an injunction under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). The RFRA was passed by Congress in 1993 and requires strict scrutiny when a law "substantially burdens a person's exercise of religion." It was amended in 2000 to define exercise of religion as any exercise of religion "whether or not compelled by, or central to, a system of religious beliefs." Hobby Lobby was founded and is run by the Green family who are devout Christians who run their company in a way consistent with Biblical principles. For example, the company and all its stores are closed on Sundays. The Greens objected to four of the twenty contraceptives covered by the PPACA, including the morning-after pill, because they conflict with their belief that life starts at conception.



Figure 12.1 Hobby Lobby. Supporters Hobby Lobby react to the U.S. Supreme Court decision of June 30, 2014.

Although the injunction was initially denied it was upheld on appeal. After an appeal by the United States government the course went to the Supreme Court in 2014 where the justices ruled in favor of Hobby Lobby (Figure 12.1).

This was considered a landmark decision and was the first time the court recognized a corporation's claim of religious beliefs. The court found that for-profit corporations could be considered as persons under the RFRA, a recognition that was already extended to non-profits.

The case speaks to a critical issue that is at the heart of liberal democracies in North America and Europe. To what extent does the government have the right to infringe on freedom of religion when it concerns the health and well-being of other groups within the state? Is the right to freedom of religion applicable only to individuals or also to businesses?

Religion, terrorism, and peace

Religiously based conflict may lead to violence considered to be terrorism. However, religion may also play an important role in peacebuilding. Examples of both of these are discussed below.

Religious conflict and terrorism

Although religious violence is nothing new, the last few decades of the twentieth century saw an increase in religious violence and terrorism around the world. Some of this is linked to new fundamentalist movements. Examples of religious violence can be found in all of the world religions and in smaller religious groups as well. Christianity is associated with attacks on abortion clinics in the United States and with the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, not to mention the religious conflicts in Northern Ireland. The Middle East has seen much violence perpetrated by both Jews and Muslims, including the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Baruch Goldstein's attack at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, and Hamas suicide bombers. Sikhism is associated with the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and a sect of Japanese Buddhism with the Tokyo subway gas attack. The September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center towers in New York and the Pentagon near Washington, D.C., is only

one of many examples of religiously motivated violence.

Much of this violence has been referred to by the term *terrorism.***Terrorism** can be defined as "public acts of destruction, committed without a clear military objective that arouse a widespread sense of fear."[6] Such acts are generally committed with a deliberately exaggerated level of violence. The violence is justified by reference to religious beliefs, including the idea that the act is part of an ongoing cosmic war, a battle between good and evil. Thus those who commit the acts are seen as martyrs to the cause; those who are attacked are defined as demons and agents of Satan.

Terrorism is also usually defined as the tactics of a smaller, weaker group against a more politically established enemy with the intent to intimidate or put political pressure on the more dominant organization. The actors are typically non-state related. Of course, there is state-sponsored violence and acts that could be considered state terror but this differs in scale, motivation, and the means by which the fear-inducing violence is carried out.

Mark Juergensmeyer argues that terrorist acts are highly symbolic and, as such, can be analyzed in much the same way that religious ritual is.[7] For example, the timing and location of attacks are usually highly symbolic. The violence is meant to send a message, although the intended message is not always the one that the general public perceives.

Many theories of terrorism focus on the role of a lack of education or poverty in states that are weak. However, research has shown that both poor and wealthy individuals engage in terrorist acts and that support for terrorism actually increased among Palestinians that were higher on the economic continuum. Similarly, individuals with increasing levels of education often show increased support for terrorism. Some terrorist organizations will specifically target university students for recruitment.

Other theories focus on the role of social dynamics in small groups. Charismatic leaders bring socially alienated individuals into a network of fictive kinship that acts as a tight-knit family group. Many individuals recruited by terrorist organizations are migrants living in diaspora communities where they are marginalized from the societies they live in. The terrorist groups offer them a sense of meaning and belonging. Not only do emotional attachments grow with the new family-like group, but bonding among young males occurs as we saw in our previous discussion of rites of

passage (Chapter 4).[8]



Figure 12.2 Terrorist attacks in Paris. People react to a series of attacks in Paris, France, in 2015, in front of a memorial display, an example of a situational ritual.

Religion and peace

Just as we needed to define conflict, we also need to define peace. Most people think of peace as just being the absence of war, something John Galtung called **negative peace**.[9] How Galtung defined peace relates to how he defined violence as including more than just direct, physical violence. An absence of direct violence would be negative peace. But only an absence of structural violence results in what Galtung called **positive peace**. Positive peace is not just about ending violent conflict but about ensuring the safety and well-being of the population.

We have discussed how religion is related to conflict and violence, but religion also has a role to play in peace and peacebuilding in the aftermath of violent conflict. There are many ways that religious leaders and religious institutions can contribute to peace, including acting as mediators, providing meeting places, and calling on their extensive communication networks. As we saw in Chapter 6, priests often have secular powers and play a strong role in society and can promote civic engagement, a sense of shared responsibility and participation in peacebuilding activities. Religious leaders can also call on

the mythology and worldview of their traditions to form strong ethical and moral arguments.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is an example that shows the role of religion in the peacebuilding process in post-apartheid South Africa.[10] The system of apartheid was based on often brutal mistreatment of the majority black population by the minority white Afrikaans population. Christianity played a role in supporting apartheid as the Dutch Reformed Church suggested that Afrikaners were God's chosen people and that blacks were a subservient species. In their worldview, apartheid and the church were linked. We can see here how more religious ideas become entangled with more secular ones such as racism.

However, religion was also an important part of efforts at peacebuilding following the transition to democracy in South Africa in the early 1990s. Christianity played a large role in the TRC, which actually led to some criticism as it was unclear whether the TRC was state-sponsored or church-sponsored. The TRC framed the process as one of religious redemption and suggested that Christianity was needed to achieve reconciliation. This case shows how difficult it can be to separate out the sacred and the secular, the church and the state. Although post-apartheid South Africa was a secular state, the people of South Africa, black and white, considered it to be a Christian country.

The TRC operated from 1995 to 2002 with the mandate of investigating human rights violations that occurred during apartheid by both the state and the liberation movement. The main focus was on providing a safe place for victims to tell their stories and for perpetrators to confess, atone, and apply for amnesty. The commissioners came from three backgrounds—legal, health and mental health, and religious—and was chaired by Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Many TRC events took place in churches and Christian rituals were also held at the TRC. Hymns were often sung during testimony and biblical passages read aloud. While the TRC helped with some healing and recovery, much of the social and economic injustices were not addressed and South Africa remains a very unequal country.

Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this book, religion is connected to and interacts with all other areas of a culture. Religion is an important aspect of identity and a major shaper of worldviews. As such it is inevitable that religion will be involved in conflicts of many different types. To truly understand these conflicts and search for solutions we need to understand the context in which they are occurring, which will include many of the topics we have discussed throughout this book. People's worldview and cultural beliefs about the supernatural may be a causal factor in conflict or may be used to express other conflicts. As such, efforts at peacebuilding need to address these factors and can harness the functional aspects of religion to help resolve conflicts.

Summary

In addition to direct, physical violence, John Galtung proposes that there is also indirect violence both structural, based on social structures and social institutions, and cultural, where culture is used to justify the structural violence. The substantive view argues that conflict is inherent to religion because religion is absolutist, divisive and irrationalist. The functionalist view states that religious conflicts are really about something else.

Fundamentalism is a religious movement characterized by a return to fundamental principles, usually including a resistance to modernization and an emphasis on certainty through a literal interpretation of scriptures. Themes of fundamentalist groups include the quest for purity, the search for authenticity, totalism and activism, the necessity for certainty (scripturalism), selective modernization, and the centering of the mythic past in the present.

Disillusionment with secular geopolitics and a need to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty were major contributors to the prominence of religion in conflicts in recent decades. Examples of the role of religion in conflicts include the Iranian Revolution, the Arab Spring, and the Hobby Lobby case.

Terrorist acts are those committed by a smaller, weaker entity against non-

combatants with the intent to arouse fear and put pressure on the more dominant organization. Terrorist acts are often symbolic in nature. Individuals may join terrorist groups for the sense of stability, family, and belonging that it gives them.

Religious institutions and leaders also play a role in peacebuilding, such as in the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Religious leaders may act as mediators, provide meeting places, and call on extensive communication networks and their secular influence. They can also call on the mythology and worldview of their traditions to form strong ethical and moral arguments.

Study questions

1. What do you think is the relationship between religion and conflict? Why?
2. Think of a situation of conflict in your own society. Can you identify any indirect violence associated with this conflict?
3. Give an example of a myth, symbol, or ritual that emphasizes or encourages conflict and violence and one that emphasizes or encourages stability and peace.
4. Imagine there was no separation of church and state in the United States and that a fundamentalist religious group has taken control. How do you think that society would change?
5. What is your opinion on the core questions raised by the Hobby Lobby case? To what extent does the government have the right to infringe on freedom of religion when it concerns the health and well-being of other groups within the state? Is the right to freedom of religion applicable only to individuals or also to businesses?
6. In your opinion, what would positive peace in a society look like? What criteria would need to be met?

Suggested readings

Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *The Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).
[An ethnography of modern fundamentalists.]

Richard T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic and Jewish Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001).
[Looks at the common characteristics of fundamentalist movements.]

Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).
[A discussion of fundamentalism, focusing on Protestant fundamentalism in the United States, Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, and Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt and Iran.]

Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[A look at Christian fundamentalism as seen through the life of Jerry Falwell.]

Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
[A comparative look at religious violence and terrorism.]

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
[The author focuses on the lives of women and children living in poverty, an example of structural violence.]

Suggested websites

www.usip.org
United States Institute of Peace.

www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/p33176

The Sunni Shia Divide (Council on Foreign Relations).

https://csrc.asu.edu/
ASU Center for Study of Religion and Conflict.

https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/religion-and-conflict-case-studies
Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University (Religion and Conflict Case Studies).

Notes

1 A. Heywood, *Key Concepts in Politics and International Relations* (2nd edn) (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2015).

2 J. Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research*, 6 (1969), pp. 167–191.

3 R. T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic and Jewish Movements* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), p. 2.

4 Ibid., p. 13, italics in original.

5 Pew Research Center, 2011, *Muslim American Survey 083.*

6 M. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 5.

7 M. Juergensmeyer, op. cit.

8 L. A. Kuznar, "Rationality Wars and the War on Terror: Explaining Terrorism and Social Unrest," *American Anthropologist,* 109 (2007), pp. 318–329.

9 J. Galtung, op. cit.

10 M. Shore, *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

Glossary

acculturation The process whereby a culture receives traits from a dominant society.

achieved status A status that one has because of a factor other than automatic membership due to gender, age, kinship affiliation, and so forth.

acrostic A word that is derived from the first letter of a series of words.

aerophone A musical instrument in which air is blown across or into some type of passageway, such as a pipe; includes whistles and flutes.

age grade A series of consecutive statuses defined by age.

age set A social group that contains members of one sex within a specific age span.

agnosticism The idea that the existence of a god is unknowable, that it is as impossible to prove the nonexistence of the supernatural as it is to prove its existence.

aleuromancy Divination by use of flour, as in fortune cookies.

altered states of consciousness Any mental state that differs from a normal mental state.

analytic definition A definition that focuses on the way religion manifests itself or is expressed in a culture.

ancestor A deceased family member who has a continued existence and the potential to impact the lives of his or her living descendants.

angels In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, spirit beings who act as mediators between God and human beings.

animatism The belief in an impersonal supernatural power.

animism A belief in spirit beings.

anthropology The study of humanity.

anthropomorphic Nonhuman entities that have human characteristics.

anti-therapy ritual A ritual that is performed to bring about illness, accident, or death.

apantomancy Divination by a chance meeting with an animal.

apocalypse Ultimate devastation or the end of the world.

apotropaic practices Cultural practices designed to shield the community from evil influences.

arbitrary A feature of symbols, in which the symbol is not related to the thing it symbolizes.

archaeology The study of prehistoric people from the analysis of their physical and cultural remains.

archetype A main character of the collective unconscious.

ascribed status A status that one automatically has because of gender, age, kinship affiliation, and so forth.

assimilation A condition whereby a dominated culture has changed so much because of outside influences that it ceases to have its own distinct identity.

astrology The belief that all of the stars and planets, as well as the sun and moon, influence the destiny of people and that reading the sky can be used as a divination technique.

athame The ritual knife used in Wiccan rituals.

atheism Disbelief in or denial of the existence of God or gods.

atonement For Christians, the idea that the death of Jesus Christ represented a sacrifice that reconciled humans and God.

attribute god A god that rules over a defined domain.

avatar The incarnation or embodiment of a god in human form.

Axis Mundi A central axis that is seen as linking the three different levels of the world, the central world containing humans, and the supernatural layers above and below it.

calendrical ritual A ritual that is performed on a regular basis as part of a religious calendar.

cargo cult Religious movement occurring among small-scale societies of Melanesia in response to culture contact; the movement focuses on the attainment of trade goods.

channeling When a person becomes a source of communication for a supernatural agent.

choice fatigue A situation in which individuals in a culture are faced with too many options, such as when a single dominant church is replaced by numerous denominations and sects.

chromolithograph A type of colored printed poster.

cicatrization Scar formation at the site of a cut or wound.

circumcision A surgical procedure during which the foreskin is removed from the penis.

clitoridectomy A surgical procedure characterized by removal of the clitoris as well as parts or all of the labia minora.

cognition The processes of the human brain, including perception, attention, learning, memory, concept formation, and problem solving.

collective conscious A set of beliefs shared by members of a social group that functions to limit the natural selfishness of individuals and promote social cooperation.

collective unconscious Inborn elements of the unconscious that are manifested in dreams and myths.

communitas A state characterized by a sense of equality, community, and camaraderie.

contagious magic Magic that is based on the Law of Contagion, utilizing things that once were in physical contact with an individual.

cordophone A musical instrument with taut strings that can be plucked or strummed, hit, or sawed, such as a harp or violin.

core shamanism Michael Harner's concept of the core and nearly universal methods of shamanism without a specific cultural context.

covenant A formal, binding agreement.

creator god A god that is responsible for the creation of the physical earth and the plants and animals that live upon it.

crisis ritual A ritual that arises spontaneously, frequently in times of crisis.

cross An upright pole with a transverse piece in the middle or near the top. Used for execution by the Romans; now a symbol for the Christian religion.

cult Historical meaning is a particular form or system of religious worship. Most commonly used to describe a small, recently created, and spiritually innovative group, often with a single charismatic leader. Connotations of the term include that the leader is evil, is in total control of his followers, and believes that the end of the world is imminent.

cultural anthropology The anthropological study of contemporary human societies and their cultures.

cultural relativism Attempting to analyze and understanding cultures other

than one's own without judging them in terms of one's own culture.

cultural violence Aspects of culture that are used to justify structural or direct violence and make it seem natural.

culture Human beliefs and behaviors of a society that are learned, transmitted from one generation to the next, and shared by a group of people.

culture area A geographical area in which societies share many cultural traits.

cursing ritual An anti-therapy ritual that involves reciting a curse to bring about illness and death.

deliberate divination Divination that someone sets out to do.

demon A spirit being, usually evil.

denomination A religious group that differs on just a few points from the mainstream religion.

diaspora Movement of a population out of their homeland.

diffusion The apparent movement of cultural traits from one society to another.

direct violence The use of physical force or the threat to do so.

discovery New awareness of something that exists in the environment.

displacement The ability to use symbols to refer to things and activities that are remote from the user.

divination Supernatural techniques for obtaining information about things unknown, including events that will occur in the future.

divination ritual A ritual that is used for the purpose of divination.

diviner A religious specialist who specializes in divination.

doctrine of signatures Belief that physical structures found in nature, such as the shape of a plant, are indicative (or signatures) of their potential use in healing.

dowsing Method of divination whereby water and other underground resources are located by use of a forked stick.

emic perspective The study of a society through the eyes of the people being studied.

endocannibalistic anthropophagers The term *endocannibalism* refers to the eating of one's own people, and the term *anthropophagers* refers to the eating of human bodies.

entoptic phenomena Visual effects that have their origin in physical

changes within the eye.

essentialist definition A definition that looks at the essential nature of religion.

ethnobotany The anthropological study of the use of plant material, especially in healing.

ethnocentrism Using one's own culture as the basis for interpreting and judging other cultures.

ethnographer A person who produces an ethnography.

ethnographic present Speaking or writing about cultures in the present tense although what is described might no longer exist.

ethnography The descriptive study of human societies.

etic perspective The study of a society using concepts that were developed outside of the culture.

Eucharist A Christian sacrament that commemorates Jesus Christ's last supper by consecrating bread and wine.

evolutionary approach An approach that focuses on the questions of when and how religion began and how it developed through time.

fasting The act of abstaining from eating and drinking over a period of time.

folktale A story that is part of the tradition of a society; not considered to be true.

foraging bands Small communities that subsist by hunting, fishing, and gathering wild plant foods.

fortuitous divination Divination that simply occurs without any conscious effort.

functional approach An approach that is based on the function or role that religion plays in a society.

functional definition A definition that is based on the role that religion plays in a society.

fundamentalism A religious movement characterized by a return to fundamental principles, usually including a resistance to modernization and an emphasis on certainty through a literal interpretation of scriptures.

ghost The soul of an individual after death that remains in the vicinity of the community.

glossolalia Unintelligible speech that mimics normal speech; known as "speaking in tongues." In religious practice, it is generally believed to be the voice of the supernatural speaking through the person.

god An individual supernatural being, with a distinctive name, personality, and control or influence over a major aspect of nature (such as rain or fertility), that encompasses the life of an entire community or a major segment of the community.

graphology Divination through handwriting analysis.

haruspication Divination by the examination of entrails of sacrificed animals.

healer A religious specialist who concentrates on healing.

hedonism Pursuit of or devotion to pleasure as a matter of principle.

herbalist A specialist in the use of plant and other material in curing.

heresy Crimes against God.

hero myth A common theme found in myths worldwide centered around the hero's journey or monomyth.

high demand religion A religious group in which much is demanded of members in terms of strict adherence to rules for thought and behavior.

holism The study of human societies as systematic sums of their parts, as integrated wholes.

homeopathic magic Magic that is based on the Law of Similarity.

horticulture The use of cultivated domesticated plants without the use of fertilizers, plows, irrigation, and other agricultural technologies.

human universals Characteristics that are found in all human societies.

hunting and gathering rites of intensification A ritual whose purpose is to influence nature in the quest for food.

ideological ritual A ritual that delineates codes of proper behavior, promotes community solidarity, articulates the community's worldview, and assists the community in managing crises.

idiophone A musical instrument that is struck, shaken, or rubbed, such as a rattle or bell.

image magic A form of homeopathic magic in which an image represents a living person or animal, which can be killed or injured through doing things to the image.

imitative magic Magic that is based on the Law of Similarity.

incorporation The final stage of a rite of passage in which the individual is reintroduced to the community in his or her new status.

increase rite A type of ritual whose purpose is to aid the survival and reproduction of a totemic plant or animal.

incubi Male demons who have sex with human women while they sleep, resulting in the birth of demons, witches, and deformed children.

indirect violence Not based on the actions of a single actor. Includes both cultural and structural violence.

infibulation Form of female genital cutting including excision of the clitoris, labia minora, and most of the labia majora.

Inquisition A unit of the Roman Catholic Church that convened to judge cases of heresy.

inspirational divination A type of divination that involves a spiritual experience, such as a direct contact with a supernatural being through an altered state of consciousness

interpretive approach Idea that cultural systems are understood by studying meaning; religion is a cluster of symbols that provides a charter for a culture's ideas, values, and way of life.

invention Coming up with a solution to a problem using the technology at hand.

jinn In the Islamic religion, a spirit being created of fire.

karma The effect of a person's behavior during the series of phases of the person's existence. Karma is seen as determining the person's destiny.

kiva A ceremonial chamber, often built underground, that is found among Native American societies in the American Southwest.

Law of Contagion Things that were once in contact continue to be in contact after the physical connection is severed.

Law of Similarity Things that are alike are the same.

Law of Sympathy Magic that depends on the apparent association or agreement between things.

legend A traditional story about past events that is considered to be true; usually contains an element of reality—a known character, event, or place.

liminality The state of ambiguous marginality that characterizes the transition phase of a rite of passage.

linguistic anthropology The anthropological study of language.

magic Ways in which a person can compel the supernatural to behave in certain ways.

mana An impersonal supernatural force.

Marxist approach Idea that religion is a construction of those in power, designed to divert people's attention from the miseries of their lives; a way

of getting people to go along with capitalist culture.

medium A practitioner who intentionally communicates with the supernatural to find information.

membranophone A musical instrument that incorporates a taut membrane or skin such as a drum.

menarche A young woman's first menstruation.

messianic movement A type of revitalization movement that is based on the appearance of a divine savior in human form who will bring about the solution to the problems that exist within the society.

millenarian movements A type of revitalization movement that envisions a change through an apocalyptic transformation.

modernity A philosophical movement based on ideas of rationality, objectivity, reason, and science as the means of gaining knowledge, truth, and progress.

monomyth A theme common to many myths that tells of the adventures of a culture hero.

monotheism A belief in one god.

mummification A technique of preserving a dead body involving drying and preservatives.

mystery religion A religion whose beliefs, practices, and true nature are known only to those who have been initiated into the religion.

myth A sacred story that provides the basis for religious beliefs and practices.

nationalism A sense of identification with and loyalty to one nation above all others.

nativistic movement A type of revitalization movement that develops in traditional societies that are threatened by the activities of more technologically advanced societies.

necromancy Divination through contact with ancestors or the dead.

negative peace The absence of war.

Neo-Paganism A revival of pre-Christian religious practices.

neoshamanism A modern spiritual practice that draws on some concepts and practices of traditional shamanism, but is usually used as a method for improving an individual's life.

new religious movement A historically recent religious movement, often involving new leaders and new scriptures or new interpretations of older

religious traditions.

noninspirational divination Forms of divination that are performed without the direct involvement of supernatural beings.

occasional ritual A ritual that is performed when a particular need arises.

occult Having to do with the paranormal or supernatural.

offerings Economic exchanges designed to influence the supernatural.

omen A fortuitous happening or condition that provides information.

omniscient State of being all-knowing.

oneiromancy Divination by the interpretation of dreams.

openness A feature of symbols; the ability to create new symbols.

operant definition A definition in which we define our terms so that they are observable and measurable and therefore can be studied.

oracle A specific device that is used for divination.

ordeal A trial by divination that is performed on the body of the accused person to determine guilt or innocence.

orientation association structure The part of the brain that enables us to distinguish ourselves from the world around us and to orient ourselves in space.

ornithomancy Divination from reading the path and form of a flight of birds.

otiose god A god who is too remote and too uninterested in human activities to participate in the activities and fate of humans.

palmistry Divination through the reading of the lines of the palm of the hand.

pan-Indian Refers to activities that draw from many different Native American traditions.

pantheon All gods and goddesses in a polytheistic system.

participant observation A research method whereby the anthropologist lives in a community and participates in the lives of the people under study while at the same time making objective observations.

pastoral nomads Societies that subsist primarily by herding domesticated animals.

pentacle A five-pointed star.

pentagram A five-sided figure.

periodic ritual A ritual that is performed on a regular basis as part of a religious calendar.

peyotism The ritual use of peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus.

Pharaonic infibulation A surgical procedure performed on women that involves the complete removal of the clitoris and the labia minora and majora, the two sides of the wound then being stitched together, leaving a small opening.

phrenology Divination through the study of the shape and structure of the head.

physical anthropology The study of human biology and evolution.

pidgin language A simplified language that forms from the fusion of two languages.

pilgrimage A journey to a sacred place or a sequence of sacred spaces at which rituals are performed.

polytheism A belief in many gods.

positive peace Structural violence is not present.

possession An altered state of consciousness that is interpreted as a deity taking control of a person's body.

postmodernism An emphasis on subjectivity over objectivity and a tendency toward reflexivity, or self-consciousness; all knowledge is seen as being a human construction that scholars must seek to deconstruct.

prescriptive ritual A ritual that a deity or religious authority requires to be performed.

presentiment A feeling in a person that something is about to occur.

priest A full-time religious specialist who is associated with formalized religious institutions.

prophecy Divination through the communication of a prophet.

prophet Someone who communicates the words and will of the gods to his or her community, acting as an intermediary between the people and the gods.

protective ritual A ritual that is performed at the start of, or during, a dangerous activity to protect the participants or to protect the community against disaster.

psychoduct A pipe or tube that connects a tomb to a temple through which the spirit of the deceased may travel into the temple.

psychosocial approach An approach to the study of religion that is concerned with the relationship between culture and psychology and between society and the individual.

Purgatory A place for souls who die with lesser faults for which there has been no repentance or for which the penalty is not wholly paid during their lifetime.

rank The relative placement of a status in the society.

reincarnation A belief in an immortal, eternal soul that is born again and again in different bodies.

relic An object of religious veneration, especially a piece of the body or a personal item of a religiously important person, such as an ancestor or saint.

religion The realm of culture that concerns the sacred supernatural.

religious ritual A ritual that involves the manipulation of religious symbols.

resurrection Dead people being brought back to life.

revitalization movement A movement that forms in an attempt to deliberately bring about change in a society.

revitalization ritual A ritual that is associated with a revitalization movement.

revivalistic movement A type of revitalization movement that attempts to revive what is often perceived as a past golden age.

rites of passage A ritual that occurs when an individual changes status, serving to legitimize the new status and to imprint it on the community's collective memory.

ritual A patterned, recurring sequence of behaviors.

sacred An attitude wherein the subject or object is set apart from the normal, everyday world and is entitled to reverence and respect.

sacrifice A gift designed to influence the supernatural in which an animal is killed.

scapulamancy A divination technique in which a dried scapula, or shoulder blade, is placed in a fire and the pattern of cracks and burns are interpreted.

scripturalism The practice of justifying beliefs and actions by reference to the religious text.

secondary burial Some time after the initial burial the bones are removed and reburied.

sect A new branch of a mainstream religion, usually involving new revelations, new scriptures, and a new leader.

separation The first phase of a rite of passage in which an individual is

removed from his or her former status.

shaman A part-time religious specialist who receives his or her power directly from the spirit world and acquires status and the ability to do things through personal communication with the supernatural.

shrine An object or building that contains sacred objects or is associated with a venerated person or deity.

situational ritual A ritual that arises as needed, frequently in times of crisis.

small-scale Describes relatively small communities that practice foraging, herding, or technologically simple horticulture.

social charter A story that establishes the proper organization and rules of behavior of a society.

social rite of intensification A type of ideological ritual that functions to reinforce the belief system and the values of the society.

sorcerer A magician who specializes in antisocial, evil magic.

sorcery Compelling the supernatural to behave in certain ways, usually with evil intent.

soul The noncorporeal, spiritual component of an individual.

spell The words that are spoken in a magic ritual.

spirit A supernatural being that is less powerful than a god and is usually more localized; often one of a collection of nonindividualized supernatural beings that are not given specific names and identities.

spirit possession An altered state of consciousness that is interpreted as a spirit taking over control of a human body and is either deliberately induced by a ritual performance or the consequence of an illness caused by a spirit taking control.

status A social position that is defined in terms of appropriate behavior, rights and obligations, and its relationship to other statuses.

stigmata Bodily wounds or pain considered by Christians to be visible signs of participation in the sufferings of Christ.

stimulus diffusion What occurs when an idea moves from one culture to another and stimulates the invention of a new trait.

structural violence A form of violence where people's basic needs are not being adequately met due to some social structure or social institution.

subincision Form of genital cutting where the underside of the penis is cut and the urethra slit open.

succubae Female demons who have sex with human men while they sleep,

resulting in damnation of the men's souls.

supernatural Entities and actions that transcend the natural world of cause and effect.

superstitions Simple behaviors based on magical thinking that are thought to bring about simple results.

supreme god A god who resides at the top of a pantheon.

swastika A symbol formed by two lines crossing at right angles with their ends bent at right angles in a clockwise or counterclockwise position.

symbol A shared understanding about the meaning of certain words, attributes, or objects; something that stands for something else.

sympathetic system The arousal system of the brain.

syncretism A fusing of traits from two cultures to form something new and yet permitting the retention of the old by subsuming the old into a new form.

tabu Objects and persons that are supernaturally prohibited. May also refer to certain behaviors that would bring about negative consequences through supernatural means.

tasseography Divination through the reading of tea leaves.

technological ritual A ritual that attempts to influence or control nature, especially in those situations that affect human activities and well-being.

tensegrity A technique of body movements that aims to increase awareness of the body's energy fields; developed by Carlos Castaneda.

terrorism Public acts of destruction committed by those in a weaker position against non-military targets with the intent of causing fear.

theory of mind The idea that people know, or think they know, what is going on in other people's minds.

therapy ritual A ritual whose function is to cure.

therianthropes Creatures that are part human and part animal.

tithing The giving or taking of a tithe, a tenth of one's income or agricultural produce, usually in support of a religious institution.

totalism The belief that religion is relevant to, and should be a part of, all parts of a society.

totem A symbol or emblem that stands for a social unit.

totemism A religious system that assigns different plant and animal species to specific social groups and postulates a relationship between the group and the species formed during the period of creation.

traditioning The idea that religious texts are relevant to life today.

transition The second phase of a rite of passage during which a person is in a liminal state and is moved from one status to another.

transmigration A situation in which a soul passes from one body to another —human, animal, or even an inanimate object.

trickster A god who gave humans important things or skills, often by accident or through trickery.

unitary state An altered state of consciousness in which an individual experiences a feeling of becoming one with the supernatural.

urban legend Contemporary story about people and events that never occurred, but are presented as real.

vampire A person who has died before his or her time and who brings about the death of friends and relatives until his or her corpse is "killed."

witchcraft The ability of a person to cause harm by means of a personal power that resides within the body of the witch.

worldview The way in which a society perceives and interprets its reality.

zombie A corpse that has been raised from the grave and animated.

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