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Death in Hinduism is sometimes a means of liberation, and a believer does not even have to wait for its natural occurrence. A widow may jump onto her husband's burning funeral pyre, or a devout Hindu can become a *sanyasi*, who renounces the world and lives a life of isolation and self-denial. The *sanyasi* "dies" to his own life; funeral rites are celebrated and the person's inheritance is passed on as if he were dead. The Hindu theodicy is most fully developed in the legends of the God Shiva, who is simultaneously destructive and life giving, representing death but also the re-creation of life, as in the cycles of death and rebirth in nature. This close connection with the natural world reveals the primal origins of Hindu beliefs. Although many Indians live highly urbanized lifestyles, the country is still based on its villages, and popular religion is intimately tied to the struggle to survive in a relatively hostile natural environment in which resources are scarce and months of drought are followed by violent monsoons in which millions are sometimes left homeless or killed.

The Hindu concepts of *dharma* and **transmigration** explain the deprivations of individual existence in a highly rational manner, at the same time giving hope for a better lifetime in the future. They provide a source of comfort at times of death as well, because the end of this life is merely a passage into the next one. One's fate in each successive lifetime is self-determined, within the boundaries of the law of karma, so that one can earn a better life in the next incarnation and hope for ultimate release from the struggle. Although this theodicy solves many problems on both the psychological and social level, it has also been exploited to maintain a strict social hierarchy that has come under attack in contemporary Hinduism.

Hindu Rituals

Yoga and Three Paths to Enlightenment

Yoga (literally, to yoke or unite) is the Hindu ritual for uniting the soul with God through meditation and certain ethical practices. Hindu rituals are extremely well developed, spelled out in rich complexity and elaborate detail in ancient ritual manuals. At the most abstract level, Hindu rituals solve the threat of chaos. Discord is held at bay by the

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Gods, who in turn require gifts (especially signs of deference and food) to do their work. Thus, it is the obligation of each Hindu to carry out the rituals of the faith as an individual contribution to maintaining the cosmic order.

Because of the syncretic and flexible nature of Hinduism, a number of paths to enlightenment are possible, all leading to the same summit. All of them involve disciplined self-transcendence to overcome excessive attachments to this world. Hinduism identifies three main paths, with a different yogic discipline facilitating progress along each route:

1. The Path of Wisdom or Knowledge, **Jnana Yoga** (for reflective persons)
2. The Path of Action, **Karma Yoga** (for active persons)
3. The Path of Devotion, **Bhakti Yoga** (the most popular path)

Jnana Yoga, the quickest but therefore steepest and most difficult path, is rarely chosen. It requires not only cognitive but also intuitive knowledge gained from a disciplined reading of the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and other works along with the guidance of a guru who helps the inquirer to reflect upon the readings and engage in deep meditation on the Absolute.

Karma Yoga, also relatively rare, focuses on selfless acts or service, so that action—even in one's work—becomes a form of worshiping God. The key to liberation through Karma Yoga is doing a task for its own sake rather than for any reward. Consequently, the process contains a paradoxical element: If practiced only for one's own liberation, it will not work, because it will not be selfless action at all.

Finally, Bhakti Yoga, the broadest and most popular path, consists of acts of devotional worship and involves daily poojas—that is, expressions of respect toward a representation of God in one's home, a temple, or one of the small shrines that dot the Indian landscape. The aim of these rituals of personal worship in Bhakti Yoga is to become consumed with love for God and therefore to be intoxicated by a divine vision.

Choosing the path most suitable to personal inclinations and abilities, the believer strives to transcend selfish desires and the routine of profane life through disciplined practice of the appropriate rituals. Such practices may be as elaborate as a sustained pilgrimage to a holy place or as simple as chanting the Lord's name in the privacy of one's home. For every devout Hindu, power accumulates in the performance of rituals so that the use of ritual packages sustains him or her in daily life and at times of crisis.

Rites of Passage

The rich ritualism of Hinduism extends beyond both cradle and grave, beginning with the fervent prayer for a child called Garbhadana (conception) and continuing to Punsavana (fetus protection) during the third or fourth month of pregnancy; Simantonny satisfies the craving of the pregnant mother in the seventh month, and Jatakarma welcomes the baby into the family at birth. Mantras are recited for a healthy long life; Namakarna is a naming ceremony, and Nishkarma is performed to take the child outdoors for the first time.

In the initiation ceremony that occurs when the child enters the Brahmachari, or student, stage of life, a sacred thread is put around the neck of the child, who is taught a mantra for worship and begins school or training with a guru, or religious teacher. Usually only male children receive the thread, which is to be worn for life, but ancient temple sculptures showing women wearing the thread suggest that the practice may formerly have been universal. Some reformers advocate introducing the ceremony for both boys and girls of all classes and sects (Jagannathan, 1984, p. 63).

The ritual climax of the Hindu life cycle is the marriage ceremony, in which the couple is treated as Gods in the sacred interval when the bride, the groom, and (just as importantly) their two families are united. A priest chants appropriate scriptural passages for several hours while the wedding party engages in an elaborate procession through the streets and then feasts. In this way, the union is sacralized and made a part of the universal order; the bride and groom enter another stage of their life cycle and thus obtain a new dharma, which they must identify and fulfill.

The final ritual ceremony of a Hindu's life is the *antyeshti samskara*, in which the body is cremated on a pyre lit by the deceased's eldest son, if possible; the body is burned since it is no longer needed, and the soul is released. The ashes are often scattered on a river, especially the Ganges. The funeral is followed by a period of restrictions placed on the relatives, and then offerings are made to the departed soul. Traditionally, a wife sometimes joined her husband in passing from one lifetime to the next by throwing herself on the funeral pyre, a practice called *setee*, which still occurs but is widely denounced.

Thus a sacred canopy is drawn over the individual's and the community's life. The 1,028 hymns of the *Rig Veda* are recited at initiations, weddings, and funerals, not only because their very sound is holy but also because they guide everyone through each lifetime, past death, and into the next life.

Decentralized Structures in Hinduism and Buddhism

Hindu institutions and their priests do not have the same authority as priests in the traditional Roman Catholic Church, for example. In traditional Catholicism (especially before the Second Vatican Council substantially democratized the church in the 1960s), the bishop appointed priests, and people were expected to defer to them no matter how competent they were. This was an “authority of the office” rather than of the person. The Hindu system rather resembles American Protestant churches, in which the authority of a religious leader or institution is based primarily on charismatic qualities such as the ability to perform and deliver in a way that satisfies people in a congregation. The authority of the ancient texts persists in popular Indian culture, as does, therefore, the importance of their interpreters, the *pandits*. Hindus believe that answers to any question can be found in these writings, and the *pandits* can interpret their advice on everything from the origins and purpose of the cosmos to the meaning of an individual’s own life, from ethical dilemmas to important decisions such as choice of occupation or marriage partner.

Eastern religious traditions have never had strong, centralized institutions as in the West, and there is no central authority like a pope or patriarch. This both reflects and shapes the nature of the beliefs and practices of the faith, which are thus more decentralized and flexible. Moreover, Hindu worship takes place in households as well as in temples, so that a wide range of authority structures sponsor religious practices and the family remains a religious institution as well (as in the “primal religions”) despite specialized institutions and a priesthood. Since people can choose their Gods and gurus, the religious pluralism of India cultivates a diffusion of authority. This might give us a clue about the nature of religion in the global village, in which a large variety of religious institutions exist side by side and people have considerable latitude in choosing from the sacred marketplace (see Warner, 1993; cf. Iannaccone, 1990; Lee, 1992; Robertson, 1992b).

Two broad branches of Hinduism center around two of the most important Gods, the Vishnaivites (or Vaisnavas), who worship Vishnu, and the Shaivites (Saivas), or followers of Shiva, and each branch has its own temples, although people can choose freely to go to more than one. A third significant group, the Saktas, is usually treated as a subdivision of the Shaivites. Temple priests, called *pujaris*, serve the deity in each temple, treating the God’s representation as an honored guest. Being responsible for the God’s maintenance, the priest has considerable authority that is linked to the God’s reputation. Hinduism is, of course, replete with famous teachers who

claim to have become enlightened, gather a body of disciples, and become known as gurus. Their authority is essentially of the charismatic variety, confirmed by the testimony of their followers but sometimes routinized into a more formal movement.

Some of the most sacred sites in Hinduism, such as the locations of encounters with God, or *dharshans*, are given special authority because of the traditions and stories of miracles, serving as places of pilgrimage for believers. Consequently, those in charge of the famous temples built at those spots have a particular authority. Of particular importance are the five Shankaracharyas—that is, *acharyas* (teachers) who succeeded the famous eighth-century Shankara (who systematized Hinduism)—who traveled by foot throughout India and established a monastic order with *matams* or *ashrams* (dwelling places for the monks) in each part of the country. A Shankaracharya governs the matams of the order in each of five locations around the country and often manages the major temples in his respective region. These leaders are not appointed or self-appointed but are “found” through a series of signs and clues given by the Gods and have great charismatic authority among the faithful. When I went to interview the Shankaracharya of Kanchipuram in South India, there was a huge line of pilgrims waiting to see him. I was told that he would meet each one briefly and give them a *dharshan* and a blessing. Fortunately for me, I was escorted by his brother, who took me in a back door; I felt a bit guilty that the long line was kept waiting while we talked.

The Internet now plays a role in transmitting centuries-old instructions about rituals. The Hindu Temple of Atlanta, for example, has a website that provides not only a virtual tour of the temple and a way to sign up for e-mail notices about events but also information about various Gods and Goddesses, complete with prayers and chants that can be downloaded (<http://www.hindutempleofatlanta.org/>). The website even contains detailed instructions to help members of the community with their prayers and rituals—for example, by telling them what supplies to bring to a funeral ceremony.

The Hindu solution to questions of ordering the collective life of a highly diverse population is reflected in this religion’s theology and its organization, which in turn help shape the nature of Hindu society. Respect for authority in general is highly regarded and internalized; Hindus are expected to be submissive to legitimated authorities. Any claim to authority must be proven, though, and a variety of options are available, some specific to particular social functions, allowing believers to choose Gods and teachers they find most appropriate for their needs. The fact that charismatic authority is highly regarded prevents the excessive rigidity of institutional forms. Moreover, the criteria for authority are

somewhat functional—that is, any prospective God or guru must bring benefits to his or her followers or suffer from neglect.

Jain and Buddhist Protest Movements

Virtually every dominant religious system eventually faces opposition that either reforms a tradition internally or even breaks off as a **new religious movement** (NRM). Hinduism is no exception—by the sixth century BCE, Hinduism was well entrenched in South Asian society and had serious critics. The most striking movements to react against it were Buddhism and Jainism, both of which not only became religious traditions in their own right, but also changed Hinduism forever. Both Buddhists and Jains, who appeared in the Ganges basin region of Eastern India, rebelled against the caste system and rigid ritualism of Hinduism and the alleged abuses of the Brahmanic authorities. (These issues were taken up again in 20th-century movements as well.)

The best-known story is that of Prince Siddhartha, born in the sixth century BCE to the wealthy King Suddhodana and Queen Maya. Dissatisfied first with his privilege and then with ascetic renunciation, he became the Buddha and founded one of the most significant religious movements on the planet, and it persists and flourishes today. I will discuss it in a moment as a separate tradition.

The other revolt against the Hindu establishment was the tradition of the Tirthankaras, the Jainist teachers culminating in Lord Mahavir, with their hallmark teachings of *ahimsa*, or nonviolence toward all living creatures. Born around the same time as Prince Siddhartha, Mahavir offers a parallel story. Unhappy with his status as a prince, Mahavir became an ascetic in the solitude of the forest for 12 years, from the age of 30 to 42. According to the Jain tradition, he reached perfection, or enlightenment, through concentrated meditation and intense purification of the self through spiritual practice and discipline. He combined the scientific knowledge of his time, and its emphasis on reason, with a quest for spiritual knowledge, and recruited 11 disciples (*ganadharas*) from among the Brahmans. Through years of fasting and sleep deprivation, he developed an intense meditative life that allowed him to become oblivious to physical pain and discomfort and sever his attachment to physical appearance and material goods.

A forerunner of egalitarianism and contemporary nonviolence, Mahavir reportedly spoke to people in their own language and addressed all castes, creeds, and genders without discrimination. He urged people to find happiness within the self through disciplined spiritual advances toward the ultimate goal of freedom from the cycles of rebirths, in order to fully realize the self and achieve a permanent blissful state. He taught that continual rebirths

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A foretelling of his mission was given to him by a Brahmin sage, Mahavir reported that he had been born into all castes, and he found happiness in all of them. He taught that all people can find happiness through the pursuit of the ultimate truth and the realization of the ultimate reality. He taught that the ultimate reality is the realization of the ultimate truth, and that this realization leads to the end of the cycle of continual rebirths.

are a product of defiled conditions of the soul, characterized by desire that in turn leads to actions that draw karmic matter, leading to further defilement and embodiment. One is weighted down, as it were, into the cycle of rebirths; the way out is to quench the power of the mind's cravings by meditation and physical deprivation to empower the soul.

Jain philosophy, following Mahavir, emphasized Right Knowledge (regarding self-understanding and self-control), Right Faith, and Right Conduct, or the Five Vows:

1. Truthfulness
2. Nontaking or nongreed
3. Celibacy, renunciation of sensual pleasure
4. Nonattachment, nonpossessiveness
5. Ahimsa, nonharmfulness

In carrying out these vows, which are stricter for monks than for nuns, Jains try to live as nonviolent a lifestyle as possible. The lifestyle of monks and nuns is so filled with scripture study and meditation that there is little time for eating and sleeping. Great care is taken not to harm or kill any life forms. Violence in thought precedes violent behavior, so all forms of injury must be avoided—whether by body, mind, or speech. A strict vegetarianism prevents Jains from eating not only meat but also vegetables grown below the ground, as that disturbs the lifeworlds of various creatures. Members of religious orders will thus have only a few possessions—a robe, an alms bowl, a whisk broom, and a *mukhavastrika*, a piece of cloth worn over the mouth to protect against accidental ingestion of small insects. They do not eat after dark or drink water that is not boiled; to do so might involve harming insects.

Because the current age is so corrupt, it is not possible to seek enlightenment in this lifetime; rather, Jains hope to move through disciplined and meritorious nonviolence toward a rebirth that will bring them closer to the desired state. Although it is not possible for most of us to imagine such an austere lifestyle, the presence of the monks in our violence-ridden, environmentally destructive time is a reminder of the violence of our lifestyles. Whenever I drive my car at night and find the windshield splattered with insects, I am reminded of the Jain monks and the harm that the convenience of my car causes to the environment. Moreover, we have all been influenced by the Jains through Raychandrabhai Mehta, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi said Mehta had an important impact on his development of his

Avalokitesvara, known as Kuan-yin (Guanyin) or Kuan-shih-in in Chinese (see Overmyer, 2002), is not just an ancient or mythical figure. She plays a very real role in contemporary world politics, believed by some to be incarnated as the Tibetan Dalai Lama, now living in exile in India. The current Dalai Lama, 14th in the line of succession, has become a popular figure worldwide, especially after winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for championing the nonviolent struggle for Tibetan independence from China. Avalokitesvara's mantra, "*Om Mani Padme Hum*," is one of the most popular prayers in Buddhism.

Buddhist Rituals

Most Buddhist rituals involve efforts to obtain merit of some sort, either for oneself or for someone else, thereby transcending one's current state through the performance of the ritual. The foundation of Buddhist ritual consists of *dana* (giving), *sila* (precepts), and *kamma* (karma). Keeping the precepts includes conscious acts of service and paying respect to others. All of these ritual acts are rooted in the concept of karma, which is conceived in much the same way as it is in Hinduism: Because every act has a consequence, if one engages in meditations, chanting, and service and keeps the precepts, merit will accrue to oneself and to others.

A central Buddhist ritual is the chanting of refuge that a believer takes in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the dharma, and the Sangha. This chant is a prelude to the performance of Buddhist rituals throughout Asia, which incorporate many ancient rites and a variety of indigenous practices. The metaphor of crossing the river helps to explain the meaning of these sacred symbols: An explorer—the Buddha—makes the trip first, proving that it is possible. He comes back to show us the way. The dharma, or teachings of Buddhism, is the vehicle of transport, the boat or raft we will use in our journey; and the Sangha, the organization of followers, is the boat's crew, in whom we can have confidence because of their training and discipline. Chanting that one is taking refuge in the Three Jewels helps a believer to recenter and focus attention on the path to liberation from this world of suffering:

Veneration to the Blessed One, the Enlightened One, the Perfectly Enlightened One, is as follows:

To the Buddha, the [chosen] resort, I go.

To [the] Dhamma, the [chosen] resort, I go.

To [the] Sangha, the [chosen] resort, I go.

Chanting is very common throughout Buddhism—especially chanting the *paritta*, the protection discourses. Chants are most significant at times of crisis or change: death, illness, possession, danger, embarking upon a new activity, entering a new house, and so on (see Cousins, 1984, p. 310).

Formal worship varies widely in the Buddhist tradition, in part because the religion has been grafted onto local traditions and thus is often practiced according to ancient indigenous customs. Followers often worship relics by bringing offerings (food, water, clothing, incense, candles, etc.), bowing or prostrating, cleaning or adorning the relic, or chanting verses. Worship can also be carried out at home, although a temple or pagoda facilitates the worshipers' gain of merit, sometimes through ingenious methods. The Ten Thousand Buddhas Temple, located in Taichung, Taiwan, contains 10,000 images of the Buddha, all of which can be worshiped in a single visit, and hundreds of which can be venerated with one bow or prostration.

Sikhism

Deep within the self is the Light of God. It radiates throughout the expanse of His creation.

Through the Guru's teachings, the darkness of spiritual ignorance is dispelled.

The heart lotus flower blossoms forth and eternal peace is obtained, as one's light merges into the Supreme Light.

—Guru Amar Das

Another tradition that challenged the religious orthodoxies in South Asia was the Sikh tradition, founded in the Punjab in South Asia, during the 15th century CE, based on the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and 10 gurus who followed him. Although it has a relatively small population compared to the world's major faiths, Sikhism continues to grow, has diffused to every continent, and has an estimated 22.5 million adherents in Asia, as well as another 600,000 in North America. Its presence is often visible, especially in urban areas of South Asia and elsewhere, because of the distinctive turban and uncut hair worn by male adherents.

The Sikhs emphasized a monotheistic faith and the principles of justice and equality, cultivating a disciplined lifestyle and meditation. Guru Nanak's writings in the Punjabi language constituted the first sacred text, supplemented by the writings of his successor gurus and even those of Hindu and Muslim saints to form the *Adi Granth* by the 1680s (Mann, 2006, p. 46).

Indeed, the authority of the personal was transferred to the sacred book by Guru Gobind Singh in 1798, making it the Guru Granth Sahib. Community prayer at the center of Sikh worship began at the house of the Guru Nanak, the *gurdwara*, the name later used to designate the Sikh houses of worship.

The culture of personal discipline and the martial tradition of the Sikhs led to their becoming important partners of the British Raj, where they often served in the military and other positions of authority. The relationship with the broader society has not always been peaceful, however, especially with the emergence of a secessionist movement in the 1980s seeking an independent Sikh state. The Indian government attacked the center of the movement in Amritsar, resulting in a decade-long period of violence and mayhem.

One interesting outgrowth of the emphasis on justice and the community's tension with Hindu orthodoxy was the institution of the community kitchen, which was open to anyone regardless of class or caste. Sikhs would cook and eat together, thus breaking with the Hindu caste norms against eating together that pervaded much of Indian society. The shared meals have also become a kind of community service, where the poor are welcome to come and eat free meals alongside members of the congregation.

Religious Life in China and East Asia

As Buddhism diffused east into China, East Asia, and Southeast Asia over the centuries, it found more fertile ground there than in its homeland. It became intertwined with indigenous religions of China and elsewhere, especially with Confucianism and Taoism, where the three traditions mingle with other local indigenous ritual practices to create a rich tapestry of spiritual beliefs, practices, and institutions that have evolved.

It is helpful to look at these three living religions in the context of their long and impressive history dating back to ancient China, before the time of Confucius, Lao-tzu, and the Buddha, to the ancient I Ching, also called "The Book of Changes" and "The Classic of Changes." The major portion of the work is traditionally attributed to Wen Wang, founder of the Chou dynasty in the 12th century BCE, making it one of, if not *the*, oldest known sacred scriptures, although it has several additions from later centuries.

Religious belief and practice in China now consists of an amalgamation of several religious traditions, especially Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, making it difficult to categorize the traditions to which individuals belong. The *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* (Religion: Year in Review 2010, 2011) identifies this complex of beliefs as "Chinese Folk Religionists" and describes its adherents as follows:

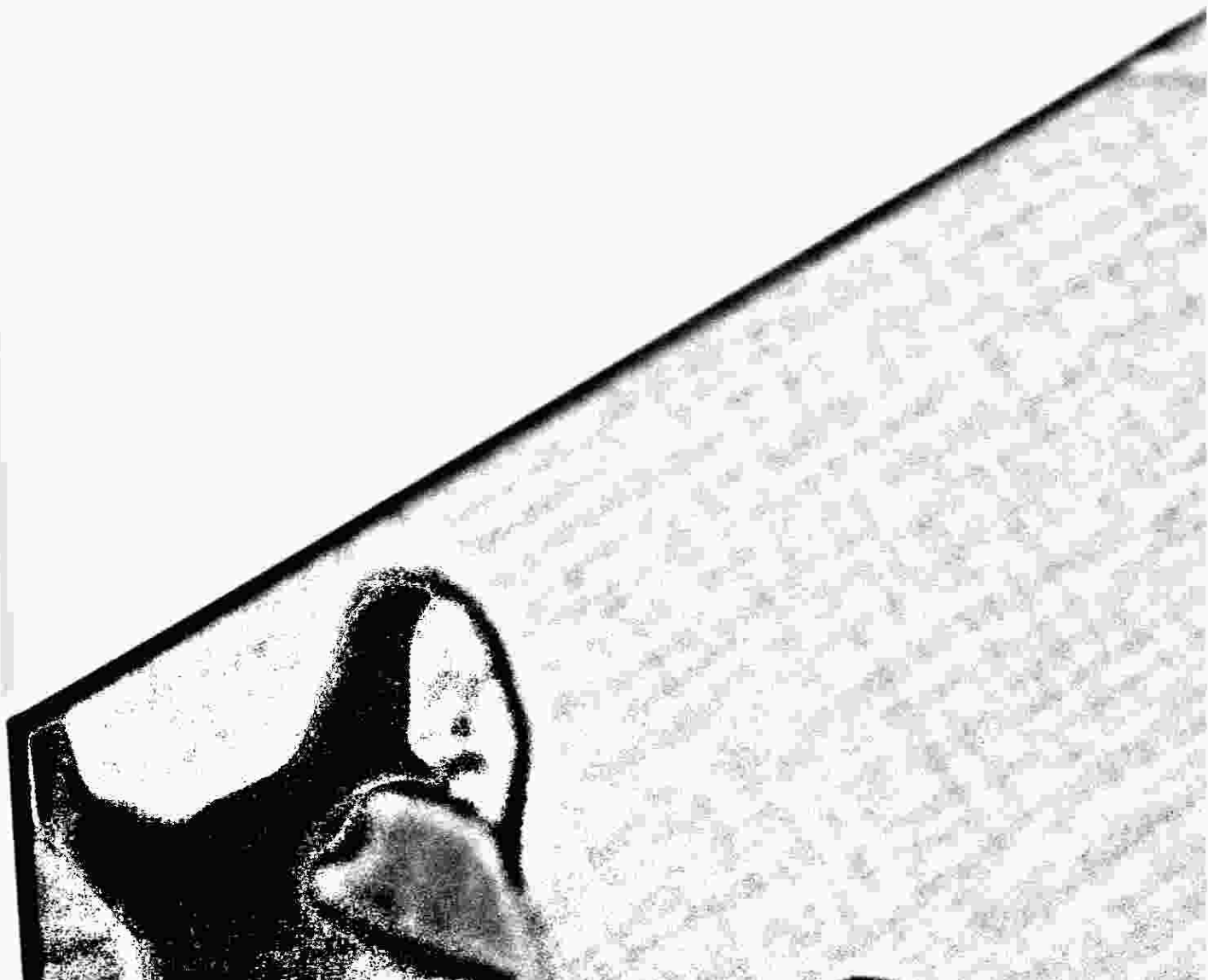
fasting), and (5) undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca. In Judaism, the community must engage in repentance and a restoration of the covenant, to do justice and walk with God.

Jewish theodicies reflect the social nature of Judaism and the ancient Hebrews' covenant with their God. The Fall in the Garden of Eden identifies the emergence of evil in the world because of alienation from God. Suffering and death themselves are consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience, which in turn resulted in their separation from the Creator, in the same sense that a child feels pain when separated from the parent. Suffering can be overcome through individual conversion and/or repentance, in order to return to God. This theory of suffering remains a constant reminder throughout Jewish history that—as in the Eastern law of karma—the person who causes suffering or breaks the covenant with God will somehow suffer, sometimes even at God's hands.

It appears, however, that the just also suffer, a problem discussed eloquently throughout Jewish literature, in part because of the great suffering that Jews have experienced as a people over the centuries—from that expressed in the ancient book of Job to the literature of the Holocaust. A popular contemporary Jewish exploration of the problem of suffering is Rabbi Harold Kushner's (1981) *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, in which he contends that a satisfactory explanation for suffering is possible only when people forfeit the idea of God as omnipotent or all powerful.

Jewish Ritual

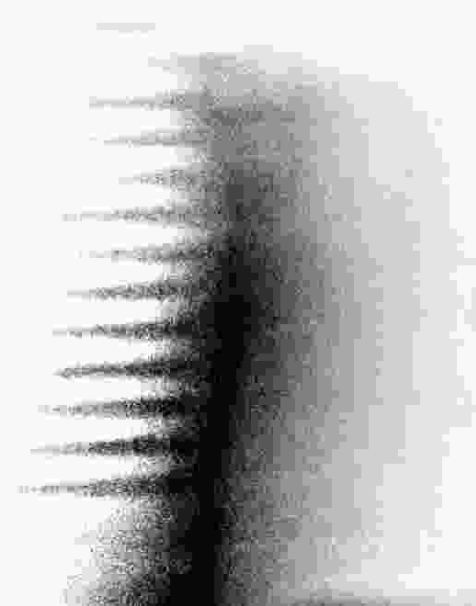
Jewish kosher laws, a complex set of regulations about food selection, preparation, and eating according to ancient Hebrew rituals, provide an interesting case of religious rituals that link routine social life with the broader goals of the tradition; they are organized on the principle of the distinction between the sacred and the profane so emphasized by Durkheim. Such dietary restrictions serve the obvious purpose of providing norms for approved eating practices, important in primal societies in which religious and social regulation were not clearly differentiated. As well as forbidding the eating of certain kinds of animals, kosher laws prohibit mixing meat and dairy foods, which must not even be prepared or served by the same utensils. Finally, the Talmud and later works define the exact manner in which food must be prepared and eaten: Animals must be killed in a prescribed procedure, all meat must be free of surface blood before being eaten, and so on. These boundaries of food preparation and eating undoubtedly provided a practical protection in ancient times from







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disease and other hazards. Many of the regulations may not sound immediately logical within the context of 21st-century theories of health and nutrition but reflect ancient public health practices and perhaps even historically specific problems that the Hebrew community encountered. A related concern is a humanitarian one for the animals themselves. Some of the preparatory regulations, such as instructions for how to kill an animal properly, mitigate the extent to which it suffers and have an interesting relevance to ethical questions surrounding industrial agriculture, which usually places profit maximization above principles of ethical treatment of animals.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas suggested that the logic of the kosher laws lies in the principle of classification itself. Establishing boundaries between purity and danger is a direct way of ordering the world. Categories of forbidden food include types of animals that do not neatly fall into one category or another in the threefold Hebrew classification of the universe as the Earth, the waters, and the firmament: "Any class of creatures which is not equipped for the right kind of locomotion in its element is contrary to holiness" (Douglas, 1966, p. 55). Through this complex set of dietary laws, Orthodox Jews are reminded with every meal and in every encounter with the natural world of the link between the people and their God, the boundaries between Hebrews and other tribes. In this sense, then, the *medium* is the message. What is important is not which foods are taboo, or even which criteria are used, but that the laws have a logic to the people who follow them and that the boundaries around food consumption reinforce boundaries around religious and hence social identities. Nonetheless, Jewish kosher practices are preserved even among many secular Jews whose (sometimes unconscious) cultural taste preferences are informed by centuries of custom—some may not have moral objections to eating pork, but find it an unattractive food choice.

The major holidays of the Jewish year reflect this religion's agricultural roots and recall significant events in the history of Israel. Three autumn holidays include **Rosh Hashanah** (New Year), **Yom Kippur** (Day of Atonement), and the **Sukkoth** (the Feast of Booths, a harvest festival commemorating the wilderness wandering following the Exodus). **Pesach**, or Passover, in the spring celebrates God's liberating activity in history, portrayed symbolically in the *seder* meal. The ritual serves as a reminder of social history: the Jews' liberation from slavery and their hope for a messiah. It is sustained by the ethnic religious community but is couched in universalistic terms for the benefit of all humanity: Just as God worked through Moses to liberate the Hebrew slaves, Jews today are reminded of their duty to work for the liberation of all who are oppressed.

With its vast literature and formidable richness, the Jewish belief system became the basis for the Christian and Islamic traditions, a historical fact that resulted in its dissemination far beyond the boundaries of the ancient Hebrew tribes. Of particular importance for Christianity was the Jewish belief that the “anointed one,” the messiah, would usher in a messianic age of peace and justice for all humanity. The followers of Jesus insisted that he was that messiah.

Christianity

The religion we know as Christianity was originally a Jewish movement started by a Jewish prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, who now has 1.5 to 2 billion followers (almost one third of the world’s human population); more people now call themselves Christians than identify with any other religious affiliation. Sociologically, the reason for Christianity’s dominance of the religious landscape is not so much a superior theology as its alliance with the power structures of Western civilization, first with the Roman Empire after the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century CE and then with the Western European powers through the Middle Ages and into the expansionism of the colonial period. In the 19th century, colonial and missionary movements spread in tandem from Europe to other parts of the world, conquering land, economic and political resources, and cultures.

As many countries joined the global community through the colonial system, Christian missionaries educated their political, economic, and intellectual elites. Like other transplanted religions, Christianity transformed dramatically as it diffused across cultures and became increasingly cosmopolitan. One characteristic of Christianity, deriving from its multiculturalism, is the tremendous variety of “Christianities” around the world. As the religious movement spread, many indigenous people grafted their own religious beliefs and practices onto the basic ideas of the Christian faith. Christian worship often includes pre-Christian religious rituals and takes on the color and many of the features of the indigenous religions it has replaced.

Before it became the official religion of Europe, Christianity was a backwater religious movement favoring the poor. Despite the diversity of its participants (see Grant, 1963/1972), the early Christian movement appealed especially to isolated, marginal people in a politically insignificant location rather than to those at the center of power. Because early Christianity was much different from contemporary practice, we have to cut through many layers of culture to understand its primary form (see Loisy, 1903/1976). Christianity was initially a Jewish movement, one of several reform movements at the time, and fell within the tradition of the Jewish prophets with

whom Jesus was identified. The apostles were a group of passionate itinerant preachers who ran into trouble with the authorities wherever they went—a far cry from the contemporary Christian leaders, especially in the West, who are respected members of the community (and usually middle class).

Jesus first joined the movement started by his relative, John the Baptist, and did not develop his own group of followers until after John's execution. Although Jesus never declared himself the head of a new religion and repeatedly affirmed his faithfulness to the Jewish tradition, he was a classic charismatic authority who challenged the religious establishment of his day. He struggled frequently with religious and civil authorities, and from the very beginning of his ministry, people sought to kill him. In his first sermon, Jesus proclaimed the following:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has chosen me to give the good news to the poor; he has sent me to heal the afflicted in heart, to announce freedom to the prisoners and give sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed, to announce the year of grace of the Lord. (Luke 4:18–19)

Immediately following the sermon,

all those in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong. (Luke 4:28–29)

This sort of controversy followed him throughout his ministry, until the religious and political authorities finally executed him.

After Jesus's death, a dramatic occurrence changed the character of this small reform movement: His followers became convinced that he had risen from the dead. The movement itself was dramatically revitalized, becoming a thriving force that gradually spread throughout the ancient Middle East and eventually into the centers of power as well as the margins of society.

One of the most sociologically significant characteristics of Christianity is its universalistic criteria for membership. Religious belief systems are usually tied closely to a specific social grouping, but early Christianity was deliberately universal in its recruitment. Judaism is an inherited religion: To be a Jew, one essentially has to be born into the community. To be a Christian in the early church, one needed no ethnic or tribal qualifications; one simply had to declare "Jesus is Lord" and go through a rite of passage—baptism—to become a member of the community. This radically universal nature of Christianity, consistent with Jesus's teachings, was institutionalized by the apostle Paul, who spread the new religious system throughout the ancient Middle East. Moreover, a central belief is that God is love—in fact, the

criteria of membership (belonging was a matter of believing) and (2) that Christianity, especially Protestantism, places a stronger emphasis on individual responsibility. Once more, the sociological reason for this shift in emphasis lies in the nature of the tradition: Whereas Judaism has defined suffering as something the community experiences collectively, Christianity has placed more emphasis on individual choice and its consequences.

Christian Rituals

Two central rituals found across the Christian faith, the Eucharist (communion) and baptism, involve communication with God in the context of collective worship. Ironically, these rituals were borrowed from the Jewish tradition and adapted by the church to denote distinctive Christian identity. Even though they are explicitly designed for communication with God, both rituals address the sociological problem of membership in the community. Because the early church broke so radically with the religious context it grew out of by denying ethnic or tribal requirements for membership, the issue was an important one. Controversies about circumcision and kosher laws recorded in the New Testament reflect the difficulties of this new form of socioreligious organization no longer rooted in ethnicity. Baptism thus became a rite of passage into the community, and the Eucharist was designed to bring members together in the body of Christ.

Several layers of symbolic meaning can be found in the Eucharist or communion service, the eating of bread and drinking of wine: First, the ritual involves a reenactment of the "Last Supper" Jesus had with his disciples before his crucifixion. Second, it also recalls the ancient Hebraic Passover meal, the ritual occasion for which Jesus and his disciples had assembled. The Hebrew rite commemorated the delivery of the slaves from Egypt and the night of the "Passover," when the Egyptian sons were slaughtered but the Hebrew children were spared. (Behind both of those rituals, it should be noted, hovers the much more ancient idea of a hierophany involving human and animal sacrifices. In some ancient traditions, the God, or the animal in which the God resides, is killed and eaten, allowing participants literally to partake of the God and incorporate it into their very being.)

Because the early Christian church saw itself as the resurrected body of Christ, the Eucharist was at the center of worship life as a way of reinforcing the internalization of Jesus into the members of the community. They reconfirmed their "incorporation" in the church, the body of Jesus, when they ate the body and drank the blood (Matthew 26:26-28). As Christianity was removed from its primal roots, in which the natural and symbolic worlds are one, the relationship between the blood and body of Jesus to

the wine and bread was rendered increasingly abstract. At the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the Roman Catholic Church countered the Protestant Reformation by insisting that the bread and wine actually became, through the mystery of the Eucharist ritual, the body and blood of Christ (the doctrine of transubstantiation). In the modern world, the literalness of the Eucharist has been stripped away; ironically, those contemporary Christian communities that insist most vociferously on a literal interpretation (“fundamentalist” Protestants) are often the most symbolic in their interpretation of the ritual. In some churches, a further abstraction is made by introducing grape juice as a symbol for the wine that represents the blood.

The most widely diffused religious tradition, Christianity has a long history of transformation from its Jewish roots. Although the central rituals of the faith have considerable continuity, they have also been diversified and modified through contact with other cultures as Christianity was carried by various empires and colonizers. Let us look briefly at this process, which hints at what may happen in the contemporary globalization of society and culture.

Because of its detachment from social criteria for membership, Christianity was syncretistic from the beginning. Its earliest advocates acted on the universalism of the founder’s teachings and took the movement from the core to the periphery of the ancient Roman Empire. Along the way, it became infused first with Greek philosophy (as in the Gospel of John), and later with a wide variety of other religious and philosophical perspectives. During the Western colonial period, Christianity became transnational and global and its practices grew exceedingly diverse. Although the colonial church eradicated many indigenous local practices in an effort to carry out its perceived mission of spreading an exclusivist religious truth, Christianity itself was dramatically changed by its encounters with various traditions. In the West, especially in New World Protestant denominations, it took on features that would seem foreign to the Christians of ancient Palestine. Elsewhere, Christian belief and practice melded with local practices in a way that most Americans would find astonishing. Although the most general sets of symbols and core beliefs remain intact, they are interpreted in quite different ways around the world, expressed in rituals and ideas that reflect the indigenous religions that Christianity replaced or with which it coexists.

One of the most striking examples of this process is in India, which is predominantly Hindu but has a Christian tradition claiming roots in the first century CE from the apostle Thomas, who reportedly first took the Christian gospel to the Asian subcontinent. In traditional Indian culture, the Gods each have their special festival days when they are brought out of their temples and paraded through the streets on a chariot borne or pulled by believers. Over the centuries, the Indian Christian church has adopted many of the

practices of the indigenous folk religions, including these processions. In Kodaikanal, in the mountains of South India, the statue of Mary is annually removed from her resting place at Saint Mary's cathedral, put on a "chariot," and reverently pulled through the streets of the town in a daylong procession. Thousands of people come on foot, and by bus, oxcart, and car, to participate. The streets blaze with lights, and as Mary works her way through the crowd, babies are lifted up to the statue for her blessing. Vendors hawk their wares: everything from religious artifacts and worship aids to food, clothing, and toys for the kids. A carnival atmosphere prevails, and people gather to talk, renew acquaintances, and enjoy the holiday. Through the process of this festival honoring Mary, life in Kodaikanal is also honored, and collective life is celebrated in the midst of poverty and disease.

Another example of syncretism between Christian and indigenous Indian practices can be seen in a Catholic orphanage outside Madurai in South India, where a statue of Mary adorns the central courtyard. That the sisters who run the orphanage would make Mary the visual focal point of their establishment is not surprising. What may be surprising is that she is standing atop a lotus flower.

Although religious traditions sometimes appear fixed and immutable, they are in fact dynamic phenomena that grow out of specific social circumstances in specific natural environments and are then transformed as the conditions in which they flourish change. This tension between continuity and change is characteristic of all human institutions, including religion. The figure of Mary is a very interesting one in Christianity, as she is extremely popular, especially among women and within the so-called Third World. There is a sense in which she buffers women against the patriarchy of the tradition, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, where she is so prominent.

Christian Hierarchy and Rebellion

Christianity's social organization, the most formalized of all the major religious traditions, is a direct response to the universalism of its theology, which encouraged efforts to convert all nonbelievers to the faith. Whereas many traditions can draw on the social organization of the culture in which they are carried, the deliberate break made by the early Christian movement with the Jewish socioreligious order precipitated the construction of cultural and ideological, rather than ethnic or tribal, boundaries to shape the new religious movement (NRM). Such a radical break with social organization is inherently destabilizing, however, so the history of the Christian church becomes a story of continual efforts to attach the ideas of the faith and the interests of its institutions to particular social orders.

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Reading between the lines of the New Testament, we can detect many religious conflicts emerging from this universalistic experiment in social organization as the early Christian community fought to establish its identity. First came the division between the ethnically Jewish church in Jerusalem, headed by the local leader Peter and the non-Jewish congregations founded or nurtured by the more cosmopolitan Roman citizen Paul, who was dramatically converted to the movement and later transformed it (hence the Christian saying, “robbing Peter to pay Paul”). Many of Paul’s letters address the relationship between what it means to be a Christian and whether or not this excludes non-Jews and whether one needs to be kosher or circumcised or otherwise connected to the ethnic roots of the faith in Judaic culture. Time and again, the early community, especially under Paul’s charismatic leadership, came down on the side of universalism.

These early battles were waged over and over again as Christianity diffused and became entangled in social and political alliances, finally resulting in institutional divisions of the church that were more political than theological. The church councils of the early centuries, meetings of high church officials from the far-flung corners of “Christendom,” were called to settle doctrinal disputes that had political or societal bases. The Roman Catholic Church attempted to monopolize the tradition, tracing the authority of the pope back to Peter, who, according to tradition, was anointed by Jesus to succeed him. When the church split between the Roman and Eastern Orthodox branches in 1054 CE, it was because the Holy Roman Empire itself had divided into Eastern and Western branches. Similarly, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century reflected not only legitimate religious disputes over the need for reform in a religious hierarchy that had become infatuated with power, but also the struggle between Roman ecclesiastical authorities and German political elites (see Bainton, 1950). Along with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branches, the Reformation created a third major branch of the church, Protestantism, but the Protestant branch subsequently subdivided into an extremely large number of sects that later grew into denominations in their own right, setting the stage for further reformations.

The history of the Christian church is one of continual rebellion and recrystallization in conjunction with related historical, social, and political developments. As the church attempted to compensate institutionally for its lack of a social organizational base, it became increasingly rigid and hierarchical in sharp contrast to the egalitarian nature of the early Christian community. The vast complex of the institutional order of Christianity at the beginning of the 21st century reflects the tremendous diversity of cultural styles, sociological and political alliances, and theological differences within

What is clear is that in many parts of the world, ancient indigenous beliefs still shape contemporary events and daily lives. Many sophisticated urban dwellers in Taipei still burn symbolic “ghost money” as a sign of respect for the ancestors and major international political figures give homage to their ancestors. Nelson Mandela (1994) wrote in his autobiographical *Long Walk to Freedom* that as a young man he “learned that to neglect one’s ancestors would bring ill-fortune and failure in life” (p. 10). During the annual *Eje* ceremony of the Yoruba, a spiritual leader gives yams to the God of the Sea, to the ancestors, and to other local spirits responsible for crop fertility.

Indigenous Rituals

Rituals of spirituality among the world’s thousands of indigenous belief systems are as varied as their settings and thus difficult to generalize, so we can only give a glimpse into the myriad forms of religious practice in that sphere. They include a wide variety of what Victor Turner (1967) called “life-crisis rituals” and “rituals of affliction” (p. 6).

Life-crisis rituals “mark the transition from one phase of life or social status to another” (V. Turner, 1967, p. 7), such as initiation ceremonies for the passage from childhood to adulthood at puberty, as well as weddings and funerals. Traditional Navajo may still hold a *Kinaaldá* for a young woman when she reaches menarche. Paiutes still hold all-night “wakes” when someone dies. Many North American plains tribes also hold a “memorial” about a year after someone’s death so that mourning can be completed. Rituals of affliction address misfortunes—for example, illnesses, reproductive disorders, or hunting failures. In the Ndembu culture studied by Victor Turner (1967), these misfortunes come from being “caught” by spirits of the dead. Turner prefers to call these “shades,” since the terms *spirit* and *ancestor spirit* suggest remote or distant ancestors, whereas the “shades” are “the spirits of those who played a prominent part in the lifetime of the persons they are troubling” (V. Turner, 1967, p. 10). Shades are believed to come out of the grave because they have been neglected or because of disapproved conduct. Most indigenous groups have healing rituals to deal with all types of afflictions, including distinctly modern problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, which can be alleviated by the performance of an Enemy Way ceremony among the Navajo.

One of the most widespread and still-practiced religious rituals among indigenous groups in North America is the sweat lodge. Although there is huge variation among tribes, a few common elements can be identified. The superficial purpose of most sweat ceremonies is to purify oneself both

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One of the most widespread and still-practiced religious rituals among indigenous groups in North America is the sweat lodge. Although there is huge variation among tribes, a few common elements can be identified. The superficial purpose of most sweat ceremonies is to purify oneself both

physically and spiritually. Water is poured at intervals over very hot rocks and produces steam, which is kept within a small, tightly enclosed round space. People with cardiac or other potentially limiting health conditions are usually warned in advance about the risks of participating in these ceremonies, which may include prolonged exposure to high temperatures and high humidity. Participants generally sweat profusely during the ritual, and one is said to “sweat out” physical impurities. The deeper purpose is actually “to renew life,” which is the meaning of *inikagapi*, the Lakota word for this ritual (Marshall, 2001, p. 223).

Most sweats include four rounds of prayer, since the number four is a pattern number, or a frequently used number to describe any aspect of existence, as in four seasons, four directions, four stages of life, four quarters of a medicine wheel, and so forth, for most North American indigenous groups. In some traditions, the first round of steam and prayer is focused on individual issues, the second on extended family and clan issues, the third on issues involving all other humans, and the fourth on issues concerning all life on Earth. In some cases, a sweat may be done as a preliminary purification in preparation for participation in more arduous rituals such as sun dances. Full details of this ceremony are deemed inappropriate to share here. Sun dances are a northern plains tradition in which dancers fast (no food or water) for four days in succession while dancing with spiritual intent in the heat of the summer sun in order to secure blessings, usually for a close relative or friend experiencing a life crisis but also for the well-being of an entire kin group or tribe.

For many tribal peoples, not only are the spiritual and mundane indistinguishable, but the spiritual and the humorous may also be indistinguishable. The Eurocentric notion that sacred things need to be kept distant from mundane things does not apply to indigenous traditions of “sacred clowns” found both in seminomadic northern plains tribes and among more sedentary Puebloan groups. Among the Lakota, the *Heyokha*, or “sacred trickster,” behaves in ways contrary to social and biological norms—for example, by wearing clothes inside out, riding backward on horses, shivering and adding additional clothing during a heat wave, or attempting to make round things such as bowls or eggs flat or straight, sometimes destroying them in the process. (Lame Deer & Erdoes, 1972).

In so doing, the *Heyokha* brings laughter—a useful survival activity for people experiencing the stresses of poverty and oppression—and intentionally promotes critical thinking and questioning of even the most revered spiritual leaders and practices. According to Mizrach (2008), the *Heyokha* was “truly unpredictable, and could do the unexpected or tasteless even during the most solemn of occasions.” Thus the individual Lakota has to turn

inward to verify through her or his own experience that the sacred rituals are beneficial in tangible ways. In similar fashion, but perhaps to an even greater extent, the southwestern Pueblos had a separate sacred jester with a unique role in each *Kiva* (confraternity or sacred society). Among the Hopi, each is a *kachinam*, or embodiment of a particular spirit, who has a specific role in preserving religious traditions. For example, a *kachinam* may make fun of someone who is behaving inappropriately, thereby bringing public shame to the individual and reinforcing adherence to both sacred and social norms (Parsons, 1939).

Another ritualized practice that may (but does not necessarily) include spiritual elements is the PowWow.¹ As the term is commonly used today, a PowWow means a gathering of indigenous peoples from various tribes to celebrate native cultures. Prize monies are usually offered to the winners of various dance contests, with contestants are placed in categories by gender, age, and style of dance. In the discourses of masters of ceremonies at these intertribal events, one may hear references to the “sacred circle” of the PowWow arena, to the sound of the drum as the “heartbeat of Mother Earth,” to intertribal dances as a way of walking in harmony with nature, and to the sacred history of some dances, such as the jingle dress dance. These references may be interspersed between activities that are arguably the opposite of sacred, such as a dance in which men are playfully coerced into dancing like women or a special dance for non-Indians in which they are requested to “dance like Indians.” Three specific practices that have occurred at PowWows also demonstrate religious content: (1) the blowing of eagle-bone whistles, (2) initiations into certain types of dances, and sometimes, (3) the process of recovering a fallen feather. Common reasons for use of sacred whistles include requests for healing of people with serious illnesses, expressions of grief regarding recently deceased individuals, and supplications for strength or courage to perform a difficult task. When an eagle-bone whistle carrier sends the high-pitched shrill into the PowWow arena, those participating in an intertribal dance may be encouraged to become a part of the collective prayer, to “dance with the sacred whistle” and thereby increase the power of the request of the whistle carrier. Thus, individuals may move from dancing for fun to dancing with spiritual intent immediately upon hearing the piercing sound of an eagle-bone whistle. Those not previously participating in the intertribal dance may join the dance, and others may stand in respect. Each person in the arena is potentially dancing a prayer, and the more energetic the dancing, the more fervent the prayer. Also, the greater the number of people dancing, the more powerful the collective spiritual power. While the drum group lengthens their song, the dancer who blew the whistle as a rule performs more energetically to increase spiritual efficacy.

Initiation into jingle dress dancing at a PowWow may be viewed as a sacred and pivotal event in the life of a young woman. It can signify a commitment to live by the old ways and to have strict respect for traditional spiritual norms; it may also include a public vow to abstain from alcohol and drugs. A solo dance may be performed by the initiate while a special song composed in the young woman's honor is sung. Overt encouragement to resist assimilation is readily apparent in this ritual, and this resistance is strengthened by communal witnessing of the sacred commitments made.

The third PowWow practice with religious significance is the way a fallen feather may be picked up. A dropped feather can be symbolic of lack of requisite attention to detail (in ensuring that all feathers are securely tied) and of something not quite right or out of balance in the person who drops it. It is sometimes equated with lack of spiritual preparedness or an inappropriate frame of mind. On the other hand, more recently (2008) I heard an emcee state that a fallen feather is just like many of the things that happen to us in life, an unfortunate event or obstacle to be overcome that is not necessarily the fault of the wearer. In any case, to restore harmony, usually a respected elder must perform an appropriate ritual that customarily includes at least a prayer and some special advice given to the dancer who dropped the feather.

Emphases on these religious aspects of PowWow phenomena demonstrate a powerful strategy for maintaining and strengthening an oppositional or resistant culture. The term *culture of resistance* signifies a distinct culture that has evolved from pre-contact times and continues to evolve under conditions of oppression (Mitchell-Green, 1994). This term is appropriately applied to most surviving indigenous groups today.

While it is appropriate to write about indigenous religions as spiritual beliefs and practices that unite communities of adherents as per Durkheim's definition, it is also important to note frequent tendencies toward very individualized interpretations and observances of religious rituals even in collectivist cultures. For example, many tribal peoples place huge emphasis on the pursuit and interpretation of individual dreams. In the imaginative realm of dreams, images and interpreted messages can be utilized to substantially modify both group belief systems and behavioral norms. This built-in flexibility has arguably contributed in positive ways to the survival of many indigenous groups into the present in spite of histories of interaction with Europeans that sometimes included attempts at both physical and cultural genocide. Warry (2007, p. 88) noted that contemporary anthropologists and aboriginal peoples in Australia understand the term *traditional culture* as conveying "ever-changing and adaptive qualities." Indeed, many indigenous people make it very clear that if they had not been very adept at adaptation, they would not have survived with a distinct identity into the present.

The book *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions* (Lame Deer & Erdoes, 1972) describes how Lame Deer and his people—the Lakotas—were experiencing oppression in the late 20th century. Lame Deer was subjected to the boarding school experience where overt attempts were still being made to civilize indigenous populations by converting them to one form or another of Christianity. In order to reach full manhood among the Lakota, Lame Deer had to go on a *hanblechia*, or vision quest, which involved four days of fasting (no food or water) and crying for a vision. At the end of his quest, a large bird came and lifted Lame Deer far above the earth and gave him sacred knowledge. As a result of Lame Deer's story, other kinds of knowledge besides that gained in schools are shown to be important. Ways of knowing that are based in spiritual practices and/or come from nature may be more valid than "book learning." From his cosmic perspective, Lame Deer is able to poke fun at U.S. society and the importance *wasicus* (Euro-Americans) attach to "green frog skins" or dollar bills. This ability to retain a sense of humor even amid severe poverty and oppression has been a critical coping mechanism for many indigenous groups, as mentioned earlier.

In addition, while an individual's dream and its interpretation may exert huge influence on a tribal group, it is usually without any institutionalized coercion. Most indigenous religions have avoided the bureaucratization Weber worried about, in part due to their reliance on oral (as opposed to written) traditions but also due to their lack of financial resources that could be mobilized to create formal organizations. It is no accident that indigenous peoples tend to be some of the most poverty-stricken populations on the planet. Additionally, the intensely local and tribally specific nature of indigenous spiritual practices makes these traditions unsuitable candidates for bureaucratization or rationalization. Thus, most indigenous religions do not keep formal membership records, and it is very hard to estimate a number of adherents. This may be changing somewhat in at least two cases. The Diné (Navajo) Medicine Men Association was apparently formed to fight legal battles to protect traditional Navajo practices, but some of its efforts in environmental areas have been condemned by the Office of Economic Development of the federally recognized Navajo Nation. The dispute over who legitimately can speak on behalf of American Indians is not new. On the other hand, the Native American Church has been forced to keep membership records and provide certification for individuals to be legally authorized to have, transport, and use peyote. It is noteworthy that this most bureaucratized of indigenous religions is also the one that is least closely tied to a particular tribe or geographic location; peyote grows primarily in southern Texas and Mexico, but its use has spread northward and westward over the last century.

Furthermore, competing visions among tribal members often exist simultaneously, and what comes through today via oral tradition may actually represent the interpretation(s) of the most charismatic person(s) since contact with Europeans. The dictionary definition of a *charism* as “an extraordinary power (as of healing) given a Christian by the Holy Spirit for the good of the church” (“Charism,” n.d.) is apropos here if we eliminate the European bias so that the definition reads “an extraordinary power (as of healing) given a spiritual leader by the Divine for the good of the community.” We are consciously implying here that if no charismatic visionaries had arisen during times of societal crises for indigenous groups, then these groups might have ceased to exist both physically and culturally. The absence of truly gifted leaders or the absence of their recognition by their own peoples is current cause for concern, especially as the languages—in which sacred knowledge is embedded—are rapidly disappearing. But the sacred tradition is that prophecies, dreams, and visions may be believed and heeded or not, sometimes with dire consequences if warnings of the visionaries are not taken seriously. Major changes in spiritual practice are generally left to an interactive process between individuals and groups that operates on its own—sometimes seemingly very slow—timetable. Indigenous rituals, as in all other faiths, grow out of and then reinforce the belief structure of the religious system but also the social system, linking religious practices with social structures. Patriarchy is reinforced by prayers recited exclusively by the male household heads at Japanese family altars on death-day anniversaries or holidays, while the altars are accessible to all family members at other times. Moreover, nonfamily visitors would pay their respects before the altar before engaging in conversation or business with family members (J. Nelson, 2008, p. 312).

The preeminence of the coming-of-age ritual for women among the Navajo is congruent with their matrilineal social structure, however, and the traditionally powerful position of women as the principle owners or stewards of land and livestock (the primary forms of wealth). As part of the *kinaaldá* ceremony—which previously required multiple days to perform correctly—the young woman who has reached menarche is believed to be especially powerful in both spiritual and physical realms. At a certain point in the ritual, she individually blesses each of those in attendance with health and strength. At another specifically propitious point in this ritual, there is a space for all in attendance to put forward a request for whatever they need or desire for good reasons.

Among many indigenous peoples elsewhere, women were just as likely as men to serve as spiritual, temporal, and political leaders, even playing critical divining roles in war parties on occasion. Powerful medicine people were also often women, although sometimes there was a gendered division of

labor in the types of healing done by each sex. A medicine person in most traditions is someone with the ability to help others beyond their ability to help themselves. There are no rigid boundaries between physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, social, and intertribal illnesses. In fact the most powerful medicine people combine most, if not all, of these aspects of sickness in their healing activities.

Indigenous Institutions

Spiritual leadership or authority among those reliant on oral tradition is generally based on the continued efficacy of services performed. For instance, a person who is at one time esteemed for powerful abilities to heal may be recognized as being “not so good” for an indefinite period and may or may not regain these spiritual gifts for the benefit of the community. This can also be seen as a direct consequence of the force of oral tradition still operating within indigenous communities.

At the same time, indigenous groups tend to retain a much stronger orientation to collective well-being than is characteristic of most Euro-American groups. Within such native traditions, charismatic individuals must continually demonstrate their commitment to social norms of sharing and providing for group well-being via such mechanisms as potlatches, giveaways, and feasts associated with most important events. Indeed, if an individual’s talents and subsequent accumulation of wealth are not used to serve the interests and needs of extended family, clan, and tribal communities, the individual risks being informally shunned by his or her people of origin. Spiritual leaders generally operate under the same rules—too much individual accumulation of wealth is unacceptable, even if one is the best medicine person for many miles around.

Indigenous peoples generally are not characterized by institutional specialization—that is, there is no sharp distinction among political, economic, religious, health care, educational, and other social institutions. A respected elder usually fulfills multiple functions, which can easily include but are not limited to political leadership, linguistic and cultural/practical education of youth, spiritual guidance, physical and psychological healing, and group therapy/counseling for extended family and friends. Thus, religious leadership among indigenous peoples does not follow the Western tendency to become reified within bureaucratic structures.

Nonetheless, people with demonstrated spiritual gifts have a certain authority, in part because of their ritual importance. Nelson Mandela (1994) recalled that as a boy he learned that “if you dishonored your ancestors in some fashion, the only way to atone for that lapse was to consult with a traditional

healer or tribal elder, who communicated with the ancestors and conveyed profound apologies" (p. 10). Native American soldiers returning from wars still require the services of respected medicine men to help them cope with the physical and mental results of combat experience and to help reintegrate them into civilian society. Many ancient traditions have, in other words, ritual solutions to the problem modern psychology calls "posttraumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) and "perpetration-induced traumatic stress" (PITS; see MacNair, 2002). Among the Navajo, an appropriate ceremony performed upon a man's return was the "Enemy Way," which lasted many days.

The nomadic Europeans tended to stigmatize indigenous peoples' reverence for sacred lakes, mountains, rivers, deserts, and so on by naming them "Devil's" whatever. The persistence of demeaning colonial names for geographic features, as with the frequent use of "Squaw" for places and plants in the western United States, retains huge and negative symbolic significance for still strained relationships between indigenous peoples and their conquerors today.

Similarly, Alan Anderson (1993), doing ethnographic work on the relationship between Pentecostalism and ancestor veneration in South Africa, reported his converted respondents as saying they still had "visitations" but labeled them not as ancestors but as "demon spirits which need to be confronted and exorcised or idols which need to be spurned for they only lead to further misery and bondage."

Indigenous Environmentalism

Because indigenous people usually live close to nature (or desire to do so as much as possible for urbanites), their religious forms and rituals are usually tied to nature and often serve as models of mutual reciprocity, although there has been considerable scholarly debate over whether indigenous peoples were ecologically sensitive or damaging (see Harvey, 2000, 2002, 2003). In the 21st century, as we face a fierce debate about how to preserve the planet's ecosystems, we have much to learn from those persisting ancient indigenous spiritual teachings that still contain a wealth of endangered wisdom about humanity's relation to the natural world.

Winona LaDuke (1999) and all Lakota use the phrase *mitakuye oyasin*, meaning "all my/our relatives," in all sacred ceremonies to reference the complex mesh of relationships among various peoples, between people and other species, and between peoples and all that their local environments sustain. Many Lakota "stories about animals refer to them as 'the elk people,' or 'the bear people,' or 'the bird people,' . . . because in [the Lakota] language the

designation 'people' was not limited to humans" (Marshall, 2001, p. 211). Similarly, Ali Mazrui (1986) suggested that "Africans felt close to nature—they almost had a theology of nearness—that emphasized what was near was dear." Moreover, animals were believed to have souls in traditional Africa—they "could be either good or evil, holy or profane." Although African forests were the home of the ancestors as well as the animals, the natural and spiritual worlds have become threatened by changes in contemporary global society.

One of the most popular figures in Native American history is Chief Seattle, after whom the city was named. He argued that happiness would come only from living with respect for nature and one's fellow human beings. Chief Seattle was born around 1790 in the part of the Oregon region now known as the city of Seattle, named after the chief because he signed the Point Elliott Treaty of 1855 that gave white settlers Indian land in exchange for the creation of a reservation. He died at Port Madison in 1866, and in 1890 the city erected a monument over his grave. As chief of the Duwamish, Suquamish, and other Puget Sound tribes, Chief Seattle befriended white settlers of the Pacific Northwest and encouraged peace between the two peoples despite his complaints about the cruel and thoughtless way in which the Europeans had treated the environment and its various inhabitants.

When the president of the United States sent an offer to Chief Seattle to buy land from him, he responded with an eloquent speech, published in 1887 and later embellished, in which he apparently proclaimed that despite differences with the Euro-American invaders, "We may be brothers after all. We shall see." Although his exact words are disputed, the general sense of his message remains. He urged both his people and the European Americans to pursue peace:

When our young men grow angry at some real or imaginary wrong, and disfigure their faces with black paint, it denotes that their hearts are black, and that they are often cruel and relentless, and our old men and old women are unable to restrain them.

But let us hope that hostilities between us may never return. We would have everything to lose and nothing to gain.

Revenge by young men is considered gain, even at the cost of their own lives, but old [men who stay] at home in times of war, and mothers who have sons to lose, know better.²

While some may rightly question his judgment in accepting the U.S. government's offer in exchange for what turned out to be unreliable promises, Chief Seattle had a larger perspective on the matter that went beyond the

apparent realities of that time. He was convinced his people would not survive, and that their demise at the hands of the whites was inevitable if he did not sign the treaty. He wished to minimize the damage in ensuing years. He also, however, believed that what might appear to be the end of his people would not be the final act, for even the dead would remain in the land. "And when the last red man shall have perished from the earth," he is claimed to have told U.S. president Franklin Pierce,

these shores shall swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway or in the silence of the pathless woods they will not be alone. . . . The White Man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not altogether powerless. (Chief Seattle, 1887)

Unfortunately, many indigenous societies were destroyed by Europeans and later by Euro-American and other conquerors, and many of their sacred ways died with them. Not only were the indigenous populations in the Western Hemisphere reduced from about 10 million, at the time of Columbus's arrival, to about 1 million in a relatively short time, but the accidental and deliberate destruction of indigenous cultures was also a global phenomenon, often carried out in the name of Christianity or some other major religious tradition.

This chapter has attempted to give voice to religious traditions of those who are often the most marginalized. Indigenous peoples have not only survived, but they have also carried—often at unspeakable, multigenerational cost—vital spiritual knowledge and wisdom into the present. For those with ears that hear, eyes that see, and hearts that feel, the elders among some indigenous peoples still hold keys to a spiritual reality that most of the rest of the world has long since forgotten. If we do not remember soon, irreparable damage and extinction may come to more of "all our relatives." When one species is lost, it is a loss that affects us all. Moreover, if we forget that the Earth is sacred, and if we do not take care of her, then she may not be able to take care of us.