

The image shows a landscape at sunset. The sun is a bright, glowing orb on the horizon, partially obscured by the dark silhouette of a mountain range. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a warm orange near the sun. In the foreground, a large, dark rock is visible, covered in ancient petroglyphs. The most prominent petroglyph is a large, stylized human figure with a rectangular body and a pointed head. Other smaller, circular and linear markings are scattered across the rock's surface.

# INTRODUCING ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION

Jack David Eller

# Introducing Anthropology of Religion

*Introducing Anthropology of Religion: Culture to the Ultimate* is the ideal starting point for students beginning their studies of the anthropological study of religion.

**Jack David Eller**, an experienced college teacher, introduces students to the key areas of the field and shows how to apply an anthropological approach to the study of contemporary world religions. This lively and readable survey covers all the traditional topics of anthropology of religion, including definitions and theories, beliefs, symbols and language, and ritual and myth, and combines analytic and conceptual discussion with up-to-date ethnography and theory.

Using copious examples from religions from around the world—both familiar and unfamiliar—and two mini-case studies in each chapter, Eller also explores classic and contemporary anthropological contributions to important but often overlooked issues such as violence and fundamentalism, morality, secularization, religion in America, and new religious movements. *Introducing Anthropology of Religion* demonstrates that anthropology is both relevant and essential for understanding the world we inhabit today.

**Jack David Eller** teaches anthropology at the Metropolitan State College of Denver. His previous publications include *Violence and Culture: An Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Approach* (2005) and *From Culture to Ethnicity to Conflict: An Anthropological Perspective on International Ethnic Conflict* (1999).



# Introducing Anthropology of Religion

Culture to the Ultimate

**Jack David Eller**

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To Robert Hefner, who showed me how  
to be an anthropologist



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## Preface

Anthropologist Pascal Boyer reports a conversation with a person whom he only identifies as a “prominent Catholic theologian” in which the person states, “This is what makes anthropology so fascinating and so difficult too. You have to explain how people can believe in such nonsense” (2001: 297). In one way the theologian was correct, and in another important way he was very wrong. Anthropology is fascinating and difficult, and anthropologists do observe many unfamiliar things. However, anthropology does not attempt to “explain how people can believe” in anything, and we would or should never call the beliefs and behaviors of others “nonsense.” Anthropology may attempt to explain *what* a society believes, but it is not ours to ask “how they can believe it,” since such a prejudicial attitude presupposes that it is a thing that is hard—or bad—to believe.

I, like most people and most anthropologists, am intrigued by religion. I have studied the subject for over thirty years and taught it for over fifteen. The current book emerged out of my teaching and research experiences and develops a number of themes that are crucial to understanding not only religion but the anthropological approach to religion. The first theme is the diversity between religions: There are many religions in the world, and they are different from each other in multiple and profound ways. Not all religions refer to gods, nor do all make morality a central issue, etc. No religion is “normal” or “typical” of all religions; the truth is in the diversity. Since anthropology is the study of the diversity of human thoughts and actions, this perspective is natural for us. A second theme, less obvious, is the diversity *within* religions: Ordinarily we think of a religion as a single homogeneous set of beliefs and practices. The reality is quite otherwise: Within any religion there is a variety of beliefs and practices—and interpretations of those beliefs and practices—distributed throughout space and time. Within the so-called world religions this variety can be extensive and contentious, one or more variations regarded as “orthodox.”

A third theme is the integration of religion with its surrounding culture. In anthropology, this is the familiar principle of holism or cultural integration—that all of the parts of a culture are interconnected and mutually influencing. Beyond simply being integrated, we will find that religion tends to be, as Mary Douglas expressed it, “consonant” with its culture and society as well. Each culture and society

has a style, a feel, an ethos which religion tends to replicate, making the experience of culture—even the “bodily” experience—consistent and symmetric.

A fourth theme is what we will call the “modularity” of religion: a religion is not even a single, monolithic “thing” but a composite of many elements or bits, virtually all of which have their nonreligious cognates. That is, there is religious ritual and there is nonreligious ritual; there is religious violence and there is nonreligious violence. Further, not all of the modules in a religion are necessarily “religious”; rather, religion may integrate nonreligious components like politics, economics, gender, technology, and popular culture.

A fifth theme is the relativity of language, which is a particularly subtle yet crucial problem in the anthropological study of religion. We describe and analyze religions in language, as we must, but our language is seldom if ever neutral or universal. In the Western exploration of religion, our terminology generally comes from the Christian perspective, where “god” and “heaven” and “sin” and “soul” and “worship” and even “belief” and “religion” itself are appropriate and intelligible. However, in discussing other religions, these terms may not be appropriate or intelligible. We must, then, be alert to the danger of imposing alien concepts and ideas to foreign religions that do not possess them.

A sixth and final theme is the *local* and *practiced* nature of religion. Since religions are internally diverse, the same religion in different times and places will vary. Of course, “traditional” or “tribal” religions—the ones with which anthropology is most associated—are local; that is often taken to be one of their defining qualities. However, even world religions like Christianity or Islam ultimately consist of a congeries of local variations, affected by the agents who introduced them, the other religion(s) in the society, the specific actors and their interpretations, and so on. Then, anthropologists do not focus on the “official” or “high” or “canonical” version of religions, particularly as we find them in texts and scriptures or in the understandings of officials and specialists. Anthropology instead emphasizes how real human individuals conceive and use their religious resources—beliefs, objects, texts, rituals, and specialists—in specific social contexts for specific social and personal reasons. That is, we are less interested in the doctrine of a religion than in the lived practice of the religion.

In the book that follows, religions from around the world—familiar and very unfamiliar—are examined with these six themes in mind. In addition, the topical coverage goes beyond the conventional treatment in the anthropology of religion. Like all texts on the subject, I discuss beliefs and ritual and myth and so on. However, I place these standard topics in wider contexts—myth in “religious language,” ritual in “religious behavior,” and the like; each of these is further relativized as a cultural concept which we may not find at all in another culture or may find to be quite different than our own. Even more, I introduce topics that usually receive little or no attention in standard texts, topics such as morality, world religions, violence, secularization, fundamentalism, and American religion. One might be surprised to learn—to an extent, I myself was surprised to learn—that anthropology has approached or can approach these subjects with its emphasis on the small and the

traditional. But if, as we have asserted, all religion is local, and if it is always evolving and adapting to its social circumstances, then anthropology is perfectly equipped to investigate all of these matters. And as not only scholars but citizens of the twenty-first-century global society, it is absolutely essential to investigate all of these matters. An anthropology of religion without a commitment to contemporary developments like violence or fundamentalism has rendered itself quaint, tangential, perhaps even inconsequential for the modern world. I hope that this book not only conveys some insight into the religions of the world but also into how anthropology is relevant, even essential, for understanding and inhabiting this world.

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# 1

## Studying religion anthropologically

### Definitions and theories

Studying religion “anthropologically”  
Studying “religion” anthropologically  
“Studying” religion anthropologically

Pre-scientific approaches/apologetics

Historical/evolutionist theories

Psychological theories

*Emotionalist theories*

*Psychoanalytic theory*

*Intellectualist theories*

*Primitive mentality versus psychic unity*

*Lévi-Straussian structuralism*

*Neurological theories*

Social theories

*Functionalism*

*Historical materialism*

*Structural functionalism*

*Symbolic/interpretive anthropology*

“Modular” theories

*The “building block” approach: Wallace*

*The evolutionary and agency approach: Guthrie, Boyer, and Atran*

**Conclusion**

As humans, we marvel at and ponder our existence, our behavior, and the world around us. Out of this self-reflection, humans have arrived at many different understandings and approaches, but there is one recurring theme in many of their answers: We are not alone. There are other beings and forces in the world and, even more so, other beings and forces significantly like ourselves, with minds and wills and personalities and histories. Such a being or force, as the theologian Martin Buber (1958) expressed it, cannot be treated as an object or “it” but must be treated as a person or “thou.” Between such beings/forces and humans there are relations and obligations which can only be called “social”; they are part of our society and our culture. They extend our society and culture far beyond ordinary humans, sometimes as far as society and culture can be extended—to the Ultimate.

## 2 *Studying Religion Anthropologically*

Such systems of thought and action we refer to as religions. Observers have always been particularly fascinated with religion; it is uniquely dramatic, colorful, and powerful. This does not mean, however, that humans always particularly understand each other's—or their own—religion. Preoccupation with the drama and color of religion can actually interfere with understanding, making it decontextualized or overly exotic. And, of course, not all humans share this benevolent curiosity about other religions.

Since religions allege to speak of the real (even of the Really Real), humans exhibit a strong tendency to condemn religious diversity as religious error. Of course, the same challenge potentially faces us in the investigation of any human activity. We might be enchanted at the complexity and diversity of spoken language or clothing styles or food habits, or we might find other languages or clothing or food silly, disgusting, or obscene and condemn them. One thing that we probably would not do though is to declare another language or clothing style or cuisine “false.”

Anthropology does not approach religion to falsify it nor to verify it nor even to judge it. Anthropology is not the seminary, intending to indoctrinate the student into any one particular religion. It is not apologetics, attempting to prove or justify some religion; neither is it an exercise in debunking any or all religion. Anthropology starts out with a different interest and a different agenda and, therefore, with different tools and concepts. What does it mean to study religion anthropologically? The most illuminating thing might be to approach this question backwards, beginning with anthropology, then turning to religion, and ending with study.

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### **Studying religion “anthropologically”**

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Many disciplines explore religion—psychology, sociology, theology, even biology in some instances. Each has its own focus and interest. The anthropological study of religion must be distinguished and distinguishable from these other approaches in some meaningful ways; it must do or offer something that the others do not. It must raise its own specific questions, come from its own specific perspective, and practice its own specific method.

Anthropology can best be thought of as the science of the diversity of humans, in their bodies and their behavior. Thus, the anthropology of religion will be the scientific investigation of the diversity of human religions. The questions it might ask include:

- What is the range of diversity of religion? How many different kinds of religions and religious beliefs, practices, institutions, etc., exist?
- What commonalities or even universals are there between religions? Are there any things that all religions do or believe?
- What relationships exist between various parts of any single religion, or between a religion and its social and even natural environment? Are there any regular patterns that we can discern across religions?

Anthropology, like every discipline, starts to address its questions from a unique disciplinary perspective. Studying religion biologically implies a biological perspective (emphasizing physical traits, perhaps most importantly the brain), while studying religion psychologically implies a psychological perspective (focusing on internal “mental” phenomena and processes). Anthropology, as we will see, has been open to and has profited from these and many other approaches. Still, it has developed some distinctive concepts, tools, and emphases. Central to anthropology is the concept of culture, the learned and shared ideas, feelings, behaviors, and products of those behaviors characteristic of any particular society. To study anything anthropologically—language, politics, gender roles, or eating habits—is, therefore, to look at it as learned and shared human behavior. Since it must be observable, anthropology also treats it as *public* behavior, not primarily something that is “private” or “in people’s heads”; it is also not *initially* in people’s heads but rather, since it is learned and acquired instead of innate, initially “outside” the individual in his or her social environment. In a word, culture is a *set of practices* in which humans engage and, among other things, about which they talk and in terms of which they act. Therefore, anthropology does not limit itself to texts or history (although it certainly considers these) but rather to culture lived by the actual members of the society.

This basic orientation leads to three aspects of the “anthropological perspective.” First, anthropology proceeds through *comparative or crosscultural description*. Anthropology does not consider only our own society and culture or others similar to it. It begins from a premise of diversity and attempts to embrace the full range of diversity of whatever is under investigation. It aims to explore and describe each single culture or aspect of culture in rich detail. This tends to manifest in a process and a product. The process is *fieldwork*, traveling to and living among the subjects of our study for long periods of time, observing and participating in their lives. Hence, the principal activity of anthropology is generally considered to be *participant observation*. The product is the “case study” or *ethnography*, an in-depth and up-close account of the ways of thinking and feeling and behaving of the people we study. Therefore, anthropological writings tend to be “particularistic,” to describe the “small” or the “local” intensively. However, and fortunately, anthropology does not emphasize the local for its own sake; as Stanley Tambiah wrote, the point of ethnography is “to use the particular to say something about the general” (1970: 1). This is an important and redefining approach because no particular group or culture is typical or representative of humanity—in fact, there is no such thing as “typical” or “representative” language or politics or religion—yet each sheds some light on the general processes by which culture works. Such an insight will be particularly valuable when we turn below to discussions of large-scale and even “world” phenomena, which we often take as typical or consistent across vast expanses of area and numbers of people. Rather, we will find that these phenomena vary widely from place to place—that all religion, like all politics, is local. Not only that, but we find that ideas, practices, and values differ *within* a society, that not all members of even the smallest societies act or think exactly alike. In other words, cultures are internally diverse, and culture (including religion) is more “distributed” than shared.

#### 4 *Studying Religion Anthropologically*

Second, anthropology adopts a position of *holism*. We start from the presumption that any culture is a (more or less) integrated “whole,” with “parts” that operate in specific ways in relation to each other and that contribute to the operation of the whole. From our examinations of cultures, anthropology has identified four such areas of function in all cultures (although not always equally elaborated or formalized in each). These four “domains” of culture are economics, kinship, politics, and religion. Each makes its distinct contribution to society, but each is also “integrated” (although sometimes loosely) with all of the others, such that if we want to understand the religion of a society, we must also inevitably understand its political arrangements, its kinship system, and even its economic practices. These major cultural domains are also connected to, reflected in, and affected by more pervasive matters of language and gender. And, finally, all of these elements are located within some environmental context.

Third, anthropology upholds the principle of *cultural relativism*. Cultural relativism grasps that each culture has its own “standards” of understanding and judging. Each occupies its own universe of meaning and value—of what is true, important, good, moral, normal, legal, and so on. It is patently obvious that the same behavior may be normal in one society, abnormal or criminal or nonexistent in another. We know that the same sound, gesture, symbol, or action may have an entirely different meaning (or no meaning) in another society; applying one society’s standard of meaning or judgment to another is simply not very informative and may actually be misleading. This does not mean, of course, that we must accept or endorse or even like what other cultures do; however, we must understand them in their terms, or else we do not understand them at all. Maintaining a culturally relative perspective is profoundly important and profoundly difficult. Most of the time we do not think of our language or our political system or our gender roles or religion as “cultural” at all but rather as “what we do” or “what is done.” We assume that all people wear clothes and marry monogamously, while in reality other peoples may not. And we tend to assume that all people believe in God (or “believe” at all) and say prayers and do rituals and worry about heaven and hell, while in reality other peoples may not. If we were to act on our taken-for-granted cultural assumptions, we would conclude that all people think and behave as we do and interrogate them for *their* versions of *our* concepts, practices, and values. We would be profoundly and dangerously wrong. A quick example will suffice. Imagine that a Warlpiri (Australian Aboriginal) person were to do nonrelativistic (“ethnocentric” or “culture-bound”) research on your society. He or she would come to the task with a battery of culturally specific concepts, like *jukurpa* (usually translated as Dreaming or Dreamtime). If that researcher were to ask what your notions of *jukurpa* are, you would say none, since you have never heard that word before. If he or she were to interpret your actions or ideas through the concept of *jukurpa*, he or she would surely get you wrong. And if he or she were to condemn you for lacking this key concept of theirs, it would surely be an inappropriate conclusion.

Cultural relativism is a consequence of crosscultural and holistic study. If we are to consider extremely diverse cultures and to understand them in relation to their

web of ideas and practices, then we must be—indeed we *are* being—relativistic. This is critically important for two reasons. First, it reorients our notion of what anthropology is or does. As Talal Asad has suggested, anthropology is not just its method (fieldwork and participant observation) or its end product (ethnography); if it were, there are many things we could not accomplish, such as studying past cultures. Instead, he posits, the mission of anthropology is “the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time and space [and] the forms of life that articulate them, the power they release or disable” (2003: 17). Our job is precisely, then, to expose and comprehend a culture’s embedded concepts, a people’s view of reality.

This raises a second and major question about the use of the concepts of one culture (ours) to describe and understand the concepts of another culture. The problem is particularly thorny in the realm of religion. We necessarily approach religions with a vocabulary, a terminology; we must have some words to discuss things. However, the vocabulary we bring to the study is not a neutral, technical language but *the language of a particular religion*, from the Western perspective usually Christianity. Like the imaginary Warlpiri researcher, we may find ourselves imposing concepts on a culture or religion when they do not relate or even exist. We may ask the wrong questions, make the wrong assumptions, and arrive at the wrong conclusions. While we cannot eradicate the problem completely, we must be constantly on guard against it.

### Case study 1.1

#### The problem of religious language

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A society’s values and meanings are intimately bound to and expressed in its language, which is much more than a set of names for things; it is, especially in the religious context, a set of concepts and relationships and of judgments and evaluations on them. In a religion like Christianity, the word “god” has a very specific meaning which may or may not be shared by other religions that have a term or name for a high spiritual power. Many religions have a word/concept that we might translate as “god” but which has very different denotations and connotations. And many religions do not have any term like “god” at all—because they do not have any *concept* like “god” at all. Likewise, familiar concepts of “heaven” or “hell” or “sin” or “soul” may not be found in other societies, or they may have very different meanings in those societies.

In the study of religion, Western scholars have deployed an array of supposedly analytical terms, such as “myth” and “ritual” and “prayer” and “worship” and even “spiritual” and “supernatural” and “belief” and “religion” itself. Despite our presumption that these words *are* analytically useful terms, we continually find that

they are not. They are concepts or categories *which do not always exist or always exist in the same form* in all cultures and religions. For instance, we might call a religion's verbal behavior "prayer" when they call it something else. We might be tempted to attribute some action to "magic" or "fear of Hell" when they lack those concepts completely. In doing so, we may profoundly distort the indigenous ideas and behaviors, forcing the foreign into the familiar or, oppositely, causing us to condemn them for "doing it wrong" or "lacking the idea/term" that we think they ought to have.

So we must be very circumspect about the language that we use to describe another society's religion. Not only all of the familiar and popular terms, but also our professional categories, must be applied cautiously, if at all. And this goes not only for our own English-language terms but, as the case above showed, terms borrowed from other languages and religions that have entered the professional lexicon. Among these are words and concepts like "shaman" (originally taken from Tungus religion), "totem" (from Ojibwa), and "taboo" (from Polynesia). This is not to say that we cannot use our or any language to talk about remote and exotic things but that we must be ever-vigilant about the appropriateness of doing so. We cannot help, and will to an extent continue in this book, speaking of "myth" and "ritual," and so on, but we must remain aware that these terms are more or less appropriate in any particular circumstance, and that we may need to remind ourselves of the specific indigenous view of things that is missed or miscast by assuming that our terms and concepts fit all cases.

It is difficult to remain relativistic in any area of human culture; for instance, people often judge other cultures for their marriage practices. When it comes to religion, that relativistic objectivity has been even harder to maintain. For example, James Frazer, the great turn-of-the-century scholar of comparative mythology, distanced himself from the myths he retold in *The Golden Bough* by testifying that "I look upon [them] not merely as false but as preposterous and absurd" (1958: vii). Of magic he concluded that "every single profession and claim put forward by the magician as such is false" (Frazer 1958: 53). The more recent and highly respected anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, writing on witchcraft among the Azande of Africa, asserted: "Witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist" (1937: 63). These men follow a long tradition, back to the Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote: "My duty is to report all that is said, but I am not obliged to believe it all" (Herodotus 1942: 556). Perhaps it is at least good when they are honest enough to admit their struggles with foreign ideas, although declarative statements like "Witches cannot exist" are not part of our anthropological trade. Ultimately, we might be chastened by the fact that an Azande anthropologist might preface his or her ethnography of Western religion with the disclaimer: "God, as the Christians conceive him, cannot exist."

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## Studying “religion” anthropologically

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When we are studying religion, what exactly are we talking about? What is “religion” after all? This raises the issue of definition. Let us begin by establishing that definitions are not “real” things; they are human and, therefore, cultural things, not ones that you find in nature or pick off trees. A definition is not “true”; it is only as good as it is inclusive and productive. A narrow definition excludes phenomena that would be included within a wider definition. For instance, if we were to define religion as “belief in one god” we would be disqualifying as religions all of the belief systems that lack a single god, so very few religions would be said to exist. If we define it as “belief in god(s),” we would still be disqualifying the religions that say nothing at all about god(s). By imposing one view of religion on others, we would be defining them into nonreligion (i.e., “if you don’t believe in a god, then you don’t have a religion”). We are reminded of the character of Parson Thwackum in the Henry Fielding novel *The History of Tom Jones*, who said, “When I mention religion I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion, but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England.” That is not an attitude that an anthropologist—or anyone else—can take.

The act of defining is an attempt to get at what is unique and distinct about the subject, the *sine qua non* or “without that, not” that makes it what it is. Probably no single definition of something as diverse as religion could ever quite capture it. Rather, what we find is that various definitions emphasize certain aspects of the phenomenon or betray the theoretical orientations of their authors. For instance, one of the earliest anthropologists, E. B. Tylor, offered in his 1871 *Primitive Culture* what he considered to be the “minimal” or simplest possible definition of religion: “the belief in spiritual beings.” A more compact definition can hardly be imagined, but it faces at least one problem: it introduces another term, “spiritual being,” that begs for a definition. Others have subsequently offered more elaborate definitions:

James Frazer: “a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life” (1958: 58–9).

William James: “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (1958: 34).

Émile Durkheim: “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (1965: 62).

Paul Radin: “it consists of two parts: the first an easily definable, if not precisely specific feeling; and the second certain acts, customs, beliefs, and conceptions



## 8 *Studying Religion Anthropologically*

associated with this feeling. The belief most inextricably connected with the specific feeling is a belief in spirits outside of man, conceived as more powerful than man and as controlling all those elements in life upon which he lay most stress" (1957: 3).

Anthony Wallace: "a set of rituals, rationalized by myth, which mobilizes supernatural powers for the purpose of achieving or preventing transformations of state in man and nature" (1966: 107).

Sherry Ortner: "a metasystem that solves problems of meaning (or Problems of Meaning) generated in large part (though not entirely) by the social order, by grounding that order within a theoretically ultimate reality within which those problems will 'make sense'" (1978: 152).

And perhaps Clifford Geertz provided the most commonly quoted definition: "(1) a system of symbols which act 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" (1973: 90). Meanwhile, Otto Rank thought it was the mysterious experience of the "holy"; Karl Marx thought it was false consciousness intended to complete the exploitation of the laborers, "the opiate of the masses"; Freud thought it was a projection of unconscious psychological processes; Lucien Lévy-Bruhl thought (at least for a time) that it was a product of a "primitive mentality"; and so on.

Clearly, scholars do not agree precisely how to begin to talk about this thing called religion. They emphasize different aspects of it: Is it fundamentally belief and ideas, or ritual, or feeling, or morality, or community? Further, they introduce other terms in the definition that plunge us into a definitional spiral: What is "spirit," "divine," "belief," "sacred," or "holy"? Finally, does it refer to something real "out there" or merely something "inside us"?

The truth is that religion probably entails all of these things simultaneously, but disparately for different religions. Ritual, for instance, is certainly a key element of religion, although not all religions valorize or elaborate it equally. Ideas and concepts are universal aspects of religion, although not all religions have the same concepts or necessarily very conscious and consistent ones. Language or verbal action, including "myth," is important, as is "morality" or notions of good and bad behavior, and, of course, community. But then rituals and ideas and verbal actions and morals and communities exist apart from religion too; they are not essentially religious issues. What makes religion "religious"?

It would be foolish and unnecessary to attempt to adjudicate between the definitions of religion. Each highlights a piece of the puzzle. Even more, since there is no "true" definition, it would be a waste of time. Instead, we want to mark out an approach to religion that distinguishes it from other human endeavors and thought systems and yet connects it to them. What unifies religion with other social

acts and organizations is the physical/ritualistic and verbal behaviors, the concerns with good or correct action, the desire to achieve certain goals or effects, and the establishment and perpetuation of communities. What distinguishes religion is the object or focus of these actions, namely, nonhuman and typically “super” human being(s) and/or force(s) with which humans are understood to be in relation—a recognizably “social” relation—that is mutually effective. As Robin Horton has expressed it:

in every situation commonly labeled religious we are dealing with action directed towards objects which are believed to respond in terms of certain categories—in our own culture those of purpose, intelligence, and emotion—which are also the distinctive categories for the description of human action. The application of these categories leads us to say that such objects are “personified.” The relationship between human beings and religious objects can be further defined as governed by certain ideas of patterning and obligation such as characterize relationships among human beings. In short, Religion can be looked upon as an extension of the field of people’s social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society. And for completeness’ sake, we should perhaps add the rider that this extension must be one in which human beings involved see themselves in a dependent position vis-à-vis their nonhuman alters.

(1960: 211)

That is to say, religion is an extrapolation of culture—potentially, and often enough actually, culture “to the ultimate.”

The key for us is that religious being(s) and/or force(s) are almost universally “social,” with the qualities of “persons” or at least “agents” of some sort. If they were not, how would we make sense of them, and what would we do with/about them? In other words, humans see themselves, in a religious context, as occupying a certain kind of relationship with being(s) and/or force(s) which we can rightly and only call a *social relationship*. It is a relationship of communication, intention, reciprocity, respect, avoidance, control, etc. The being(s) and/or force(s) *are like us* in some ways, despite the fact that they are greatly unlike us in others. They may have a language (usually ours), personality or intentionality, desires and interests and likes and dislikes; they may “live” in their own social arrangements; and they can be approached and influenced. This takes us to the real significance of religion as a cultural factor and its real distinction from the other domains of culture. Economics, kinship, politics—these are all about people. The “objects” or players in religion are different, but they are not so different. They are the nonhuman: the dead ancestors, or “spirits” of plants or animals or natural objects (the sun and the moon), or natural forces (the wind and the rain), or “gods,” or impersonal supernatural forces like mana or chi. Yet they interact with us. *They are social, because they are part of society.*

In other words, religion is the discourse, the language and practice, or the means by which human society and culture is extended to include the nonhuman. This is not making any truth claims about what being(s) and/or force(s) actually exist

or what traits they possess. It simply clarifies that, for the member of the religious community, the being(s) and/or force(s) that they “believe in” are part of their real and social world. A professor of mine once told a story of an informant who, when asked if all rocks and trees are people, answered, “No, but some are.” Another professor told a story of going with a Native American spiritual leader to gather stones for a ceremony; asked how he would know which stones to gather, the spiritual leader responded, “The stones will tell me.”

The evidence of the “socialization,” the “culturization,” of the nonhuman is clear when you consider how humans talk about religious beings and forces. In Christianity, God is the father—a kinship term. Australian Aboriginals speak of the kangaroo-grandfather or the moon-mother, in terms very similar to most societies. In fact, for them and many others, their religious beings are ancestors, sometimes even literally part-human and part-animal or part-plant. The kangaroo-grandfather may have been an actual kangaroo-man. Furthermore, religious being(s) and/or force(s) often have temperaments and tastes like people: Again, the Judeo-Christian God, especially in the Torah/Old Testament, enjoys the smell of cooking meat, and he is jealous and angry. The same God in the New Testament experiences love but also justice and vengeance—all human traits. In whatever religious tradition, the beings or forces almost always have personalities—they are friendly, hostile, indifferent, deceptive, or what have you. Animals are believed to talk, plants to think, rocks and stars to feel. But they are human-like. Indeed, religion makes part or all (depending on the tradition) of the nonhuman world human—participants in the norms and values and meanings of culture.

Assuming that we have some general and workable idea of what religion is and what we will be studying, perhaps it is more profitable to talk about what religion *does*. So we can ask, what is the function of religion? Why do humans have such a thing, and what does it do for them? Of course, a member might answer that we have religion because it is “true” and because we are the kinds of beings who can perceive or receive the truth. This is not very helpful from an anthropological point of view, especially since different humans have perceived or received such different truths across time and space. No doubt there is something unique about humans that makes it possible (and necessary?) for us to have religious notions, but let us set aside questions of “truth” and concentrate on social and cultural nature and functions of religion, which include:

1. Filling individual needs, especially psychological or emotional needs. Religion provides comfort, hope, perhaps love, definitely a sense of control, and relief from fear and despair.
2. Explanation, especially of origins or causes. Humans wonder why things are as they are. How did the world start? How did humans start? How did society start? Most religions not only explain cosmogony (the creation of the world) but also the origin of specific cultural institutions, like marriage, language, technology, politics, and the like. Religions also explain why things happen in the present: Why do we get sick? Why do bad things happen to us? Why do we

- die? In some societies, much, if not all, of sickness and misfortune is attributed to “spiritual” rather than natural causes.
3. Source of rules and norms. Continuing with this idea, religion can provide the answer to where the traditions and laws of the society came from. All religions contain some element of “order-establishment” or “culture-founding.” This is the *charter* function of religion: It acts as the “charter” or guideline or authority by which we organize ourselves in particular ways and follow particular standards. Why do we practice monogamy? Because a religious being or precedent says to, or because the first humans did, etc. Why do other societies practice polygamy? Perhaps because their religious being or precedent (say, the ancestor or founder) said it or did it.
  4. Source of “ultimate sanctions.” Religion is, among other things, a means of social control. Even in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a large part of the religion is about what we should do, how we should live. Politics and even kinship provide a measure of this control. However, the limitation of political social control is its scope: Human agents of social control cannot be everywhere and cannot see everything, and the rewards and punishments they can mete out are finite. For instance, they cannot continue to reward or punish you after you die. But religious “sanctions” can be much more extensive, exquisite, and enduring. In other words, religious being(s) and/or force(s) not only make the rules but enforce them too.
  5. Solution of immediate problems. If religion is the “cause” of a variety of human ills, then religion can be the solution as well. If we are sick or distressed, are the beings or forces angry with us? What should we do about it? If there is an important social or political decision to make (say, going to war), is there a way to discover the preferences and plans of the beings and forces—to “read their mind”? Can we ask them for favors, give them gifts, or do anything at all to influence their actions and intentions?
  6. Fill “needs of society.” In some ways, and for some anthropologists, society can be seen as nothing more than an aggregate of individuals; individuals are “real” while society is “conceptual,” even imaginary. Therefore, the “needs of society” would only be the cumulative needs of individuals. However, it is also possible to view society as a phenomenon in its own right, with its own higher-level needs. Certainly, not everything that a religion teaches or practices is good for every individual: Human sacrifice is not about fulfilling the needs of sacrificial victims. Nor does religion always soothe individual fears and anxieties; for instance, the belief in a punitive afterlife may cause people to fear more, and concerns about proper conduct of rituals can cause anxiety. However, belief in a punitive afterlife can cause people to obey norms, which is good for society. The primary need of society, beyond the needs of individuals, is integration, cohesion, and perpetuation, and religion can provide an important “glue” toward that end.

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## “Studying” religion anthropologically

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Anthropology as a science has carved out for itself a territory to investigate, and that territory includes all of human behavior in its dazzling and bedeviling diversity. Religion falls within that territory. But what precisely does anthropology hope to accomplish? What does it mean to “study” religion, or anything else, from an anthropological or any scientific point of view? The one thing it does not mean is to *acquire* a religion, to *specialize* in one, to become a master or functionary of one. Candidates for the priesthood “study religion,” as do theologians, but their interests are to “take up” a religion or to believe more deeply in one or to defend one, which cannot be the interest of anthropology. Anthropology is not apologetics. What anthropology, like any other science, ultimately wants to do with its chosen subject matter is to *explain* it.

To “explain” religion or any other social or physical phenomenon is to construct a model of it, to identify processes or mechanisms at work in it, and/or to give reasons for it. As an example, some people might study dogs: they get to know all the different kinds of dogs and their bodily and behavioral characteristics. That is a worthwhile pursuit but ends up with a mere catalog of dog details; in essence, it allows them to answer the question, “What is a dog?” What are the things that make a dog a dog, and how many different kinds of dogs are there? That is the descriptive agenda. However, if they want to go deeper, they may desire to explain dogs. This would be a matter of asking a very different kind of question—not “What is a dog?” but “Why is a dog?”

The anthropological study of religion, which is a scientific study, is similar. We can describe and catalog religions, but at some point we want to advance to explanation; no longer content with definitions (“What is religion?”) or crosscultural descriptions (“How many kinds of religion are there?”), we move on to the question “Why is religion?” One obvious answer is “Because it is true” or “Because God/the gods put it in us.” These are answers that anthropology or science in general cannot be content with. Rather, anthropological, or any scientific, explanations of religion or anything else explain it *in terms of something else*. What that “something else” might be varies, but fundamentally the process of explaining anything is giving a reason for it in terms of something other than itself—finding its foundation or its function outside of itself.

The final goal or form of scientific explanation is a theory. A theory orients us to the data in a particular way: What are the most important or irreducible or universal elements to look for, what relationship are they in with each other, and how do they interact to produce the facts under investigation? A theory ought to offer us a model with some specific mechanisms or processes that give rise and shape to the subject of inquiry; it also ought to make some predictions which are testable in some way, allowing us potentially to verify or falsify it. It should, therefore, offer the possibility of using it to acquire further knowledge or understanding. Anthropologists and other scholars of religion have offered a variety of theoretical perspectives,

each productive and each limited in its own way. No single theoretical perspective, like no single definition, can probably ever capture the entire essence or nature of religion. Above all, we should avoid reductionism, the attitude that a phenomenon like religion can be explained in terms of (“reduced to”) a single nonreligious cause or basis, whether that cause or basis is psychological, biological, or social. At the same time, we cannot help but notice that scientific/anthropological theories of religion find the “reason” or explanation for religion in nonreligion.

### **Pre-scientific approaches/apologetics**

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With the exception of a few ancient Greek philosophers, the premodern approach to religion tended to involve not explaining religion but *explaining why religion is true*. This is the realm of apologetics, the systematic argumentative defense of a particular religion. While apologetics is an interesting subject in its own right, it is not “anthropological” in any sense and will not be taken up here; besides, the very point of the apologetic exercise is *not to explain* one’s religion but rather to *prove* it. Any religion can, and many religions do, engage in this mutually exclusive effort.

As in all areas of thought, inquiry begins when certainty ends, so it was with the first ancient “doubters” or skeptics that theorizing about religion commenced. Xenophanes in the fifth century BCE was among the first to notice religious diversity and the relation between a religion and its society. He wrote:

Ethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair, Thracians have gods with gray eyes and red hair [. . .] If oxen or lions had hands which enabled them to draw and paint pictures as men do, they would portray their gods as having bodies like their own; horses would portray them as horses, and oxen as oxen.

(quoted in Wheelwright 1966: 33)

Herodotus the historian extended this “comparative method,” suggesting that the various tribal and national gods he encountered were all local names for the same universal deities—his so-called “equivalence of gods” principle. Thus, he concluded, the Egyptian god Horus is the same god as the Greek Apollo, and the Egyptian Osiris is the same as Dionysus. This led him naturally to the notion of cultural borrowing and diffusion to explain the recurrence of the same beliefs in disparate locations. In the later skeptical or Hellenistic era, Euhemerus developed this questioning into a nearly explicit humanistic theory of religion, in which he posited that the gods were merely deified human ancestors or leaders. There is no doubt that this accurately describes at least some premodern (and sometimes even modern) cases, as when pharaohs were deified in their own lifetimes or when deceased Mayan kings were left sitting on their thrones, allegedly still issuing orders. Even today, the “cult of personality” of some living leaders and the reverence they receive after death (e.g., placing Lenin’s corpse in a clear glass sarcophagus in the former Soviet Union for display) suggest a “sacred” attitude toward very powerful humans.

Another premodern, in particular medieval, approach to religion—one that carried over strongly into the modern era—was the comparative or classificatory approach. For instance, the Muslim writer Shahrastani organized religions (not including traditional tribal ones) into four classes: Islam, the literary religions or “religions of the book” (Judaism and Christianity), the quasi-literary religions (e.g., Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism), and the philosophical religions (Buddhism and Hinduism—failing to note, apparently, the expansive literature of these faiths, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and Sutras). Roger Bacon in thirteenth-century Europe also developed a typology, including pagans, idol-worshippers (such as Buddhists and polytheists), Mongols, Muslims, Jews, and, of course, Christians. These systems of classification do not have much, if any, explanatory value, and they tend to be very judgmental and ethnocentric, but at least they were taking other religions seriously after a fashion.

### **Historical/evolutionist theories**

Even some of the ancient “theories” of religion had a historical or evolutionist flavor; diffusion is a historical process, and Herodotus reiterated the even older Homeric notion of a series of historical “ages” in culture and religion, from the “golden” age of gods to the “silver” age of heroes to the “iron” age of normal humans, each inferior to its predecessor. The works of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx reinforced the pattern of historical, “progressive” analysis. Early in the nineteenth century, the philosopher Hegel (1770–1831) proposed a comprehensive historical system progressing from the age of religion to the age of philosophy to the final age of science, in which each phase is a clearer step in self-knowledge of the Universal Spirit. The early sociologist Auguste Comte (1798–1857) described the same three-stage history by the names of theology, metaphysics, and science or positivism. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), a proponent of social Darwinism, echoed this idea in a more down-to-earth version but still with science eventually replacing religion and superstition. Early anthropologists like E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) also had a determined evolutionist streak in their work. Finding animism or “nature worship” to be the first phase of religion, Tylor then traced the development to polytheism and finally monotheism (finding, predictably, that his own form of faith is the “highest”).

Another historical approach in anthropology was diffusionism, not without its ancient precedents like Herodotus. Fritz Grabner (1877–1934), Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), and G. Elliot Smith (1871–1937) represented this tradition in various versions. All diffusionists traced the diversity of the world’s religions back to a few—or in Smith’s case, one (ancient Egypt)—sources; the common origin explained the similarities, and the subsequent historical development of each independent spin-off explained the differences.

## Psychological theories

Some of the earliest “modern” theories of religion were psychological in nature, that is, appealing or referring in some way to the thought or experience of the individual. However, this appeal could differ profoundly. Some forms of psychological theory of religion include emotionalist, psychoanalytic, intellectualist, “primitive mentality,” Lévi-Straussian structuralist, and neurological.

### Emotionalist theories

Many scholars of religion emphasized the emotional quality as its most distinguishing and driving feature. Which particular emotion they emphasized varied. For the seventeenth-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, it was fear; bad things happened to people beyond their understanding or control, so religion was invented to assuage unavoidable fears. Although writing long before anthropology had developed, he made the relativistic observation that out of this universal emotion grew such religious diversity that peoples could hardly recognize let alone accept the religions of others.

Another famous focus for emotionalist theory is the experience of “awe” or “wonder,” advanced by Max Müller (1823–1900) and Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Müller addressed himself to the awareness of “the divine” or “the infinite,” expressed through conventional media like the sun or the moon or the seasons and so on. In his 1856 *Comparative Mythology* he argued that traditional societies had a feeling of the vastness and power of the cosmos but could only express their feelings in poetic symbolism incorporating natural objects; later, they forgot or confused their poetry with literal fact, resulting in religious belief. In other words, religion starts with overwhelming emotion and ends with linguistic error. This led him to characterize religion as “a disease of language.” For Otto, author of *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), the religious emotions—both fear and fascination, love and dread—are a response to the “transcendent,” the overwhelming power of that which is outside humans, the Holy which is “wholly other.” The experience is primary, and religious ideas and practices follow to make sense of it and to harness it in some way.

### Case study 1.2

#### The “disease of language”: spirit

To illustrate what Müller meant by religion being a corruption of language, we can consider one of the key religious concepts of Western society. The crucial concept of “spirit” derives etymologically from the Latin word *spiritus* or “breath.” Breath is present in life and absent in death. Breath is a life force. Breath, therefore, is an apt

continued



metaphor for life or vitality; we see it in many English words, like “inspire” (breathe in life/vitality), “expire” (breathe out or lose life/vitality), and so on. However, the metaphor can be taken literally and reified: Breath becomes a “thing,” not a process of a living body. Breath or spirit comes to be seen as separate and distinct—even detachable—from the body, as a separate source or essence of life, leading in the most extreme case to a Cartesian-type dualism of (dead) body and (living) spirit.

Breath is a powerful and recurring metaphor across cultures. In the Hebrew of the Torah/Old Testament, *ruah* or breath was used to stand for life or spirit, and Greek *pneuma* carried some of the same connotations. Other metaphors also occur in various traditions: Blood is a common image, as is its instrument, the heart. Even modern English-speakers talk of someone with passion being “hot-blooded” or someone with courage having “a lot of heart.” Different cultures locate various emotions or qualities in various body parts or organs and sometimes proceed to concretize those emotions or qualities as distinct “things.” The furthest instance would be not only to reify but deify such qualities, as in a “demon of anger” or a “goddess of love.”

In another vein, the “functionalist” theory of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) held that religious beliefs and institutions exist and function to fill the needs of individual humans, primarily psychological needs. Religion, as in his famous account of ritual in the Trobriand Islands, came into play when individuals needed a feeling of reassurance, control, and, of course, relief from fear; in other situations, where there was little threat or a fair chance of practical success, people did not resort to religion but focused their efforts on “practical” concerns.

### Psychoanalytic theory

A special type of theory is that of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who related or even reduced religion to a mental process, quite literally a “symptom” or manifestation of our mind. For Freud, all humans shared a common set of unconscious drives and instincts. These drives and instincts, many of them antisocial and most of them asocial in a way, must and will be expressed. However, both physical and social reality force us to curb, control, direct, sublimate, and in some cases completely deny or “repress” our nature—to push or hold things down into the unconscious. In particular, Freud suggested in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) that a scene had been played out in real history in which men acted on their drive to kill their father and take possession of his women (repeated in the infamous Oedipus complex, which he thought was part of the deep psychology of all males); subsequently, out of guilt, they reified or deified the dead father, making him an object of veneration and authority—perhaps more powerful dead than alive. The dead but divine father was both the first god and the first conscience or “superego.” From that experience

(literal or mythical) flowed a complex of “religious” beliefs and practices like the incest taboo, totemism, sacrifice, propitiation of spirits, and so on.

Even more basically, religion, like all behavior (including the behavior of “high culture” like art and, of course, dreams) is symptom and neurosis in the Freudian view. Our unconscious, instinctive nature must and will come out, but the ways that it can come out are circumscribed by society. So, our unconscious mind often substitutes an (unacceptable) expression with another (more acceptable) one. Very human kinds of psychological and social dramas, like family dynamics, are played out in the “spiritual” realm, being essentially symbols for the “real” processes in our minds and lives. The living flesh-and-blood father is the prototype of the god, with his power to judge and punish. The child, unable to resist or even respond, becomes the model for the believer, putting his or her faith in the all-powerful adult. Religion, in this interpretation, is “an infantile obsessional neurosis” and one that Freud hoped we would grow out of as we understood and gained control over our own lives and drives (as evinced by his 1927 book *The Future of an Illusion*).

### Intellectualist theories

Other students of comparative religion have downplayed the emotional or “feeling” part and highlighted the explanatory or “thinking” function. In the intellectualist tradition, religion exists as or arises from question-asking or problem-solving. For instance, while Tylor’s framework was evolutionist, his attitude was intellectualist. Primitive humans, he reasoned, had certain experiences that did not make sense to them, such as dreams, visions and hallucinations, and the difference between living and dead beings. To explain these uncanny phenomena, they invented an invisible, nonmortal, detachable part of the self called the soul or spirit. From there, other concepts and behaviors would suggest themselves, such as cults of the dead and propitiation of spirits, etc.

James Frazer (1854–1941) also took an intellectualist if not quite “rationalist” stand in regard to religion. In fact, his contribution was that religion is an answer to a question or problem, just not a rational answer. He too holds a “developmental” or “historical” opinion about religion, except that religion is not, in his view, the first step in the process. Before there was religion, he says, there was magic, which is a kind of faulty reasoning, a brand of pseudoscience. People want to know what causes what, or what they can do to cause or prevent what. Primitive humans had the right general idea—cause and effect—but they got the causes all wrong, indulging in magic instead of effective causal behavior. But still, magic is *technique*, a kind of “technology.” When magic failed, humans then attributed events to intelligent, willful sources, namely spiritual beings. Thus the age of genuine religion begins.

Malinowski also noted the “prescientific” but rational nature of magic, making the distinction between magic and religion. Both magic and religion he linked to emotional needs, as we saw. However, magic is more purely goal-oriented or “instrumental,” whereas religion has no specific “goal” but is more social or moral in nature. Furthermore, no human, even a “primitive” human, is so backward as to rely

exclusively on magic (or religion) to get a job done; while they may pray or perform rituals over their crops, they also plant seeds. So magic is like one tool in the individual's practical toolkit rather than a comprehensive way of life.

### Primitive mentality versus psychic unity

These contrary notions fall within the intellectualist school, but they are unique enough to deserve a separate comment. One of the very first, foundational thoughts in modern anthropology was Adolf Bastian's (1826–1905) concept of *elementargedanken* or “elementary ideas.” All humans, he suggested, share a certain set of basic, fundamental ideas or experiences (what Carl Gustav Jung would later call “archetypes”). All humans are thus mentally the same; there is no profound and unbridgeable difference between “primitive” and “modern” or “religious” and “scientific” humans. There is, in other words, a common “psychic unity” of humanity. What does differ is the local expression or formulation of these elementary ideas, which he called *volkergedanken* or folk ideas or ethnic ideas. Thus, while all humans may have some idea of a transcendent power or a survival after death, the particular forms that these ideas take may and will vary from place to place and from time to time. Religious diversity then was to be examined not for the “surface variation” but for the deeper and more universal patterns and truths that were expressed in them.

The exact opposite position was formulated by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), who stated that the thoughts and beliefs of “primitive” people came from a completely different way of thinking than that of modern people. We moderns, he argued, are logical, especially when it comes to the “law of exclusion”: Something cannot be itself and something else at the same time. Primitives, however, know nothing of this. Instead, they are “prelogical,” operating on the “law of participation,” which allows different or even contradictory things to coexist or coreside simultaneously. For instance, a statue could be a statue and a god all at once, or a being could be a human and an animal at the same time. If this analysis is true, then there is a deep gulf between them and us; however, even he himself disavowed it in his lifetime, and it is easy to see that “primitives” are not always prelogical (they may perform hunting rituals, but they sharpen their spears too) and that “moderns” are not always logical (they may use jet planes and cell phones but still believe that a wafer is simultaneously a human body—the well-known doctrine of the transubstantiation, that the Catholic communion wafer literally “becomes” flesh). We will return to the discussion of mental dualism in Chapter 3.

### Lévi-Straussian structuralism

Structuralism generally refers to the view that the meaning or the functioning of a phenomenon depends less on the nature of its individual “bits” than the relationships between those bits. Language is perhaps the paradigm of a structural system, in which the meaning of a word is determined by its place in an array of words, and the meaning of a sentence is determined by its place in an array of sentences. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) revolutionized linguistics with this structuralist approach,

emphasizing the “grammar” or transformational rules which allowed people who have mastered the general rules of language (*langue* in his terminology) to produce specific acts of speech (*parole*).

Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908) was hugely influential in applying this grammatical approach to religion, especially mythology. Providing anthropology with a “method” to analyze and interpret myths, he suggests that the symbols and events in myth can only be understood as utterances within a grammar or pattern of transformations; as he writes in *The Savage Mind*, religious facts such as myths or totems “are codes suitable for conveying messages which can be transposed into other codes, and for expressing messages received by means of different codes in terms of their own system” (1966: 75–6). Thus, the analysis of myths and other religious facts involves the discovery of the underlying relationships between the units or details of the whole.

While all versions of structuralism claim something similar, Lévi-Strauss’s version goes further, which is why it is included in our discussion of psychological theories. He asserts that at the foundation of mythical transformations is the nature of the human mind itself, which operates on binary grounds. The human mind classifies things into pairs, such as nature/culture, male/female, alive/dead, raw/cooked, and so forth. The mind also seeks to resolve and unify these binary contradictions, but since such resolution is not permanent if even possible, humans generate repeated, different, yet recognizably similar attempts to do so. Thus, any myth, for instance, will appear to be struggling with the same issues over and over. Add to this Lévi-Strauss’s suggestion that the mind is a *bricoleur* (1966: 20–1) or playful creator of meaning and manifestation, and we see the religious results: an ongoing attempt to examine basic existential themes in multiple ways through “analogies and comparisons,” metaphors and poetry. We will return to this theory in our discussion of myth in Chapter 4.

## Neurological theories

Where psychology meets neuroscience, there is an assortment of approaches to religion that emphasize the physical substrate that makes belief possible if not necessary. This has sometimes taken the form of talk about a “god spot” in the brain, an area or structure that is “tuned” or “designed” for religious functioning. Whether the brain makes the religion or the religion makes the brain (that is, supernatural beings or forces arranged our brain as a “receiver” for spiritual “transmissions”) is one dispute.

A popular study by Newberg, d’Aquili, and Rause (2002) examined mystics in the midst of their practices and identified measurable differences in their brains in and out of mystical states, with differing levels of activity in the left temporal lobe during meditation. Their conclusion was that, since ostensibly brains react to the external world, the brain-activity of adepts was evidence of their experience of some real external phenomenon or power. Others, such as Michael Persinger (1987), have used medical technology to assert quite the opposite: by stimulating certain areas of the brain with an electrical device, Persinger has been able to generate “religious

experience” in subjects, leading him to conclude that religion is a result of the brain’s own activity rather than of some reality outside of the brain. It has also been clinically observed that patients who suffer from left-hemisphere epileptic seizures often develop obsessive interest in religious matters, which lasts long after the actual brain events.

Finally, Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988) have proposed another neurological basis of religious notions and motifs in what they refer to as “entoptic” images. These are the kinds of patterns that are produced spontaneously by the nature of the human eye and nervous system, consisting of geometric forms like dots, lines, zigzags, and so on. These patterns and shapes are commonly reported by people in trance and other altered mental states and represented in the art of traditional societies, such as rock paintings. These physiological experiences, then, would have been interpreted as “supernatural” in origin and meaning and attributed with significance and power beyond their organic sources.

### **Social theories**

Not all scholars of religion did or do turn to the individual or the inner workings of the mind to interpret it. They note that, while religion may have some root or origin in the brain/mind, it is a public or social phenomenon which cannot be explained in psychological and subjective terms alone; further, many individuals never have a “religious experience” at all. Such scholars, anthropologists among them, turn to an “external” and more social style of explanation. As a school of thought, social theories emphasize the role of groups and institutions, of community, and/or morality, which were often conspicuously lacking in the previous theories.

### **Functionalism**

Much of the pioneering work on the sociology of religion was done not by anthropologists but by classicists studying ancient Greek, Roman, and Hebrew sources. (This was not unproblematic work, as it was not popular to treat the Christian Bible as just another document to be analyzed scientifically.) One brave soul was W. Robertson Smith (1846–94), who lost a teaching job for searching for the origins of Old Testament/Torah rituals and beliefs. His discovery was that ancient peoples had gods and religions *as peoples*, that is, that religious beliefs and practices had “national” or “tribal” or “ethnic” sources. Each group had its own god(s), which, as Xenophanes noticed 2,500 years earlier, resembled the people of the group and legitimated the ways of the group. In fact, the essence of religion, Smith decided, was the communal ritual, a social act by definition. Explicit “doctrine” or creed came later as an explanation for the rituals, but the bedrock of religion was social behavior and, even more so, the social group that engages in the behavior.

The most influential early sociologist, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), took this idea and developed it extensively, particularly in his groundbreaking 1915 book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. He asked the question, What is most basic in

religion? If we take away every other layer and accouterment, what is left? His answer, as we saw in the definitions above, was an irreducible dichotomy between the “sacred” and the “profane.” The sacred is the special, powerful, set-apart realm—the one that we dare not touch or approach carelessly, if at all. The profane is the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday realm—the one that we dwell in most of the time but that would disrespect or corrupt the sacred by contact. But where could such a notion as “the sacred” come from? Other analysts would point to the psychology of awe and wonder, but Durkheim pointed to the sociology of the group—literally. What is it that is more powerful than the individual, that exists before the individual, that survives past the individual, and upon which the individual depends? It is the social group: “this power exists, it is society” (Durkheim 1965: 257). The group is a “social fact” and an important one. There is the society as a whole, and within it the family and the clan and the village and other concrete social aggregates. These social realities are symbolized, with a name or a banner or a “totem.” They have their stories, their songs, their designs, their dances. They have their god(s). As he reasoned, “The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can therefore be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem” (Durkheim 1965: 236). In other words, when the group celebrates or worships its spirits or gods, it is really symbolizing or representing its society to itself.

But tribal, social religion does more than celebrate; it creates. The main issue is social integration and cohesion—the creation and perpetuation of the group as a group. This is accomplished in two ways. The first is the establishment of a moral community—a group of people who share common norms, values, and morals. Religion not only tells you what to worship and how to make it rain but what kind of person to be and what the correct behaviors are in your group. By recognizing common rules and authorities, individuals become a community, with shared identity and shared interests. The second means of achieving group cohesion is through the effectiveness of ritual. This communal activity not only gives members ideas and beliefs in common, but it operates at a lower and more instinctive level as well through a psychological power he called “effervescence.”

When they are together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all the minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others. The initial impulse thus proceeds, growing as it goes, as an avalanche grows in its advance. And as such active passions so free from all control could not fail to burst out, on every side one sees nothing but violent gestures, cries, veritable howls, and deafening noises of every sort, which aid in intensifying still more the state of mind which they manifest [ . . . ] So it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born.

(Durkheim 1965: 247)

Whether or not this is an accurate portrayal of traditional ritual (and in many ways it is not), it does show a keen awareness of the power of collective action. It is well established that human beings are more excitable and suggestible in groups than individually, and the more active the group the greater the effect.

### Historical materialism

One of the dominant perspectives on religion over the past century and a half has been that of Karl Marx (1818–83). His theory, identified most closely with political economy and the ideology of communism, is actually a theory of social structure and social change. Basically, his argument is that the driving force, the motor, of society and culture is not ideas but activity or practice. He is talking about the way that humans relate to the world through their work or labor—the ways that we express and “objectify” ourselves in our productions—and through the social relationships in which they organize themselves to perform that work.

The central concepts in historical materialism are “mode of production” and “relations of production.” However, Marx also recognizes that a society is not a simple, homogeneous thing but is composed of various subgroups with different positions in the relations of production—different roles to play, different perspectives on the system, different interests, and different power. He calls these subgroups “classes.” In class-differentiated societies, ordinarily one class has more control over the mode and relations of production than the other(s). The “upper class” is not only richer and more powerful, but it is also dominant in ideas and values. As he concludes, the dominant ideas of a society are the ideas of the dominant group of the society, not least because that group controls not only the “economy” but also the educational system, whatever forms of “media” exist, and the institutions of society, including the religion.

Thus, religion, he opines, reflects the on-the-ground realities of social life. If the economy and the politics are very centralized, then religion will be centralized too, with one or at most a few gods that rule everything. However, religion is more than reflection; it is also legitimation. That is, people in the society—especially those who are not in the upper class—may ask why they should participate in it. What is the benefit to them? Religion provides the answer, by setting up and enforcing a view of the world that explains and authorizes the current social arrangement. Perhaps the purest version of this idea is the “divine right of kings” conception from European history, which “proved” that the contemporary political system was correct; the traditional Chinese “mandate of heaven” accomplished the same purpose. In all societies, in the “charter” function mentioned above, religion helps to account for why things are the way they are and why we should go along with it. However, religion does not always *accurately* represent society; it can misrepresent and even mystify social relations. Leaders may intentionally foster religious views that prop up their power and prevent challenges. This is why Marx called religion an “opiate of the masses” and the “heart of a heartless world.” This is also why Marx, like Freud, hoped and expected that religion would go away.

A variation on the materialist perspective can be found in the work of Marvin Harris. In such books as *Cow, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* (1974), he argues that religious practices like cow worship in India or pig aversion in Judaism can be based on immediate material—namely, economic and environmental—causes. In India, cows are worth more alive than dead, so religion created an aura of supernatural significance around them to encourage people to preserve them. In the desert of Israel, pigs were economically unviable, so the same supernatural aura castigated them. In whatever case, a practical, nonspiritual reason for the belief or behavior can be found, which is then wrapped in a shroud of religious meaning as a form of legitimation and compulsion.

### Structural functionalism

Within professional anthropology, functionalism under the influence of Malinowski was the first significant theory of culture and of religion. However, Malinowski's version of functionalism as usually perceived is not a very social theory; each individual could theoretically invent his or her own unique language, religion, or eating utensils to get the practical job done (we will see in Chapter 4 that this is hardly the whole of Malinowski's approach to religion). But individuals do not (mostly) invent their own solutions to life's problems; they learn and inherit the solutions of their ancestors and peers.

A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) was the main rival for anthropological theory in the first part of the twentieth century. He agreed that function was a central issue but not the function that Malinowski and the “individualists” promoted. Rather, Radcliffe-Brown emphasized the needs of the group or of society. But what needs could society have other than the cumulative needs of its constituent members? The answer is, as Durkheim pointed out, integration and cohesion. It is entirely possible for every individual to be well fed and relieved from fear but for society to collapse or atomize. Radcliffe-Brown, on the other hand, saw society and its groups and institutions as having their own needs and, therefore, perceived the function of any item of culture or society to be “the contribution that they make to the formation and maintenance of a social order” (1965: 154).

Structural functionalism insists that religion plays its most important role in the creation and maintenance of the group and society, not the comfort of the individual. One argument for this perspective is that without social maintenance society can come to an end, endangering the lives of all the individual members. So, as Durkheim stated, religion gives members of society a common identity, activity, interest, and destiny. It makes one out of many. Even more so, there are moments in the “life” of a society when its existence is threatened—say, times of death, war, or other crisis. Ordinary ritual and belief may get society through the ordinary times, but extraordinary rituals and beliefs may be necessary for these extraordinary times. Thus, funeral rituals, for instance, might be viewed as giving comfort to the grieving survivors, or they might be viewed as holding them together as a society at a time when fights or other conflicts could rip it apart. Some rituals have a purely social



function; Fourth of July festivities are fun for American individuals, but, more importantly, they remind and refresh the solidarity that binds them together as Americans.

A second argument for social functions of religion follows from this one. Individual functionalism depends on religion relieving fear and stress and other negative emotions. Radcliffe-Brown astutely realized that religious beliefs and actions sometimes actually increase fear and stress; after all, if one does not believe in hell, one has no fear of it. There is the additional fear of the powerful and often capricious or malicious spirits. There is the fear of performing a ritual wrong and suffering the effects. There is the fear of the shaman or witch or sorcerer who can use spiritual power for good or ill. So, a simple “religion makes life better” view is simplistic and inaccurate. Sometimes, the individual may have to be worse off for the group to be better off. Even “scapegoating” and sacrifice mean pain and loss for the victim but (hopefully) gain for the group.

### Symbolic/interpretive anthropology

All of the above theorists (with the exception of Malinowski, as we will see in Chapter 4) have relied heavily on the concept of “symbol.” It seems self-evident to us that humans use symbols and that religion in particular is a system of symbols, although we will have the opportunity to critique this assumption in Chapter 3 and beyond. Nevertheless, a school of anthropology developed in the 1960s, at least partly influenced by the “revolution in philosophy” occasioned by the emphasis on symbols as conveyors and enablers of thought. Suzanne Langer in 1942 had announced that all human thought was symbolic in the sense of condensing meaning into some sound, gesture, image, etc.; symbols were thus “vehicles for conceptions,” and conceptual thought would be impossible without them.

Anthropologists like Mary Douglas (b. 1921), Victor Turner (1920–83), and Clifford Geertz (b. 1926) pioneered a symbolic or interpretive approach to religion or, in the case of Geertz, of culture in general. As noted above, religion in Geertz’s definition is a system of symbols, and culture itself is a yet more extensive and complete system of symbols, a “web of significance” of our own making upon which we are consequently suspended (Geertz 1973: 5). So symbols play a decisive role in Geertz’s understanding: they “are tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs” (1973: 91). Even more, they are *effective*; Geertz regards them as extrasomatic control mechanisms for organizing experience and governing behavior. Thus, symbols are not mental but social, observable in the “flow of behavior” and the “pattern of life” (Geertz 1973: 17)—and shaping both.

Victor Turner develops the symbolic approach even more explicitly in the direction of “performance,” eventually (e.g., 1974) offering a theatrical model in which religion, especially ritual, is a drama unfolding over time, through various acts and stages. Elsewhere and earlier, he regards ritual as a “process” (Turner 1969). For both Turner and Geertz, religion and its rituals and symbols are not static but alive,

embedded in and constitutive of social order and individual experience. The “effectiveness” of symbols, therefore, resides not only or mainly in human minds but also in political systems (Geertz 1980) and the very human body (Douglas 1970).

### **“Modular” theories**

Recently, but not only recently, some scholars within and outside of anthropology appear to be converging on an approach to religion that emphasizes the modular or composite quality of religion. The idea of modularity is not new or unique to religion. We know that the brain is a modular organ, not a single homogeneous one, composed of various specialized functional areas which combine to give us our human mental experience. Similarly, the modular view of religion is grounded on the notion that religion is not a single homogeneous thing and perhaps not a “thing” at all. Rather, it is a combination and, therefore, a particular cumulative expression of elements—elements that may not be specifically “religious.” As William James (1842–1910) noted over a century ago, for instance, in regard to “religious emotions”:

There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man’s natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations; and similarly of all the various sentiments which may be called into play in the lives of religious persons. [ . . . ]

As there thus seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw, so there might conceivably also prove to be no one specific and essential kind of religious object, and no one specific and essential kind of religious act.

(James 1958: 40)

If this is correct, then our quest for “religion” may be a misguided one and more of a product of the Western historical and cultural perspective than of religion as such.

### **The “building block” approach: Wallace**

Anthony Wallace (b. 1923), in his influential discussion of religion, suggested that religion may ultimately be “a summative notion and cannot be taken uncritically to imply [ . . . ] one single unifying, internally coherent, carefully programmed set of rituals and beliefs” (1966: 78). His view was that religion starts from a single premise, the “supernatural premise” that “souls, supernatural beings, and supernatural forces exist” (Wallace 1966: 52). This premise must be given shape, and he suggested that there are thirteen “elementary particles” or categories of religious

action that serve as building blocks for religion, including (1) prayer; (2) music and dancing and singing; (3) physiological exercises, including substance use and physical hardships and trials; (4) exhortation or orders, encouragements, and threats; (5) myth; (6) simulation/imitation such as magic, witchcraft, and ritual; (7) mana or the power one gets from contact with powerful objects; (8) taboo or the prohibition from contact with certain things; (9) feasts; (10) sacrifice; (11) congregation or group activity; (12) inspiration, such as hallucination and mysticism, and (13) symbols. Notice that most if not all of these, as James indicates, have their secular variation as well.

These elementary particles can be aggregated into bundles or sequences of behavior, resulting in “ritual complexes,” along with the “rationalization” of such behaviors in the form of beliefs (for him, beliefs were quite secondary). Any particular ritual complex may incorporate any set and order of elements and exclude others; in fact, any religion may prioritize one or more elements over others, for instance, elaborating myth or sacrifice while overlooking magic or witchcraft. Next, ritual complexes and their associated beliefs and social roles are combined into higher-level “cult institutions,” which he defined as “a set of rituals all having the same general goal, all explicitly rationalized by a set of similar or related beliefs, and all supported by the same social group” (Wallace 1966: 75). Finally, when “a loosely related group of cult institutions and other, even less well-organized special practices and beliefs” (Wallace 1966: 78) are agglomerated, the result is “a religion.” Thus, any particular religion may differ from any other particular religion in the selection and organization of its constituent pieces, and the pieces may not even be essentially “religious,” but in specific combinations and arrangements, the product is specific “religions.”

### The evolutionary and agency approach: Guthrie, Boyer, and Atran

Observers have noted since the time of Xenophanes that religious entities tend to have human-like traits, a phenomenon called anthropomorphism. In 1993, Stewart Guthrie offered his “new theory” of religion based on a serious appropriation of the anthropomorphic idea. However, from his perspective, anthropomorphism in regard to the supernatural (and the natural) world is not a mistake but rather a “good bet”: “It is a bet because the world is uncertain, ambiguous, and in need of interpretation. It is a good bet because the most valuable interpretations usually are those that disclose the presence of whatever is most important to us. That usually is other humans” (Guthrie 1993: 3). Of course, supernatural entities are not *exactly* like humans: they are often larger or more powerful or invisible or immortal, but still these are extensions or negations of human qualities (humans mortal, supernatural beings immortal). The key to humanness is not, ultimately, in our bodies or our mortality but in our *intentionality*, our minds and wills.

Pascal Boyer’s project to “explain religion” begins with the now-familiar premise that human thought is not a unitary and homogeneous thing but the result of inter-operating thought modules, a “confederacy” of explanatory devices which he calls

“inference systems.” Among these systems are three with particular significance—concept formation, attention to exception, and agency. Thought proceeds via the creation of concepts and even more abstract “templates”; templates are like blank forms with certain fields to be filled, and concepts are the specific way that the form is filled. For example, the template “tool” has certain options, and the concept “hammer” fills those options in a particular way. Likewise, the template “animal” or “person” has certain qualities with a set of possible variables. One of these qualities of persons is agency—the ability to engage in intelligent, deliberate, and more or less “free” action.

As interested as humans are in our concepts, we are drawn to exceptions and violations of them. Humans are mortal animals with two arms; a three-armed human would be interesting, but an immortal human would be even more so. Some ideas, Boyer claims, have the potential to “stick” in our minds better because they are just exceptional enough: As he offers, a being that is immortal has sticking power, but a being that only exists on Tuesdays does not. Not surprisingly, “religious concepts *violate* certain expectations from ontological categories [but] they *preserve* other expectations” (Boyer 2001: 62). Among the most critical ones that religion preserves are agency and reciprocity/exchange. Supernatural entities “are not represented as having *human* features in general but as having *minds* which is much more specific” (Boyer 2001: 144), which is not such a stretch for human thinking, since even animals manifest some agency. Furthermore, it is advantageous, as Guthrie opined, to attribute mind to nature and supernature, since (to paraphrase Pascal’s famous wager), if we are correct it could be critically important, but if we are wrong no harm is done.

As Boyer concludes, religion is constructed out of “mental systems and capacities that are there anyway [therefore] the notion of religion as a special domain is not just unfounded but in fact rather ethnocentric” (2001: 311). In this view, religion does not require a separate explanation at all, but is rather a product or by-product of how mind in society functions in all, including nonreligious, contexts. In particular, he points to the evolved mental predispositions of humans, the nature of social living, processes of information exchange, and the processes of deriving inferences. If nonhuman agents exist, and they can be engaged as social beings—as “social exchange partners”—this is clearly worth thinking about and acting on.

Scott Atran has elaborated this view further and in his own direction. He asserts too that religion involves “the very same cognitive and affective structures as nonreligious beliefs and practices—and no others—but in (more or less) systematically distinct ways” (2002: ix). Since “there is no such entity as ‘religion,’” there is no need to “explain” it in a specific way. Religion is once again a by-product and epiphenomenon of other, generally human processes or modules, of which he identifies several: perceptual modules, primary emotional modules (for “unmediated” physiological responses like fear and surprise and anger and disgust), secondary affective modules (for reactions like anxiety and guilt and love), and conceptual modules. Agency is also high on his list of human priorities, and we have elaborate and essential processes for detecting and interpreting it, especially because we

can be fooled and faked by others. Supernatural agents are a mere and fairly reasonable extrapolation of human and natural agency, “by-products of a naturally selected cognitive mechanism for detecting agents—such as predators, protectors, and prey—and for dealing rapidly and economically with stimulus situations involving people and animals” (Atran 2002: 15). No wonder, he concludes, that “supernatural agency is the most culturally recurrent, cognitively relevant, and evolutionarily compelling concept in religion” (Atran 2002: 57).

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## Conclusion

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Many sciences (and nonsciences) take an interest in religion, each with its own purposes and methods. Anthropology takes its lead from the dazzling diversity of religion, not judging whether any or all religions are true but treating them all as influential personal and social forces. This means, among other things, examining each in its social context and in its own terms. This further means attending to how religions are actually practiced and used by real people in their real socially structured lives. Religion is part of lived human existence. How we define and conceptualize religion will affect what we accept *as* religion, along with what aspects of it we particularly attend to. No definition may capture all of the depth of religion, but each contributes a portion to our final understanding. As we move from definition and description to analysis and explanation, we find various possible approaches and emphases, each again contributing to our complete understanding. What we find in the end is that religion is a profoundly human and social phenomenon—arising from and addressing intellectual, emotional, and social sources—in which the nonhuman and “supernatural” are seen as profoundly human and social.

## Religious entities and concepts

### The anthropology of belief

#### Religious entities: beings and forces

Spiritual beings

Human spirits

Nonhuman spirits

Spiritual forces

#### Religious conceptions: the universe and human existence

Cosmology and cosmogony

Theodicy: explaining evil

Human conception, birth, and death

End of time: eschatology

#### Conclusion

Whatever the ultimate source(s) of religion, and whatever other components it may include (emotional, behavioral, moral, etc.), any religion contains certain ideas and conceptions about what kinds of things exist in the world, what they are like, and what they have done. We might refer to this as the “ontology” that each religion embodies, in the sense of the “existents” that it posits—the beings, the forces, and the facts of religious reality. These are commonly referred to as the “beliefs” of religion.

Not all anthropologists and other scholars of religion have stressed the belief dimension equally. Anthony Wallace, as we noticed, regarded behavior and ritual to be paramount and “myth” and “belief” to be an adjunct to them. However, we typically concentrate on, if not privilege, the “idea” or “intellectual” side of religion. This is partly because Western culture accentuates thought or ideas, especially over “ritual,” which often seems to be only empty form. Even more so, academics prize thought, ideas, and concepts as our primary interest and medium. Partly, it is an artifact of Christian religious habits, in which belief or “doctrine” is held high. Beliefs are “discursive,” something to talk about and to “know,” both flowing from and to a view of religion and culture as a language or a “text” to be spoken or read.

Accordingly, many definitions of religion feature, if not highlight, the concept of belief. Recall that E. B. Tylor's minimal definition of religion was "belief in spiritual beings." Durkheim insisted that religion is "a unified system of beliefs and practices." In other, although not all, anthropological definitions, its beliefs represent the essence of a religion, and belief represents the essence of religion. Scholars and laypeople alike have regularly assumed, often uncritically, that belief is the most important aspect of religion, that we can study and know the "beliefs" of a religion in a straightforward way, and that there is such a thing as "belief" in the first place.

In this chapter we will investigate the range of kinds of topics and claims that religions tend to offer conceptions about. These will include not only the familiar matters of spirits and gods and supernatural forces but also subjects that religions often (but by no means always) talk about, such as the beginning or end of the world, the structure and nature of reality, the beginning or end of human life, and so on. We will see the striking diversity in which of these matters particular religions elaborate or leave unelaborated, let alone in the precise elaborations. We will also observe that the standard approach of developing "types" of religions does not quite succeed, since many ideas and concepts cross or defy typological boundaries. Any actual religion may integrate ideas and concepts from what would be considered different "types" of religion. Our exercise will give us our first sustained opportunity to struggle with the problem of language in discussing and describing religion—language like "god" and "spirit" and "soul," etc. Where such concepts appear, they may vary more or less greatly from colloquial uses of the terms; in some cases, they may not appear at all. Finally, we will have the occasion to reflect on the very notion of "belief"—what it is, whether we even have a clear and coherent understanding of it, and whether it is essential to the religious worldview. In the best anthropological tradition, we want to interrogate concepts and relativize understandings, making sure not to impute to other cultures what they do not impute to themselves.

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## The anthropology of belief

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Belief is so self-evident to most of us, so current in our vocabulary, that we cannot help but speak and think in terms of it. Often enough, the term is not even defined, since it seems so patently obvious; we think that we could not speak of religion at all unless we spoke the language of belief. Melford Spiro, in his study of Burmese religion, does take the time to define the term, by which he means:

any cognition concerning human beings, society, or the world that is held to be true. By "religious belief" I mean any belief that directly or indirectly relates to beings who are held to possess greater power than humans and animals, with whom human beings sustain relationship (interactions and transactions), and who can affect human lives for good or for evil. In short, "religious" beliefs are beliefs related to supernatural beings.

(Spiro 1978: xii)

Thus, Spiro ends by affirming the conventional view that religious beliefs are beliefs about supernatural beings. But more interestingly for our purposes, he proposes that belief is not unique to religion; religious beliefs are a subset of beliefs in general. What is distinctive about beliefs in general is that they are “cognitions” and that they are “held to be true” by those people who have such cognitions.

Such a definition and attitude does not depart much from our conventional sense of belief and believing. However, others have asked whether belief is (1) as simple as we think and (2) as universal as we think. Rodney Needham has attempted an extended analysis of belief in a crosscultural context. He starts with the observation that the notion that humans “can be said to believe, without qualification and irrespective of their cultural formation, is an implicit premise in anthropological writings” (1972: 3). However, anthropologists cannot and dare not leave premises implicit, including or especially their own premises. He goes on to find that belief is a much fuzzier concept than we realize and that it is a much more culturally specific, rather than culturally universal, concept than we think.

He discusses, for instance, a wide variety of cultures and languages in which the word for and experience of belief are very complex and not necessarily like our everyday notions of them. Nuer, Navajo, Hindi, Kikchi (Guatemala), Uduk (Ethiopia), Penan (Borneo), and Chinese are some of the languages he surveys, and he finds three important consequences:

The first consists in a clearer and more evidential recognition of the bewildering variety of senses attaching to words in foreign languages which are indifferently translated by the English “believe.” The second is that, whereas it may often seem possible, in comparing other languages, to isolate this as the equivalent in each of the English word “believe,” there are languages in which senses that to an English interpretation are quite disparate are nevertheless so conjoined, and so equally expressed, as to make it unjustifiable to abstract any one of them as definitive. Thirdly, there are apparently languages in which [. . .] there is no verbal concept at all which can convey exactly what may be understood by the English word “believe.”

(Needham 1972: 37)

In fact, Evans-Pritchard did warn us in his classic study of Nuer religion that “belief” is not quite an indigenous concept for this society: “There is, in any case, I think, no word in the Nuer language which can stand for ‘I believe’” (1956: 9). Instead, the Nuer say that they *ngath* their god/spirit (*kwoth*), which Evans-Pritchard indicates we should translate as “trust,” not “believe in.”

Other societies have given us equal reason to pause. Feinberg, for example, argues that the Anutans of the Solomon Islands do have a local belief concept. “The word *pakatonu*, literally ‘make straight,’ is used in almost precisely the manner of the English ‘to believe.’ Anutans are very much concerned with truth and falsity. After relating a story or an incident, they ask each other whether they ‘believe’ (*pakatonu*) the narrative’s assertions” (Feinberg 1996: 107). On the opposite hand,



Howard (1996: 135) concludes that inhabitants of Rotuma had no word for belief prior to missionization, when the missionaries had to coin a new word, *pilifi*, to represent the Christian idea. Thus, we are not saying that no religions—or no religions other than Christianity—have a concept of belief. We are saying that we cannot attribute such a concept to them unless they actually do have one. If they have a local belief concept, and understand their religious experience accordingly, so be it. However, “we are not sharing their apprehension and are not understanding their thought if we foist this typically Western distinction on to them” (Needham 1972: 175) when they do not recognize it themselves. My surmise is that we would find more exceptions to the “belief-assumption” if we thought to question it.

A further problem with the belief concept in crosscultural studies is that it has both “objective” and “subjective” aspects. In other words, “belief” has a propositional and a psychological nature. As an objective, propositional issue, a belief constitutes a “truth claim,” an assertion about something “real” in the world. If a person is said to “believe” something—or to “believe in” something—that means that the person takes it to be true. Of course, as Needham reminds us, such a belief “is not a guarantee of reality, and it does not necessarily depend on the reality of what is believed” (1972: 66). In fact, a belief can quite easily be false, and in some ways the typical English usage of the term implies uncertainty or the possibility of falseness (i.e., one does not say that they “believe” that two plus two equals four or that they “believe in” their foot).

As a “subjective” or psychological issue, beliefs are additionally and necessarily construed as mental states of individuals. That is to say, if we say that a person believes X, we are making a statement about that person as well as about external reality. A person who believes X should *know* that he/she believes X and be able to declaim X. Is there such a thing as “belief” if a person does not and cannot self-avow the belief? Can we attribute perhaps “tacit” or “implied” belief to a society? This is one of the key questions in anthropology. Further, can we attribute it *equally strongly* and *equally clearly* to all members? Spiro’s response is that the psychological element of belief is not one-dimensional but multidimensional, yielding at least five levels of personal belief: acquaintance or familiarity with the belief, understanding of the belief in the conventional way, advancing the belief as “true,” holding the belief as important or central to the believer’s life, and following the belief as a motivational or guiding force (Spiro 1978: xiii–xiv). For any given belief in any given society, individuals will fall anywhere along this spectrum.

This is particularly timely because anthropologists often seek out the “specialists” on religion in a society to discover its beliefs. However, as Spiro urges, “there is no a priori reason to assume that the meanings attributed to beliefs by religious virtuosos are shared by the other members of the group” (1978: xv). Even worse, Needham finds no consistent or “essential” component to the psychological aspect of belief—no specific mental or physical state that goes with it or distinguishes it—making the entire approach problematic. Even in vernacular English, “belief” is a word with three quite distinct senses. First, it can be used in the propositional sense, to claim that a proposition is true, such as “God exists”; supposedly, other religions could be

imputed to have beliefs like “*jukurpa* exists” or “*hekura* spirits exist.” Second, it can be used in the sense of “confidence” or “trust,” as in “I believe my wife will pick me up from the airport”; here, the existence of my wife and the airport are not the issue. Third, it can be used in the sense of “commitment” or “value,” as in “I believe in democracy,” in which one is not disputing the existence of democracy but the goodness of it.

These senses can be conjoined or disjoined in any particular language or religion, and their interrelation can change over time. For example, Ruel (1997) demonstrates that the conception of belief in Western (including ancient Greek) civilization and Christianity has evolved, from a kind of “trust” in god(s) to specific propositions about God and Christ (the *kerygma* or “creed”) to the notion of “grace” based on the personal experience of and commitment to God and Christ to a conception of belief as an “adventure of faith” which does not have any particular destination or make any specific claims. The evolutionary trajectory of belief in Christianity is, then, distinctively “local” and historical—that is, culturally and religiously relative—and not to be found in every religion. Many religions do not have any “creed” of explicit propositions about their supernatural worlds, and many do not mix fact, trust, and value in the English/Christian way (many do not “trust” their spirits at all, or even like them). Ruel arrives where Needham arrives, concluding that the English and Western concept of belief is “complex, highly ambiguous, and unstable” (Needham 1972: 43) and “is demonstrably an historical amalgam, composed of elements traceable to Judaic mystical doctrine and Greek styles of discourse” (1972: 49).

Fortunately, in a way, the problem is not insurmountable. Members of a society might not advance and analyze propositions about their supernatural realms the way we do, but they communicate and inform us about those realms in various ways. Not only in their (potentially rare) explicit avowals but also in their behaviors, their stories, their rituals, and their everyday lives they give us clues about their religious ideas. “Belief” might be the wrong word for it, partly because they do not assert it the way we do, or cling to it the way we do, or doubt it the way we do. Following Clifford Geertz, religious ideas may be, for the member, more along the line of “common sense” than proposition. Just as it would be inaccurate or unfamiliar to say that we “believe” that rain makes you wet or that microbes make you sick, so it might be inaccurate or unfamiliar (to them) to call their ideas “beliefs.” What both of us share is a “taken for granted,” “doesn’t everybody know this?” attitude toward our ideas, even if on different subjects and with different views on those subjects. For many people (remote and nearby), religion is like common sense in that both seem self-evident, immediate, even obvious, no questions asked or needed. In fact, that is the very appeal of common sense and often of religion: “the unspoken premise from which common sense draws its authority [is] that it presents reality neat” (Geertz 1983: 76), just the way it is to anyone who has eyes and brains.

To be more explicit, Geertz proposes that common sense “as a cultural system” has five properties, which we recognize in many religious systems as well. They are (1) “naturalness,” that it presents matters as being simple and simply what they are;

(2) “practicalness,” that it tells us what we need to do to get by; (3) “thinness,” that what seems true on the surface really is true; (4) “immethodicalness,” that ideas are not “theoretical,” elaborated, or particularly thought-out; and (5) “accessibleness,” that anyone can, and everyone should, “get it” (Geertz 1983: 85–91). Ultimately, common sense, and religion with it, “represents the world as a familiar world, one everyone can, and should, recognize, and within which everyone stands, or should, on his own feet” (Geertz 1983: 91).

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## Religious entities: beings and forces

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We have been adequately chastened about the relativity of belief as a descriptive and analytical category. Yet we can, with some trepidation, talk about the religious ideas or contents that constitute their ontologies. Every religion does, of course, contain ideas of and about nonhuman and superhuman agencies in the universe; however, not all of these agencies are equally “agentive,” that is, not all equally have “personalities” or “minds” or “wills.” This is another reason why Tylor’s venerable definition is insufficient: not all religions have supernatural *beings*. At the same time, all religions have much more than just “beliefs” about the supernatural; they also have more or less elaborated and explicit stories about them, more or less formal activities to engage in with and in regard to them, and more or less specific behavioral or “moral” principles or codes that are demanded of people because of them. All of these will be subjects for discussion in later chapters.

In some societies, there may be many religious entities or a few, although no religion actually includes only one. Some religions do not include beings at all but rather one or more forces—*impersonal* energies or principles that underlie the world. And some include a combination of beings and forces, which is why we cannot speak of these as “types.” Furthermore, “supernatural” is another one of those problematic terms; not all cultures have exactly this concept in the Western/Christian way, and even when they do, there is not necessarily anything “unnatural” about them. Often, what we would call supernatural entities are quite “natural,” or on the borderline between natural and not, from other religions’ perspectives. It all depends on what one’s conception of nature is; if ghosts or gods exist in “nature,” then they are natural too after a fashion.

### Spiritual beings

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Most, but not quite all, religions have notions about more or less well-known spiritual beings. But what precisely is a “spiritual” being? All of the beings that we ordinarily meet are “physical” or “material”—that is, they have corporeal bodies, they take up space, they are constrained by laws of motion, they age and die, etc. Spiritual beings are different in some (but not every) way. In some versions they do not have physical bodies, or they might not occupy space or might be able to coexist in the same space as physical bodies, or they can move and act in ways that defy natural law,

or they do not age or do not die. That leaves a great deal of room for diversity, but the one thing that spiritual beings have in common is that they are *beings*, that is, that they are individuals with wills and “minds” and “personalities” of their own. Beyond that, the variation is almost limitless.

Some observers have attempted to distinguish “spirits” from “gods.” According to the definition given by Levy, Mageo, and Howard, spirits and gods stand at opposite ends of “a continuum of culturally defined spiritual entities ranging from well-defined, socially encompassing beings at one pole, to socially marginal, fleeting presences at the other” (1996: 11). Apparently, gods are intended to be the former, spirits the latter. They offer four variables by which gods and spirits differ—structure, personhood, experience, and morality. By structure they mean that gods are the focus of more detailed social institutions, including priesthoods, shrines, and festivals, as well as specific territories; spirits are not the subject of such elaboration, being more “fluid,” “emergent, contingent, and unexpected” (Levy et al. 1996: 14). By personhood they mean that gods are more physically and socially human, while spirits are “vague [. . .] only minimally persons” (Levy et al. 1996: 15). By experience they mean that gods are actually less directly experienced whereas spirits are more commonly encountered and often more immediately the objects of human concern. Finally, by morality they mean that gods are more likely agents and paragons of moral order than spirits, who tend to be “extramoral” or evil. Gods, they argue, “are clear models for social order” (Levy et al. 1996: 21) who establish and sanction human morality, but spirits “are threats to order and frequently must be purged so that order may be re-established” (1996: 16).

As hopeful as this dichotomy is, it does not conform to the empirical evidence. First, as we will see, gods are not always particularly good or moral, nor do they always take an interest in human affairs. Spirits may be the objects of extremely involved cultic behavior, while gods (especially distant “high gods”) may be so abstract and remote as to invoke little human interest and activity. Also, spirits, since they are more immediate, are often better known and actually *more* like social persons than gods. Finally, as they admit, this continuum leaves all kinds of other beings—“giants, gnomes, fairies, phoenixes, and the like” (Levy et al. 1996: 12)—as well as plant and animal spirits, zombies, vampires, and an unlimited number of others unaccounted for.

It is probably more apt to consider “spirit” the most general level of classification, with “god” as a subset of this category. In other words, “gods” are a particular kind of “spirit,” a kind that may not exist in all religious systems. In some situations, it may not be clear and unequivocal whether a spirit is a god or not, and the distinction may be trivial in the end. Even more, there may be no sharp line between spirits and “natural,” including human, beings. Indeed, most religions depend on the notion that humans are or have a “spiritual” component too—or primarily. Thus, any attempted typology of spirits is bound to founder on the rocks of religious diversity.

## Human spirits

One of the most persistent and “natural” ideas across cultures is that humans have a spiritual part or parts, which cohabit(s) the world with the body to some extent and which survive(s) the body (for a time at least) after death. In the Christian tradition, this is called the “soul.” In Hinduism, it is known as the *atman*. It has not only different names but different qualities and dispositions in different societies. The crucial thing is that humans, even now, *are* spiritual beings in a manner of speaking. Again in the Christian tradition, it is asserted that this spiritual-human part is implanted in us from outside (it was originally “breathed into” the first created human), dwells in our body in some obscure way, and detaches from the body at death to continue its existence in some other form.

The precise characteristics of the human spirit—alive or dead—vary widely from culture to culture. The notion that we are most familiar with is a single, permanent, integral soul, not situated in any particular part of the body, which preserves our “personality” or individuality in its single, permanent, integral destination (namely, heaven or hell). That is not a universal notion. Some cultures tell of multiple souls or a soul with multiple parts. The Tausug of the Philippines believed that humans are composed of four parts: The body, the mind, the “liver” or emotion, and the soul. The soul itself is composed of four parts: The transcendent soul, which is all-good and always in the spiritual realm, even while you are alive; the life-soul, which is related to the blood and attached to the body but which wanders from the body in dreams; the breath, which is the essence of life and always attached to the body; and the spirit-soul, the person’s “shadow” (Kiefer 1972).

The Nupe of Africa identified three “soul-like entities” in addition to the body: the *rayi* was the life force, the *fifingi* was the “shadow” which remained visible after death and occasionally haunted people physically or in their dreams, and the *kuci* was the “personal soul” that entered the body at birth and gradually integrated with it. However, this *kuci* was not completely “personal,” since it was reincarnated in another person and could incarnate simultaneously in more than one person, ideally in the same family or clan. S. F. Nadel accordingly calls it “an impersonal principle of descent and heredity” (1954: 24), linking the individual with the kin group. The Mandinko, also of Africa, had a four-part human identity, including the body, breath, intelligence (located in the heart), and the soul; both the intelligence and the soul continue on in the afterlife (Schaffer and Cooper 1980). The Huron of North America talked of two souls or *atishken*. Both were the same size and shape as the body, and one remained with the body after death while the other departed (Trigger 1969). The Konyak Nagas of India were reported to believe in several different soul-parts that separate at death. The *yaha* contains the individual’s personality and goes off to the land of the dead, while the *mia* stays attached to the skull (which explains their practice of headhunting), and the *hiba* becomes a ghost if the person dies a violent death (Von Fürer-Haimendorf 1969). Finally, the Dusun of Borneo believed in seven soul-parts, one inside the other. The smallest was the width of the little finger and the largest the thickness of the thumb. They were not

“born” full-sized but grew as the body grew. The six “outside” souls or *magalugulu* were visible in human form, but the innermost soul or *gadagada* was formless and invisible (Williams 1965).

The mention of the Nagas’ belief about souls and ghosts reminds us that humans are not spirits only or mostly while alive but even more so after death. Of course, the ultimate “spiritual” fate of former humans also varies from society to society. Even in our own age and society, many people believe that souls can become ghosts, at least temporarily. Ghosts are spiritual parts of dead humans that continue to exist and participate in the human world, usually to our detriment. The Burmese villagers that Spiro (1978) studied, while being nominally Buddhist, recognized the spirits of the dead or *leikpya* as potential mischief makers that remain around the house or village and haunt its living inhabitants; former government officials were particularly likely to end up this way, since they did not like relinquishing their power. More worrisome yet than the ordinary dead were the spirits of those who lived wicked lives, for they were transformed into *tasei* or *thaye*, evil ghosts. Members recounted that these beings were usually invisible but could become visible, with a “flimsy and resilient materiality.” They were enormous (over 7 feet tall), dark or black with huge ears, tongues, tusk-like teeth—“repulsive in every way” (Spiro 1978: 34). These bad ghosts camped on the edge of the village, especially near burial grounds, from whence they ate corpses or attacked and consumed the living.

Other, if not most, societies also fear or worry about their dead. The Navajos told Downs (1972) that the ghost was the evil part of the deceased person, so ghosts were all evil by definition. The Dani of New Guinea too claimed that most ghosts were malevolent and tended to attack living adults, usually from the front (Heider 1979). The dead do not always become troublesome, though. One Christian belief is that dead souls become angels, either disembodied or embodied spirits in another, “heavenly” dimension or reality. Sometimes these angels interact with humans, as in “guardian angels”; in fact, the word “angel” derives from the Greek *angelon* for messenger. (There are other angels who were reportedly created before humans and never were humans at all.) Finally, in some religions or sects of religions, especially pious and virtuous former humans can become saints, who also may continue to act on behalf of humans, protecting travelers and the like. In Islam, the veneration of saints is common, particularly in certain “popular” sects and interpretations, and prayers, rituals, and vigils may be held at their tombs or shrines. In many traditions, a body part or artifact (a relic) of a deceased holy person may be revered and incorporated into worship and ritual. This can take any form from the bones of a saint to the Buddha’s tooth to a piece of the “true cross” or the burial shroud of Jesus (the “shroud of Turin”).

Many societies believe that the individual soul eventually “puts on another body,” in other words, is reincarnated. The person cannot always remember the life of the previous body; the spirit of the person may not even be completely “personal,” as in the case of the Warlpiri, where it is essentially nonhuman or prehuman first and incarnates in human form but does not change its essential nonhuman character. Other twists on the dead-spirit theme exist too, like the idea of a zombie who is a

dead individual who has somehow been reanimated but without his or her soul; this is not completely dissimilar to the European concept of a vampire, a dead person without a soul who is now “undead.”

In some instances, beliefs about the dead can coalesce into systems and institutions concerning ancestor spirits. An ancestor spirit is the nonphysical aspect of a dead kin-group member that continues to inhabit the area around the family and to interact with them, for better or for worse. The !Kung viewed the //*gangwasi* or recently deceased as the main element of their religious reality (see Case study 2.1). Meyer Fortes (1959) described the importance of ancestor spirits for the Tallensi of Africa, to whom the living not only owed allegiance but who supernaturally affected the lives of the living through the control of “destiny.” Chinese homes, as in many other societies, traditionally had altars to the spirits of the kin group, where prayers and other offerings were made, again suggesting that the fundamental bonds of kinship do not expire with death.

### Case study 2.1

#### What is “the religion” of the !Kung?

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When we examine a specific society, even one as reputedly “simple” as the !Kung, the identification of its “religion” can become highly problematic. The !Kung are a much-studied foraging society in the Kalahari desert of southwest Africa. Conventional wisdom says that foragers are usually animists, lacking a conception of “gods” and “worshipping” nature. The reality is not so simple. In reality, the !Kung did not purely represent any one approach to or “type” of religious entities. A prime concern of theirs was the dead ancestors, known collectively as the //*gauwasi* or //*gangwasi*, who were not “worshipped” at all and were regarded with mixed feelings. They constituted a prime source of danger to humans, not out of malice but out of their loneliness; still aware of and sad for their living loved ones, they would try to bring the living to the land of the dead to be with them, with undesirable results for the living. In addition to the //*gangwasi* or //*gauwasi*, the !Kung also conceived of gods, including the great god *Gao Na* and the lesser god *Kauha*. Each has a wife and children and lives in the sky. *Gao Na* has human form and gives both good and bad to humans, via the dead ancestors and other intermediary spirits. He was known for having human emotions—including “passion, stupidity, and frustration”—and enjoyed food and sex. He was not a moral paragon but performed immoral acts like incest and cannibalism, and the people did not defer to him in awe and reverence. Their “prayers” typically took a somewhat accusatory tone, implying the god’s injustice in doing bad things to those who do not deserve it (Katz 1982: 31). Finally, along with ancestors and gods, they possessed a concept of an energy called *n/um*. Richard Lee defines it as a “substance that lies in the pit of the stomach

of men and women [. . .] and becomes active during a healing dance. The !Kung believe that the movements of the dancers heat the *n/um* up and when it boils it rises up the spinal cord and explodes in the brain" (1984: 109). This force was crucial to their conception of shamanism and healing (see Chapter 3).

### **Nonhuman spirits**

Many other kinds of spiritual beings never were and never will be humans. Perhaps the most common of these are the "nature spirits," the spirits that "are" or "are in" plants and/or animals and/or natural objects and/or natural forces. This was the observation that led Tylor to formulate what he termed *animism*. Animism, derived from the Latin *anima* for soul, or more literally "alive" or "moving," is the general conception that nonhuman beings can and do have spiritual parts too. Not necessarily every nonhuman thing is thus "animated." For the Warlpiri, some trees and rocks have spirit or *pirlirpa* and some do not; they can point at one tree and say that it is "just a tree," while another of the same species is a spirit. Some entire animal and plant species are spiritually important, and others are just natural beings. This relationship between humans and nonhuman material objects is sometimes called totemism, a term not much in current usage. The idea behind totemism is that an individual human or a group (family, clan, village, etc.) of humans has a unique spiritual relationship with a particular species or object, such that this species or object is the person's or group's "totem." The relationship should result in some special behavior toward the totem, such as not eating it; however, some societies do eat their totem species. So totemism is not a consistent phenomenon and is probably just one form of a greater spiritual relationship between humans and the nonhuman.

The spirits of plants and animals, etc., may be "individual" or "mass." That is, each particular kangaroo may have its own "personal" spirit, or there may be a "kangaroo spirit" that relates to all kangaroos. Either way, "spiritualized" plants or animals or natural forces cannot be ignored; if there is a seal-spirit or a spirit-of-the-lake, those spirits have an intelligence and a will not unlike our own. They communicate with us and interact with us. The Ainu of northern Japan, for example, claimed that plants, animals, and even man-made objects were "spirit-owning" or "spirit-bearing" beings who had to be treated accordingly. In "life" there were restrictions on how humans could interact with them, and even (and perhaps mainly) in death these restrictions held; for instance, they had to maintain a separate location for the disposal of each type of spirit-owning being, called *keyohniusi*, and negligence of their duties toward these beings could bring sickness or worse (Ohnuki-Tierney 1974). The Huron spoke of plant, animal, and even inanimate objects having spirits, which were the same size and shape as their physical bodies. The Dani of New Guinea, like many peoples of the world, experienced the spirits of or in natural objects or places like hills, rocks, ponds, and whirlpools. The Anutans described by Feinberg (1996) made



claims about a type of spirits called *tupua penua* or land/totemic spirits, associated either with species like the shark, octopus, or sea turtle or with natural features and sites. These spirits were godlike in some ways—with names, individual personalities, and power, who are bound to locations, prayed to, and invoked in song and story—yet also amoral, egotistical, and dangerous.

In addition to spirits of specific plants, animals, and objects, many societies recognize spirits that are not attached to any specific material forms but have their own independent “reality.” These beings may be good, bad, or indifferent to humans; they may be helpful, harmful, mischievous, or unaware of their effect on humans. Such beings include demons, devils, and any of a wide array of culturally local characters such as fairies, elves, sprites, muses, furies, *kinkis* (in Warlpiri culture), *hekura* (in Yanomamo culture), *jinn*s or genies (in Arabic cultures) and many others. Feinberg’s Anutans (1996) had a category of spirits called *atua* or *atua vare* that haunt the area outside the village; they do not have individual names or personalities, but they do have bodies, and they cause accidents and difficulties although more to scare than to harm. Nukulaelae spirits (Besnier 1996) called *Te Lasi* or “The Big One”—not the *agaaga* or the spirits of humans, living or dead—were permanent entities with names and identities, powerful and evil, with wills of their own, and took various forms including babies, animals, or sea creatures; they were typically female and killed out of anger, mostly by strangulation, suffocation, or “consumption” of the victim.

One of the most elaborate spirit systems on record comes from Spiro’s work in Burma. In addition to the ghosts and the witches, there were various demons such as the *bilus* or ogre that eats humans. However, the really extensive part of the religion was the set of *nats*, which included the nature spirits, the *devas* or Buddhist, and therefore benevolent, beings, and the “thirty-seven *nats*.” Nature spirits were associated with and guarded their particular locations, personified in such beings as *taw-saun nat* and *taung-saun nat*, the guardians of the forest and hill, respectively. Collectively they made the world a treacherous place. But worse were the thirty-seven *nats* or powerful beings, called *thounze khunna min nat* or “thirty-seven chief *nats*.” They were distinctly malevolent, each with a name and its own mythical story, and they had to be propitiated with gifts of food. Interestingly, Spiro reports that most villagers could not name or describe more than one or two of them, and when it came to the notion of “personal *nats*” that supposedly associate with and protect individual humans, two out of the twenty households he questioned had never heard of them, four had only general ideas about them, and four denied that they existed at all (1978: 55).

Of the nonhuman spiritual beings, the greatest are the gods. There is no perfect, universal definition for gods, but we tend to think of them as extremely powerful, mostly moral or beneficent, usually creative, and utterly “other” spiritual beings; by “utterly other” we mean that they are not part of nature or in nature nor do they always interact directly with humans. Richard Swinburne, a prominent Christian philosopher, has defined god as “a person without a body (i.e., a spirit) present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, able to do everything (i.e., omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation,

immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy and worthy of worship” (1977: 2). However, this is not so much a *definition* of god as a *description* of a particular god, namely the Christian one. It does not fit all cases. Among the ancient Greek gods, for instance, there were gods who were good, or bad, or both, or neither. Some were more or less eternal, but many were born of other gods (or humans) and many died. Some played no part in creation, as creation was all in place by the time they came along. Often, each had his or her “domain” in a supernatural “division of labor”—i.e., a god of the sea, a god of war, a god of love, a god of wine, etc. Many societies that recognize gods do not attempt to communicate or relate directly with them but rather through lower-level spiritual intermediaries, like saints or ancestors or other lower spirits.

A religion that not only includes but focuses on god(s) is called a theism (from the Greek *theo-* or *deo-* for god, which also gives us our word “deity”). There may be in any particular theism one or more (sometimes many more) than one god, and there may be—and always are—other spiritual beings as well. A theistic religion that contains many gods is known as a polytheism, while a theistic religion that contains one god is known as a monotheism. Ancient Greek religion is a familiar example of a polytheism, with its “pantheon” (from *pan-* for all and *theo-* for god) residing on Mount Olympus. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam constitute the dominant monotheisms in the world. Some versions of Christianity posit a “trinity” of God, while Islam insists that God is one (the doctrine of *tawhid*)—no son, no trinity, and nothing like God.

Theism can take a few other less known forms. For instance, deism is the position that there is or was a god who created the world and put it in motion but then withdrew from it; this god is more or less “impersonal” and may take no active part in the daily affairs of humans at all. Monolatry refers to the worship of one particular god without necessarily denying the existence of others; some scholars regard the earliest sections of the Judeo-Christian scriptures as representing monolatry, in which Hebrew leaders like Abraham and Moses were given “their god” to worship, while other peoples (presumably) had their own. Finally, some thinkers have come to the conclusion that god is everything and everything is god, a belief known as pantheism. Baruch Spinoza was an articulate pantheist, and Albert Einstein seemed to hold this position. Some “mystical” traditions within larger religious systems, and to an extent the entire system of Hinduism, maintain that the whole universe is really god or the “mind of god” or one great cosmic soul (the *Brahman* in Hinduism), of which the human soul (*atman*) is one small alienated piece.

Within these major classes there is incredible diversity in ideas about gods. Some gods are creators, others are not. Some are moral guarantors and arbiters, others are not. Some are near and well known, others are not. The Konyak Nagas, for instance, referred to a sky god called *Gawang* or *Zangbau* who was a highly personal being and the creator of the universe. He had the form of a gargantuan human and was called upon in daily life and the main social occasions in culture; he was the protector of morality and punished wrongdoing. On the other hand, the Azande of Africa thought about a god named *Mbori* or *Mboli*, who Evans-Pritchard (1962) tells us was

morally neutral and not terribly interested in human affairs. Locals did not even have clear and consistent “beliefs” about him: Some said he moves about on the earth, but others disagreed.

Between these extremes are all sorts of complex variations on the god theme. The Kaguru of East Africa knew of a god named *mulungu* who was a universe creator, but the people did not know the story of this creation nor care very much; the god itself was imagined as human-like but with only one foot or arm or eye or ear (Beidelman 1971). The islanders of Ulithi in Micronesia made claims about several gods, none of whom were creators, and their religion contained no creation story, according to Lessa (1966). There was a high god, Ialulep, who was described as very large, old, and weak, with white hair, and who held the “thread of life” of each person and decided when a person would die by breaking the thread. Under him were numerous sky gods and earth gods, including his son Lugeilang, who liked the company of human women and fathered the trickster god Iolofath. The earth gods included ones with more or less specific natural and social jurisdictions, like Palulap the Great Navigator, Ialulwe the patron god of sailors, Solang the patron god of canoe-builders, and so on.

It is entirely possible and indeed common for gods to coexist with other kinds of spirits, most obviously human spirits but also animistic and ancestral spirits. The Ainu, who believed that all animate and most inanimate things have spirit, also had notions about gods or *kamuy*. There were several categories of gods, including gods of the shore, of the mountain, of the sea, and of the sky. Among the shore *kamuy* were God of the House, Grandmother Hearth, and God of Ground; among mountain *kamuy* were *iso kamuy* or bear god, *horokew kamuy* or wolf god, and *sumari kamuy* or fox god.

Finally, the line between gods and other kinds of spirits is not always clear or firm—if it exists at all. The Tewa, a Southwestern US indigenous society, had a six-tiered theory of “personhood,” of which the lower three were humans and the upper three spirits. When a person in the lowest tier of humans died, he or she became the lowest tier of spirits; accordingly, when members of the highest tier of humans (what they call “Made People” or *Patowa*) died, they became and joined spirits of the highest tier, the “Dry Food Who Never Did Become” or the spirits who never took human form. These spirits or gods were the remote, detached types of deities who were not discussed much or known in much detail. They were talked about as *opa pene in* or *opa nuneh in*, meaning “those from beyond the world” or “those from with and around the earth,” respectively. Eight named gods, in the class of *oxua*, were associated with each moiety or half of society, in a ranked order.

Perhaps the single most famous discussion of the god problem in anthropology comes from Evans-Pritchard’s *Nuer Religion* (1956), which is an extended struggle with that society’s concept of *kwoth*, which he translates as “god” or “spirit.” *Kwoth* appears to be a particular being, a “god.” It is construed as in the sky and is associated with the sky and celestial objects and events (like rain and lightning), but it is not the same thing as these physical phenomena. It is the creator, *cak ghaua* or creator of the universe; it is also a person or *ran*, with *yiegh* or breath or life. At the

same time, *kwoth* manifests itself as various types of named spirits, including *kwoth nhial* (spirits of the sky) and *kwoth piny* (spirits of the earth). *Kwoth*, then, as spirit is one and many at the same time.

### Spiritual forces

Not all religions include “beings” at all, and not all of those that do have beings have exclusively beings. There is also a regular occurrence of claims about impersonal spiritual forces—ones that are not associated necessarily with any particular living thing nor have an individual “mind” or “will.” Often these forces are more like “spiritual water” or “spiritual electricity”—a (super)naturally-occurring power that exists in and flows through nature, giving it the qualities that we find there. The usual name given to religions that highlight these forces over beings is animatism.

The classic example of a spiritual force is mana as understood in numerous Melanesian cultures. Mana is an energy or power that presents itself in material objects, including people, but is not inherent in them; that is, it is a separate “thing” from them and can come and go. It is in the interest of a person to know, use, and accumulate mana if possible, since luck, strength, virtue, and many good results come from having or controlling it. The Chinese notion of chi is another familiar animatistic principle. It is probably a very old idea but is most clearly and poetically discussed in the ancient work *Tao Te Ching*, historically attributed to a sage named Lao Tze. In this book, the tao is described as the “way” or “path” of nature and the chi that informs it. The tao flows like water (water is the most often-used metaphor for it), taking the path of least resistance. Thus, the person who would live well should go with the tao, leading to such insights as “Do nothing and leave nothing undone” or “The best ruler is he who rules least.” The general idea is that human will, when it goes against the tao (as it usually does), ends in struggle, difficulty, and wasted effort; it is like trying to swim upstream. The wise person “goes with the flow,” letting the force of (super)nature take him or her where it will.

In a certain sense, the Hindu-Buddhist notion of karma is animatistic, although in a way it is not a force at all. It might be more appropriate to think of it as a principle of “spiritual cause and effect”—what we do in this life has spiritual consequences for the next life. If we accumulate karma, we will have to expend effort later on to “work it off,” as if we had put on “spiritual weight.” In some local versions, this concept develops into a notion of “merit” (and the opposite, “demerit”): in Stanley Tambiah’s ethnography of Thailand (1970), members can acquire *bun* or merit through certain actions, for themselves and their family, but can accumulate *baab* or demerit through others. Sherry Ortner (1978) notes a similar concern among the Sherpas of Nepal with *payin* (merit) and *dikpa* (demerit).

Variations on this idea abound. The Dusun of Borneo worried about a notion of “luck,” which was a finite spiritual resource, such that a person could expend his or her luck in one area of life and so endanger other areas (e.g., acquisition of property, success in disputes, etc.). Also, luck was finite in society, making one person’s gain in it another person’s loss; this naturally led to arguments about

surreptitious efforts to steal or damage each other's luck. The Apache functioned in terms of a power known as *diyí*, which for them was in infinite supply. Individuals who possessed or controlled *diyí* were markedly different from those who did not. Many forms of this power were recognized, related to different animals or natural phenomena. In a twist on the animatistic theme, *diyí* did have some "personal" attributes, including the ability to seek out people to attach to (individuals could also seek *diyí*) and to experience anger, which could of course be harmful to humans (Basso 1970). The Menomini of North America also knew of a power which they called *tatahkesewen* ("that which has energy"), *meskowesan* ("that which has strength"), or *ahpehtesewesen* ("that which is valuable"). They described it as nonmaterial and invisible but like a bright light. This form of power could also be sought and mastered, through dreams, vision quests, and the guidance of guardian spirits (Spindler and Spindler 1971).

Meyer Fortes (1959) recounts the Tallensi conception of a type of "fate" or "destiny," not unlike the ancient Greek concept that gives us the English term. In the Tallensi version, humans were born with a good or evil destiny which determined the course of their lives; in a sense, their ultimate lot was "predestined." An evil destiny was indicated by the person's refusal or inability to execute his or her social roles and obligations; obviously, a person's successful fulfillment of social expectations was proof of a good destiny. Thus, human social failings were traceable to supernatural sources and "no fault of our own." In a view that ties animatistic and ancestral "beliefs" together, it was the dead ancestors who provided a person with his or her fate. But, fortunately, not all was lost for the person born with evil destiny: rituals could be performed to help, on the premise that ancestors were potentially amenable to reversing their original assignment of destiny.

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## Religious conceptions: the universe and human existence

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While beliefs about beings and forces underlie all religions and probably constitute the bedrock and central preoccupation of most if not all traditions, there are many other things that those traditions teach about. These include origins and ends, reasons and relations, health and sickness, and virtually any topic that might come to the mind of humans. In the next section we consider a few of these areas and some of the diversity in claims and doctrines about them.

### Cosmology and cosmogony

Nearly all religions offer a view of what the universe is "really like"—what it is made of, what "parts" or "layers" it has, and how all of this relates to humanity. Cosmology deals with the order or structure of ultimate reality, whereas cosmogony deals with the origin of that structure or order. Both words derive from the Greek root *kosmos* for "universe" or "order" (as opposed to "chaos"), and the former has been

picked up by science to name astronomical and physical theories about the universe, while the latter has not found any scientific application.

The cosmologies and cosmogonies of different religions vary extensively. The Christian version tells of a fundamentally three-layered reality, with a heaven (above) and a hell (below) sandwiching an intermediate world inhabited by humans and other material beings (interestingly but not surprisingly, contemporary fictional cosmologies, like that of *The Lord of the Rings*, echo this same design, with a “Middle Earth” where humans and hobbits reside). Other religions envision ultimate reality in very different terms. The Yanomamo worldview as presented by Napoleon Chagnon included a four-layered reality, “like inverted dinner plates: gently curved, round, thin, rigid, and having a top and bottom surface” (1992: 99–100). These four layers included the highest one, called *duku ka misi*, which was of least concern to them, being “empty” or “void.” The second-highest level, *hedu ka misi*, constitutes our sky as its lower surface; on it, animals and plants and dead ancestors live very much as we do. Humans reside on the third level, *hei ka misi*, which formed when a bit of the upper layer broke off and fell. The bottom layer, *hei ta bebi*, was described as “almost barren” except for an odd race of Yanomamo-like people called the Amahiri-teri. Since their netherworld was so lifeless, they sent their spirits on cannibalistic expeditions to the “real world” above to capture Yanomamo, especially children.

The Navajo conceived the universe as a “stack” of fourteen “world structures” or platter-shaped worlds laid out on top of each other. Sam Gill does not tell us how these world structures came to be, but within this system a process of “emergence” began at the center of the lowest level, moving upward through a series of events told in myth. Living in the lower levels were insect-, animal-, and bird-people with their own languages and societies, and the “upward journey was a forced movement due to the misconduct of these peoples. Each world offered the promise of happiness and a good life to its inhabitants, but they were unable to maintain proper relationships with one another” (Gill 1981: 51). For each layer along the way, detailed descriptions of the geography as well as of the social events were known. Emerging finally at the top world, which is the contemporary Earth, First Man and First Woman “begin to whisper to each other, planning what will be created on the earth surface” (Gill 1981: 52). Out of these deliberations and their actions came the first sweat lodge, the first hogan, the sacred medicine bundle as a reservoir of spiritual power, and the birth of Changing Woman. A ceremony created the original two groups of “human forms” and a man and woman “who represent the means of life for all things as they proceed through time” (Gill 1981: 52). Finally, the Holy People who had achieved the emergence departed, ushering in the era of culture heroes and of the origins of contemporary rituals.

The Dogon of Africa, according to Marcel Griaule (1965), had a remarkably intricate cosmology and a cosmogonic story to go with it. Ogotemelli, his informant, told a genesis story in which the One God Amma created the sun and moon through the art of pottery: the sun is like a pot “surrounded by a spiral of red copper with eight turns. The moon is the same shape, but its copper is white” (Griaule 1965: 16).

Amma then threw a handful of clay which landed “on the north” and spread to the south, forming a flat surface and a body: “This body, lying flat, face upwards, in a line from north to south, is feminine. Its sexual organ is an ant-hill, and its clitoris a termite hill. Amma, being lonely and desirous of intercourse with this creature, approached it. That was the occasion of the first breach of the order of the universe” (Griaule 1965: 17). Thus began the imperfect history of spirits and humans. Amma eventually created the first twins, the Nummo, who themselves had eight children, four male and four female but all hermaphroditic and self-fertilizing. These eight became the founding ancestors of the Dogon people. They invented weaving, farming, blacksmithing, and all of the crucial crafts and knowledge for humans. Amma gave each a grain for food, the most critical for them (and humans) being *digitaria*. The key event that established the earthly order began when the first ancestor introduced the granary, and with it the natural and social order, into the world. In fact, on each step of the structure were particular species or genera of plants and animals, and on the roof were the tools of the forge to make iron-working possible. The entire system then descended from the sky.

As we can see, many religions and cosmologies view the universe as round or circular, with the territory of the particular society as the “center” of the world. Often, there is a connection—sometimes a literal “line”—that connects the center point of the world with the spiritual realm. One common motif to depict this relation is the “axis mundi” or “tree of life” which stands at the center of creation and reaches up to “Heaven.” The Hindu texts *Bhagavad Gita* and *Mahabharata* speak of such a cosmic tree. The Norse also spoke of a cosmic tree, called Yggdrasil, the Tree of Wisdom and the Tree of Life (reminiscent of the tree in the Garden of Eden). The gods met at the ash tree, as perhaps the ancient druids did and some modern-day wiccans do, which connected and shaped all of creation. In other cases the central point is a mountain; for Hindu and Hinduized cultures like traditional Java, Mount Meru was such a focal point, while for ancient Greece it was Mount Olympus. Even Moses met God on a mountain. All such images not only provide a cosmology but a “sacred geography” tying together Earth, Heaven, society, and spirits.

## Case study 2.2

### The cosmology of a Thai Buddhist village

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The villagers of Baan Phraan Muan (Tambiah 1970) conceived of a universe consisting of an indefinite number of worlds or galaxies. Each world-system contained its own sun and moon and earth, and each earth contained its own land and seas, with its own central Mount Meru. The entire universe was destroyed and remade over enormous time-periods called *kalpas*. The cosmology further specified that there

were thirty-one “planes of existence” (*lokas*), arranged in three major classes. The “lowest” was *kama loka*, the dimension of physical form and desire. It was divided into eleven *lokas*, six for the gods and five for humans, animals, ghosts, demons, and tortured souls (i.e., “Hell”), respectively. The first of the “heavens” or divine worlds (*deva loka*) lay below the top of Mount Meru, where the four “guardians” lived at the four cardinal points; of these, the one that concerned the people most was the western kingdom of the Nagas, beings with serpent bodies who were associated with water and were positive toward Buddhism. The second heaven sat atop Mount Meru and was home for the god Sakka or Indra. Above it were four more heavens, the highest called *Tusita* which held the bodhisattva or “future Buddha.” The five lower *lokas* were realms of increasing pain, and the lowest *loka*, “Hell,” actually featured eight major hells, described as “fiery places of intense misery and pain” (Tambiah 1970: 39).

All of these levels, which in Western thinking would exhaust the entire cosmology, made up just the first great *loka*. “Above” it was *rupa loka*, consisting of sixteen “heavens” or dimensions with form but no sensuality, only “mind.” Still “higher” was *arupa loka*, four dimensions without form at all but only mind. Even these did not complete the universe: All three *lokas* still referred to “this world” (*laukika*). The “other world” (*lokotarra*) lay beyond even mind and was “hypercosmical.” Being so “abstract,” it played little role in village religion.

### **Theodicy: explaining evil**

It is immanently clear in all places and times that bad things happen to people, even good people. Humans look for explanations for these developments, as well as ways potentially to control or prevent them. No matter what the precise form of explanation, it tends to have an “intentional” or even “personal” source. Theodicy is the Christian term for explaining evil or suffering, especially in a world made and ruled by an omnibenevolent God.

The concepts of beings and forces and of cosmology will obviously affect the concepts of evil; in fact, it will even determine what is considered evil in the first place—or whether “evil” as a concept exists. For instance, in a tradition that believes in the existence of an all-good spirit, evil is a particularly vexing problem. One solution is to blame humans for it, through a subordinate concept like “free will.” Another, often in tandem with the former, is to attribute it to one or more beings of evil (a devil or satan or demons). A third and less appealing possibility is that the good spirit creates the evil too or at least allows it. “I form the light and create darkness: I make peace and create evil: I, the Lord, do all these things,” prophesied Isaiah (45:7). The Book of Job is centrally concerned with the problem of evil, demonstrating that there is no relationship between the goodness of the person and the evil that befalls him.



Christian theodicy represents the general solution of “dualism” for the problem of evil, that is, that there are two distinct and opposing forces or beings, the clash between which results in visible evil. This is a recurring theme, as seen in the even older religion of Zoroaster or Zarathustra, who believed in a universe with two equal forces—light (Ahura Mazda) and darkness (Ahriman or Angra Mainyu)—at odds with each other. Angra Mainyu was a kind of “counter-creator” or “anti-creator,” who was responsible for bringing the serpent, plagues, “plunder and sin,” unbelief, “tears and wailing,” and 99,999 diseases into the otherwise perfect creation of Ahura Mazda. Accordingly, the two gods or forces were perpetually at war, making the universe a battleground. Thus, all of religion and all of human existence was or should be directed toward combating Angra Mainyu and his forces of evil, and all humans were in fact warriors in the struggle between light and darkness.

Other belief systems find the cause of misfortune in other agents, human and not-so-human. This might consist of ancestral spirits, as we described above. It might also consist of human operators—witches, sorcerers, and the like—as we will discuss in the next chapter. Another way to approach the problem of evil is to accept it as inevitable, as part of the nature of things. Buddhism finds suffering or brokenness (*dukkha*) to be an inherent quality of physical reality. The ancient Greek poets never pretended that their gods were all good. The gods, like humans, were good and bad, grand and petty, full of all the emotional and intellectual foibles that a being can exhibit. They were arbitrary and capricious, doing what they will.

In some religious views, the world is simply dangerous. For the Piaroa of Venezuela, danger flowed from the actions of the two creator beings, Kuemoi and Wahari (Overing 1986). Kuemoi, the Master of Water, was a violent—even insanelly violent—ugly cannibal, and Wahari, the Master of Land, was the creator of the Piaroa people. Invading Wahari’s land domain, Kuemoi created fire, plants and animals, and the “culture,” the knowledge and skills of farming and hunting. Wahari, in addition to creating humans in his own domain, created fish and fishing in Kuemoi’s. More consequentially, he transformed the nonhuman species into their present edible forms, depriving them of their original spiritual and anthropomorphic nature. They thus became proper food for humans. The extreme and almost unbearably contradictory message in this tale is that poison is everywhere in their world. Culture is poisonous because it was created by a mad god. Food is also poisonous; animals and large fish are dangerous to eat, but so are small fish, birds, and even plants. Consuming any of these things is dangerous, not because they cause physical harm but because they cause spiritual, invisible harm. After all, animals and fish are jealous and angry for losing their human forms and their ability to have culture. Therefore, while we humans eat them, they try to avenge themselves by “eating” us. The world, thus, is an inescapably violent and dangerous place. If we do not eat, we die; but if we eat, we may also die. Every choice, every step, is fraught with peril.

A final way to “solve” the problem of evil is to deny, in a sense, that there is any problem. In other words, a tradition may assert that evil is only apparent and that from another, more enlightened, point of view it does not exist at all. The *Bhagavad Gita*, the most famous and popular of the Hindu scriptures, makes this point clearly.

In this tale, the warrior Arjuna finds himself on the eve of battle looking across the battlefield at his enemies, who include some of his own kinsmen. He is about to throw down his bow and arrow in desperation, when his chariot-driver, the god Krishna in disguise, begins a discourse on the proper actions of a righteous man. Arjuna is a member of the *kshatriya* or noble/warrior caste, whose duty is war. He would be at fault to refuse his duty, which would condemn him yet again to a demotion in the great cycle of *samsara* or rebirth, which is the greatest evil. But even more than this, Krishna instructs the reluctant warrior why neither he nor any man should worry about taking a human life: since the true essence of a person cannot be killed, and since the body is a mere temporary receptacle for that essence, then the fate of that body is of little import. In fact, killing a *kshatriya* is helping him achieve a higher existence.

### **Human conception, birth, and death**

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Human birth and death are commonly regarded as spiritual or religious phenomena, hedged about with beliefs, rituals, and moral value. Death in many religions is the transition from a mundane to a spiritual condition; birth may be such a transition as well (especially if the religion entails that humans preexist in some supernatural way). Among the Azande, for instance, conception was understood to follow from sexual intercourse, semen or *nziro* containing the soul of the unborn child. In the womb male and female “soul-stuff” mixed, and whichever parent’s part was stronger determined the sex of the child. A fetus was regarded as “a soul with an undeveloped body, and even when the child is born the soul has not become completely and permanently attached to its abode,” making it susceptible to “flying away” and death (Evans-Pritchard 1962: 246). The fetus was strengthened and built out of the blood of the woman and the repeated insemination of the man, as well as the mother’s food.

The Dinka said that men and women give birth jointly, with divine intercession to “create” the child and the ancestors’ assistance to protect it from evil forces. In other words, two supernatural media (god and ancestor spirits) met with humans to make life and guard it against a third supernatural medium (evil powers) (Deng 1972). Ainu asserted that conception and birth were not caused by sex at all but by the god *Aynu Sikohte*, since humans do not have the power to make life. Similarly, Australian Aboriginals did not see a link between sex and child-making; in many of their societies, babies came from the Dreaming spirits and were “spirit children” born into human form. These spirits dwelt in the landscape and entered a woman’s womb when she sat, lay, or camped at sacred sites. Human women were sometimes considered to be passive “hosts” of the spirits that desired to be born, while men played no part at all except perhaps to “open the way.”

The Kaguru of East Africa (Beidelman 1971) had one of the most interesting takes on human birth. According to their religion, when a human died, he or she went to the land of the dead or the ghosts. However, when a human child was born, that person was born *out of* the land of the ghosts, such that a human *birth* was a ghost

*death.* Just as the living mourned the loss of one of their own from death, the ghosts mourned the loss of their own from “birth.” Hence, there was a reciprocal life-and-death relationship between ghosts and humans in which each was born from and died into the other.

Once birth has occurred, not all societies consider this a completion of the making of a human, certainly not “socially” and sometimes not even physically. Newborns are widely held to be particularly vulnerable to supernatural threats, whether from demons, witches, or spirits; accordingly, they are often subjected to periods of ritual seclusion. The Konyak Nagas closed the house of a newborn to strangers for six days out of concern for evil effects. But beyond this, infants must not only physically but socially mature into real humans. The Navajo, for example, conducted a series of initiations from the fourth day after birth until about age twenty in which the child was transformed into a full human (a “Dry Food person” or *seh t’a*, literally meaning “dry food”). An *ochu* or moist/unripe (“green”) person was not quite a person at all, because they were ignorant and innocent: “To be innocent is to be not yet Tewa; to be not yet Tewa is to be not yet human, and to be not yet human is to be, in this use of the term, not entirely out of the realm of spiritual existence” (Ortiz 1969: 16). At the end of the initiation cycle, not only was the child a real Tewa, but he or she was situated firmly in the kinship (moiety) system; he or she had taken his or her place in society.

Eventually, every life ends; in many, if not most, cases, something is believed to follow it. The Kaguru, like many peoples, envisioned their domain of the dead to be very similar to the domain of the living, where dead spirits “lived,” farmed, hunted, fought and quarreled, and in numerous ways conducted familiar lives, including “dying” and being mourned by their survivors. They were not particularly clear on where this ghost world was (some said above, some said below). For the Huron too, the “village of the dead” resembled the habitations of the living. Even more, different dead had different courses to follow: the very old or very young might linger around their families, while those who died in combat gathered to make their own unique community. And, of course, the departed were often threats to the living, especially if they died badly (Trigger 1969).

Many religions understood death as a kind of journey between worlds that can, literally, take time and involve challenges and obstacles. The Ainu said that the dead spirit remained around the body through the funeral and then sojourned to the land of the dead to be rejoined with the body; in fact, the dead were called *yayasirika* or “reborn.” They traveled to a dead world called *auru n kotan* that was similar to the living world except reversed in seasons. The living could visit the dead, although the dead could not see them (while, interestingly, dogs could smell them). The Konyak Nagas declared that the dead needed to carry weapons on their trip to their future home, since each would meet and fight again all of the warriors they had killed in battle during life. In the afterlife, conditions were similar to life, and men were always reunited with their first wife. Among the Tewa, a dead body (from which the spirit escaped via the mouth) was buried with an amount of food, depending on how long the voyage to the next life would take; good people took a

“straight” and short path, but bad people would travel a long and winding road, sometimes encountering beasts along the way. The dead spirit wandered with its ancestors for four days, during which time the living were nervous about its effects on them, since the dead get lonely and may return to take relatives with them, especially children. On the evening of the fourth day, a “releasing” ritual was performed to send the spirit on its way, with a repeat performance on the first anniversary.

Clearly not all societies considered death to be a “sudden” and total phenomenon and transformation. The Mandinko believed that a person was not entirely dead at death but was a “transitional corpse,” who would be interviewed by the angel Malika in the grave before moving on. The Dusun said that the dead soul waited near the village for seven nights before going on to its final destination of *Nabalu* on the summit of Mount Kinabalu. But some souls would never make it, since they could be captured and imprisoned by other dead spirits or by “disease-givers” or such evil-workers. A related idea is the practice of zombification of the dead or the creation of “undead.”

Among the Trobriand Islanders, there were two different and incompatible beliefs (Malinowski 1948). One was that the dead had a “short and precarious existence” on the outskirts of their village in the form of *kasi*, where they pestered the living. The second and much more elaborated view was that the soul or *baloma* traveled to a physical location, the island of Tuma, where it waited on the shore crying until other spirits of the dead heard the grief and came out to join it. Then the deceased encountered Topileta, the chief of the village of the dead, who had to be compensated; for this purpose, the dead body was buried with valuables like jewels and artifacts. Those who could not afford to pay never reached the land of the dead and were condemned to become denizens of the ocean, mythical sea-creatures called *vaiaba*. For those who were able to continue, three different paths led to Tuma, based on the style of one’s death (magic, poison, or combat). At their destination, they discovered their dead ancestors and made a home for themselves. Women outnumbered men in the land of the dead, and these dead women tried to lure the men with irresistible love magic, making them forget their previous existence.

### **End of time: eschatology**

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Many but not all religions have some conception of the “death of the world,” of an end at least of the present age if not of all of creation. This is the area of eschatology, from *eschaton* for “end” or “last” or “farthest.” Christianity is a highly eschatological religion, warning of a final confrontation between good and evil in which evil is defeated and consumed, the Earth as we know it destroyed, and the final victory of God enshrined in a new earth where Jesus rules supreme. “Linear” traditions like Judaism and Christianity believe in a single creation, existence, and destruction, but other “cyclical” traditions believe in multiple recurring creations. Hinduism describes a reality which is repeatedly made and unmade, as the god Brahma sleeps and wakes, bringing the universe into existence in his dreams. Each cycle of creation

undergoes a decline from its most perfect initial stage to its eventual destruction and replacement with a new, pristine godly dream. The present age, the *Kali yuga* or age of Kali (the goddess of death) is the end stage of the most recent creation. It is distinguished as a time of troubles, of power and injustice, and of the breakdown of social institutions and the loss of belief. According to one version, as the end of the cycle approaches, the Earth becomes an uninhabitable wasteland, killing off most of the beings who once lived on it. Then the god Vishnu himself completes the devastation, drinking up the last waters and allowing seven suns to scorch the desiccated surface. After that, torrential rains extinguish the fires but inundate the land with floods, which is finally ripped by high winds. Only after all life is crushed and all energy expended does Vishnu again take the form of Brahma and bring a new cycle of creation into existence, which in turn will pass through thousands of ages until it too ends harshly.

Another well-known version of the end is told in Norse tales, of Ragnarok. According to the *Edda*, winter will engulf the land, during which time social order will break down. Brothers will fight, taboos will be broken, wars will flare, all ending in the world's ruin. A wolf will swallow the sun, and another wolf will swallow the moon. Earthquakes will tear down great trees and mountains, followed by floods and tidal waves. Out of the shattered sky will ride the sons of Muspell, and the gods will awaken and meet in counsel. Odin and his court will battle Muspell's sons and their evil hordes until all the gods and men and even the tree Yggdrasil have been laid waste. However, out of the sea a new earth will rise, with new good lands and new good gods and new people and a new sun.

Eschatological views are not particularly common among the small-scale, "traditional" religions of the world. Most appear to have a more continuous notion of existence, in which things persist much as they are. However, as we will see, eschatological ideas have diffused around the modern world and penetrated many religions, generating new beliefs and new movements of great historical and cultural importance.

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## Conclusion

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Every religion makes a (more or less integrated) system of claims about the "supernatural" world and its relationship with the natural, human, and social worlds. Whether or not we can call these "beliefs" is an interesting relativistic problem. Nevertheless, ideas or concepts or categories of religious entities are a universal and necessary component of religions. We cannot always, however, divide these ideas and resulting religions into neat "types," and perhaps we are better served if we do not attempt it. Rather, it might be more meaningful and accurate to think of components—building blocks or modules—of religious conceptions, which can be assembled in various combinations to yield particular religions. Then, we might be better off to speak of a "religious field" than a "type of religion," recognizing that any religious field may contain some and not other elements, may elaborate some

elements more than others, and may mix elements in ways that at first would seem to us unlikely or incompatible. Precisely because religions are often *not* explicit cognitive systems, such (apparent) incompatibility is less of a problem than we usually think.

# 3

## Religious symbols and specialists

### The anthropology of symbolism

Is religion symbolic?

What are symbols for?

### A world of religious “symbols”

Sacred spaces

Icons/idols

Charms, amulets, and relics

Masks

The human body

Ritual objects

Texts

### Religious specialists

Shaman

Priest

Diviner/oracle

Prophet/medium

Ascetics/monks/mendicants

Sorcerer

Witch

Conclusion

Although concerned ultimately with the “spiritual” or “supernatural” realm, religion must and does find its expressions and effects here in the mundane material and especially social world. Even more, humans cannot relate to entirely disembodied or abstract beings or forces, and even if we could, as long as we live in the physical world, those beings or forces will be expressed or made manifest in and through specific objects and specific persons. However “transcendental” it may be, religious reality must be made immanent for humans to know it and to interact with it—to communicate *with* it and *about* it. It must take concrete forms, both nonhuman and human.

This chapter deals with two manifestations or media of spiritual meaning and power in the physical and social world: “symbols” or representations or objects

and “specialists” or people who have privileged knowledge or power or roles in religion. This will take us on a journey through the diversity of religious symbols and specialists across religions. It will also provide an occasion to consider the nature of “symbolic” thought and behavior, which is obviously not restricted to religious contexts; religious symbols must be seen as a subset and variation on symbolism in general.

In particular, we will find that the conventional concept of symbol may be inadequate to understand what members are doing in their religion. We usually take symbols to be things that “stand for” other things. However, symbols are things themselves, and powerful things at that; their power may be more important than their “meaning”—or *may be* their meaning. The same is true for religious specialists: although they do not stand for religious beings and forces, they *may stand in for* these entities, serving as their representatives or intermediaries in the human world. As Victor Turner, one of the most influential symbolic anthropologists, phrased it in discussing the symbolic work of the Ndembu of Zambia, symbols and the specialists who use them (and in a certain sense *are* them) “make visible, audible, and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments, and psychological dispositions that cannot directly be perceived” (1967: 50). A concept like “symbol” seems perhaps too anemic to convey all of this significance—and we must be wary as before that it may be *our* concept but not theirs.

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## The anthropology of symbolism

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Symbols, in the very simplest construction, are things—objects, images, sounds, actions, gestures, utterances, and almost any other medium—that “mean” something, that “have a meaning.” The “meaning” is that which the symbol “stands for,” the phenomenon of which it is a representation or a place-holder. Moreover, the relationship between the symbol and its meaning is arguably *arbitrary and conventional*—that is, there is no necessary connection between the particular meaning and the particular symbol. It is only cultural habit that unites the two. In other words, humans could and do use any linguistic symbol (i.e., “word”) for dog and still mean dog. Humans could use any symbol to represent the USA or Christianity, and the meaning would be the same (in fact, the USA and Christianity have been represented by other symbols at other times). Also, any symbol could have different meanings, like the swastika for Nazi Germany or Hinduism.

Symbols are clearly not the only kind of “meaningful” things. For example, in *Symbols: Public and Private*, Raymond Firth (1973) distinguished symbols from “indexes,” “signals,” and “icons.” An index for him is a signifier that is directly or objectively related to what it signifies, perhaps as part-to-whole or particular-to-general, like the tail of a dog signifying a dog. A signal is something that is “made” by or co-occurring with the signified, like the bark of a dog or the crash of thunder. An icon is a “sign” that bears some similarity or resemblance to the thing it signifies, like a picture or statue of a dog. Finally, a symbol is not directly or objectively related



to its meaning and is “meaningful” through a chain of associations, for instance, the dog being a symbol of companionship or loyalty.

Making and using symbols entails the cognitive ability to find and place meaning where it otherwise “is not.” Formerly, it was assumed that only humans have this talent, but we have discovered that chimpanzees and orangutans and even some other primates are able to manipulate and communicate through symbols like hand gestures (e.g., American Sign Language), cut-out shapes, buttons and keyboards, and the like. However, no species is as habitual or as obligate a symbol-user as humans.

While symbolism has come to be an important element in anthropological thought, it was hardly originated by anthropology. Freudian psychoanalysis took the notion of symbol particularly seriously and particularly far. In fact, Weston La Barre, one of numerous twentieth-century anthropologists to apply psychoanalytic thinking, gave it credit for being “the first psychology to preoccupy itself with the symbolic *content* and *purpose*, as opposed to the mere modalities and processes, of thinking” (1972: xii). According to Freud, the mind operates on two principles, a “primary process” and a “secondary process.” The latter involves effective action on “reality” or the external world whereas the former is not in touch with or even particularly interested in reality. The primary process is the spontaneous working of the isolated unconscious mind, before the “reality principle” sets in. The unconscious mind, he proposed, is full of inexpressible and even unacceptable drives and wishes and memories—most of them sexual in nature—which nevertheless must find their outlet. This outlet is creative and imaginative via meaningful indirectness or substitution, of which dreams are the most conspicuous instance. Dreams, then, are a symbolic “language” for a specific set of mental phenomena. And not dreams alone: neuroses and other mental illnesses are symbolic (e.g., hysterical blindness might be a symbol of seeing something terrible and painful), as well as “slips of the tongue” (so-called Freudian slips), making both significant for diagnosis. As Freud’s thinking expanded, he also attributed “higher” cultural achievements—like art, ritual, and myth—to this same symbolic process, as well as “primitive” culture in general.

Carl Gustav Jung, while more sensitive to religion, echoed Freud’s approach. In his famous essay “Concerning the Two Kinds of Thinking,” he argued that while dreams are “apparently contradictory and nonsensical,” they arise from a distinct and important mental process, which is a symbolic one (1949: 9). He asked two subsequent questions: Why are dreams symbolic? and *How* are they symbolic? The answer to the first question was for the precise purpose of *preventing* their understanding and obscuring their meaning. As for how, that depends on a different mode of thinking than the mundane, discursive, language-based mode. What he referred to as “thinking with directed attention” or simply “directed thinking” is “reality thinking”—logical, adjusted to external conditions, effective, and as clear and certain as language itself, which is a mere bridge between mind and world. However, the fount of symbolic thinking is a separate mode, undirected or “dream” or “fantasy” thinking. Dream/fantasy thinking “turns away from reality, sets free subjective wishes, and is, in regard to adaptation, wholly unproductive” (Jung 1949: 22). Jung located this same mentality in two other realms: ancient history and

“primitive society,” in particular religion. In ancient and primitive settings, the logic of exclusion was never followed (as in Lévy-Bruhl’s theory), and everything “was considered according to its anthropomorphic or theriomorphic attributes, as human being or animal” (Jung 1949: 25). Thus, he was led to “draw a parallel between the phantastical [*sic*], mythological thinking of antiquity and the similar thinking of children, between the lower human races and dreams” (Jung 1949: 27–8).

An advance (some would say a revolution) in symbolism came in 1942 with the publication of Suzanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key*. She announced that symbolism was a discrete and describable mode but a much more pervasive one than previously suspected. In fact, she opined that the problem of “meaning” was not a strictly symbolic problem but the fundamental human problem. All experience, including the experience of supposed “sense-data,” is “primarily symbolic” (Langer 1942: 16). Symbolization, the process of making and using symbols, then is “the starting point of all intellection in the human sense, and is more general than thinking, fancying, or taking action” (Langer 1942: 33). All thinking starts with concepts, not isolated perceptions, and all concepts are symbolic in that they refer to “types” or “classes” of things, not individual things: “Rover” may mean a specific dog, but “dog” means a general kind of being.

Rather than looking for “the meaning” of a symbol—that is, its translation into another “language” (for instance, the Freudian language of sex or unconscious drives)—she proposed that symbolism was not linguistic in the strict sense or at least that it constituted a kind of “nondiscursive language.” She distinguished language and symbolism in these ways:

**Characteristics of Language**

**Characteristics of Non-Discursive (Symbolic) “Language”**

Has vocabulary and syntax.

Has no vocabulary—cannot be broken into “words” or “morphemes”.

Dictionary possible (one word can be “defined” by or “translated” into others).

No dictionary possible (one symbol cannot be “defined” by or “translated” into another).

Translatability (words in one language can be rendered by equivalents in another language).

No translatability (symbols in one medium or genre cannot be rendered into equivalents in another medium or genre, i.e., you cannot re-state a symphony as a poem, etc.).

The key to Langer’s new philosophy is *metaphor*, the use of one thing to suggest another through the similarities between the two (for example, “love is a game” in that both have winners and losers, and so on). Another name for this is *analogy*, that is, one thing is like another in certain ways, although not in all ways: when we say that someone is a tiger we do not mean that he or she has claws and black stripes.

Metaphor or analogy is still thinking, she insists, but it is not “rational” or fact-related thinking; even though the “grammar” of such statements looks literal, we are not making any claims about tigers or about people being tigers. It is not essentially “denotative” talk, and it is often not talk at all. In fact, she proposes that much of symbolism is image-based and -driven, and images quickly crowd in on images, forging further analogical or associative links. The result is a flight along metaphoric chains that go where nobody knows or predicts: “Metaphor is the law of growth of every semantic” (Langer 1942: 119), as people make more and more analogies and associations and play with the ones they have. The end product is a tangled and virtually impenetrable forest of meaning and metaphor which she calls “vegetative thought,” in which “the very use of language exhibits a rampant confusion of metaphorical meanings clinging to every symbol, sometimes to the complete obscurity of any reasonable literal meaning” (Langer 1942: 120–1). (Alfred North Whitehead said something similar, in that “the symbolic elements in life have a tendency to run wild, like vegetation in a tropical forest” [1960: 233].) One name that Langer gives to this process, as opposed to the denotative or “factual” type of thinking and speaking, is *poetic significance*.

Ernst Cassirer expanded the scope and import of the symbolic function. In his *An Essay on Man*, he notes that as history or as explanation, symbolism fails, being full of “errors and heresies” (1954: 97), “a logic of absurdity” (1954: 29), but only if we take it logically, that is, literally. However, what we should see, he urges, is the thorough and inescapable symbolic nature of all of our experience—that symbols mediate our perceptions utterly:

man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. [. . .] No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man’s symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. [. . .] His situation is the same in the theoretical as in the practical sphere. Even here man does not live in a world of hard facts, or according to his immediate needs and desires.

(Cassirer 1954: 43)

This excursion into psychology and philosophy has been necessary because anthropology has borrowed so much from it. The symbolic or interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner is built on these foundations. Geertz’s definition of symbol—“any object, act, events, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol’s ‘meaning’” (1973: 91)—reflects and is explicitly credited to Langer. He also picks up philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s suggestion that mind and meaning are fundamentally “public” and to an extent “objective” and echoes it in his subsequent statement that symbols “are tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs” (Geertz 1973: 91).

With symbols playing such a powerful role, it is no wonder that Geertz views religion as exactly a system of symbols, as his definition (see Chapter 1) shows. Even more, culture itself is a system of symbols, of which religion is one component or cluster, though a particularly important one.

The concept of culture I espouse [. . .] is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber [and Ernst Cassirer], that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.

(Geertz 1973: 5)

Victor Turner is another influential promoter of the symbolic perspective in anthropology. In his aptly named *The Forest of Symbols*, he explores the ritual symbolism of the Ndembu. For him, ritual and symbolism are intimately linked; in fact, he posits that the symbol “is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context” (Turner 1967: 19). Symbols are construed incredibly widely, to include “objects, activities, relationships, events, gestures, and spatial units” (Turner 1967: 19). Surveying the types and uses, he arrives at three properties of symbols—condensation, unification of disparate significata, and polarization of meaning. By condensation he means that one symbol can and frequently does carry multiple meanings or representations simultaneously. These multiple or disparate meanings or significata “are interconnected by virtue of their common possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought” (Turner 1967: 28). A central example for the Ndembu is the milk tree, which he asserts stands at once for “women’s breasts, motherhood, a novice at *Nkang’a* [an initiation ritual], the principle of matriliney, a specific matrilineage, learning, and the unity and persistence of Ndembu society” (Turner 1967: 28). Finally, symbols bring together two “poles” of experience, the natural/physiological and the moral/social. Thus, a symbol integrates the physical qualities and associations of the symbolic object (e.g., the red and therefore “bloody” quality of the *mukula* tree) and the emotional and even visceral reactions it inspires with the ideas, norms, and values of the group that uses it.

In conclusion, then, both Geertz and Turner describe and implement what we might call “the symbolic project.” If culture generally and religion specifically is a system or pattern of symbols, then the task of anthropology is to “interpret” or “translate” or “decode” these symbols. As Geertz puts it, anthropology becomes an essentially “semiotic” exercise, looking for the “meanings” within which people act. Real-life social action is never lost or ignored; we cannot study symbols in abstract isolation from social life.

Behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior—or, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation. They find it as well, of course, in various sorts of artifacts, and various

states of consciousness, but these draw their meaning from the role they play [. . .] in an ongoing pattern of life, not from any intrinsic relationships they bear to one another. [. . .] Whatever, or wherever, symbol systems “in their own terms” may be, we gain empirical access to them by inspecting events, not by arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns.

(Geertz 1973: 17)

But still, social life and culture as such can be treated as a “text” to be read or a “language” to be spoken.

### Is religion symbolic?

While no one could deny that symbols exist and that much of religion and culture is symbolic, the treatment of culture and religion as essentially or universally symbolic is not shared by all. For instance, Bronislaw Malinowski rejected the symbolic approach to myth, if not all religion: in his essay “Myth in Primitive Psychology” (to which we will return in the next chapter), he asserted that myth “is not symbolic [. . .] We can certainly discard all [. . .] symbolic interpretations of these myths of origin” (1948: 101).

Dan Sperber asks the surprising question of *why* we seek symbolic explanations in the first place. He suggests that when anthropologists hear certain accounts from informants, we conclude, “‘That’s symbolic.’ Why? Because it is false” (1975: 3). In other words, most of the time, we dub symbolic “all activity whose rationale escapes me” (Sperber 1975: 4). For Sperber, Radcliffe-Brown would probably represent the standard social-science position when the latter pronounces,

we have to say that from our point of view the natives are mistaken, that the rites do not actually do what they are believed to do. [. . .] In so far as the rites are performed for a purpose they are futile, based on erroneous belief. [. . .] The rites are easily perceived to be symbolic, and we may therefore investigate their meaning.

(Radcliffe-Brown 1965: 144)

False or impractical behavior, that is, requires a “symbolic interpretation,” whereas true or practical behavior does not: we do not ask the *meaning* of planting seeds in the ground, but we do ask the meaning of performing a ritual over the field.

Further, Sperber insists that interpreting a symbol or an entire symbol system would require a “key” or “decoder,” the sort of which does not exist in most societies. We might query the members as to the meaning of their behavior, but the explanation they offer (its “exegesis”) is not, in most, if any, cases, the “meaning” of the symbol but merely a further extension of it (Sperber 1975: 34)—just more symbol. And if we told the members that their behaviors or beliefs were symbolic, often enough they would disagree. For example, Joseph Campbell, a friend to religion, wrote throughout his career that “God is a symbol,” one that can and must be interpreted “in psychological terms [such that] what is referred to [. . .] as ‘other

world' is to be understood psychologically as inner world" (2001: 25). The meaning of a religious symbol like "God" is mystery, the unnameable, a reference beyond reference; one thing is for sure, though: "God is not a fact" (Campbell 2001: 17). However, presumably few believers would accept such an "interpretation"; they would respond that God is a very real being. Ultimately, Sperber decides that the entire discussion of symbols and meaning may be our imposition on the ethnographic data: "The attribution of sense is an essential aspect of symbolic development in our culture. Semiologism is one of the bases of *our* ideology" (1975: 83–4)—in which case, the whole issue of symbolism would be culturally relative.

John Skorupski, a philosopher examining the anthropological treatment of religion, carries the critique farther. He notes that anthropologists have largely absorbed the symbolic approach of Durkheim and others. The reason for this is twofold: one, as "explanation" religion has so often proven to be patently and immanently false, and, therefore, members could *not* use it in that way; and two, it seemed disrespectful to point out number one. So instead, description and analysis moved to the symbolic arena, where, as Durkheim said, all religions are true "in their own fashion." Skorupski argues that religion could be symbolic in different senses: it "(a) may be unconsciously symbolic, (b) may turn out to be symbolic when its logic is properly surveyed and construed, (c) may have been originally symbolic and then become literalised, or (d) may be symbolic in the interpretation of the observer, but not in that of the actor" (1976: 36). How the first might be true is difficult to ascertain. The evidence for the third would be in the lost past, making it also difficult to determine. That leaves two choices—either it "really is" symbolic, or its symbolic character is an attribution of the outsider, not a part of the insider's understanding. But if the latter is true, then the notion that symbols can and must be interpreted is itself an interpretation, and a foreign one at that.

Skorupski comes down against a symbolic approach and in favor of a more "literalist" one—that is, for taking the natives at their word. If they think they are making it rain or curing illness, then that is important ethnographic data, not something to be translated into the anthropologist's preferred code. Of course, he is not saying that it is necessarily true but that the natives think it is, and that is what is interesting. As with "belief," it is a mistake to attribute "symbolism" where it does not apply: Sometimes even the members know or think they are being symbolic, but sometimes they think they are being deadly serious. We should take the religious worldview more seriously ourselves, a worldview that rests "on an agency-based cosmology which will extend the social order, so to speak, up the hierarchy" from merely humans to the superhuman; also, this "conception of the (rule-constituted) social order will be naturalized and, specifically, 'sacramental'"—that is, productive of the spiritual goals and conditions that it aims to produce (Skorupski 1976: 169–70). To do otherwise leads us down tricky paths: "If Trobriand canoe magic is a ritual which 'stresses the importance of canoe-building for Trobrianders,' then presumably running away from a lion is a ritual which expresses the importance of not being eaten for the runner" (Skorupski 1976: 172). In other words, if we report "symbolism" in one situation and not another, we must look at whether it is the situations or

ourselves that make the difference: *We* can see the pragmatic value of escaping lions, but we cannot see it in magic, ritual, myth, etc.

From the ethnographic side, Ladislav Holy concurs. He finds that “meaning” or “interpretation” or “speculation” is not an indigenous aspect of Berti religion (see Chapter 8). From their point of view, religion is more instrumental and “practical” than symbolic and expressive; they are “more concerned with means than with meanings, with results than with reasons, with controlling than with explaining” (1991: 76), borrowing language from Keesing’s study of the Kwaio. The Berti do not know or care *how* religion works; they are simply sure it works. This leads him to a critique of the anthropological tradition of treating culture as “first of all a cognitive device [ . . . ] If it is seen as an instrumental device at all, it is seen as such, not for achieving practical goals, but for imposing meaning on experience and for expressing that meaning” (Holy 1991: 202).

My answer to this problem is simple: instead of assuming the existence of specialized categories of the actors’ comprehension which only a sophisticated analysis of the cultural forms themselves can reveal, let us assume the obvious: if understanding a coded message does not seem to fit well with the experience of those who, for example, perform ritual, why could it not simply be that there is no coded message to be transmitted? In other words, when the actors say that they do not know or understand, let us believe them and assume that they indeed do not know or understand.

(Holy 1991: 210)

### **What are symbols for?**

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It is doubtful that Sperber, Skorupski, and Holy would argue that there is no such thing as a symbol or that some cultures and religions do not use them some of the time. Nevertheless, they raise several provocative points that make us more circumspect about symbol talk. First, we may be attributing “symbolism” where the locals do not. Second, we may be imputing meanings to symbols that they do not. And third, “meaning” may not be the only or key consideration in analyzing symbols when we do find them.

The conventional approach to symbols, as we have seen, stresses their cognitive aspect: symbols are “vehicles for a conception,” depositories of cultural ideas, which are their “meaning.” Precisely what meaning(s) to ascribe to a symbol has been a contentious issue. Some observers, like Holy, insist that certain symbols do not “mean” at all for the users, and S. F. Nadel, among others, has urged that we not ascribe meanings other than the ones members themselves advance. In other words, the only possible or meaningful meaning of a symbol is the symbol-user’s meaning; there cannot be, Nadel claims, “uncomprehended meanings,” let alone “uncomprehended symbols.” As he explains, the entire point of a symbol is to mean something, and if symbols mean “nothing to the actors, they are, from our point of view, irrelevant, and indeed no longer symbols” (1954: 108).

Turner fundamentally disagrees. According to him, symbols may mean and therefore be interpreted in three different ways: the members' explanations, the overt qualities of the symbols themselves, and the contexts and ways in which the symbols are employed. In fact, there are two reasons why members might not be able to express *all* the meanings of a symbol. First, each individual sees only one social "angle" on a symbol, while the anthropologist has a more "inclusive" view, not being committed to just one position in society. Second, the society may have an "official" interpretation that more or less intentionally rules out certain understandings. "On these grounds, therefore, I consider it legitimate to include within the total meaning of a dominant ritual symbol, aspects of behavior associated with it which the actors themselves are unable to interpret, and indeed of which they may be unaware" (Turner 1967: 27). In fact, since a symbol can have multiple meanings, and since it can and tends to embrace all of the ambiguities and contradictions in social life, many meanings escape or are unacceptable to the members themselves.

### Case study 3.1

#### Symbols, public and personal

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The problem of what—or perhaps *how*—symbols mean rests partly on the fact that the same symbol can mean different things to different people. Obviously, the expert and the layperson may have divergent and incompatible understandings of symbols, but even among regular folk, meaning may differ. In other words, the meaning is not "in" the symbol. But then where is it? Gananath Obeyesekere suggests that symbols are potential vehicles for meaning, and perhaps vehicles for "conventional" or "official" meaning, but they are not personally meaningful to individuals until they are taken up by the individual and refracted through the personal, biographical experience of that individual. In this particular case, he discusses hair as an important Hindu symbol, whether it is wearing long hair or shaving off one's hair. He shows through the lives of specific people how the dialectical process—cultural symbols shaping the experience of persons and the actions of persons reproducing the symbols—works. In the first turn, "the Hindu's experiences are articulated in terms of traditional symbols" (Obeyesekere 1981: 21); in other words, the symbols precede the individual and make certain experiences possible and typical. Thus, "the Hindu's consciousness is already influenced by his culture, facilitating the expression of intrapsychic conflict in a cultural idiom" (Obeyesekere 1981: 21). However, through selection and application to the individual's life and unique biographical experience, the symbol is appropriated, recreated, and made available to others once more as a social symbol. In the middle is the overlooked aspect, in which the public symbol becomes a "personal symbol."

continued



A personal symbol for Obeyesekere is one of the public social symbols “whose primary significance and meaning lie in the personal life and experience of individuals. And individuals are also cultural beings or persons” (Obeyesekere 1981: 44). Thus, humans are produced by but also produce symbols. Social symbols are the available “language” in which a person can communicate and even create his or her experience, but individuals can “say” different things with that language depending on what they see, think, and feel. That the “language” of Hinduism includes hair simply reinforces the idea that the body is a potent medium and metaphor for experience and extrapersonal reality. Long or tonsured hair as a public and personal symbol involves “wearing” the body in a symbolic way, just as tattooers or body-piercers or for that matter Freud’s hysterical patients do.

But even Geertz and Turner do not limit their analyses to the “intellectual” dimension of symbols. As Turner expresses it directly, “Symbols instigate social action. In a field context, they may even be described as ‘forces,’ in that they are determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action. [. . .] The symbol [is] a unit of action” (1967: 36). For Geertz, the function of symbols is “controlling behavior” (1973: 52); symbols, the constituents of religion and culture, “are ‘programs’; they provide a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes” (1973: 216). In other words, symbols may not be so much about thinking as doing.

In her essay “On Key Symbols,” Sherry Ortner (1973) elaborates on the multiple powers of symbols. She finds two major classes of symbols, which she names “summarizing” and “elaborating.” Summarizing symbols capture or condense a major and powerful concept or experience or feeling for the society; they do so, however, in a fairly “undifferentiated” way, that is, they do not ask members to think or feel any one thing in particular nor to reflect on or analyze those feelings nor their source. Elaborating symbols are exactly the opposite: they are “analytical” and provide opportunities and tools for “sorting out” the complexities of concepts and emotions and, of course, translating them into specific experiences and actions. These are “modes” of symbolism, naturally, and may therefore occur in the same symbol.

The precise differences between the two types are broken down into content versus form, quality versus quantity, and vertical versus lateral. Summarizing symbols are more about “content” or meaning, while elaborating symbols are more about form, especially their ability to enter into structured relations with other formal symbols. Summarizing symbols also emphasize quality, the “ultimacy” and “priority” on which other experiences and meanings depend, whereas elaborating symbols are more important as elements or bits in symbolic “clusters” or chains. Finally, summarizing symbols are vertical in the sense that they “ground” meanings to deeper or “higher-level” concepts and feelings, while elaborating symbols are lateral or horizontal in the sense that they can and do interrelate with other like symbols to form chains or “scripts” or “narratives.”

Elaborating symbols receive more attention from Ortner, partly because they are more “active” than summarizing ones; being more “fundamental,” the latter are more static in a way. Elaborating symbols are broken down further into what she calls *root metaphors* and *key scenarios*. Root metaphors are those big analogies that help us organize our thinking on a particular subject; a minor example would be the metaphor of an atom as a miniature solar system, while a major example would be the metaphors of the human body as a machine (or the brain/mind as a computer) or of society or the universe as an organism or body. They are about modeling and thinking. Key scenarios are about acting; they are the “scenes” or “plots” or bits of “story” that we tell ourselves to describe our expectations and our goals. It is not hard to see—in fact, it is probably the whole point—that these root metaphors and especially these key scenarios can be added together, associated with each, and strung end to end to create more complex models and narratives, including “myths” and “rituals.” That is exactly their power and their function. They help us think about who we are and what we are supposed to do.

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## A world of religious “symbols”

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In this section, we want to survey the variety of kinds of symbols found across religions. Symbols, religious and otherwise, mean something, but they also *are* something. They are words or acts or objects, etc. And they are *used for* something: they are powerful, even—from the perspective of the user—efficacious. Often (and this may be the locus of their power) they are not “symbols” in the familiar sense at all, but *real*. For instance, Victor Turner found that the Ndembu speak of their symbols as *ku-solola*, not “representing” but “revealing” or “making visible” a truth or a power (1967: 48). In other words, for members of the religion, the “symbols” may be *manifestations* or *results* or *remnants* of spiritual activities or events, or else conduits through which the beings or forces act—what Mircea Eliade, the great student of comparative religion, calls a “hierophany,” from *hieros* for “holy” and *phany* for “appearance” or “manifestation.” Arguably, the spirits could have acted through other means and objects, but the “historical” fact is that they *have* acted through these. Thus, the relationship between a religious symbol and its meaning or power is often not arbitrary but “historical” and real.

Spiritual concepts, beings, and forces, which are not “present” in the ordinary sense, are made present, made physical, made “flesh” by sacred symbols and objects. These entities “break through” normal reality in specific forms; such forms are an eruption of the supernatural in the natural and social. Humans, concrete beings that we are, need something to talk to, to focus on, to hold and manipulate, and the symbols give us a “hands-on” experience of the sacred. They also give us traces of the reality of the sacred in its impact on our lives and our world.

## Sacred spaces

One of the most persistent forms of material religious objectification is the sacred site or place. In most, if not all, religious traditions, “place” is deeply important for belief and worship, and such a location is not a random space but a space where *something is* or where *something happened* (the Ndembu call it *isoli* or *chisoli*, a “place of revelation”). In Australian Aboriginal societies, the land is crisscrossed with “tracks” of the creator-ancestors, the Dreamtime beings. These beings literally gave the land its current form through their adventures there; the land is the living product, the hierophany of their doings. All of Aboriginal space is, in a sense, sacred space, because it was “formed” in sacred time by sacred beings. Particular sites of spiritual power were tended by humans (with painting or songs or rituals), and sites were sacralized by humans, as when grounds for rituals were cleared and prepared.

For Judaism and Christianity, the city of Jerusalem is a “holy” place, for concrete historical reasons. Within the city, some sites are more sacred than others; for Christians, these include the locations where Jesus walked and suffered and was buried. Modern-day Christian pilgrims still perambulate along the “via dolorosa” or the path their savior trod on his way to crucifixion. Modern-day Jews still perform prayers and leave prayer-messages at the western or “wailing” wall on which the Temple once stood. Islam too has its holy places, in particular Mecca, the city of the prophet Muhammad. A key “pillar” of the Muslim faith is the journey or *hajj* to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. Within the borders of Mecca, some sites are yet more sacred or holy, climaxing in the structure called the Ka’aba, regarded as the center of the Muslim world.

Other societies and religions have their sacred spaces. Mount Fuji is a center of power for Japanese, as is Mount Meru for Hindus. Rivers are often sacred sites, like the Ganges in India. Of course, wherever a spirit is believed to reside—potentially any body of water, any mountain or hill, any tree, any cave—is a candidate for sacredness or, at least, spiritual concentration. It is also possible for humans to create a sacred space, either by focusing attention on an event that transpired there or by importing spiritual power or significance to the site. Christians have repeatedly built churches on sites where important events occurred, most notably the cathedral of St. Peter, the site of the Catholic Vatican; this was the spot where the disciple Peter was reportedly killed. Cathedrals constructed where no historical precedent consecrated the ground were often provided with a sacred object—in particular a “relic” or body part of a saint—to “plant” sacredness there. In many Islamic societies, the tombs of saints are sacred sites.

Spaces are religiously significant for additional reasons. The souls of the recently or remotely dead may also inhabit places, and one or more places may be the official abode of the dead (like Mount Kinabalu or the island of Tuma in the last chapter). It is a widely held opinion in Native American cultures that the four (or six, if you include “up” and “down”) cardinal directions are sacred. The Tewa of the American Southwest have the added benefit of four prominent mountains that stand at the cardinal directions for them. Each of these sites is regarded as an “earth navel”

and as an entry way into the underworld and, even more, as a place where the three levels of the world (above, middle, and below) most closely intersect. At the center of these points is the center of existence, which they refer to as “Earth mother earth navel middle place.”

### Icons/idols

“Idol” has a negative connotation in English and in Judeo-Christian parlance, but many, if not most, religions have had ways to represent the gods or spirits amidst humans—at least their reality if not their literal presence. Ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian religions included life-size or larger-than-life-size statues of gods, often with fantastic traits like the heads of birds or other animals. Ancient Greeks also erected likenesses of their gods, including Athena in the Parthenon at Athens. Hinduism pictures its gods in paintings and sculptures and various visual media. Arjun Appadurai’s discussion of Hindu temple practices indicates that the objects are not “symbolic” to the worshippers: the deity located at the center of the temple

is not a mere image. It is conceived to be, in several thoroughly concrete senses, a person. [. . .] The ceremony of vivifying the idol (*prana pratistai*), in Puranic and Agamic texts having to do with the temples does not seem to imply allegory or metaphor. The daily cycle of worship in the temples, involving waking up the deity, dressing and periodically feeding it, and putting it to sleep at night, implies the literal personality of the deity.

(Appadurai 1981: 20–1)

Judaism and Islam, in particular, explicitly forbid visual representations of divinity, in the belief that divinity cannot possibly be visualized and that such attempts lead to “idol worship.” Christianity typically portrays divine figures, from Jesus and Mary to God himself (as in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). In a Japanese Shinto shrine (referred to as a *jinja* or “god-home”) the innermost sanctuary contains a *shintai* or “god-body” in the form of a stone, a text, a weapon (e.g., sword), paper, hair, jewels, pictures, or, recently, a mirror (Holtom 1965: 10). Sherry Ortner (1978) reports that Sherpas performed rituals in which the gods were invited to “take a seat” on a *torma* or molded dough figure, which became a temporary body for the gods—a body in which they could not only accept human gifts but also experience human passions.

### Charms, amulets, and relics

All religions make or find, keep, and use objects—natural or artificial—as foci of meaning and power. Such objects of power have been called “fetishes,” although that word is not frequently used anymore. Evans-Pritchard refers to Nuer fetishes or *kulangni*, pieces of wood which the Nuer testified could speak, move, and, especially,

harm. *Kulangni*, which could be bought or inherited, were “amoral” in the sense that anyone could use their power for any purpose, and they and the people who owned them (*gwan kulangni*) were feared as dangerous (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 101). The Bagandu of central Africa used their power objects as “countermagical” protections; these festishes, purchased from specialists in spirituality and medicine, included natural objects like a mole’s tooth, which was supposed to keep away witches (Lehmann 2001: 159). Hoebel (1960) refers to the sacred medicine arrows of the Cheyenne as a tribal fetish, one given to them by a mythical ancestor called Sweet Medicine; the sacred arrows had to be cared for and ceremonially renewed, or else their neglect would cause the decline of the people as well. The arrows were also used in hunting and war, where they conferred power and success on their users.

Various religions employed a wide array of other objects. In fact, Burch and Forman maintain that for the Yupik or Inupik people of arctic North America, all objects were, in a sense, sacred objects, that they “did not distinguish between the sacred and the profane, for every object had a spirit of its own, and every act, no matter what its purpose, was observed and reacted to by some spirit or other” (1988: 114). For example, they used amulets for protection and luck, usually made of natural objects or the occasionally carved piece. Such amulets, called *iinrug* or *inogo*, were normally small things, a few inches long at most, sometimes as simple as a stone or feather or animal part. Individuals would often collect up to dozens of *iinrug*, some original, some inherited, and some acquired from spiritual leaders. Owners would carry their amulets with them at all times, hung on belts, sewn on clothing, dangling around the neck, or tucked away in pouches. Charms were more often used to communicate with and control spirits and were, therefore, most likely the property of shamans. Sometimes small and sometimes larger (and more often human-like than amulets), persons of power would fashion them and display them on houses and boats or wield them in curing rituals.

The Islamicized Berti of Sudan present an example of the combination of objects and texts. Their religious specialists or *faki* made amulets (*hijbat*) consisting of a piece of paper inscribed with words from the Qur’an and/or divine names and astrological symbols. The recipients sewed the paper into a leather bag or strip of cloth and used them to counteract sorcery or the evil eye, to ward off diseases or weapons, to attract wealth or customers or lovers, and to prevail in court; they could also be used for malicious purposes (Holy 1991). The Bosnian Muslim villagers of Dolina (Bringa 1995) also used amulets (*zapis*) of writing, wrapped into red cloth triangles and pinned onto clothing close to the body, like an undershirt. These charms were thought to combat evil spells and to bring happiness and good luck.

The bodies of religiously powerful humans are frequently thought to carry power. “Relics” or parts of the dead bodies of saints abound in Catholicism, and bodies or tombs of Muslim saints are also centers of popular worship in many parts of the Islamic world. Buddhists allegedly possess today a tooth of the Buddha, which they care for and venerate affectionately. Relics need not be human remains but can also be bits of significant objects. Indisputably, the most precious of relics in Christianity is or would be a piece of the “true cross.” Others which have fired interest and

controversy are the “shroud of Turin,” which some believers claim to be the actual burial cloth of Jesus, and the “Holy Grail,” the cup used at the Last Supper.

## **Masks**

Many societies make and use masks during ritual cures or reenactments of myth. The Yupik exercised great creative freedom in the styles they produced, from the realistic to the surreal. Formally, they were made of wood, some as long as 4 feet, and painted brightly in white, black, red, and blue-green. They were often decorated with feathers, quills, down, hair, fur, grass, and other materials and had amulets and charms suspended on them. They represented human, animal, and other less realistic and more or less grotesque figures. Functionally, the most visually stunning and spiritually powerful masks were made and used by specialists in ceremonial activities, although not curing ceremonies. Rather, they were associated with activities that involved animals and animal spirits, among which were the Bladder Festival (in which the bladders of dead sea animals were honored, the bladder believed to be the seat of the spirit), the Messenger Festival (in which humans portrayed animal behaviors and hunting scenes), and the Inviting-In Feast (in which dancers “invited” the animals to offer themselves on the next year’s hunt). Each mask existed, then, not as an “art” object or even a stand-alone power object “but as part of an integrated complex of story, song, and dance in religious and secular activity” (Ray 1967: 6).

Masks are remarkably common in both religious and secular contexts across cultures. They enable human participants to portray and impersonate and even become the figures, including spiritual figures, represented in ritual. The Hopi wore masks of their *kachina* spirits in their ceremonies. Balinese use masks extensively in their story-telling traditions, portraying both historical and divine characters, among them the all-good Barong and the all-evil Rangda. African masks are rightly famous, used by societies all over the continent, including the Dogon.

In perhaps more familiar settings, masks were incorporated into “dramatic” activities like ancient Greek and traditional Japanese theater. Behind masks, the “actors” were not encouraged—or in fact able—to display individual expressions but were rather presenting highly stylized forms of stock characters. In fact, in a real sense, the whole point of a mask is to “hide” the individuality of the actor and to replace it completely with the person of the character he or she played.

## **The human body**

Among the many ways that a community embodies its ideas and values—and its identity as a community—is through its treatment and manipulation of the human body itself. This can include standards of dress and comportment, including grooming. In at least some Muslim societies or subcultures, men are expected to wear beards, and, of course, women are expected to wear some version of the veil, from a light scarf over the head to a thorough draping of every inch of the body. Traditionalist Jewish men can still be seen wearing the long curls of hair hanging

from their temples (earlocks), and many Jewish men wear the skullcap or yarmulke. At least on ritual occasions, including prayer, they may also don the prayer shawl and phylactery, a small box on a leather strap worn on the arm and the forehead which holds a verse from scripture (not unlike the Muslim amulets above).

Other cultures order other forms of dress or presentation, especially on ceremonial occasions. The Sikhs, at least in their most “orthodox” or Khalsa version, are distinguished by five traditional markers—unshorn hair (*Kesh*), the sword (*Kirpan*) which should be worn at all times, a special type of undergarment (*Katcha*), a comb (*Kanga*), and a bracelet or bangle (*Kara*). Clothing can and often does have symbolic significance. The Muslim women of Dolina wore a type of baggy trouser (*dimije*) and headscarf to state their identity vis-à-vis the Catholic women in the village, and the men wore dark blue berets. Certain colors can have religious meaning, such as green in much of Islam. Of course, religious specialists and people participating in religious activities tend to dress and comport themselves in distinguishable and typically more “formal” ways.

From Amish farmers to Hindu yogis, people indicate their religious beliefs and their spiritual state by the manner in which they appropriate their bodies. Australian Aboriginal men scarified their chests, knocked out a front tooth, pierced their nasal septum, and circumcised and subincised their penises. Nuer pastoralists in East Africa cut scars or *gar* into the foreheads. Women across a swath of Africa and the Middle East undergo “female circumcision” of more or less extreme kinds. Hindu women wear a dot between their eyes to indicate their marital status, whereas mainstream Americans wear a golden ring on their left hands. Many cultures, like the Iban of Borneo, tattooed themselves grandly.

## **Ritual objects**

In addition to fetish objects, most, if not all, religions possess a battery of objects that are necessary to carry out the business of the religion. These can include things like candles, altars, plates, cups, beads, staffs, bells, gongs, and an infinite variety of others. Some are naturally occurring objects—plants, stones, parts of animals or entire animals—while some are man-made. Curers in areas of South America may incorporate llama fetuses into their rituals, and it is not uncommon at all for ritual objects to be burned as a way of “sending” them to the spirit world.

## **Texts**

All literate religions include a set of writings in their kit of religious objects. Some of these texts are to be read by all members of the society. In other cases, the texts are “secret” or “esoteric” and only intended for the initiated or the full-time practitioners of the tradition. One function, therefore, of religious specialists may be to read, memorize, and recite these texts on religious occasions.

The fundamental text in Christianity is the Bible, and in Islam it is the Qur’an along with the Hadith (“traditions” of Muhammad). The earliest writings of Hinduism

are the Vedas, books of hymns and ritual rules and practices. Epic tales like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* came later, as well as the teachings known as the Upanishads, which are more “philosophical” in nature. Buddhism has a huge scriptural component, including the oldest “sutras” in the Pali language but continuing into current times with books and commentaries by Tibetan, Zen, and other masters. Still more ancient religions possessed writings, from the Egyptian Book of the Dead to the Sumerian *Enuma Elish* and *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Zoroastrian *Avestas*. Chinese religions have their *Tao Te Ching*, *Chuang Tzu*, and the works of Confucius and others, while Sikhism has its *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, which is believed to be literally a textual “person.” And new scriptures continue to appear or be written. For instance, the *Book of Mormon* was revealed in the 1800s. The *Kitab-i-Aqdas* forms the basis of the Baha’i faith, while L. Ron Hubbard’s Scientology and Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Science stem from these individuals’ writings. Even more non-mainstream works, from *The Urantia Book* to Gerald Gardner’s works on Wicca (see Chapter 12), have provided foundations for new religions.

Texts are sometimes regarded as containers of ideas, but they can also be regarded as objects of power in their own right; even the very skill of writing itself may be powerful. Holy notes that literate religious leaders (*faki*) hesitated to use literacy for any purpose other than religion. Verses from the Qur’an were respected for their inherent power to cure diseases or achieve other effects, and part of the training of a *faki* was learning which verses “worked” for which problems. Each *faki* would also assemble his own book or *umbatri* (“that which mentions everything”) in which he would collect knowledge from orthodox and unorthodox sources such as astrology, dreams, and any other “secrets” he discovered (Holy 1991: 25). In some traditions, including the Islamic one, the scriptures were and are treated as sacred physical objects, which must not be mishandled or profaned.

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## Religious specialists

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As in all other walks of human life, there are always some individuals who have more knowledge or ability in religion than others. This skill may come from training, personal experience, inherent talent or spiritual power, or other such factors. These individuals may be leaders and functionaries, but they may be much more—the “conduit” through which the spirits communicate with the human world or vice versa. They may “represent” and “embody” the spirits on earth as emissaries or spokespeople, or they may be those who, for one reason or another, have “broken through” the barrier between the two dimensions and can thereby interact with both.

There is great variety among religious specialists, in terms of their abilities, their practices, and the beliefs or concepts behind them. Analysts often try to organize this diversity of specialists into “types” with discrete abilities and functions; however, as in other instances we have seen, actual specialists often slip through such typologies,



merging aspects of different “types” or lacking one or more of the “typical” features. Rather, it might be better to think of religious specialization from the modular perspective—as roles that combine various powers and functions. There are certain religious “jobs to do” in a society (curing different ailments, leading specific rituals, bringing luck or preventing bad luck, enhancing fertility, producing rain, and a host of others), and those jobs can be apportioned in any number of ways. One specialist may perform an assortment of tasks, or the tasks may be assigned to an assortment of specialists. And the very tasks that exist in a society will depend on what kinds of concepts and “beliefs” and interests and goals they have.

## Shaman

One of the most celebrated of all religious characters is the shaman, sometimes called (much less politely and accurately) a witch doctor or medicine man. The term “shaman” derives from the Siberian (specifically Tungusic) word *saman*. The unique and important thing about the shaman is that he or she is a spiritually “able” person with unique talent to achieve certain spiritual states and purposes. In fact, Mircea Eliade referred to shamanism as the “technique of ecstasy” (1964: 4).

The shaman is typically a person who shows a propensity or tendency toward certain abilities early in life, such as talent in singing, facility in entering trance, susceptibility to visions, or such other qualities. One very common element in the biography of a shaman is a serious illness in youth, from which the patient dramatically or miraculously recovers. This is evidence that he or she “has the power,” and it is also often the first significant contact with the spirit world. The aspiring shaman often then becomes a student or apprentice to a senior shaman, who “teaches” the novice in ways that would not quite qualify for education in our society. The master will seldom “lecture” or “instruct” him or her about how to be a shaman. Instead, the teacher may subject the student to trials, like sleep deprivation, long hours of chanting, drug ingestion, seclusion, quests of various kinds, and other difficult and even painful ordeals.

One of the key factors in becoming a full-fledged shaman is often acquiring a helper-spirit, sometimes called a “spirit familiar.” This spirit will show the apprentice things that cannot be known any other way. It will teach him or her about the spirits and give him or her a personalized set of songs, dances, symbols, and other spiritual tools. That is why a shaman cannot simply learn the knowledge of past shamans; each must have his or her own “kit,” which he or she may acquire in dreams, trances, or bouts of illness. Paramount in many of these kits is the ability to enter into a dissociated state, during which the most “spiritual” of shamanic work—the shaman’s “technique”—is done.

!Kung shamans, for example, were called upon when a member of the band was sick or troubled. According to Katz (1982), nearly all men and most women attempted to become shamans, or *n/um kausi* (“master/owner of *n/um*”). Spiritual power was mostly acquired by doing the trance dance; those who demonstrated a talent for the trance state (*kia*) were said to receive *n/um* from the gods, who put

the power in songs and visions; another source for the apprentice was senior shamans, who were said to give their juniors *n/um* to drink by shooting them with invisible arrows of power by snapping their fingers. Fortunately, there was an infinite supply of *n/um* in the world, so about half of men and one-third of women succeed in their spiritual quest.

The !Kung shaman began his or her work by singing and chanting until the *n/um* located at the base of the spine heated and boiled, rising up the spine in a painful manner. They fell, literally, into a trance; the body collapsed on the ground, because the “soul” had left it and was sojourning in the spiritual dimension. Having become a spirit, they might struggle with the ancestors (// *gauwasi*) or, in the case of especially serious illness, the great god *Gao Na*. The shaman, still in trance, regained his senses and conducted “operations” that included rubbing their own sweat on the patient, with the belief that the sweat of the shaman is spiritually potent. They also practiced a technique called *twe* that entailed pulling the sickness out of the victim. The shaman eventually literally “swam” back to consciousness.

In Australian Aboriginal societies, shamans would often accomplish their cures by pulling objects—like stones or feathers—out of the body of the victim. Shamans also might incorporate more “mundane” elements into their cures, including potions, charms, sacrifices, and such. According to Trigger (1969), Huron shamans in southeastern Canada recognized four different kinds of shamans or *arendiwane* (meaning “his supernatural power is great”): those who could make wind and rain, those who could predict the future, those who could locate lost objects, and those who could cure the sick. The last, called *ocata* or *saokata*, were considered the most important. Among the Tausug of the Philippines, the curer or *magubat* tended to be an older man, often with a reputation for odd behavior, who conducted healing ceremonies in private using a combination of spells, potions, ritual bathings, palm reading, and social “advice” on restitution or redress for past wrongs the sufferer may have committed (Kiefer 1972).

## Priest

In conventional thinking, the priest is all of the things that a shaman is not. He or she is often a full-time specialist occupying the formal “office” of priest achieved by study, testing, and “ordination” by a religious institution or structure with the power and authority to invest priests. Priests may or may not be powerful individuals—some are quite ordinary people—but they hold a powerful office. Many, probably most, societies, have nothing as formal as a priest. Certainly small-scale, foraging societies do not; the !Kung and the Aboriginals did not. Even some larger-scale societies like the Swazi in Africa did not; despite the fact that they achieved a level of political integration, including a king, the leader of spiritual activities was merely the family head (Kuper 1963: 60).

One becomes a priest by very different means than one becomes a shaman. Commonly, acquiring a priesthood means mastering a body of knowledge and dogma, becoming an “expert” in some orthodoxy (*ortho* for “correct/straight”

and *doxa* for “opinion”). Individuals with deviant or “heretical” ideas do not tend to receive priestly offices; thus, priests tend to be agents of conservatism. In fact, they represent the institution to which they belong, rather than being the “free agents” that shamans are.

The activities of priests tend to be different as well. The occasional priest may engage in curing practices. However, more often priests are ritual leaders, functionaries who organize, conduct, and preside over more formulaic ritual situations. Priests are not encouraged to “improvise” or receive their own private spiritual instructions or resources; they do not, for instance, have spirit familiars. In many societies, every time a priest performs or leads a ritual, it should be exactly the same, down to the finest detail. The efficacy of the ritual may depend on each bit of it being correctly done.

The priesthood, while not always hereditary, may have a hereditary component. In the Jewish Torah (the Christian Old Testament), one particular lineage or clan, the Levites, was presented with the honor of being the priestly group. This suggests and requires a certain amount of social stratification: Presumably, it is better and more prestigious to be in the priestly clan than a non-priestly one. Hindu *brahmans* also constitute a closed succession (caste) of priests, and in traditional Hawaiian society, priesthood was an inherited rank.

So, priesthood tends to come with social stratification, institutionalization of religion, and even the equation of religious with political power. In South India in particular, as described by Beals, the system of priests followed the system of gods; there were various kinds of gods, from the benevolent “high” gods served by a class of vegetarian priests, to lower goddesses that protected or punished humans and were approached through nonvegetarian priests of lower caste (1962: 47–8). Priests, especially in larger, richer, and more centralized societies, tended to be full-time employees of the religious establishment, depending on a considerable surplus to support them, and they often exercised “secular” or political power as well as religious. In fact, as we have noted, high political office may mix politics and religion, as with the king or emperor controlling the priests or being the chief priest or even a god himself.

Even more so, in societies with blended traditions—especially one in which a “world religion” like Christianity or Islam has mingled with and superimposed itself on an indigenous tradition—we may find priests coexisting with shamans or other specialists in a kind of spiritual “division of labor.” Among the Tausug, shamans and curers handled the indigenous spirits and ghosts through shamanic skills and practices. However, the “official” religion was managed by Islamic priests who formed a hierarchy from novice (*bilal*) to master (*imam*) and even high master (*imam muwallum*). The priests acquired their position through knowledge of the Islamic literature and ordination. Likewise, among the Aymara of Bolivia, curers or magicians (*yatiri*) shared the spiritual field with Catholic-based priests, who presided over masses, funerals, Christian holidays, and the ceremony having to do with twins (Buechler and Buechler 1971). We will return to this issue in Chapter 8.

## Diviner/oracle

Especially in societies with gods or powerful and well-known spirits, it can be extremely valuable to know what those beings want or intend. The diviner/oracle has the ability to read or interpret the will of spirits, sometimes by asking direction questions and examining some material manifestation of an answer. Astrology has traditionally been a divining activity, looking for traces of “divine” communication in the stars. Any number of other kinds of signs are read for spiritual meaning, from tea leaves and coins to the bones or entrails of animals; a diviner may put a question or request to the spirits, then kill and study the body of an animal for indications of an answer. The Azande chicken-oracle administered poison to a chicken for a quick answer. Probably the most famous oracle in Western history was the Greek oracle at Delphi, where citizens—including kings and generals—would ask advice from young priestesses who would give cryptic responses while in a trance. Decisions to go to war and other epoch-making decisions were settled this way.

Divining was common in Africa, although by no means exclusive to the continent. The Bunyoro of Uganda practiced divination for illness, childlessness, theft, and other offenses and misfortunes. Beattie (1960) characterizes most diviners as “doctors” too, diagnosing and curing physical problems in shamanic style. The most common method of divination among Bunyoro was throwing cowrie shells and reading the resultant pattern; however, other techniques included throwing small leather squares, sprinkling water, rubbing blood on a stick to see where the hand sticks to it, and reading the entrails of animals. The Swazi of South Africa also practiced divination, and diviners or *tangoma* were regarded as more important and powerful than curers or medicine men, although their role was diagnosis, not cure. Their abilities came from spirit possession, which explains why women were more often diviners than men, since they were more easily “possessed” than men. Swazi diviners conducted séances to communicate with the dead, tossed bones to read the pattern, and performed a poison oracle similar to the Azande.

Among the Kaguru, the diviner or *muganga* was almost always a senior male, and his power was used regularly to combat the effects of witchcraft and sorcery. For their divination (*masetu*) work, they incorporated various techniques such as “gazing into bowls of water, casting stones, seeds, or sandals, or poisoning chickens and watching how they flutter” (Beidelman 1971: 36). The Barabaig diviner or *sitetehid* manipulated a pile of stones and studied the patterns for messages, usually involving witches or angry ancestor spirits, although he did not actually perform the cure, which was turned over to another specialist. Outside of Africa, the Menomini Indians had a role called *ceseko*, sometimes translated as “juggler,” who combined the functions of diviner and shaman: They would diagnose spiritual illness, listening for voices in the wind that blew against their special-purpose lodge and responding via the medium of a turtle. To cure witchcraft they would call the victim’s soul to enter a small wooden cylinder, which they would return to the family, or they would suck out the witches’ infection (an “arrow”) which they spat out in the form of “a maggot, a fly, a quill, or some other small object” that had entered the body (Spindler and Spindler 1971: 45).

### **Prophet/medium**

Prophets offer another solution to the problem of divine silence. A prophet is an individual who receives direct communication from the spirits, often quite involuntarily (recall how Moses and other Hebrew patriarchs were often reluctant to take on the role), and is then charged with the obligation to pass that communication along to other humans. “Prophecy,” which is often confused with telling the future, is a bulwark in the Christian tradition, and Muhammad is revered among Muslims for being not only a prophet but also “the seal of prophets”—the final and authoritative one. His prophecy, received as a recitation or Qur’an from God and his angels themselves, was to complete and correct all prophecies. Obviously, though, there have been many since who believed they were prophets, both within and outside the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition.

In a way, all shamans and diviners are mediums in that they provide the “mediation” between the mundane and spiritual worlds. Dozier (1967) refers to the medium as the only religious specialist among the Kalinga of the Philippines and goes on to attribute to them many of the skills or powers of the shaman or diviner, including curing illness (by guiding the soul of the ill person back after its capture by a malicious spirit or ancestor). Kalinga mediums underwent a “calling” similar to a shaman, and most of them were women.

### **Ascetics/monks/mendicants**

In a variety of religious traditions, there are those who voluntarily remove themselves from society and “cloister” or even scourge themselves, either for their own “benefit” or for the benefit of their family, village, society, or species. Ascetics are specifically people who choose a difficult, even painful, existence for themselves out of some religious motivation. There is certainly an ascetic tradition in Christianity, flowing from a combination of the general sinfulness of human nature and the need to avoid physical (especially carnal) pleasure together with a condemnation of wealth as an obstacle to spiritual pursuit. Hence, some Christians, at least since the time of St. Anthony (c. 300 CE) who withdrew into solitary existence in Egypt, have valued a rejection of “worldliness”; in fact, his example set the standard for monasticism, in which groups of men (or women, in the case of nunneries) would seclude themselves from the world and focus on their spiritual business.

From the monastery comes the monk, who chooses (usually) this set-apart life for himself. Again, he may do this for his own personal spiritual advancement. The Buddhist tradition, especially in its Theravada form, emphasizes this course: the spiritual seeker should abandon worldly goods, or at least worldly attachments, and become a full-time spiritual practitioner. However, one person’s quest cannot possibly aid another person’s, any more than one person’s antibiotic treatment can cure another person’s infection. Eventually, various local Buddhist traditions developed the notion of having monks perform their spiritual exercises for the good of the whole family or community or even the dead. At the same time, this is

often the path to an education, since the monastery may be the center of literacy in the community.

The life of the ascetic or mendicant is a difficult one. In its most complete form, it entails the rejection of family and other social obligations, often a wandering lifestyle, and usually a deprived condition in terms of food and comfort. The ascetic, monk, or mendicant may own little or nothing and beg for his/her meal; a classic Buddhist mendicant owns only a robe, sandals, and a begging bowl, and they can be seen today looking for offerings of food, which “make merit” for the giver. In Hindu theory, asceticism or mendicancy is not so much a choice as a life stage. Although not all follow the prescription, the life of a man should culminate in the phase of *simnyasin* in which he renounces his home and family and embarks on the itinerant spiritual life; this stage only comes in later life, after he has completed the stages of student and householder. At this final stage of life, his main concern is and must be his own spiritual progress. In more than a few cases, asceticism crosses the line to self-mortification (see Chapter 9).

### Sorcerer

Sorcerers are generally people who are believed to exercise spiritual power, typically for the worse, through specific “technical” means. That is, sorcery might be classed as a subset of *magic*, which is normally thought of as an instrumental action in which certain gestures or behaviors “automatically” lead to certain results. The sorcerer, then, can be conceived of as a person who performs “black magic” or such activities as ordinarily cause evil or harm.

Among the Bunyoro, sorcery was not only a great but actually a growing concern. Like many societies, they believed that little if any misfortune befalls people accidentally; there were few if any “natural” causes. The Bunyoro sorcerer used a mixture of natural and supernatural means to inflict intentional harm, usually on those fairly close to him in proximity and kinship. As one of Beattie’s informants told him:

A sorcerer is a person who wants to kill people. He may do it by blowing medicine toward them, or by putting it in the victim’s food or water, or by hiding it in the path where he must pass. People practice sorcery against those whom they hate. They practice it against those who steal from them, and also against people who are richer than they are. Sorcery is brought about by envy, hatred, and quarreling.  
(Beattie 1960: 73)

Similarly, the Kapauku of New Guinea feared and disliked the sorcerer or *kego epi me*. The Kapauku sorcerer had his own supernatural powers, not emanating from any spirit-familiar like that of a shaman. Rather, he secretly performed spells and magical processes (including imitative magic) to injure or kill his victim. Anyone suspected of sorcery was avoided or even ostracized, and in extreme circumstances might be killed by the family of his alleged victim (Pospisil 1963).

On the Pacific atoll of Ulithi, people hired sorcerers clandestinely to do evil to those “whom they feel are guilty of ill will or overt action against them” (Lessa 1966: 71). The materials utilized in this setting included “magical starfish, live lizards, and coconut oil” that had been sung over and planted in or near the victim’s house; also potions might be poured on the victim’s comb or clothing (Lessa 1966: 72). Apache sorcerers had an array of techniques to draw from, including poisons, spells, and “injection” of a foreign substance into the person’s body. Males were more often sorcerers because they were held to be more prone to *kedn* or “anger” than women. Spell sorcery, the most varied type, tended to involve ritual actions in fours, such as walking around the victim’s person or home four times or situating four pieces of wood in the cardinal directions around his or her residence. Sorcery could be aimed not only at the person but at other things, including their animals and even personal property.

### Witch

The traditional image of a witch in the Western world is female, old and ugly, wearing pointy hats with wide brims. This is a cultural picture at best. Many societies recognize and express concern about witches and are quite sure that they operate in their community all the time. As a cultural concept, witchcraft is very diverse, but the common thread across cultures is that witches are responsible for bad things that happen to people—often all bad things. In one of the classic studies of witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard, who is largely responsible for the anthropological conception of witchcraft and sorcery, argues that the Azande of the Sudan saw witches at work everywhere:

If blight seizes the ground-nut crop it is witchcraft; if the bush is vaingloriously scoured for game it is witchcraft; if women laboriously bale water out of a pool and are rewarded by but a few small fish it is witchcraft; if termites do not rise when their swarming is due and a cold useless night is spent in waiting for their flight it is witchcraft; if a wife is sulky and unresponsive to her husband it is witchcraft; if a prince is cold and distant with his subjects it is witchcraft; if a magical rite fails to achieve its purpose it is witchcraft; if, in fact, any failure or misfortune falls upon anyone at any time and in relation to any of the manifold activities of his life it may be due to witchcraft.

(1937: 18–19)

Some societies believed that a witch was a person with an innate, even anatomical, power to do harm; the witch may have an extra organ in his or her chest that holds negative spiritual power. Witch-power may actually be involuntary, at least initially; they may simply exude negativity in ways that even they do not understand or control. Or they may practice, sharpen, and intentionally employ their power for their benefit, especially against rivals, including rival witches.

The Swazi recognized witches as well as sorcerers, which they categorized together as *batsakatsi* or “evil-doers.” As noted, they believed that witches had an innate physiological and psychological potential for evil, whereas sorcerers depended on “technique.” The “talent” for witchcraft belonged to men and women, but only women transmitted it to children. Further, the inborn ability must be developed into real witchcraft ability by training and by infusions of evil power. To this end, witches formed congregations or covens, in which they practiced their craft and ranked themselves according to their malevolent achievements. The Kaguru also said that witches (*wahai*) were congenitally evil people, the ontological opposite of normal human beings. Like the Bunyoro, they also believed that witchcraft was actually more, not less, common than in the past—no doubt reflecting the increased stresses associated with the modern age. The Dani of New Guinea held a mutated view on witchcraft: they themselves did not do it—they didn’t even know how. However, their neighbors practiced it, by physical (e.g., poison) or supernatural (e.g., pointing a stick at a victim) means. There are even tales of Dani hunting down and killing suspected witches among their neighbors, although witchcraft did not seem to be as relentless a preoccupation for them as for some societies (Heider 1979). Finally, the Menonimi took it to be the case that all powerful elders were potential witches.

According to the Burmese studied by Spiro, witches filled out a spiritual world that also included souls of the dead, ogres, Buddhist deities, and the multifarious *nats*. Some informants claimed that witches were not even human but evil spirits in a human guise; also, they did not make a sharp distinction between sorcery and witchcraft. A witch might have innate evil powers or the learned and acquired power more usually associated with a sorcerer. They distinguished two main types, the witch (*soun*) and the master witch (*aulan hsaya*). The *soun* was almost always female, recognizable by her dimly colored eyes; her power could be inherent or learned, with the learned witches being less powerful but more deliberately evil (since they sought out the ability actively). They were believed to cause various illnesses and to eat feces by detaching their heads and rolling along the ground. They might also work in conjunction with bad spirits. The master witch was much more powerful and always male. He did his dirty work by controlling evil spirits, feeding them raw meat until they became dependent on him. Interestingly, though, there were also good master witches (*ahtelan hsaya*) who could counteract the malice of *aulan hsaya*.

### Case study 3.2

#### Ambiguous and multifunctional specialists

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Some religious specialists defy our attempt to create solid categories. As described by Myerhoff (1974: 94), the central religious figure among the Huichol of Mexico

continued



is the *mara'akame*, who combined the function of "shaman, priest, healer, and leader":

His part in Huichol life transcends the usual shamanic functions found in primitive societies and approaches the more public, formal activities associated with the role of priest. The *mara'akame* attends the sick, divining the causes of illness with the assistance of Kuyumari who acts as his tutelary spirit [ . . . ] The *mara'akame*, like all classical shamans has the gift of access to the other worlds. He is able to transform himself into various animals; he has the power to make the magical flight to the land of the gods and can follow the souls of the dead to the underworld. [ . . . ]

But in the Huichol tuki services, in the annual ceremonial cycle, in the making of offerings, in presiding over life crises, he acts more as priest than as shaman, for here he is officiating at recurrent, ritualized public events on behalf of the entire group. On these occasions he performs as "singer-priest," embodying and promoting traditional values, jealously guarding the Huichol cultural heritage and identity—admonishing, teaching, modeling, explaining, and advocating "all that it means to be Huichol."

(Myerhoff 1974: 94–5)

Investigating the *paye* role among the Cubeo of the northwestern Amazon, Goldman (2004) asks the question straight out, "Is he a shaman or is he a priest?" and answers in the only possible and meaningful way: "But to ask such a question is to yield to our own categorical obdurances" (2004: 301). The Cubeo *paye* went through a rather conventional shamanic training experience and performed the familiar shamanic cures, but his position and knowledge were not as personal and idiosyncratic as that of classic shamans. Rather, more like a priest, becoming and executing the role of *paye* involved mastering a set body of religious doctrine and practice. He was not just a curer but an "authority":

He has learned the repertory of songs and dances of most public rituals, and he has become the sought-after authority on mythology and local traditions of sib and ritual origins. Apart from what he has learned from teachers, he adds to the general body of esoteric knowledge from his own "clinical" experiences and from his "field studies" among fish and other animals. The most common reply to my questions on esoteric matters was "only the *paye* knows, for only he has lived among the fishes and has talked to them and observed what they do."

His visions are the inspiration for decorative design and for ritual modification. He is the trusted investigative reporter, the ethnographer of hidden worlds. However, what he "sees" and comes to "know" is knowledge by surrogacy. Under the influence of shamanic hallucinogens, his mind joins that of the Thunder God to share a common knowledge and vision. [ . . . ]

The other side of the visionary is the natural scientist. In basic respects, he is the complete practitioner, actually the true Cuban who knows the place of traditional beliefs and empirical knowledge.

(Goldman 2004: 300–1)

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## Conclusion

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Religion is about ideas and beliefs, but even more about power and effectiveness. And while transcendent and abstract, it must be made immanent and concrete in order for it to have that power and effectiveness. Objects, actions, places, and people can all be manifestations of and conduits to religious beings and forces. Sometimes these manifestations may be “symbolic” in the familiar sense, as standing for or reminding of other, nonnatural and nonhuman phenomena. Sometimes, though, they are not mere stand-ins or reminders but, to the believers and practitioners, real containers, products, or presences of supernatural power. Geertz called symbols vehicles for meanings, but at least in some cases they are vehicles for actions, vitalities, and effects. We should not impose intellectualist interpretations where the members view themselves as *doing* something. And, of course, doing requires a doer, a human actor or intermediary. Since religion is fundamentally a “social” relationship between the human and the nonhuman, some persons must take their place as the partner or contact-point with the supernatural—a role of power and danger, precisely *because of* the power involved.

# 4

## Religious language

Myth as religious language  
Types and themes of myth  
The structural study of myth  
Myth as oral literature  
Religious language as performance  
The power of words  
Conclusion

Humans are communicative beings. We communicate in many different ways, for many different purposes, and with many different partners. One of the main things we do is talk. We talk to convey information, of course, but also to express ourselves and to make an impact on the world. We talk to other humans, who we think will hear, understand, respond, and behave in some particular way because they are intelligent agents like we are. And we talk—to pets or machines or the wind—because that is what we do.

If language is a necessary and even universal medium of human communication, and if humans converse with and about intelligent agents, then it is sensible that humans would attempt to speak with and about nonhuman and “supernatural” agents as well—and that those agents would be expected to communicate back to us. And it is sensible that humans would use language not only to pass information but to express their feelings and desires to these agents, to instill feelings and desires in these agents, and to sway their behavior, that is, to achieve some result.

The present chapter explores religious language. Often, even in anthropological discussions, this is taken to mean *myth*. Myth is, in fact, an extremely common and important form of religious speech but by no means the only form. There are other major genres, such as prayer, incantations or “magical speech,” songs, proverbs or wisdom literature, and liturgies which also deserve our attention. Accordingly, we will begin with myth in this discussion but also refer to these other verbal forms.

One other tendency in treatments of myth in particular and religious language in general is to concentrate on the “content” of the utterances, that is, the information or “ideas” or “beliefs.” In myth, this entails the events and the characters

performing the events. Language, though, whether it is religious or nonreligious language, is more than ideas or “facts”; it is not strictly propositional. Therefore, we will attend to two other facets of religious speech. The first is the “form” or style, or better yet, the *performance*, of the linguistic behaviors. Too often the performative qualities of religious speech are lost in the insistence on the things that are spoken about; but sometimes *how* things are said is as important as *what* is said. The second is the “effective” quality of speech: people often speak not so much to describe something as to *achieve* something. It is fair and important to say that words, names, utterances, and tales are frequently thought to possess power and to affect the world in some real way.

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## Myth as religious language

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Myth is a pervasive and fascinating aspect of religion. Like other genres of religious language, they are things we do with or in words. Humans can do many things with language—state facts, ask questions, issue commands, articulate emotions, etc. One use to which we put language is to tell stories, to present happenings in a “narrative” format such that they are connected in a processual (i.e., occurring or unfolding in time) and meaningful way. Events, in a narrative form, do not occur randomly but have coherence and significance, that is, they signify something; there is a “theme” or “moral” to the story, even (or especially) if it is a life story (a biography).

A myth is a story or a “history”; the word derives from the ancient Greek *mythos* or *muthos* for story or fable. However, it is not just any kind of story but one involving the doings of the gods or ancestors or spirits or other religious beings. Myths, in a word, are narratives about the activities and adventures of these beings. As Mircea Eliade expressed it:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fable time of the beginnings. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a ‘creation’; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. [. . .] Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the supernaturalness) of their works.

(1998: 5–6)

Thus, myths are frequently creation or origin stories, in which spiritual or supernatural beings are the creators or originators. The myths tell us what transpired “in the beginning”—not always or necessarily in the beginning of time, but in the

beginning of some particular fact or phenomenon, natural or social. As such, they are treated as *true* stories, an accurate account of events, by those who tell them.

Myths, thus, not only represent an “explanation” for things but also, like many religious symbols, a *hierophany*, an appearance of the sacred amidst the profane or mundane. Eliade goes on to say that “myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the ‘supernatural’) into the world. [. . .] It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the World and makes it what it is today” (1998: 6). The interventions or manifestations of the non/superhuman give the natural and social world their shape and character; the natural and social come from and depend on the supernatural and non/superhuman in some essential way.

From a certain point of view, then, myth is characteristically taken to “explain” something, to answer some factual question about the origin or disposition of reality. However, as explanations, myths confront one serious objection—that they are fanciful, contradictory, usually unprovable, and often enough patently false. One religion’s myth might explain the origin of humans in one supernatural way and another religion’s myth in another and completely incompatible way. Especially when it comes to *other people’s religions*, it has been common, as we noted in the first chapter and as Radcliffe-Brown said, to treat them as “systems of erroneous and illusory beliefs” (1965: 153). In fact, people typically regard their own religious stories as true, retaining “myth” to designate other people’s (false) stories.

To avoid this attitude, and to emphasize the social value (independent of the “truth”) of myth, Bronislaw Malinowski proposed a very different approach. Myth for him was not “explanatory” or “etiological” (concerned with causes) at all. He strenuously suggested that myth is not speculative story-telling or question-answering or even holy history but something else. “Myth is not a savage speculation about origins of things born out of philosophic interest. Neither is it the result of the contemplation of nature—a sort of symbolic representation of its laws,” he wrote (1948: 83–4). If myth is not speculative and explanatory, then what is it? He answered this question in what is probably the most oft-quoted passage in all his writings:

Studied alive, myth [. . .] 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 culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces 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 moral wisdom.

(Malinowski 1948: 101)

In other words, myth “is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed

to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies" (Malinowski 1948: 100). Therefore, he concludes, myth should not be treated as explanation or as symbol but rather in terms of how it motivates people and shapes their lives and realities. Rather than a factual description, it is a plan, a model (a "model *for*," as Geertz put it), or—in Malinowski's own word—a "charter" or guideline for life.

Others, almost at the same moment, continued not only to stress the symbolic approach to myth and religion but also to apply it to the problem of living in social reality. Cassirer, we noted, saw that as history or as explanation, myth fails, being full of "errors and heresies." The only option was to view myth as "nontheoretical in its very meaning and essence" (1954: 99). Myth does not attempt to make factual and true statements or explanations about the natural world, because such a world "does not exist for myths. The world of myth is a dramatic world—a world of actions, of forces, of conflicting powers. In every phenomenon of nature it sees the collision of these powers. Mythical perception is always impregnated with these emotional qualities" (Cassirer 1954: 102). In other words, myth is not only fundamentally emotional, but it is also never "disinterested": It does not deal with "the world as it is" but some version of the world as humans are related to it.

Suzanne Langer's philosophy of myth depends on her philosophy of symbols, which mediate and formulate perception and, in turn, express thought and response. Thinking is not, for her, entirely rational or discursive; in fact, symbolic or expressive or emotive "thinking" is the original kind of thinking, "the mode of our untutored thinking, and stories are its earliest product" (1942: 118). Before humans started collecting facts, we were generating imaginative imagery and spinning it into narratives. Myth is more like a dream (also a narrative) than a fact. Myth then "is the primitive phase of metaphysical thought, the first embodiment of general ideas" (Langer 1942: 163). But we cannot look to myth for "explanations" and certainly not for "solutions," as that is not its function or intent. It is a different kind of discourse from the empirical, descriptive, "scientific" one. In fact, the question about the "truth" of myth starts us down a nonmythological road, into a different form of discourse altogether, what she calls the rational or factual or discursive versus the poetic. It would be a rather profound error to mix or mistake these two different ways of speaking and thinking. However, sometimes people do precisely that: they experience a "rampant confusion" between the two modes, taking their metaphors literally—or perhaps their facts metaphorically. The former she refers to as "savages"; the latter she might call postmodernists.

This approach has been given its most recent treatment in the work of Karen Armstrong. Following the tradition of Freud and Jung, she distinguishes between *mythos* and *logos* as two modes of thought and speech. *Mythos* refers to a perspective that is not directed toward or concerned with "practical" matters and is not meant to be taken "literally." It is an ancient form of psychology, bringing into the light obscure and otherwise inaccessible regions of the unconscious. It is not and does not attempt to be "factual" or rational, and so it cannot be demonstrated or verified. It tends to speak the language of history, or cast itself in historical terms, but the

historical events of which it speaks are not specific and unique occurrences in the past but rather “external manifestations of constant, timeless realities” (2000: xv). *Logos*, on the other hand, is the logical, the rational, the pragmatic, the literal and, in our time, the “scientific.” It is propositional, that is, makes claims that are either true or false and can be verified or falsified as such. It is functional rather than expressive, goal-oriented rather than contemplative or playful. The relationships which it suggests between phenomena are causal rather than metaphorical or analogical, and the events which it describes are particular and unique rather than “typical” or “eternal.”

What myth then purports to do is to express or clothe the timeless or eternal or at least “non-temporal” in a specific and temporal guise. For instance, when a myth tells of The Creation, what it is really expressing is something about creativity. Or when it speaks about A Birth and Resurrection, it is really talking about the general cycle of birth and death and rebirth. The “events” in myth, from this perspective, are not events at all but rather ideal or typical situations—situations that did not happen just once in the long-ago but that happen (or should happen) continuously. To say it another way, myths are less about the “then” than the “now.” They set the stage—and the standard—for our present lives.

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## Types and themes of myth

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Myths are highly diverse. Still, perhaps because humans have a limited set of typical or even “archetypical” experiences, there are certain recurring motifs and elements across cultures. Creation is one obvious and compelling theme, understandably since religion attributes most of the creativity to non- and superhuman beings and forces. Myths often describe how the universe as a whole, the Earth in its present form, human beings, and social institutions began (see Chapter 2). There is a tremendous amount of latitude in such matters, yet some motifs appear again and again. For instance, Rooth (1957) investigated 300 North American Indian creation myths and discovered that 250 of them fell within eight general types:

1. Earth-diver, in which some being retrieves mud or sand from the bottom of a primordial body of water, from which the Earth grows.
2. World-parents, in which creation ensues from the joining of a sky father and an earth mother.
3. Emergence, in which the human world begins when ancestral beings emerge from a lower world.
4. Spider as creator, in which a spider-like being weaves the world like a web.
5. Creation of the world through struggle and robbery, in which a supernatural being (like Prometheus) steals something and gives it to humans, or else fights other supernatural beings (giants, dragons, etc.) out of which the world is made.
6. Ymir type, in which the world is created out of the dead body of a slain giant or a primordial man or woman.

7. Two creators, in which two beings—sometimes brothers, sometimes father and son or uncle and nephew—create the world jointly, often as part of a competition or a display for each other.
8. Blind Brother, in which one brother blinds the other in some sort of trick, such as getting him to open his eyes before reaching the surface during an emergence moment (note in the next chapter the significance of keeping one's eyes closed until the right moment in the Huichol pilgrimage).

Many of these themes can also be identified in other cultural areas, and other themes can also be identified in those areas. In fact, Clyde Kluckhohn (1965) conducted a more extensive survey of recurrent themes in world mythology and came up with a list of six common motifs across the fifty societies he studied: a flood element in thirty-four of the fifty societies, a monster-slaying element in thirty-seven, an incest element in thirty-nine, a sibling rivalry element in thirty-two, a castration element, including four cases of actual castration and five of threats, and an androgynous deity element in seven.

Myths are depositories for cultural ideas about issues like cosmology and cosmogony, which are usually if not always portrayed in mythic terms. Evans-Pritchard retells an Azande story, which, he maintains, was the only creation myth in their religion. In it:

Bapaizegino, or Bapai, who is the same person as Mbori [the high god], put mankind with the rest of creation into a kind of round canoe which he completely closed except for a small hidden entrance by which it could be opened. The entrance he closed with wax. Bapaizegino sent a messenger [. . .] to his sons, the Sun, the Moon, the Night, the Cold, and the Stars, to say that he was dying and that they were to come immediately. All the sons of Bapaizegino received well their father's messenger at their homes and each showed him the path to the home of the next son, but it was the Sun alone who treated him with the consideration a messenger from their father deserved. Here we find Zande notions of princely obligations colouring the story. The sons of Bapaizegino should have behaved as a son of King Gdubwe would have done had a messenger from his father arrived at this court. This is just the way a Zande king might have tested the character of his son. For the messenger, in one version, acting on his master's orders, chose the Sun on account of his munificence to the greatest of the sons of Bapaizegino and explained to him the secret of opening the round canoe which contained mankind. He told him to look for a stain, made with fruit of the *mbiango* [. . .] tree, on its surface, and when he saw that he would know that there was the hidden opening.

When the sons of Bapaizegino arrived he told them that he had sent for them to open the round canoe of the universe and had it placed in the center of them. Each in turn made an attempt to open it without success. When the Sun was called upon he saw this stain but pretended he had seen nothing and so appeared to meet with failure like the other sons. Their father upbraided them



for their inability to open the canoe and the Sun then stepped forward a second time and scraped away with his nail the wax beneath the stain and with a great noise poured out men and beasts and trees and grasses and rivers and hills. The first clan of men to emerge were the Ambata, the Men, so-called because Bapaizegino has used up all the names he could think of on the other clans.

(Evans-Pritchard 1962: 315–16)

Myths can also recount the origins of human institutions or social relations, making those institutions or relations good and right. A Bunyoro myth narrated the origins of relations between siblings, establishing the nature of economic practices, servitude, and kingship. The first human father, Kintu or “the created thing,” had three sons. The boys were given two tests. First, six things were placed where the boys would find them—an ox’s head, a cowhide thong, a bundle of cooked millet and potatoes, a grass head-ring (for carrying loads on the head), an axe, and a knife.

When the boys come upon these things, the eldest picks up the bundle of food and starts to eat. What he cannot eat he carries away, using the head-ring for this purpose. He also takes the axe and the knife. The second son takes the leather thong, and the youngest takes the ox’s head, which is all that is left. In the next test the boys have to sit on the ground in the evening, with their legs stretched out, each holding on his lap a wooden milk-pot full of milk. They are told that they must hold their pots safely until morning. At midnight the youngest boy begins to nod, and he spills a little of his milk. He wakes up with a start, and begs his brothers for some of theirs. Each gives him a little, so that his pot is full again. Just before dawn the eldest brother suddenly spills all his milk. He, too, asks his brothers to help fill his pot from theirs, but they refuse, saying that it would take too much of their milk to fill his empty pot. In the morning their father finds the youngest son’s pot full, the second son’s nearly full, and the eldest son’s quite empty.

(Beattie 1960: 11–12)

These decisions settled the identity and fate of the sons and their descendants forever. The first son and his line would always be servants and farmers, laboring for his younger brothers and their descendants; he was named “Kairu” or peasant. The second son and his descendants would have the elevated status of cattle herders; he was called “Kahmua,” little cowherd. The youngest son would be political heir and leader, so he was named “Kakama,” little Mukama or ruler. His descendants became the kings of Bunyoro.

Some societies, like the Kaguru, apparently lacked a cosmogonic myth altogether, although they did have social-origin myths, especially to account for the kinship (clan) distinctions within their society. Beidelman recounts:

Kaguru sometimes compare this birth of Kaguru society to the birth of a person; as humans are born from out of the land of the ancestral ghosts, so too the

Kaguru nation emerged from the north and west, two directions associated with the dead and birth. Some even say that the people marched in a column with the women to the left and the men to the right, directions associated [. . .] with femininity and masculinity, and with subordinate and superordinate status. While there is a general legend common to all Kaguru, this varies in detail from clan to clan. Kaguru may cite this legend to prove their common origin and thus explain their common culture, but they also use it as a means to account for the differences in Kaguru society, differences which provide the most basic feature of Kaguru social organization. That feature is clanship: Kaguru are divided into about one-hundred exogamous, matrilineal clans (*ikolo* or *kolo* or *ikungugo*). Clan size varies from a few hundred to several thousand members. [. . .] Kaguru say that although they may have left their original homeland without such social distinctions (no one stresses this point, however), somewhere en route clans came into being. Most clans derive their names from a series of events said to have occurred during the migration to present-day Kaguruland. Some clans are also said to be related to one another, and this too is explained through such legends.

(Beidelman 1971: 32–3)

Myths often account for specific roles in society, including religious roles themselves. Hence, a specialist position like shaman or priest is often given mythical origins and sanction. Goldman reports the myth of the first Cubeo shaman or *paye*.

Once there were no *payes*. A youth named Djuri wishing to become a *paye* went to the forest [. . .] and sat in a small clearing and thought about how he should go about making thunder. While he was deep in thought, Onponbu [Thunder Man], the owner of *dupa* appeared. He knew the thoughts of the youth and he could see that he had a clean body. He decided to make him *yavi* and set down beside the boy three objects—a fragment of *dupa*, a small container of beeswax, and a tray of eagle down. The youth prepared the *dupa* and beeswax for inhaling and he also inserted the eagle down up his nostrils from where it moved to lodge in his head.

That night he had visions, and he then understood how to make thunder. In his visions, he saw the houses where the *payes* gathered and saw that there were very many in them. He slept and when he awoke before dawn, he heard the first thundering in the East where the rivers fall off the earth. He fell asleep again and dreamt that Onponbu was asking him if he was satisfied with what he had been given and if he believed he had learned how to make thunder. Onponbu advised him how to live. He cautioned him not to sleep with a woman. “You must guard the conduct of your life,” he told him. “You must not eat what others eat. You are to eat only farinha of starch. [. . .] You should not eat anything hot or take food directly from the hand of a woman. Set hot food aside until it turns cold, and it will cause you no harm.”

(Goldman 2004: 303–10)

Onponbu proceeded to give the boy many gifts, including thunder and lightning. He also taught him to seek out specific powerful plants. And he transformed the boy into a shaman by literally changing his body, inserting spines into his forearms and put a stick in his mouth. Finally, he received ritual objects, like a rattle with small stones inside, a feather crown, stone and bark ornaments, and others.

Humans cannot help but note, and, therefore, myth cannot help but note, that all is not well in the natural or social world. Thus, one recurring motif across cultures is the “trickster” or ambiguous spirit character, who causes misfortune through its ignorance, innocence, or mischief. Especially well known in Native American cultures, the Pacific Islanders of Ulithi also had a version of the trickster myth, involving the god Iolofath, son of Lugeilang and a human woman and grandson of Ialulep the Great Spirit. He was responsible for some of the noisome qualities of life. According to the story, as he ascended to his father’s domain in the Sky World, he stopped at each of the four levels to make his unfortunate mark. First, he was rebuked by some boys who were fishing, and he gave the fish spines to pierce the boys. On the second level, other boys rejected him, so he gave the shark they were playing with teeth to bite them. Rebuffed on the third level, he made the stinger of the stingray to harm those boys.

Reaching the fourth level he finds men fetching timber to build the great house of the Sky World known as Farnal. They are all fish but have human attributes, gliding back and forth, imperceptible in their appearance between the piscatory and the anthropomorphic. The people of the fourth level are digging a hole into which to plant the great housepost of the Farnal. On seeing Iolofath they decide to kill him because he is a stranger. They induce him to go into the posthole and then they ram the post down on him. Red and green fluids squirt upwards and the people think this is his blood and bile, but he has tricked them by taking refuge in a pocket he has dug to the side of the hole. The fluids are merely red earth and green mountain apple leaves that he has put in his mouth. Our ingenious hero escapes from his subterranean prison by having termites eat a hole upward through the great housepost. He has ants bring him small morsels of coconut meat and an arum, and magically causes these to attain full size. He increases the size of a grain of sand until it becomes a rock. Dashing the coconut against the rock he cries out “Soro!” to the workmen below. They are astounded and immediately realize that he is the son of Lugeilang. Thenceforth they treat him with deference.

(Lessa 1966: 57)

If there is any general lesson from such trickster stories, it is that the undeniably unpleasant features of nature and existence have a source (originally did not exist and might not have existed) and that socially appropriate behavior is not always followed (with negative consequences for self and others).

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## The structural study of myth

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The verdant plenitude of myth has made it very problematic to study. What exactly do we do with all of these fantastic, ambiguous, and almost certainly fanciful stories? Even worse, what do we do when we collect different and even contradictory versions of the same story? Is it possible to take myth seriously and to treat it scientifically at the same time? Around the middle of the twentieth century, Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced what he considered to be just such an approach—literally a *method*—for the scientific study of myth, based not on the “contents” of myth so much as on its “structure.”

Lévi-Strauss began developing his method in the area of kinship. Taking the notion of a kinship system as a language seriously, he suggested that the meaning of utterances is not so much in the individual items (e.g., words) of which they are composed as in the “grammar” or relationships between the words, that is, the *structure*. Language in this view (derived from the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure) is a set of combinatory and transformational rules or syntax or grammar for arranging its “bits” or words. The structural model thus suggests that the meaning is not *in* the words or symbols but *between* them, in how they are related to each other. Thus, actual speech can say the same “meaning” in many different ways as well as using the same “bits” or symbols or words to convey very different meanings.

Lévi-Strauss applied this notion to religion in the analysis of “totemism” or the spiritual link between natural species or phenomena and human individuals and groups (see Chapter 2). The interpretation before structuralism was often that the totem was chosen because of some characteristic it and the person/group possessed that established a commonality (e.g., people of the bear totem might be strong, etc.). This realist or literalist perspective on religion generally and myth specifically is precisely what the structuralist approach avoided. As Lévi-Strauss wrote in *Structural Anthropology*, “If a given mythology confers prominence on a certain figure, let us say an evil grandmother, it will be claimed that in such a society grandmothers are actually evil and that mythology reflects the social structure and the social relations” (1963: 202). However, that would be a case of looking for the meaning of the myth in the individual item rather than in the structure or context in which the item is deployed.

Despite linguistic and cultural difference, Lévi-Strauss argued, myths across cultures are remarkably similar and are mutually intelligible. His explanation for this similarity and intelligibility was the one thing that all humans have in common—the human mind. All myths being products of the same human mental constitution, all myths have a common and analyzable nature. The fundamental quality of this mind is its *binary* nature: humans think in pairs of opposites. Some central oppositions in his view are male/female, living/dead, nature/culture, matter/spirit, and us/them. The mind then operates on these oppositions or contradictions with a battery of transformational rules, generating the assortment of myths we find crossculturally to “resolve the contradiction” or synthesize the opposites. Myth achieves this goal,

finally, by mixing or manipulating two different variations of time, the eternal or timeless (universal) and the temporal (particular). Myth, then, is both historical and ahistorical, the manifestation in time of timeless truths.

If myth “works” with oppositions and contradictions so as to resolve or synthesize them, in the end it does not and cannot succeed; life and death, matter and spirit, male and female, and so on cannot be resolved or synthesized, at least not permanently. But this helps explain the productivity, the duplication, the “vegetative quality” of myth: We cannot stop at one resolution or synthesis, one story uniting the timeless and the temporal. Rather, we must make and tell the stories over and over again, in endless variation, in a kind of playful seriousness that Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*. Myths in this sense are more like dreams than we first suggested; no single dream can definitively capture or exhaust an unconscious thought or desire. We can—and we must—express it again and again. The contradictions that myth manipulates are not changed or eliminated by the manipulation, and so another myth, like another dream or another work of art, will follow in an unending stream of temporal manifestations of timeless themes.

Lévi-Strauss goes on to demonstrate how to put this theory into practice, to provide a “method” for the structural analysis of myth. First, he says, we must break the myth down into its smallest possible narrative pieces, which he calls “mythemes.” Literally we might write each scene or event in the myth on an index card and lay them on a table. We would then begin to arrange the mythemes into a scheme of rows and columns, rows representing time (flowing from left to right) and columns representing similar types of events or themes that occur at different places in the myth. In his famous dissection of the Oedipus myth he has one column for scenes that invoke problematic or incestuous family relations, another column for murders, and yet another column for slaying of monsters. The result, he claims, is a kind of “musical score” of the myth, with the melody and harmony, rhythm and counterpoint, laid out graphically. The product will be the “structure” of the myth, the particular kinds of oppositions or contradictions dealt with by it and the means by which they are resolved or synthesized.

Naturally, different myths will deal with different contradictions, but there will be in the end a finite list of such matters, and some—like life and death or male and female—will appear over and over again. The structural method, then, should identify these recurring patterns as well as doing one other important thing, namely, removing any “observer bias” in the analysis. Structural analysis should be completely “objective” such that all analysts achieve the same results. Another benefit of such an objective study should be the elimination of the “translation” and “version” problems of myth. In other words, if the meaning of myth is in specific words or in the culturally relative value of actions or ideas, then translating a myth would distort or destroy exactly what we seek. However, if myth is a manifestation of a “deep grammar” that all myths share, then we can confidently translate without fear of loss. Also, we know that different informants will sometimes give different versions of the same myth, or that different regions will have a variant of a more or less standard myth. That is a huge problem for realists, who must study each version independently

or else continue looking for the “true” or “original” myth. For structuralists, each version is little more than a new twist on the same lower-level structure; there is no true version of the myth, and every permutation of the myth is just as good as another.

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## Myth as oral literature

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Myth is, before all else, a story or narrative of a specific kind—the sacred kind, concerning the exploits of supernatural beings. But myth is not the only kind of narrative (religious or nonreligious), and narrative is not the only form of “literature.” Anthropologists and scholars of myth and oral literature have characterized myth as a subgenre of the much more inclusive genre of *folklore*. First used as a technical term by William Thoms in 1846 to refer to “the lore of the people,” (1846: 862) the concept of folklore has expanded to embrace a vast array of verbal cultural behavior. William Bascom, one of the influential early folklorists, held it to include “myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles, the texts of ballads and other songs, and other forms of lesser importance” (1953: 287) but not behavioral genres like dance or art or costume and such. A much more recent compilation on folklore edited by Richard Bauman (1992) contains entries on folktales, oral poetry, proverbs, riddles, insults, gossip, oratory, song, mime, dance, clothing, and masks among others. Perhaps Alan Dundes, the noted anthropologist of folklore, offered the most comprehensive list:

Folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas. [. . .] It also includes folk costume, folk dance, folk drama, folk instrumental music [. . .], folksongs [. . .], folk speech [. . .], folk similes [. . .], folk metaphors [. . .], and names. Folk poetry ranges from oral epics to autograph-book verse, epitaphs, latrinalia (writings on the walls of public bathrooms), limericks, ball-bouncing rhymes, jump-rope rhymes, finger and toe rhymes, dandling rhymes (to bounce children on the knee), counting-out rhymes [. . .], and nursery rhymes. The list of folklore forms also contains games; gestures; symbols; prayers (e.g., graces); practical jokes; folk etymologies; food recipes; quilt and embroidery designs; house, barn, and fence types; street vendor’s cries; and even the traditional conventional sounds used to summon animals or to give them commands.

(1965: 3)

While we might quibble about the details of the list (for instance, Bascom and others would exclude art, dance, music, costume, and such nonverbal media), it does alert us to the fact that there are many things humans do with language other than tell myths.

According to most students of folklore, the items on these more or less extensive lists share certain key features, particularly being *oral*, *traditional*, and *face to face*. Georges and Jones define folklore precisely as

expressive forms, processes, and behaviors (1) that we customarily learn, teach, and utilize or display during face-to-face interactions, and (2) that we judge to be traditional (a) because they are based on known precedents or models, and (b) because they serve as evidence of continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief, and feeling.

(Georges and Jones 1995: 1)

Dundes and others disagree with, or at least problematize, this definition, since obviously not all folklore is oral (some has long been committed to writing) or, therefore, face to face, nor is all oral behavior folklore; in addition, “traditional” is relative (some folklore is very old, but some is much more recent). And even precisely who the “folk” are is debatable. In other words, Dundes concludes that if we accept this conventional view, then “the folk of today produce no new folklore” (1965: 1)—in fact, “new folklore” would be an oxymoron.

These concerns and objections notwithstanding, within the category of folklore we can identify at least two main genera, namely “narratives” and “nonnarratives,” with myth falling in the genus “narrative folklore.” Other species of this genus include *legends* and *folktales*, *fairy tales*, *epics*, and others. Oring discusses the three major species of narrative folklore—myth, legend, and folktale—as distinguished less by “form” than by the “attitudes of the community toward them.” More explicitly, myth, he claims, is a story “generally regarded by the community in which it is told as both sacred and true,” and myths “tend to be core narratives in larger ideological systems.” Typically, the narrative setting of the story is “outside of historical time.” Also, the delivery of myths differs: “Myths are frequently performed in a ritual or ceremonial context. There may be special personnel designated to recite the myth; the time and manner in which it is performed may also distinguish it from the other forms of narration in the society. Indeed, the language of the myth may be as sacred as its message” (1986: 124).

Legend, on the other hand, refers to narratives “which focus on a single episode, an episode which is presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre, or sometimes embarrassing.” It is usually, if not always, set in familiar historical time, and it might be “regarded as false, or true, or false by some and true by others” (Oring 1986: 125). Finally, a folktale is “related and received as a fiction or fantasy” (Oring 1986: 126). Its characters are normally stereotypes (the beautiful princess, the evil witch, the innocent child, etc.), often in contrasted pairs, and the plot “proceeds as a logical sequence of events” although this logic is “not always the logic of the everyday world” (Oring 1986: 130).

Significantly, not all societies divide their narratives into the same typology that we do; this is yet another area in which we must be careful not to impose our own “folk” categories as analytical tools, believed and intended to apply to all cultures. For instance, Parks (1996) in a detailed examination of narratives of the Arikara Indians of South Dakota finds that they had their own terminology for talking about their narrative talk. At the most general level, they distinguished “true stories” (which do not have a genus name but are spoken of as *tiraanaaNI*s meaning “it is

true”) and “tales” or *naa’iikaWIs*. Under the heading of true stories were the sacred stories and the nonsacred stories, both taken to be true. Sacred stories included what he calls “genesis traditions” in which the origin of each village was recounted as coming from a religious being in a dream. “Myths” were a second type of true stories, consisting of

traditions of incidents that occurred during a period before the earth had fully taken its present form, before or at a time when human institutions were developing. Arikaras refer to this as a holy period, the time when mysterious events occurred. Stories set in this era are said to be holy (*tiraa’iitUxwaaRUxti*, ‘it is a holy story’). It was a time when animals were the actors in dramas and deities came down to earth from the heavens above, when animals killed humans and buffalo ate people rather than the reverse.

(Parks 1996: 49)

Finally, legendary events were regarded as true stories and fell into three sub-types: (1) “etiological narratives” that told of the beginning of a particular social institution or tradition; (2) “dream stories” in which human characters interacted with animals or supernatural agents who help the humans by giving them special powers in hunting, war, or medicine; and (3) stories of supernatural occurrences in which uncanny events took place, like “a girl is shamed and turns into stone” (Parks 1996: 50).

Alongside the sacred stories under the top-level category of “true stories” were the nonsacred stories, which “in general describe events that are more recent in time and, more importantly, do not have a predominant supernatural component—although nearly every story has some supernatural reference” (Parks 1996: 50). These included accounts of historical events, personal/biographical stories, and war reports. All of these “true stories” contrasted with the second major category of “tales” or essentially nontrue stories. These included trickster tales and other animal stories as well as stories about humans, with a limited and well-known cast of characters such as Bounding Head, Lucky Man, Bloody Hands, Scalped Man, and Stays in the Lodge Dressed in Finery. It is worth noting that this culturally specific typology of narratives was not even totally unanimous within the society; Parks writes: “What are true myths for some Arikaras today are tales for others. For many stories, in fact, it is doubtful that consensus in regard to their historical validity could be achieved now—or even, perhaps, could ever have been achieved in the past—since in no culture does everyone hold identical beliefs” (1996: 51).

The other genus of folklore is the nonnarrative, composed of other speech-acts than stories. This category may actually contain more of a society’s oral literature, since there are so many things humans can do with language besides tell stories. For instance, John Messenger (1965) discusses the role of proverbs, short and pithy sayings encoding a bit of cultural wisdom, in the Anang society of Africa. Probably all societies have proverbs of various kinds and use them for various purposes, including didactic or instructional ones; “a stitch in time saves nine” is an example.



Messenger notes that Anang proverbs functioned in several ways—for fun, education, daily interaction, religious ritual, and, most strikingly, legal proceedings. When Anang members went to their traditional courts or *esop*, they, like people in many societies, attempted to display their verbal skills, in this case by quoting an apt proverb. Some examples he shares are:

“If a dog plucks palm fruits from a cluster, he does not fear a porcupine.”

“A single partridge flying through the bush leaves no path.”

“If you visit the home of the toads, stoop.”

“A leopard conceals his spots.” [Think of our own proverb “A leopard can’t change its spots.”]

“The crayfish is bent because it is sick.”

Each of these sayings had cultural meaning, which is sometimes quite foreign to us.

Riddles are another linguistic form that modern Westerners tend to take lightly. In many cultures, riddles are more than entertainment but may be instructive and even competitive. Beuchat (1957) provides a detailed discussion of Bantu riddles, which they used for fun and to demonstrate intelligence and wit. The riddles were characteristically short verbal analogies which require a “solution” or answer, like:

“I have built my house without any door.” Answer: an egg.

“The little hole full of grass litter.” Answer: the teeth.

“Two little holes that refuse to be filled; there enter people, oxen, goats, and other things.” Answer: eyes.

De Caro also talks about riddles, from a crosscultural perspective. He notes that a riddle “seems to depend on *metaphor*, on a kind of poetic comparison drawn between the thing actually described and the referent to be guessed” (1986: 178). Proverbs share with riddles this metaphorical nature. Six contexts in which riddling takes place in cultures include leisure, education (for instance, the famous Buddhist *koan*), courting and mating, greeting, initiations and funerals, and folk narrative. In Dusun society, riddles could be combative as well as humiliating, and Turkish culture used riddles in festivals such as weddings and actually has professional riddlers and neighborhood riddling teams.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked verbal genres across religions is prayer. Not all religions contain prayer, at least in the familiar Western/Christian sense, but many do, and for many it is an essential form of religious language. Sam Gill conducted an analysis of Navajo prayer, which, he argues, cannot be understood apart from the beliefs and myths of the society; “prayers are considered to be complex ritual acts whose performances engage and are informed by elements of mythology and the cultural contexts in which they are performed” (1981: xxii). In fact, this context is critical, since any particular prayer can be used in different ways with different

meanings, e.g., “in one context to request and effect a smooth and healthy birth and in another to request and effect rainfall in a period of drought” (1981: xxiii).

Reviewing 300 different accounts of prayers, Gill arrives at eight general types: (1) blessings, (2) prayers of restoration/recovery by reidentification/reassociation with the means of health, (3) prayers of restoration by expulsion of foreign malevolence, (4) prayers of restoration by expulsion of the malevolent influence of native ghosts or witches, (5) prayers of restoration by the removal of the malevolent influence of Holy People, (6) prayers of restoration by the recovery, return, and reassociation with the means of health, (7) prayers of procurement of protection against potential attack, and (8) prayers of restoration by remaking/redressing the Holy Person’s means of health and life (Gill 1981: 39–42). He determines these eight types by a form of structural analysis different from and less theory-driven than that of Lévi-Strauss. Gill’s structuralism considers the elements or segments of which prayer utterances are composed and the arrangements of those segments, and then the relation between the resulting structure and the function or use of the prayer.

For instance, Gill finds that there are twenty identifiable constituents of Navajo prayers, such as “place designation,” “name mention,” “offering,” “plea for assistance,” “assertion to affect,” “procurement of protection,” “journey of a Holy Person from his home to the home of an Earth Surface Person,” and so on (1981: 14). Each of these is assigned a letter value, from A to V. Any particular type of prayer, then, is a particular combination of these building blocks. Thus, he can name and describe each prayer type (in terms of its ceremonial classification) and its unique structure of components, as follows:

**Prayer Classification**

**Structure**

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| 1. Blessingway | (A) . . . (F) G (U) (V) or<br>(A) . . . (F) V or<br>(A) . . . (F) G <sup>n</sup> V <sup>n</sup> (U) (V) |
| 2. Lifeway     | (A) . . . (F) P G (U) (V)   |
| 3. Enemyway    | (A) . . . (G) K (V)   |
| 4. Uglyway     | (A) . . . (F) M (N)   |
| 5. Holyway     | (A) . . . (G) H M (U) (V)   |

And so on. To take one example, Enemyway ceremony strives for the expulsion of foreign malevolence, and that is what the prayers ask. The structure here is an opening reference to a place or places ([A] in the list of constituents), which is common to all prayers. It is followed by the naming or association with one or more Holy People ([G]), a section asking for the removal of the foreign malevolence ([K]), and one or more references to a state of blessing ([V]). The result might be such a prayer:

He of ‘Waters flow together’!	(A)
His feet have become my feet, thereby I shall go about,	(G)
By which he is long life, by that I am long life,	

By which he is happiness, by that I am happiness,  
 By which it is pleasant at his front, thereby it is pleasant at my front,  
 By which it is pleasant in his rear, thereby it is pleasant at my rear,  
 When the pollen which encircles sun's mouth also encircles my mouth,  
     and that enables me to speak and continue speaking,  
 [replace "feet" with "legs" and "body" and "mind" and "voice" and  
     repeat]

You shall take the death of the upright, of the extended bowstring (K)  
 out of me! You have taken it out of me, it was returned upon him,  
 it has settled far away!

Therefore the dart of the Ute enemy's ghost, its filth, by which it  
 bothered my interior, which had traveled in my interior, which had  
     absorbed my interior, shall this day return out of me! This day it  
     has returned out of me! [. . .]

Long life, happiness I shall be, pleasant again it has become, (V)  
 pleasant again it has become, pleasant again it has become,  
 pleasant again it has become, pleasant again it has become.

(based on Gill 1981: 106–7)

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## Religious language as performance

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A serious approach to myth as folklore and particularly as oral literature leads to other crucial considerations. At the heart of these is the fact that oral genres, whether they are myths, legends, riddles, proverbs, prayers, or what have you, are *performed* and, to a greater or lesser extent, only exist *in the performance*. What this means is that we do not have the luxury of examining only the "content" or the "symbols" or even the "structural relations" within the myths and other oral "texts" but that we should and must include much more in our analyses.

Scholars have tended to focus on the content—the characters, the events, the "beliefs"—of myth and religious language to the exclusion of what we might call "style." Even worse, when we commit oral literature to writing, all other qualities of speech are usually washed out and lost. And what we as ethnographers often report of myths and oral literature are after-the-fact or outside-the-fact summaries or commentaries of them rather than actual "live" versions—that is, we sit down with knowledgeable members of society and have them talk *about* myth rather than *do* the myth. Often enough, our ethnographic accounts summarize the summary (convert it into a Western discursive description) or excise the non-content elements, the non-plot-advancing parts, of the story. Notice, for instance, that the prayer given by Gill ends with a repetitive section of "pleasant-becomings" which could easily be, and often would be, dropped.

Dennis Tedlock found that this summarizing and rendering of myth and oral literature was deemed good enough by early anthropologists:

Franz Boas advocated a “faithful rendering of the native tales,” which for him and most of his followers meant what professional translators would call a “crib” or a “trot”—not a true translation into literate English, but rather a running guide to the original text, written in an English that was decidedly awkward and foreign.

(Tedlock 1983: 31)

For an analysis like that of Lévi-Strauss, this was sufficient, since the form and style of myth were irrelevant; any translation and any version would suffice, since each was a variation on a deeper “grammar” of myth. But in Lévi-Straussian analysis as well as in less theoretical cribs and collections of myth, something—maybe the main thing—is lost.

Another advocate of a more performance-based approach to myth and oral literature was Dell Hymes. Hymes attributes the obsession with content and structure to the linguistic theory and tradition that privileges *rules* or *knowledge* over *production*, that is, the underlying regularities of language over the actual realities of speech. Instead, he proposes that an actual speech performance, whether it is reciting a myth or greeting someone in the morning or telling a joke, “as an event, may have properties (patterns and dynamics) not reducible to terms of individual or standardized competence [that is, rules]. Sometimes, indeed, these properties are the point” (2001: 65). In the main, there are two sets of these properties: stylistic components and social context.

Gill writes in his study of Navajo prayer that descriptions of oral literature that emphasize performance “have begun to show us that the elements of context and style in specific performances of any oral act are essential to our fuller understanding of it” (1981: xxii–xxiii). Myths, for instance, are not normally if ever told like other kinds of stories; they may not be “told” at all but may be recited or enacted or “sung” alone or as part of ritual performances. And different cultures will have different traditions for doing so. Just as English has certain stylistic conventions and options for story-telling, so do other cultures and languages.

Parks, for example, offers a rich description of the stylistic qualities or devices of Arikara story-telling. “Narrative perspective” was one device: The teller usually removed himself or herself from the account, speaking in the third person. Also, Arikara language included grammatical forms like “evidentials,” verb variations that indicated the action was being reported second hand and that its truth could not be verified. Two examples were the “quotative,” indicating that the speaker was repeating something previously heard rather than witnessed, and the “evidential proper,” signifying the action was “apparently the case” but was not personally observed (Parks 1996: 65). Besides narrative perspective, Arikara myth-telling counted on indirect discourse or the use of quoted speech, in which the speaker quoted other speakers, who themselves were often quoting other speakers. The sequencing of events and episodes marked a story, by stating the result of an event first and then telling the event itself; also, actions might be described before the actor was named, and generalities would be described before the details were given. “Discourse

bracketing” involved formulaic introductory and closing forms, such as “This is what he did” or “Then he said” or “This is what he said.” A final remark like “That is what I want to say” ended the story. Finally, other devices such as repetition, indeterminacy (marking when details are missing or left out), abbreviation, and numerical patterning were used to build a good Arikara performance.

The very way that the language is chosen may characterize a myth or other story from everyday speech. Parks notes that the Arikara used various unique words or grammatical forms to make stories. These included sentence introducers and connectors, like *nawah* or “now” or “well,” and verb prefixes. Also, “existential constructions” provided emphasis as well as expressions of surprise. Demonstratives like “this one” or exclamatives like “oh my” added narrative color.

Because of the awareness of these performative qualities, a specialized field within anthropology has developed to attend to the linguistic devices or options that exist in a culture for making different kinds of religious speech and how they relate to other nonreligious kinds of speech. This subfield is known as the *ethnography of speaking*. Joel Sherzer has applied the concepts of the ethnography of speaking to the Kuna people of Panama. In his *Kuna Ways of Speaking* (1983), he describes several different linguistic variants depending upon what kind of talk is occurring. To fully appreciate the specialized styles, we must contrast them to everyday speech or *tule kaya*. Unlike our own mundane language style, Kuna everyday talk typically took the form of a dialog between a speaker and a responder, with the speaker engaging in reports or retellings of things that he or she has heard or even previously said. Thus, quotations and quotes within quotes were a major part of their speech style. Within the major genre of *tule kaya* fell minor subgenres such as lullabies, play languages (akin to our pig Latin), and humorous stories called *kvento*.

The first specialized way of speaking was political or chiefly speech (*sakla kaya*). This type of speaking was done only at the meeting house and was characterized by what the Kuna called “chanting” (*namakke*) which could last for an hour or two, starting softly and building in volume over time. Like everyday speech, it too took the form of dialog, with a “chanting chief” and a “responding chief” as well as a spokesman or interpreter for the crowd. Words were spoken more slowly and formally, with vowels fully enunciated. There was more repetition, parallelism, and length in the language and many occasion-specific alternative words. There were also special words and phrases to indicate the beginning and end of “verses” in the chant, as well as elaborate and creative use of metaphor (as a really good English speechmaker might do).

Further along the line of specialized and formalized speech was the curing song (*suar miimi kaya*), done in “stick doll language.” In this case, the “partner” in the dialog was not another person, not even the patient, but a doll, to which the words were spoken or sung (to Sherzer’s ear the speech sounded like song, but the Kuna claimed that it was spoken or *sunmakke*). The formalization of this style included even more retention of phonemes and words and phrases, more specialized vocabulary, and a unique set of prefixes and suffixes. It was also highly standardized and “routinized,” with fixed metaphors and figurative language.

At the extreme end of formality was the ritual language associated with girl's puberty rites (*kantule kaya*). The Kuna described this speech as neither spoken nor chanted but "shouted" (*kromakke*). The dialog here was conducted with the spirit of the ceremonial flute. The speech style was more conservative than any other, with the most retention and elaboration of sounds, words, and phrases and the most specialized lexicon. Finally, the lines were recited identically in each performance, and the recitation had to be letter-perfect—no creativity or clever improvisation allowed.

### Case study 4.1

#### Representing speech: Zuni narrative

Dennis Tedlock attempted a fascinating experiment to represent in writing the performance qualities of Zuni storytelling. Zuni style devices included stress shifting and vowel lengthening, intonation changes with vowel lengthening, longer sentences, and specialized vocabulary and formulaic phrases. More particularly, Zuni vocabulary had a range of styles from very informal "slang" (*penaky'amme*) to very formal and sacred (*tewusu*) with "various shadings and a large unnamed neutral category in between" (Tedlock 1983: 43). They, as in many languages, also had archaic words to employ, as well as the whole array of voice qualities such as loudness, pitch, and pauses. Tedlock's method was to lay out the translation on the page to communicate some of its vocal characteristics, such as emphasis, rising and falling pitch, and length of vowels and words. An example looks like this:

SON'AHCHI. [a convention story-opening]

SONTI LO————NG A GO

[pause]

AT STANDING ARROWS

OLD LADY JUNCO HAD HER HOME

And COYOTE

Coyote was there at Sitting Rock with his children.

He was with his children

And Old Lady Junco

was winnowing.

Pigweed

and tumbleweed, she was winnowing these.

With her basket

continued

she winnowed these by tossing them in the air.  
 She was tossing them in the air  
     while Coyote  
 Coyote  
 was going around hunting, going around hunting for his  
     children there  
 when he came to where Junco was winnowing.  
 "What are you DOING?" that's what he asked her. "Well,  
     I'm winnowing," she said.  
 "What are you winnowing?" he said. "Well,  
     [pause]  
 pigweed and tumbleweed"  
     that's what she told him.  
 "Indeed,  
 What's that you're saying?" "Well, this is  
     my winnowing song, " she said.  
 "NOW SING IT FOR ME  
 so that I  
 may sing it for my children," he said.  
 Old Lady Junco  
 Sang for Coyote:

	HINA	HINA
YUUWA	YUUWA	
	HINA	HINA
YUUWA	YUUWA	
	HINA	HINA
YU	YU	
PFFF	PFFF	
	HINA	HINA
YU	YU	
PFFF	PFFF	

That's what she said.

(based on Tedlock 1972: 77–9)

At the most general level, Bauman (2001) offered a list of common or potential performative qualities or “keys” to performance, including the following:

1. “special codes, e.g. archaic or esoteric language, reserved for and diagnostic of performance”;
2. “special formulae that signal performance, such as conventional openings and closings, or explicit statements announcing or asserting performance”;
3. “figurative language, such as metaphor, metonymy, etc.”;
4. “formal stylistic devices, such as rhyme, vowel harmony, other forms of parallelism”;
5. “special prosodic patterns of tempo, stress, pitch”;
6. “special paralinguistic patterns of voice quality and vocalization”;
7. “appeal to tradition”;
8. “disclaimer of performance.”

(Bauman 2001: 171)

As we can see from Sherzer’s material above, each culture and each oral genre may have its own distinct set of these keys.

Finally, in addition to the linguistic styles employed in the production of the myth or other genre, there are extralinguistic contextual elements as well. These may include who can perform the speech-act and when they can perform it. Oring asserts that oral narratives

are performed in specific social contexts. These contexts are constituted by a specific group of people, by a specific set of principles governing their inter-relationship, by a specific set of behaviors and conversations in which the narrative is embedded, and by a specific physical and symbolic environment present at the time of narration. The understanding of a narrative is governed to some extent by an understanding of the specific situation or situations in which it is told.

(Oring 1986: 136–7)

Parks notes that Arikara story-telling was mostly a male prerogative. Some myths or parts of myths should only be told during certain seasons or at certain times of day; Arikara myths and tales were only to be told during the winter. Some myths or parts of myths might only be recited in the midst of rituals. They might also only be told before certain audiences—or, as in the case of many Australian Aboriginal societies, different (less “esoteric”) versions might be told in front of general audiences, the “inside” or esoteric versions reserved for initiated men. There might be specialists with the prerogative to tell myths—priests, shamans, or designated story-keepers. And other performative features might accompany the story, such as singing, dancing, noise-making of various kinds, and so on. Irving Goldman recounts how he was reviewing his field notes on mourning rituals with an informant “when the traditional dance leader rose from his chair to dance a few steps while illustrating a



mourning song. He turned to me and said, ‘It cannot be done this way. I cannot sing without dancing.’ Then after a long pause he said, ‘I cannot dance without wearing the mask’” (2004: 5). A special symbolic or sacred space may be reserved for the telling or created by the telling. Finally, speakers and/or participants may have to be in special ritual conditions (e.g., purified) in order for the telling to occur. The narrative cannot be told—or least it may not work—otherwise.

In conclusion, neither myth nor any other oral folklore genre can be regarded as a mere rote enactment of a grammar or set of rules nor of an “ideal” and unchanging “original” narrative. The performance is relative to a range of variables and, in the end, is a particular “event” in the linguistic and ritual world of the society. Whether myth or chant or prayer, the performance can and must be

creative and responsive to heartfelt needs while the words [. . .] are utterly formulaic. The relevance and immediacy and the creativity and freedom [. . .] are not fully apparent at the level of simple reference, but they become so when [oral performance] is considered also as a highly symbolic religious act which incorporates much more than the words.

(Gill 1981: 187)

There is, therefore, no “real” or “true” or “perfect” version of an oral literature; there are only different versions. Myths and other narratives “exist in multiple versions. No single text can claim to be the authoritative or ‘correct’ one. Rather, different narrators perform narratives differently in different circumstances. A folk narrative, in other words, must be re-created with each telling” (Oring 1986: 123). And this is not a fact to be lamented or elided but to be studied and celebrated.

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## The power of words

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The preceding discussions converge to make a single point. We should not and dare not approach myth or religious language in general solely in terms of its content, that is, the “facts” or “ideas” or “beliefs” it seems to present. Language—religious and otherwise—might ultimately be less about describing something or believing something than about *doing* something. That is, language is, like all behavior, a form of action, often intended to achieve subsequent action. In a way, the content of religious speech may be its least important aspect; it may be meant not so much to “inform” anyone of anything as to “accomplish” something. Ultimately, its *content* may be less crucial than its *consequences*.

The notion that words can make things happen is not completely unfamiliar; after all, the Judeo-Christian god created the entire universe through speech. And many, if not all, cultures would insist that their speech-acts—whether prayers or songs or myths—have or at least seek demonstrable effects on the world. J. L. Austin, in his short but influential book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), showed how this is less exotic than we think and not limited to religion. He distinguishes various functions

of speech, including the customary propositional quality which he designates as its “locutionary force”; this is the “meaning” of a statement in the ordinary sense, its content or claim. As such, an utterance is either true or false. If I say, “The cat is on the mat,” I am making a factual claim about a state of affairs, and either the claim is true or it is not. Much of our speech is of this sort—but less than we might usually assume.

An entirely separate mode or function of language consists of its “illocutionary force,” by which he means the “effect” that the speech has or the way in which it brings about a state of affairs. In other words, if I say, “The cat is on the mat,” my saying so does not make it so. However, when a priest or minister says, “I now pronounce you man and wife,” the saying so does make it so. The utterance *accomplishes* the state of affairs. Other examples might include a college dean or president conferring degrees on graduates or a monarch knighting a servant. By speaking the words “I knight thee” or “I confer this degree on you,” the recipient *becomes* a knight or a college graduate. Of course, in our world, where not only language but official pageantry and symbolism have lost much of their power and significance, we would probably feel equally graduated without the dean’s speech-act (we might not even attend the ceremony), but the point is that for many people in many times and places, speech has been much more than a *description* of events and an actual *doing* of events.

Finally, Austin also mentions the “perlocutionary force” of speech, in which words neither describe facts nor make changes but have psychological effects on the hearers. For instance, the function of an utterance or a series of utterances (namely, an “argument”) can be to convince or persuade people to believe a claim or to come to a conclusion or, more importantly, to take an action. Clearly much of political speech, not to mention advertising, is of this variety. Hopefully a politician or a commercial employs true facts, but that is not the real point of the exercise, and certainly when a politician asks “Vote for me” or a commercial pleads “Buy this product,” the saying so does not make it so. The goal is to alter the listeners’ thoughts and actions in particular ways, and, as such, the speech may succeed or fail.

A hugely important consequence of this analysis is that some kinds of talk can be subjected to true/false judgment, while some kinds cannot—or at least that is not the most important thing to do with them. We can assert that a proposition is either true or false and, in principle, determine which: the cat is on the mat or not, or the earth is round or not. Other kinds of speech do not fall within the true/false discourse—what Langer called “factual reference” and Armstrong called *logos*—at all. Questions (“What time is it?”), imperatives (“Open the window!”), and expletives (“Liver again, yuk”) are among the nonpropositional uses of language. Utterances that sometimes sound like propositions may not be propositional but illocutionary or perlocutionary in function (e.g., “You are under arrest” or “Be very afraid”), and nonpropositional speech cannot in any meaningful way be assessed as true or false. It might, however, be more or less *successful* or *effective*. I might decide to vote for a candidate or not, to buy the product or not, stop for the police or not, or act scared or not.

In order to be successful or effective, the speech must meet certain culturally and situationally relevant conditions. It must be performed correctly, that is, the right words must be said in the right way. It must be performed by someone authorized to perform it. For instance, only an ordained priest can conduct a mass; it would not “work” or “count” otherwise. It must be performed in the right or “official” context and circumstances, which explains the difference between a wedding rehearsal and a wedding. And, perhaps, the performer must be in the correct social or spiritual or ritual condition (e.g., be purified, have observed prohibitions, or be in the right state of mind, including “sincerity,” since performances can be “faked”).

Bronislaw Malinowski earlier in the chapter called myth a “charter,” and Clifford Geertz in his discussion of religion emphasized its “modeling” function. Both refer not to description but to creation or production: Religious language in particular, and language in general, not only portrays the world (*model of*) but *produces* the world (*model for*). This is accomplished by religious language in two ways. First, it provides the ultimate explanation and the ultimate authority for the state of the world, natural and social. As Eliade reminds us, life, society, and reality are contingent, the results or consequences or effects of certain events or actions in the past. The “founding events” occurred long ago—and not only long ago in time but often in a qualitatively different time, the creative time, the Origin time. The Beginning was a “strong time,” when the source was closer and more immanently active. Hierophany was the norm; every creative act was and is a hierophany. Hence, Eliade speaks of the “prestige of the past,” or the “perfection of the beginning.” That description, that foundation, gives us our models for our own thoughts, actions, and institutions; myth “assures man that what he is about to do *has already been done*” (1998: 141, emphasis in the original)—that this is the way it should be done because it is the way it was done.

Second, religious language is effective in the here and now. Words have power, not just to inform but also to transform. Speech is effective in transforming humans from one social or spiritual status to another (child to adult, single to married, profane to holy, alive to dead). It is also effective in influencing people’s behavior and the outcome of cultural events (like court hearings). This is part of what Geertz referred to as the “moods and motivations” that religion establishes and perpetuates. But if speech is socially powerful—effective with social beings or agents—and if religious entities are also social beings or agents, then the words of humans could be and usually are seen as religiously powerful too. Language—myths, prayers, chants, songs, spells, proverbs, and the like—can conceivably influence and transform the supernatural world and bring results that are observable and desirable in the natural world, such as health, long life, success, good fortune, rain, and fertility. For instance, when the Navajo prayed “pleasant again it has become,” they were not describing a more pleasant life or expressing a hope for one but creating one.

## Case study 4.2

### Power beyond understanding: the efficacy of words not understood—or even heard

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It seems credible to us that words that are heard and understood could have their social force. However, in many traditions, religious language need not be comprehended, or even heard, in order to “work.” For instance, monks may be isolated from general society in their monasteries, offering their prayers for the good of society. Sometimes, as Tambiah notes, specialists like Thai Buddhist monks may chant in public in an obscure or esoteric language (ancient Pali, in this case) that is unintelligible to layfolk. Such chants “are meant to be heard but paradoxically they are not understood by the majority of the congregation (nor by some of the monks themselves)”; yet the villagers were “emphatic that through listening to the chants the congregation gains merit, blessings, and protection” (Tambiah 1970: 195). Tambiah calls this attitude “the virtue of listening without understanding” (1970: 196).

In other circumstances, words are believed to be “objects” of power whether they are spoken or read or whether they merely have physical existence. For many Muslims, the physical Qur’an is a potent force. We mentioned above how *faki* in Berti society made amulets out of qur’anic verses. Even more remarkably, they would also write verses on a wooden slate, wash the words off with water, and have people drink the liquid (*mihai*). Individuals would consume the liquid words routinely as religious precautions, and the entire society would drink together to ward off disasters and misfortunes like drought, fire, locusts, or diseases. For the Berti, the Qur’an “is considered to have an immense power which guarantees the well-being of those who have internalized it” (Holy 1991: 33)—and not just internalized it “intellectually.”

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## Conclusion

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Humans use language. They speak to and about other humans. They speak to communicate objective facts and subjective feelings. And they speak in many different and subtle styles depending on the subject, the situation, and the relation between speakers. But they speak for other purposes—and to other listeners—as well. One subject or subset of language is religious language, with most, if not all, the same processes and properties of nonreligious language, plus some distinct ones of its own. Religion, positing nonhuman beings or agents, encourages humans to speak to and about them as well. It encourages humans to communicate objective facts and subjective feelings to spiritual entities and to employ styles for these specific subjects, situations, and relations that may not be used in any other aspect of culture. And they

speak of and to the supernatural in order to unleash and direct the power of the religious dimension.

Myths are typically the narrative depository of the knowledge of the past actions of the religious beings, and they receive most of the attention from students of religion. However, many significant language behaviors comprise religious speech, each for its “audience” and purpose. In total, religious talk provides a source and, therefore, model or paradigm for human thought, action, and organization as well as “practical” ways to influence and control other humans and society, the natural world, and the supernatural itself.

# 5

## Religious behavior

- The anthropology of ritual and ritualization
  - Ritual and the “interaction code”
  - A continuum of ritual behavior
- The diversity of religious ritual
  - Technical rituals
  - Therapeutic and antitherapeutic rituals
  - Salvation rituals
  - Ideological rituals
  - Rituals of revitalization
- Rites of passage: the structure of ritual
- Ritual fields, ritual performances, and “social theater”
- Conclusion

All human activity, whether verbal or bodily, is behavior, so myth and prayer and chanting and singing are as “behavioral” as any physical action. In fact, they *are* physical actions, usually performed in social settings for an audience with a part of the human body (the mouth or voice), usually as part of a concert with other gestures, actions, and objects. Western religion, especially Protestantism, has tended to privilege words and ideas (“beliefs”) over behavior, but this is not universal among religions. Malinowski reminded us that religion “is a mode of action as well as a system of belief” (1948: 24), and viewing it as action—and specifically *social* action—sheds a different light on religion.

When we think of religious behavior, we think of *ritual*, that fascinating, colorful, and symbolic activity that expresses religious beliefs and directs toward religious beings or forces. Ritual is usually multipartite and multimedia. It is often a protracted performance of multiple “scenes” which may take hours or days to complete. Victor Turner wrote that a ritual “is segmented into ‘phases’ or ‘stages’ and into subunits such as ‘episodes,’ ‘actions,’ and ‘gestures.’ To each of these units and subunits corresponds a specific arrangement of symbols, of symbolic activities and objects” (1981: 3). Accordingly, a ritual typically includes many genres of action, from language to dance to stillness and silence to plastic arts (masks, body painting, sacred objects of various kinds) and food and any number of other elements.

In this chapter we will consider the meaning and function, the “origin,” and the variety of ritual. We will also discuss some of the building blocks or recurrent elements in ritual, such as sacrifice and magic. Finally, we will notice and explore the fact that ritual as communication and social action is not unique to religion—in fact, much of human life is “ritualized”—nor even to humans. It is quite clear that social species, including humans, can and often do communicate or interact ritually. Ultimately, ritual interaction may not be “communication” in the normal sense—that is, the transmission of information—so much as *performance* intended to establish, maintain, influence, or break relationships, including relations with the nonhuman and superhuman. Humans may interact ritually with the superhuman precisely because ritual is how humans interact.

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## The anthropology of ritual and ritualization

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We have all observed or participated in rituals, religious and secular; ritual is not necessarily or essentially a religious phenomenon. College graduation is a ritual with little or no religious content or significance. Some hold that getting your first driver’s license and going on your first date are rituals. We even speak of someone washing their hands or engaging in some other such mundane behavior “ritualistically.” As Anthony Wallace comments, “although ritual is the primary phenomenon of religion, the ritual process itself requires no supernatural belief” (1966: 233).

Anthropological definitions of ritual vary, including the following:

Victor Turner: “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to belief in mystical beings or powers. The symbol is the smallest unit of ritual” (1967: 19).

Stanley Tambiah: “a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition)” (1979: 119).

Anthony Wallace: “communication without information: that is to say, each ritual is a particular sequence of signals which, once announced, allows no uncertainty, no choice, and hence, in the statistical sense of information theory, conveys no information from sender to receiver. It is, ideally, a system of perfect order and any deviation from this order is a mistake” (1966: 233).

Thomas Barfield: “prescribed, formal acts that take place in the context of religious worship” as well as “any activity with a high degree of formality and a nonutilitarian purpose. This usage includes not only clearly religious activities, but also such events as festivals, parades, initiations, games, and greetings. In its broadest sense, ritual may refer not to any particular kind of event but to the

expressive aspect of all human activity. To the extent that it conveys messages about the social and cultural status of individuals, any human action has a ritual dimension. In this sense, even such mundane acts as planting fields and processing foods share a ritual aspect with sacrifice and the mass" (1997: 410).

Edmund Leach: "Behavior which forms part of a signaling system and which serves to 'communicate information,' not because of any mechanical link between means and ends, but because of a culturally defined communication code"; and "Behavior which is potent in itself in terms of the cultural conventions of the actor but *not* potent in a rational-technical sense [. . .] or alternatively behavior which is directed towards evoking the potency of occult powers even though it is not presumed to be potent in itself" (1966: 403).

As different as these definitions are, they evince a few recurrent features. They emphasize action (although not always "practical" or "instrumental" action), patterning, and communication—even if, at least in some cases, that communication is regarded as "empty." Catherine Bell, who has recently compiled a summary and analysis of theories of ritual, points out that these theories tend to offer "formality, fixity, and repetition" as central aspects (1992: 91–2). Further, she notes that anthropological treatments of ritual have often, if not ordinarily, separated it from the more "cognitive" or "conceptual" area of religion. As she asserts:

Theoretical descriptions of ritual generally regard it as action and thus automatically distinguish it from the conceptual aspects of religion, such as beliefs, symbols, and myths. [. . .] Ritual is then described as particularly *thoughtless* action—routinized, habitual, obsessive, or mimetic—and therefore the purely formal, secondary, and mere physical expression of logically prior ideas.

(Bell 1992: 19)

She concurs with Edward Shils that "beliefs could exist without rituals; rituals, however, could not exist without beliefs" (Bell 1992: 19).

Bell also mentions that analysis of ritual has taken two different approaches in relation to other aspects of behavior, particularly nonreligious behavior. On the one hand, scholars may view ritual as "a distinct and autonomous set of activities" that can be identified and understood (perhaps only) in terms of itself, while on the other hand they may see ritual as "an aspect of all human activity" (Bell 1992: 70). In the latter case, religious ritual would be a simple subset of ritual in general, which might further be a subset of social behavior in general. As Jack Goody has argued, "'routinization,' regularization, repetition, lie at the basis of social life itself" (1977: 28). Indeed, from this perspective—and there is some merit to it—all of culture is "ritualistic" in the sense that it makes patterned, fixed, communicative habits out of behavior.



### **Ritual and the “interaction code”**

The philosopher John Skorupski (1976) offers a fruitful commentary on anthropological theories of symbolism and religion which elaborates the notion of ritual and ritualization. Beginning with a discussion of the intellectualist tradition from Tylor and Frazer, he indicates how the symbolist school of Durkheim and most subsequent social scientists moved in a direction toward disregarding the content or beliefs of the religion and emphasizing its expressive and representative functions. This conveniently exempts us from having to engage the truth-claims of a religion, which we often find to be false. However, to do so, he says, is to mischaracterize religion from the member’s point of view: “If Trobriand canoe magic is a ritual which ‘stresses the importance of canoe-building for Trobrianders,’ then presumably running away from a lion is a ritual which expresses the importance of not being eaten for the runner” (Skorupski 1976: 172). This satirical example raises Skorupski’s point that perhaps the people mean what they say and do—and expect some result from it.

His analysis turns on his description of most if not all rituals as “interaction ceremonies” in which humans as agents interact with other agents, generally other humans. Interaction ceremonies “communicate” between the parties in a conventional “language” that he calls the *interaction code*. “The point of interaction-code behavior is to establish or maintain (or destroy) an equilibrium, or mutual agreement, among the people involved in an interaction as to their relative standing or roles, and their reciprocal commitments and obligations” (Skorupski 1976: 77). Thus, there is an available “vocabulary” of coded actions which participants master and from which they select to construct their interactions with each other.

Interaction-code (IC) behavior is not unique to humans. In fact, Skorupski refers to it as “part of a more general form of social life” (1976: 77) which we would expect to and do see in virtually all social species; indeed, he notes that a “parallel with what animal ethnologists call ritual [. . .] is obvious” (Skorupski 1976: 84). Certain species-specific behaviors “mean” a challenge or a surrender or an invitation to mate, and while this meaning might not require “agreement” (in the sense of a social convention) it does require “comprehension” and correct performance. It should also require the appropriate response to them, or else the interaction would fail and social life would be threatened.

Interestingly, just as cats or birds or fish need not “understand” or “agree to” the interaction code, so humans need not necessarily either. Humans only have to be able to perform the code, with or without “believing” it or “meaning” it. This code is not explicitly articulated in most cultures (being more tacit or implicit) and is generally not written down. The point of IC behavior is “that people should use the code to establish the relationship which ought—in accordance with other norms—to hold between them, to maintain it, to re-establish it if it is thrown out of equilibrium and to terminate it properly” (Skorupski 1976: 83–4). And this code permeates human society, from the grand religious gestures through the high-level political ones of prostrating oneself before the king and kissing his ring to the minor

and mundane ones that pervade everyday life like handshaking and exchanging greetings.

While IC behavior is part of daily life, it is also distinguished from other kinds of behaviors by its qualities of *elaboration* and *formality*. Many of our routine actions are relatively “free” and voluntary, although still expressed within a culture that provides familiar and stock actions and responses. Even much of our “nonritual” life is remarkably conventional and routine. However, IC behavior, and especially ceremonial and ritual behavior, is particularly notable for its seriousness, precision, stereotypy, and detail. Part of this elaboration is insuring that the ritual is done correctly, but another part is self-referential, that is, a way “of marking out, emphasizing, underlining the fact of code behavior” (Skorupski 1976: 87). In other words, it must be clear and apparent to participants that this is not normal everyday behavior but something special and something that demands a (perhaps equally elaborate, formal, and specific) response.

The IC actions that are supposed to evoke a particular response set a particular counteraction in progress, or even institute a new norm or relationship, are called “operative actions,” which reminds us of Austin’s illocutionary acts. “Operative acts are performed to set up new patterns of rules. Hence one can also say that they can establish people in new statuses or roles, and can set up new institutions” (Skorupski 1976: 99). Operative acts “are produced, then, by being *said* to be produced (the ‘saying’ need not be verbal, of course)” (Skorupski 1976: 103). Thus, interaction code behavior, of which the most striking is religious ritual, does not, in his view, so much represent social realities as make and maintain them.

The essential aspect of interaction rituals is that they *are* interactions that “call out” and expect certain responses. They are symbolic in the sense that we are not directly saying or doing what we mean—for example, a Japanese person might say straight out “I am of a lower status than you” instead of bowing deeply to a superior—but not in the sense of “representing society” in some other medium and definitely not in the sense being “nonutilitarian.” And, ultimately, religious ritual as a distinct species of coded behavior cannot be understood, Skorupski asserts, without considering and taking seriously the religious “beliefs” of the society.

If humans are ritually interacting agents, then we would expect humans to ritually interact with other agents too. Accordingly, Skorupski concludes that “to a large extent religious rites *are* social interactions with authoritative or powerful beings within the actor’s social field, and [. . .] their special characteristics are in large part due to the special characteristics these beings are thought to have” (1976: 165). In other words, if you bow deeply to a human superior, you would likely bow (maybe more deeply) to a superhuman one. What humans are doing in religious ritual is extending their interaction code beyond the human realm into the nonhuman, to include those nonhuman agents that the particular society “believes in.” What he calls the traditional religious cosmology “extends the social field—and thus also the patterns of social relationships—beyond its human members. In doing so it extends the scope of interaction and operative ceremonies” (Skorupski 1976: 166). We interact with the superhuman agents the same way we interact with the human agents, only more so.

### **A continuum of ritual behavior**

The presence and importance of an interaction code leads to the general phenomenon of ritualization, the formation of set behaviors or patterns of behavior that “mean something” to other members of the group. Ritualization of this sort has been observed in many animals, as mating rituals and fighting rituals and so on. The highly stylized and typically noninstrumental behavior of one individual not only communicates to the other(s) but also communicates that it is communicating. That is, not only the content but the *form* of ritual is critical and communicative.

We might think of ritualization as the process by which rigid patterning or stereotyping of behavior takes place, so as to de-emphasize the everyday mundane consequences of the behavior and to emphasize the special communicative consequences such as courtship, threat, dominance, or display. “Ritualized” behavior not only means something different from ordinary behavior, but the very way that it is performed clearly distinguishes it from ordinary behavior. As Bell has mentioned, ritualization accomplishes the task of making sure that “certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions”; in other words, ritual is “a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities” (Bell 1992: 74). When a ritual performance is on, people (or ducks or cats or fish or bees) stop and pay attention in a different way.

Part of what ritualization in general does is not only communicate *between* the participants but communicate *about* them; it is a commentary on the relationship. Another part is the call to response: a mating ritual has its intended response, and such rituals are announcements and invitations. The formality and fixity of the performance helps to assure communicative success; if the action is always done the same way, there should be no confusion over its intention. Finally, these same qualities help to guarantee the *practical* success of the action; if it worked this way before, it should work this way again. Communication in this sense means not so much the conveyance of information as the achievement of goals.

Not all rituals are equally formal or important, and the level of formality indicates to an extent the level of importance. Ritualized behavior falls on a rough continuum from *individual/compulsive* to *casual* to *etiquette/diplomacy* to *normal religious* to *liturgical*. Individual rituals would include repetitive behaviors that a single person engages in, often not “learned” at all and even “neurotic,” such as superstitious gestures or obsessive hand-washing, etc. These behaviors often have meaning for the individual, and they supposedly have effect too—perhaps to insure success in sports or love or to protect one from the harmful consequences of germs or a more general loss of personal control.

Casual rituals occur all day continuously in human social life; they constitute the first level of IC behavior. From saying “Hello” and shaking hands to more elaborate and situational actions, humans have a set of culturally appropriate interactional patterns that would seem odd if omitted or if done improperly. When we offer a hand for shaking, we expect a hand offered back; when we say, “How are you?” we expect

a simple “Fine, thanks,” not a detailed litany of complaints. In other cultures, interactional rituals can be very different; bowing in Japanese culture or exchanging lengthy questions and answers about one’s life and family in some African cultures are just two examples. No matter what its form, it must be conventional and shared to be useful and effective.

Etiquette and diplomacy concern more specific and typically more formal social occasions, such as weddings or ceremonial dinners or political functions. There is a correct way to send thank-you notes after a wedding or a correct fork to use at a dinner. There are the polite things to say to a host or friend (or an enemy). Mastery and performance of these rituals shows one’s own social skill and status as well as respect (or disrespect) for one’s interaction partners; it is easy to accidentally (or intentionally) send other messages—including slights and insults—by subtly modifying the expected gestures. Specialized rituals pertain to particular occasions. In courtrooms, for example, there are ritualized ways of standing and speaking and unique rituals for swearing oaths and such. Classrooms have their own rituals. The workplace has its rituals, as do most situations where humans gather and interact.

Normal religious rituals tend to escalate the formality and stereotypy, since for the first time on this continuum nonhuman and superhuman agents are explicitly involved. These greater beings must be approached with more respect and solemnity, although not all religions or religious occasions practice this solemnity equally. In some instances, humor and even intentional sarcasm or disrespect are intended (not all spirits disapprove of such attitudes). Further, while a certain degree of formulaic repetition is typical of religious ritual, we have already seen that there is also a degree of freedom and creativity in how the formulas are assembled and deployed. Even religious rituals may allow for some deviation, invention, or interpretation.

Liturgies are the most formal, fixed, and weighty of rituals, in which the exact gestures, objects, and words must be used in the precisely correct ways in order for the ritual to “succeed.” In fact, a poorly or wrongly done liturgy can be worse than no liturgy at all. The Catholic mass is an example of a highly formalized liturgy, and other Christian and non-Christian religions also have liturgical aspects or moments, like the Kuna rituals discussed in the previous chapter.

All rituals, then, are clearly interactional in some sense. We can think of religious rituals as codified interactions in which the partner or audience is a religious/supernatural being or force. This implies that such beings and forces are social, that they are within communicative range, that they are paying attention and—perhaps most crucially—that they respond. However, since the participation of religious agents is not always observable, the success of the communication is uncertain. Human participants cannot be sure that their ritual gestures were seen, received, accepted, and responded to. This very uncertainty can lead to still greater formality and compulsiveness of behavior. Repetition of an already repetitive ritual form, even more precise attention to detail, even more conservatism of what is perceived to work—all of these basic features of ritualization can become more exaggerated in religious ritual, where the stakes are higher and the results less quantifiable.

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## The diversity of religious ritual

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Despite the common qualities of all religious (and nonreligious rituals), there is also great diversity among them. They are diverse both in their structure and in their function. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Anthony Wallace suggested that we regard religion as a construction of discrete bits, a cumulative entity composed of identifiable and not necessarily distinctively religious building blocks. Rituals, he proposed, are made out of even more elementary particles, the thirteen different activities including prayer, music/dancing/singing, physiological exercise (e.g., self-mortification, drug ingestion, food and sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation, etc.), exhortation (messages or commands to other people including orders, threats, and words of comfort or encouragement), myth, simulation/imitation (e.g., magic, ritual, and witchcraft), mana or power, taboo or restrictions, feasts, sacrifice, congregation, inspiration, and symbolism and symbolic objects.

A ritual in Wallace's view is a composite phenomenon, and any actual ritual could contain any or all of these parts in any combination, including multiple instances of each (that is, a number of different prayers or simulations or symbols). Of course, this analysis is not perfect or universally accepted. Turner and Geertz would not place the concept of symbol as just one in the list of ritual constituents, but, rather, they would see all of these elements as symbolic. The list could be longer or shorter, and not every entry on it is necessarily elementary: a constituent like physiological exercises or sacrifice or congregation may itself be a composite of multiple ritual objects and gestures.

We can also identify and organize rituals in terms of their function. Catherine Bell (1997) has proposed a short list of ritual types based on their functions:

1. rites of passage or life crisis rituals;
2. calendrical or commemorative rituals;
3. rites of exchange and communion;
4. rites of affliction;
5. rites of feasting, fast, and festival;
6. political rituals.

There is no perfect or universally accepted typology of rituals; any attempt to provide one would, as with typologies or beliefs or specialists previously discussed, almost certainly leave some gaps and some overlaps. Specific rituals do not always fit nicely into any one or only one category. Nevertheless, for the purpose of imposing some order on the diversity of ritual, we can consider the influential system proposed by Wallace, who divided rituals into technical, therapeutic/antitherapeutic, salvation, ideological, and revitalization.

## Technical rituals

Technical rituals are those intended to achieve natural or supernatural effects through “technique.” Technique is the more or less mechanical manipulation of objects and words to achieve some end which is more or less guaranteed by the very manipulation; we might think of it as a version of “spiritual technology” or “spiritual cause-and-effect”: Do X and Y will result.

One subtype of technical rituals is *rites of intensification*, which function to increase the fertility or number of natural species. It is widely claimed across the world’s cultures that humans have a power, if not a duty, to preserve and reproduce the natural life of the Earth. Australian Aboriginals, for instance, believed that they could and must maintain the kangaroo and other animal populations through their rituals, not to mention their dreams. Such rituals might involve mimetic behavior, that is, imitation of the species—how it looks, walks, behaves—in order to invoke and restore its reproductive power.

The Inuit, like the Australian Aboriginals and most foraging societies, believed that they shared a fundamental and inescapable spiritual relationship with nature. Most acutely, they believed that the seal was or had a spirit, and there was a Seal Goddess who animates and guides the beasts. Seals, being spiritual as well as material beings, participated reciprocally with humans in the hunt; far superior to humans, they could easily elude capture if they chose, but they volunteered their lives for the benefit of humans. This was a gesture that humans cannot take lightly, for to disrespect the seal would be to abuse it and to cause it to stop offering itself for the hunt.

Therefore, the Yupik society, for instance, had a complex of three rituals in which they honored the seal and requested its continued self-sacrifice. In the first of these, the Bladder Festival, fallen seals were honored by returning their preserved bladders to their ocean home. The bladder was the chosen body part for ritualization because the Yupik believed that it was the seat of *yua*, roughly translated as “spirit.” *Yua* comes from the same root as *yupik*, their word for themselves, literally “person.” The *yua* is what makes a human as well as a seal a “person.” This spiritual part is not the same as the *yuchia* or *inuchia*, the individualistic, immortal aspect of a living being or what we would call the “soul.” Inanimate objects did not have *yuchia* but they could have *yua*, and *yua* was not personal but more of the essence of the type/species. An animal’s *yua* had human-like qualities and was represented by a human face. This is why animal/human faces were carved on the ceremonial masks that are used by religious specialists for the rituals.

Fienup-Riordan suggests that the significance of the Bladder Festival “was to reverse the separation of body and soul effected at the time of the [animals’] death” (1996: 38). Songs and dances were performed to entertain the animal spirits. The Messenger Festival, so named because communities sent messengers to their guests to inform them of the event, also invoked the hunted animals; masked dancers would imitate the behavior of seals as well as the actions of hunting and killing them. However, masks were most intricately involved in the Inviting-in Feast (*Agayuyaraq* or “way of

requesting”), in which masked dancers entreated the animals to offer themselves up to the hunters again during the next season—in other words, the animals were “invited in” to participate in the hunt along with the hunters who were ready to receive them. As a critical part of the ritual, shamans wearing masks would travel to the moon, where the moon-man spirit who controls the movements of all animals lives.

Another subtype of ritual placed by Wallace in this category is divination. This assignment is more problematic, because divination, as we have seen, is not always “technical,” although it does centrally involve the gods or spirits who are the authors of the messages received from the practice. However, in some cases it can be distinctly technical. Either way, the main point of divination is the acquisition of information, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Although Wallace does not mention it here, perhaps this is the right place to put *magic* as well. Magic is frequently distinguished from religion in that the former is more technical and the latter more social; this is Frazer’s classic analysis. The meaning of this distinction is that magic often works directly on the object of the behavior, while religion tends to depend on an indirect relationship between means and ends, mediated by spirits or gods. For instance, rain magic or “voodoo” function by immediately affecting the clouds or the human victim by way of magical manipulation of materials (water, perhaps, or an effigy of the victim). Magical behaviors cause or compel their effects. Religion, on the other hand, requires the assistance of spiritual others; humans cannot cause effects but can petition for them. As Malinowski expressed it, religion is a social thing, an end in itself, whereas magic is a means to an end.

Most famously, Frazer divided magic into two types, imitative/sympathetic and contagious. Imitative magic, he asserted, depends on some similarity between the technique and the end goal: A rain-making ceremony in which water is poured onto the ground imitates the goal of rain falling from the sky. Resemblance between the object of the ritual and its target also qualifies: A doll that represents a human victim can substitute for the victim in a black-magic or sorcery ritual. Turner’s discussion of Ndembu symbolic use of the milk tree rests on the similarities between its fluid and milk. Contagious magic, on the other hand, depends on a physical contact or connection that exists or has existed between the technique and the goal. One form this might take is acquiring a lock of hair, a bit of fingernail, or a piece of clothing of a person in order to make magic on it, thus transferring the effects from the part to the whole. Touching someone with a magically powerful object could also qualify.

Magic, in Frazer’s and Malinowski’s view, is utilitarian and also neutral. It can be used for positive or negative purposes. The point is that doing magic is mastering a technique which, like baking a cake, ought to work every time if it is done correctly. Humans can use magic to improve their crops, win a lover, cause an accident, or commit a murder. Like all techniques, they are available to all practitioners regardless of their intent. It has even been likened to a “faulty science” in the sense that people grasp the concept of technical action and cause and effect, but they have the wrong actions and causes in mind.

## **Therapeutic and antitherapeutic rituals**

Many rites are performed as therapy, for the purpose of curing or preventing illness or other misfortune (e.g., bad luck), or alternately for causing such misfortune. In many societies, it is believed that much, if not most or all, harm, sickness, and death are attributable to spiritual causes, human or otherwise. Forest Clements (1932) proposed that there are six sources of misfortune understood across cultures, one natural and five (magic, object intrusion, soul loss, spirit intrusion [possession], and breach of taboo) spiritual. Therefore, the appropriate solution for (or way to cause) such circumstances is ritual.

One familiar form of therapeutic ritual is shamanism. In shamanic rituals, the specialist diagnoses and treats a specific complaint by a combination of spiritual and material (e.g., medicinal plants) means. In many cases, the shaman transports himself or herself, by way of trance, to the spirit world to gather information or struggle with the spirits that are causing the affliction. And misfortunes do not always come from nonhuman spiritual sources. Humans, namely witches and sorcerers, also cause harm. Sorcerers classically use manipulation and ritual to make their mischief, but witches are often viewed as people with “natural,” even organic, powers to cause harm, sometimes not even intentionally but simply from the parts within them that project malice when the witch feels anger, jealousy, or other negative emotions. A witch or sorcerer, finally, might use his or her power to ward off the negative effects of others, either for themselves or for their clients.

In a more familiar context, modern religions like Christianity have a place for therapeutic and antitherapeutic practice. Faith healers are believed to channel divine power, often through their hands and touch, that can cure the faithful of all manner of diseases, commonly including sensory loss (e.g., blindness and deafness), pain and paralysis, and maladies like cancer. This curative function also entails in many cases combating the destructive power of demons or the very Devil himself. Other specific traditions, such as Christian Science or Seventh Day Adventism, have taken the health effects of religion and spiritual forces even further.

### Case study 5.1

#### An Ndembu ritual of affliction

Turner has been particularly interested in so-called “rituals of affliction” (e.g., 1981), which are intended to identify and relieve the spiritual causes of ailment and which can involve many different beliefs, specialists, and ritual episodes. For instance, the entire process among the Ndembu started with a visit to a diviner, who was the spiritual diagnostician but not the therapist. This type of divination was not about

continued



revealing the future but discovering the past: What particular spirit is afflicting the patient? He goes on to describe in great detail one subsequent ritual, known as *Nkula*, which was intended "to remove a ban imposed by the shade of a deceased relative on the patient's fertility" (Turner 1981: 55), a condition usually reserved for women and indicated by such symptoms as infertility, sexual unresponsiveness, menstrual disorders, and irregular births (breach or stillbirths). The ritual occurred in two large phases, each consisting of a number of scenes or episodes.

In Phase One, called *Ku-Lembeka*, medicinal materials were collected and administered in an overnight ritual sequence. First, various substances were gathered from various sources, such as the *mukula*, *musoli*, and *mujiwu* plants. The symbolic-sympathetic quality of much of their action was apparent even to them, for instance using *mujiwu* for infertility since it "has many roots, therefore many children" (Turner 1981: 61). After collection, the substances were prepared and then applied, mostly by rubbing on the victim's body. As this was done, songs were sung, reminiscent of the Navajo prayers discussed above, such as: "It is good, let us just dance, it is good, it is good. It is good, *Nkula* manifestation, it is good, it is good, the position of clasping a baby in one's arms. Having to do with a child, it is good, it is good" (Turner 1981: 67).

The second phase, *Ku-Tumbuka*, was more extensive and public. It also began with the collection and preparation of medicinal substances. Then the patient was dressed in ritual garb—a waistcloth, animal skins draped over the shoulders, a quill in the hair, and clay rubbed on the face. This was followed by a nighttime ceremony in which the women danced around the sufferer. Next came a procession known as *Isoli* and a prayer at a *mukula* tree. When the prayer was complete, the tree was cut to be used for ritual carvings. The cuttings were carved into figurines described as "highly stylized representations of babies," although one informant asserted that they symbolized the shade called *mukishi*. During this procedure, a red rooster was decapitated and roasted. Medicines were applied to the head of the figurines, made of a mixture of rooster entrails, feathers, hair and nails from the patient, clay, bark, and other material which formed a thick red liquid, likened to a mass of coagulated blood. For the Ndembu, the menstrual and fertility metaphors were immanent. Finally, another dance named *Kutumbuka* was performed, and a payment was made to the ritual leaders. Throughout the *Nkula* time, the patient observed various taboos, against touching or carrying water for instance; the Ndembu said that water leaks and, therefore, would make the medicine leaky and weak (Turner 1981: 77).

### Salvation rituals

Wallace applies the term "salvation ritual," perhaps a little unfortunately, to those rites that seek to cause change of personality. Salvation as a Christian notion

refers to something very different from personality change, so another term like “transformation ritual” or “psychological ritual” might have been more appropriate and crosscultural.

An example of such rites might be the initiation of shamans, in which the future specialist is transformed into a new kind of person, one with spiritual powers, even one who is “dead” in a certain sense or has died and returned to the living. Master shamans prepare and instruct apprentice shamans not only (or mostly) by conveying information to them but by exposing them to experiences and perils that alter their consciousness. Typically this exposure includes sleep and food deprivation, long periods of singing or chanting, painful ordeals, and psychoactive drugs. At a point in the process, the former mind or personality of the novice breaks and is replaced by the new.

“Mystical” experiences in general have the capacity for personal transformation. Mysticism, an imprecise term, refers generally to the direct and immediate contact between the human and the supernatural, however conceived. The person may see a vision, hear a voice, feel the presence of the sacred, or sense a unity between him/herself and divinity or the universe. Commonly, the mystic describes the experience as a loss of self, as a collapse of the boundary of individuality and an “oceanic” feeling in which he or she is one with the cosmos. Beyond that, the particulars of mystical experiences are incredibly diverse. Some mystics claim that the encounter is ineffable, that no words can communicate it. Others have written voluminously and systematically on the experience. For some, mystical union conveys no particular knowledge, while others claim to know specific things as a result. For some, the experience is warm and comforting, while others find it alien or even frightening. Above all else, people tend to have the experiences that their culture prepares them for: Christians tend to experience God or Jesus, Buddhists tend to experience nirvana, and so on. Finally, people often claim to be changed by the experience, although others do not, and no definitive follow-up studies have been done to determine whether the transformation is permanent or significant.

Expiation is another form of personally transformative ritual. Expiation refers to the process of shedding guilt or sin, and rituals with this intent change the person by relieving the burden of spiritual negativity, lightening him or her spiritually. Confession might be an example within the Catholic tradition, in which sins are forgiven by being admitted and then paid for with various ritual acts, verbal and manual (e.g., repeating Hail Marys or counting rosary beads). Sacrifice is a way for an individual or community to expunge guilt or other negativity, by symbolically transferring the burden to the sacrificial victim and then destroying it, thereby destroying the burden (see Chapter 9).

Spirit possession is one remaining form of salvation ritual on Wallace’s list. This might strike us as strange, since possession by spirits is viewed as wholly negative from the Western perspective and is regularly the very condition to be cured rather than to be sought as a cure. Exorcism of spirits in Christian doctrine transforms the person by removing the causes of spiritual oppression and allowing the person to live his or her own life. In other religious settings, however, the situation is not so simple.

Erika Bourguignon (1976: 9), for example, finds that there are at least three different ideas about and attitudes toward possession crossculturally. One is the familiar attitude that possession is wholly negative, to be avoided, and to be cured when it happens. However, in other circumstances, societies may regard the initial possession experience as bad and even sickness-producing, but the response is to induce a possession trance in an intentional and controlled way. In still other contexts, possession is actually seen as a positive condition and is literally sought and voluntarily induced.

The most interesting alternative for our purposes is the second, in which possession is not seen as desirable but, once it happens, is accepted and even accommodated in significant ways. Lambek (1981) in his ethnography of possession on the island of Mayotte (off the African coast between Mozambique and Madagascar) relates the concept to gender, ethnomedicine, and, of course, religious belief, both “native” and Islamic. In Mayotte society, spirit possession was indeed a form of affliction, alongside “natural disease” (which was still caused by God) and sorcery, which was obviously the work of humans. Spirit possession or *menziky lulu*, occurred when one of the many types of spirits known to the people entered a human’s body, rose into the head, and took control of the victim’s body. At such times, the person’s own soul or essence or life force or *rohu* was said to be displaced by the spirit, although no one could say where it went.

When a person suspected that they were or was suspected of being inhabited by a spirit, a specialist induced a trance in the victim, during which the spirit was interrogated as to its intentions; typically, the spirit “makes a list of excessive, if predictable, demands, and there ensues a process of bargaining and exchange, which stabilizes the relationship between spirit and host” (Lambek 1981: 46). At no time did the Mayotte consider exorcizing the spirit, which they thought would be harmful to the person. Rather, they worked out a peaceful coexistence between the victim and the spiritual inhabitant, which may last for the rest of the person’s life.

Lambek could not help but notice that the vast majority of the victims of possession were women: Of a total of seventy spirit-possession cases, fifty-nine were women and only eleven men. He also noticed that Mayotte society had a layer of Islamic belief over the beliefs about spirits and possessions. He suggests that women found themselves burdened, if not oppressed, by social and religious roles and structures, especially Islamic ones, and that possession for women “is not so much an expression of opposition toward Islam as freedom from it” (Lambek 1981: 64). That is, because society was so burdensome and restrictive for women, and even contradictory in its demands on her, she could not possibly find escape or respite in any “natural” or cultural medium; instead, her only recourse might be the release that spirit possession provides. Men, on the other hand, were less restricted in their options and less exposed to contradictory situations; even when they were, “they may more readily escape from the situation. They have less opportunity to learn to respond to paradox by ‘blinking out’ or by role playing than girls do, and they are, therefore, not as prepared to enter trance” (Lambek 1981: 68–9). This analysis corresponds to the conclusion that Bourguignon reaches:

Possession trance offers alternative roles, which satisfy certain individual needs, and it does so by providing the alibi that the behavior is that of spirits and not of the human beings themselves. And furthermore, in order for human beings to play such assertive roles, they must be totally passive, giving over their bodies to what are ego-alien forces. In a hierarchical society, demanding submission to those in authority, one acquires authority by identification with symbols of power, identification with which goes as far as the total assumption of the other's identity, total loss of its own. In this authoritarian society, it is possible to act out dominance fantasies by pretending, to self as well as others, total passivity and subjection.

(Bourguignon 1976: 40)

### Ideological rituals

We might think of Wallace's ideological rituals as rites of social control (including perhaps Bell's "political rituals"), in which individuals, groups, or society in its entirety are moved, influenced, and manipulated. They work to structure social reality and to adjust individuals to that reality, creating the rules and experiences that shape and perpetuate the members' reality. Some of these rituals are instructional or informative, while others are intended to instill "moods and motivations" upon which society depends. Or, most often, as in the case of the Christian passion play that recounts the story of Christ's suffering, both are accomplished simultaneously.

Rites of social intensification are among the most obvious and important such rituals. As Radcliffe-Brown commented, contrary to Malinowski, the function of religion is often not to satisfy the needs of the individual, especially the need for freedom from fear and anxiety. Religion and ritual can actually *increase* the fear and anxiety of individuals, not least their fear and anxiety about religious matters—people who do not believe in demons or hell, or a punishing god, have no fear of them. Rather, Radcliffe-Brown suggested that much of religion and ritual functions above the personal level, for the good of society as such. Especially in times of crisis, but often on a day-to-day basis, society is threatened with disintegration, with the collapse of groups and order and the atomization of individuals or families. When there is a death (particularly a suspicious one, and recall that death is often, if not always, suspicious in some societies), or a natural disaster, or merely an internal feud, society could disintegrate. Rituals, even negative ones like witch inquiries or hostile funerary rites, can prevent the disintegration of society by giving people things to do and ways to direct their feelings and concerns.

Australian Aboriginal societies, for instance, often responded to a death with an aggressive duel between kin groups. Dancing in opposing lines, the event would turn into a confrontation in which the sides tossed spears at each other. Usually, no mortal injury was desired or achieved; one side or both would draw blood (normally by bouncing spears off the ground so that they would strike at unpredictable angles), and when the blood-vengeance was satisfied, the ritual could end and people could return to their common lives together.

Taboos and ceremonial obligations form a genus of ideological rituals. These types of beliefs and behaviors center around things that people must or must not do or touch. The very essence of these restrictions is the notion of sacred power, as Durkheim hypothesized. Some objects, actions, or persons are so powerful that they are dangerous, at least for the normal person in normal circumstances. When a person is properly prepared (purified, ritually protected, etc.), he or she might approach these same items safely. Perhaps the social significance of taboo is the experience of ritual *seriousness*—that all things are not equal and that our behavior must reflect this fact. And, of course, it is not only things that are unequal but *people*. Rituals of kingship, for example, establish the powerful or even sacred character of the king or ruler, and ideologies such as the “divine right of kings” justify and perpetuate that power. The ritual obligations that individuals observe in relation to each other create and maintain social structures as well as spiritual ones, as we will discuss in the next chapter.

### Case study 5.2

#### Sherpa society, ritual, and consciousness

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In *Sherpas through their Rituals*, Sherry Ortner (1978) describes how rituals not only express but also shape the relationships and values of Sherpa society. This society, dominated by Buddhism, was a more or less “egalitarian” and generally individualistic one. The social and economic ideal was the “autonomous nuclear family” (Ortner 1978: 23). There were no formal political leaders, although there were prominent families and lineages who dominated village committees. However, this hierarchy was fluid, leading to “status jockeying” which Ortner characterizes as “a vital part of Sherpa village life” (1978: 25). Individuals and families carried out this jockeying for position through contributions to local Buddhist temples and through “hospitality” in the form of parties where households invited the entire village as guests. Such events were experienced as happy social occasions but also functioned “as the model for conducting most of the critical instrumental transactions in the society: manipulating neighbors, propitiating gods, pacifying demons, making merit, discharging (and regenerating) mutual-aid obligations” (Ortner 1978: 63).

The ritual called *Nyungne* involved the laypeople in practicing renunciations typical of monks, with “fasting and other abstentions, together with acts of humility and contrition” (Ortner 1978: 34). It even included acts of charity, which Ortner sees as significant because they are nonreciprocal and aimed not at the needy but at sacred persons like monks. She judges these behaviors to be “antirelational” (Ortner 1978: 38)—a kind of “closing off” of the self and family—which are also accompanied by “antipenetration” and “antidrainage” symbols designed to enclose and protect

the household. Finally, she notices that the ritual is observed mainly by the elderly, making it a kind of model for late life and post-parenthood—a stage distinguished by asexuality, segregation, deprivation, but a sort of generalized beneficence.

The problem of evil and anger threatened Sherpa society as well, and Ortner comments that they lacked institutions and practices to control and manage such negativity as duels, vendettas, war, litigation, witch accusations, and so on. She sees “general paralysis in the face of socially threatening situations” (Ortner 1978: 140). Being unable to work them out any other way, the Sherpas solved their social problems ritually. Exorcism rituals purified individuals and groups of spiritual evils like violence and greed, which they found omnipresent and “somewhat overwhelming” (Ortner 1978: 92) and the source of much, if not all, social friction. Offering rituals sought to recruit the benevolent spirits on the human side—spirits who, like successful Buddhists, were fundamentally detached from and disinterested in human affairs, who “represent all the tendencies of Sherpa religion that encourage the pursuit of one’s own salvation while ignoring the needs of others” (Ortner 1978: 153). The spirits had to be called into society and literally given human form so that they could participate in human emotions (both pleasure and anger) and thus be induced to help humans.

Under ideological rituals, Wallace includes rites of passage, which are important and pervasive enough to deserve a separate treatment below. Finally, he mentions “rituals of rebellion,” which we might, in some cases anyhow, regard as *anti-ideological rituals*. That is, these rituals of rebellion can comment upon, criticize, and even invert everyday social relations and structures. Carnival, in the traditional sense, was one such occasion, where the point of the event was to break intentionally many of the rules and norms of society; nonconformity, sexual license, and “political” inversions (making fun of or even desecrating the king, among others) were common forms, and we can still see some of this in the New Orleans Mardi Gras festival or more so in the Brazilian *carnivale*. Halloween is a faint echo of such a practice, when people deliberately conceal their identity and take on fictional and even sacrilegious personae for the day. At the same time, these rule-ordered rule-breakings also have the effect of restating and reaffirming the structures and power relations of society; the very fact that you can belittle the king on one day a year (with his permission) establishes his power every other day of the year (see next chapter).

### **Rituals of revitalization**

Religion and ritual can be not only conservative and stabilizing but also creative, liberating, resistant, and even revolutionary. When a society, or at least some segment of a society, is in crisis, religion can provide the language for rethinking rules, roles, and realities and for responding to the critical challenges with a “program” intended to breathe new life into a staggering social, natural, and supernatural order. Among

the types of rituals or ritual movements in this category, all of which we will return to later, are messianic and millenarian ones, “cargo cults,” nativism and fundamentalism, syncretism, separatism/schism or the founding of new religious sects within an existing tradition or church, and “new religious movements” with more or less novel spiritual views and agendas. Most often, by the time a society is deep enough in crisis for these phenomena to appear, many of these various forms are appearing simultaneously, making of a society a bubbling broth of religious innovation and competition. Such is the modern world and modern American society. We will delve into these processes in Chapters 7 and 8.

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## Rites of passage: the structure of ritual

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Students of religion like Victor Turner have suggested that there is a “ritual process” that cuts across the superficial differences between rituals to unify them at another level. Most simply, this ritual process involves the transformation of individual, group, or society through an operation that begins with separation. Turner has written extensively on the ritual process, developing the ideas of Arnold van Gennep on so-called *rites of passage*. Many rituals around the world seem to occur at key moments in the life of individuals, groups, or society as a whole. Rituals accompany these key moments—moments when things are changing or threatening to change in some way, such as puberty, adulthood, marriage, parenthood, and death. Even more, though, the rituals help or serve to *accomplish* the change occurring at that moment; along the lines of illocutionary speech acts, the ritual facilitates the change rather than merely acknowledging or celebrating it.

The ritual process involves three stages, the middle of which draws the bulk of Turner’s attention. These three stages can be conceptualized as follows:

Separation → Marginality/Liminality → Aggregation

The best way to think of this progression is in terms of the condition or status of the subjects before and after the ritual. Prior to a ritual, a person is in some state—say, unmarried or juvenile or ill. Subsequent to the ritual, the person is in a different state—in these cases, married or adult or well. Something happens in between that transforms or delivers the individual from one status to another. However, that cannot happen without two concomitant things happening—the loss or falling away or “death” of the old status and the journey through an ambiguous transitional phase.

Thus, a rite of passage often begins with a symbolic break from the previous status. In some societies, an initiation ritual into adulthood (perhaps the classic rite of passage) starts with a capture of the youth and even a mock “death.” Adults may enter the community and seize the youngsters while their mothers wail that they will never see their children again. In a certain sense, they are correct. The adolescents may be sequestered from the rest of society for the duration of the ritual or for weeks

or months at a time, where they are put through trials including physical operations like circumcision or scarification, shown sacred objects, and instructed in religious knowledge. Or there may be little such “training.” The Gisu of Uganda traditionally practiced an initiation ritual in which males aged eighteen to twenty-five were circumcised in public and then given gifts signifying their entry into manhood, such as farming implements. However, what they did not receive was any specific teaching. The main function of the ritual, other than to announce maturity, seemed to be to generate a particular emotional or psychological trait in the men, which the Gisu called *lirima*. *Lirima* was the manly quality of violent emotion, connected with anger, jealousy, hatred, and resentment. It was not totally wild emotion, though; it also implied or required self-control, strength of character, bravery, and will. It was the characteristic that enabled men to overcome fear (the ritual itself was a test of overcoming fear), but it was also a dangerous characteristic, one that produced aggressiveness in men that even the Gisu themselves regretted (Heald 1986).

To return to our general discussion, having been separated from their social world and their previous lives, the candidates of rites of passage enter into the second or “liminal” (from the Latin *limen* or threshold) stage. This is a condition that Turner has referred to as “betwixt and between,” not another status but a *non-status*. It is the absence of status, a social no-place, but a condition of potential. It is the doorway or portal between statuses, the road that links the origin and destination. This non-status takes a variety of symbolic forms, often likened to or expressed as death, wilderness, return to the womb, even bisexuality. It is without name, rank, or social identity. Occupants of this threshold may be deprived of possessions, including clothes; they came into life naked, so they must come into their new life naked. They are often expected to be obedient, passive, receptive, and nonassertive. In other situations, including periodic rituals partaken by adults, the language of liminality may involve opposites, doing things “backward” or “upside down,” and other forms of contradiction or violation of everyday behavior, as we will see below.

In a way, the liminal condition is a lowly one, virtually outside of society altogether. In another way, though, it is a sacred condition—special, powerful, and perhaps dangerous. One particular way in which liminality combines all these features is in the elimination of distinctions, social and otherwise. It is a manifestation of the unnamed state, the circumstance when all things are equal but therefore unstructured. Turner refers to this as *communitas*, a kind of undifferentiated and structureless existence. There are no children or adults, no males or females, no kings and commoners. As an example, when Muslim pilgrims undertake the *hajj* or journey to Mecca, they shed their markings of nationality or rank and don the same white robes, indicating the shared (and therefore undifferentiated) status of pilgrim.

It should be easy to see that, while this is a creative state, it is also an unstable one. Neither individuals nor society can endure there for long. In other words, “all sustained manifestations of *communitas* must appear as dangerous and anarchical, and have to be hedged around with prescriptions, prohibitions, and conditions” (Turner 1969: 109). Interestingly, Turner identifies this *communitas* experience in other social locations than the liminality of ritual passage. He also suggests that



it constitutes the status of “hippies,” monks, prophets, and jesters/comedians, and no doubt poets and artists—all those people who are at the margins or the “interstices” or the bottom of society. Structured society tolerates them, even benefits from them, but their “anti-structure” always poses a threat to social order. They also represent the creative corner from which new social orders will emerge. Thus, ultimately, society, via religion and ritual, is a cycle or dialectic of *communitas* and differentiation, anarchy and order.

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## Ritual fields, ritual performances, and “social theater”

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In the ethnography of religious behavior, as of religious language, we find not a single monolithic practice but a diverse “field” in which different kinds of rituals are “performed.” It is perhaps possible—and all too common—to conceive of myths and other verbal genres without the performance, as Lévi-Strauss and others have actually done. However, in the case of ritual, performance is fundamental to their reality, let alone their effectiveness; while one could summarize or describe a ritual, in no way would the summary or the description equate to the real thing. In fact, Roy Rappaport writes that ritual “is an order of *acts* and *utterances* and as such is enlivened or realized only when those acts are performed and those utterances voiced” (1992: 252). For this reason alone, ritual cannot be understood apart from its performance.

It is also true that, in any given society, a variety of rituals or entire ritual genres may coexist and that any particular ritual is a temporal combination of elements from the ritual field (as Wallace suggests). Turner, one of the central contributors to the performative analysis of ritual, goes so far as to reject the “obsessional” aspect of ritual—the compulsive repetition of formulaic acts—and to highlight its creative and multimedia aspects. He regards ritual as “an immense orchestration of genres in all available sensory codes: speech, music, singing; the presentation of elaborately worked objects, such as masks; wall paintings, body paintings; sculptured forms; complex, multi-tiered shrines; costumes; dance forms with complex grammars and vocabularies of body movements, gestures, and facial expressions” (1984: 25), and presumably much more. Each specific such orchestration—with its attendant beliefs and specialist roles—would generate a specific kind of ritual. For instance, Seneviratne (1978) distinguished between two types of rituals in pre-colonial Kandy, a kingdom in Sri Lanka. One type concerned the maintenance of sacred objects, including daily and weekly rites for tending temple artifacts and symbols, as well as the annual New Year ceremonies consisting of bathing, boiling milk until it overflowed and flooded the site, and food offerings. The second type focused on common social ends, such as the New Rice festival (itself composed of a series of events from processions to the fields to measurement of the crop to distribution among the temples to presentation of a bowl of rice to the *Dalada* or relic of the sacred tooth of Buddha). Tambiah, also working in a Buddhist context, found an even more crowded ritual field with four types of rituals: formally “Buddhist” ones

(performed by monks), *sukhwan* rites (performed by elders to “bind” individuals’ personal spirits to their bodies), ceremonies for the cult of village guardian spirits, and rites of possession aimed at evil spirits (performed by a panoply of specialists depending on the complaint and the spirit involved). Tambiah concluded explicitly that “the four ritual complexes are differentiated and also linked together in a *single total field*” (1970: 2).

On an even grander scale, Turner relates rituals and ritual behavior to what he calls “social dramas” (1974). Social dramas are public, symbolic scenes in which the conflicts or disharmonies of society are played out; they might also be, although he stresses the disharmonic side, scenes in which the harmonies or essential relationships or truths of a society are played out (as in Ortner’s case above). Social dramas are built from basic components which he calls *fields* and *arenas*. Fields in this sense are defined as “the abstract cultural domains where paradigms are formulated, established, and come into conflict. Such paradigms consist of sets of ‘rules’ from which many kinds of sequences of social action may be generated but which further specify what sequences must be concluded” (Turner 1974: 17). Arenas then are “the concrete settings in which paradigms become transformed into metaphors and symbols with reference to which political power is mobilized and in which there is a trial of strength between influential paradigm-bearers” (Turner 1974: 17). Social dramas, as a result, are the performed processes of this social contest, played out in public and over a (more or less protracted) period of time. They are characterized by four phases, from the initial breach in social relations, to a social crisis of some sort, to “redressive action” aimed at healing the breach, to the ultimate reintegration of actors into society and (ideally) the restoration of social relations and institutions.

### Case study 5.3

#### Return to paradise: the peyote hunt

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An example of a key social drama comes from Barbara Myerhoff’s account of the Huichol peyote hunt, which she called “the central ceremony in the Huichol religious calendar and the pivotal event which unites the Huichols with one another, with their deities, and forges into a single complex the deer, the maize, and the peyote” (1974: 112). Myerhoff describes them as a society of some 9,000 members inside Mexico. Each year they conducted a pilgrimage back to their spiritual heartland of Wirikuta, which had taken forty to forty-five days on foot. During her research, the trip took advantage of buses and trains, which diminished its sacredness in no way.

In preparation for the voyage, costumes had to be prepared, washed, and decorated “until the transformation of the tired, dirty, poor group from the city and mountains into properly adorned Huichols was complete” (Myerhoff 1974: 25). Prior to departure, a number of behavioral restrictions were imposed on the pilgrims, the

continued

most severe reserved for the *mara'akame* or spiritual leader of the society. Each participant or *peyotero* was also given the name of one of the gods. Finally, each had to publicly confess their sexual misdeeds and be absolved of guilt. By confessing and expurgating these sins, the "*peyoteros* were now pure, made new. They were no longer mortal. It was from this moment that the pilgrims became and were known to each other as the Ancient Ones" (Myerhoff 1974: 136). The following morning they set off on their pilgrimage.

Wirikuta was a sacred place, the place of origin for the Huichol; as such, it was full of power and danger. When the troupe arrived at the place called the "Vagina" in Huichol, the pilgrims dismounted from their vehicle and were led with eyes downcast by the *mara'akame* "into the middle of an utterly desolate but holy place" (Myerhoff 1974: 139). The danger was greatest for the novices, who were making their first pilgrimage; accordingly, the *mara'akame* prayed over each of them, sweeping them with the sacred plumes which he then swung about in the air. "The *primeros* were especially solemn now, and some tearful, 'because it is the first time we will see our lives, because we are coming to pay our debts, there in the sacred land'" (Myerhoff 1974: 140).

Along the way, linguistic and behavioral inversions were applied. Ramon the *mara'akame* facetiously called himself the Pope and referred to females as males and to adults as children. A sneeze became the subject of laughter, due to the convention of associating the nose with the penis. "The reversals applied to behaviors as much as to people and objects, thus one addressed someone in front of him by turning to the rear and one accepted something from another by telling him, 'You are welcome,' so that the giver replied, 'Thank you'" (Myerhoff 1974: 147–8). As the leader explained, whenever possible, "everything should be upside down and backward."

Upon arriving at the sacred country, the party proceeded on foot. They crossed the desert quietly and seriously, walking in single file and staring intently at the ground as if searching for tracks. Myerhoff describes the scene:

As they approached the mountains, the *peyoteros'* pace slackened for peyote was more likely to be found here and the tension mounted. Their behavior was precisely that of stalking an animal. There were no sudden movements, no talking. The pilgrims bent over close to the ground, moved in the brush on tiptoe, gingerly raising a branch or poking under a cactus in hopes of catching sight of the small gray-green peyote plant which is so inconspicuous, growing nearly parallel to the earth's surface and exactly the same color as the surrounding vegetation in this region.

Finally, Ramon beckoned everyone to his side—he had found peyote, seen the deer. [In Huichol myth, deer and peyote are associated.] Quickly we all gathered behind him as he drew his arrow and readied his bow. We peered

down at the barely noticeable round flat-topped plant, two inches in diameter, segregated into eight sections. Everyone prayed quietly as Ramon began to stalk it, moving ever closer until when he was only a few feet away he aimed and shot one arrow at the base of the plant toward the east and crossed it quickly with another arrow pointing north so that the peyote was impaled in the center. The peyote-deer was thus secured and unable to escape. Ramon drew nearer, placing his horns of Kauyumari beside it, to the west of the plant. He cleared the ground all around the plant with his knife and beckoned everyone to come forward to stand closely around it. From his *takwatsi*, or sacred basket, he took his plumes and swept downward and over the peyote. This was because the first arrow in penetrating the peyote had caused rays of colors to spurt upward, like a rainbow; the rays had to be stroked and coaxed back into the peyote-deer. The colored rays are the *kupuri*, soul or life-blood of the deer, the life-blood of *hikuri*, and must be preserved. [ . . . ]

Ramon carefully began to dig out the peyote with his knife, cutting it so as to leave some of the root in the ground, "So that the deer could grow again from his bones".

(Myerhoff 1974: 152-5)

Rituals as social dramas are many things, including socially appropriate interaction with the supernatural, communication, effective action, social and political power, and entertainment. All of these features combine into the notion of social theater, in which people and groups put on performances for each other, even if they are not intentionally "putting on" their performances at all. One scholar to take the notion of social theater quite seriously is Erving Goffman, whose highly influential *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) developed a theatrical account of social life, in which all human beings at least on occasion are actors taking on roles and in which all social encounters are potentially stages upon which these actors play their roles. The most minute situations may be opportunities for individuals to demonstrate their social competence or to manipulate the impressions that they make upon others, and in some cases individuals realize they are doing so and play these roles self-consciously.

If Goffman describes human social action as performative and theatrical at the smallest scale, Clifford Geertz describes it as such at perhaps the greatest possible scale. In his discussion of traditional Balinese culture, he refers to Bali as a "theater state" where ritual was politics and politics was ritual. In the theater state,

the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. The stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to particular ends: they were the ends themselves, they

were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power.

(Geertz 1980: 13)

Ritual was theater indeed—a great display of the society, by the society, and for the society—in which people enacted their roles and their rules and in enacting them made them real. A ceremony like a royal cremation (recounted in detail by Geertz) was a performance of the deepest and most important themes of Balinese culture: “the center is exemplary, status is the ground of power, statecraft is a thespian art” (Geertz 1980: 120). This is probably not much less true today, even in the USA, and it is perhaps more visible today than at any time in its past: Politics is performance; leaders are actors and the public is the audience; and together they create and maintain the cultural and political world they inhabit. The ceremonialism of society is never merely superficial decoration, because in the USA and in pre-colonial Bali, and arguably in all societies at all times, “the pageants were not mere aesthetic embellishments, celebrations of a domination independently existing: they were the thing itself” (Geertz 1980: 120). Rituals, in other words, are “great collective gestures” (Geertz 1980: 116), realizations in the sense that they “make real” cultural ideas and ideals. In the final analysis, the “dramas of the theatre state”—and probably of all states and societies—“mimetic of themselves, were, in the end, neither illusions nor lies, neither sleight of hand nor make-believe. They were what there was” (Geertz 1980: 136).

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## Conclusion

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Rituals are a key component of religion. However, the tendency to see ritual as uniquely religious and uniquely symbolic distorts both religion and ritual. Religion is not so much a thing to believe or to “mean” as a thing to *do*. Humans have goals—practical and social—to accomplish. If language is effective, though, then action is doubly so. Social action—religious or otherwise—is *interaction*, and it makes sense that humans who ascribe supernatural agency to the world would interact with those agents in the only ways they know how. Since all human social interaction takes place within an “interaction code” which not only comments on but *performs* and achieves those interactions, then religious interactions can be understood as instances—and particularly formal and serious instances—of a behavioral code as well. And while much human behavior is symbolic (and some may be purely symbolic), religious behavior must be understood, from the actor’s perspective, as at least partly “real” too. Religious rituals, whether or not they have practical effects, have social effects, but it is hard to imagine that people would perform healing rituals solely for the social effects. They must think, rightly or wrongly, that the ritual

has some healing effects as well. In other words, rituals are not merely informative (and often not informative at all) but *transformative*—establishing certain states of being (like wellness), certain kinds of persons or social statuses, a certain kind of society, and ultimately a certain kind of world.

# 6

## Religion, morality, and social order

### The anthropology of morality

Sin and pollution

Morality and the demands of social living

### The efficacy of religion: formation and transformation

Religion and the “embodiment” of morals

### Religion and the social order

Legitimizing order

Inverting order

Mystifying order

Conclusion

Morality is often presumed to be the essence or greatest contribution of religion. People who know or value little else about religion may esteem it for its moral qualities; parents may expose their children to religion solely for the purpose of making them “good.” In fact, some argue that it is impossible to be “good without God” (which raises the doubly awkward problem that “good” is a relative term and that not all religions have gods). C. S. Lewis, the author of *Mere Christianity* (1952) and one of the leading advocates for Christianity in the twentieth century, went so far as to insist that the very existence of human morality was evidence of a god.

While there is no doubt that all religions, and all cultures, possess or include behavioral exhortations and injunctions, the relationship between morality and religion has been a controversial one. E. B. Tylor, a cultural evolutionist, wrote rather dismissively that the “moral element which among the higher nations forms a most vital part, is indeed little represented in the religion of the lower races” (1958: 29). Indeed, it was the moral or ethical dimension which most separated the “lower” and “higher” religions. Durkheim, on the other hand, placed morality in the very definition of religion: “beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (see Chapter 1).

It cannot be that morality is both peripheral or optional and central or definitional to religion simultaneously, unless these authors use the term in different ways. If one means by morality abstract and formal conceptions of justice and right, then perhaps

some religions do not contain them, but then not all cultures have been equally distinguished by abstraction and formality, and this is not a criticism. If, however, one means by morality a sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit or tacit, set of standards for acceptable behavior, then surely all religions have had such a thing, and we cannot imagine a religion without it.

In this chapter, we will explore the relation between religion, morality conceived as behavioral codes or standards, and the order and institutions of society. From an anthropological perspective, we are less interested in the particulars of any moral system, let alone in ranking such systems as low or high, than with how such systems contribute to society and to the formation of the individuals who compose a society. Religion by no means is the only source or sanction of rules, but in its Malinowskian function as a “charter” for society, it is potentially the firmest source. At the same time, we must acknowledge the role of *disorder* or at least of the violation, transgression, and inversion of order as part of social reality, with its inevitable tensions, complexities, and ambiguities.

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## The anthropology of morality

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Millennia of philosophers have struggled to define and document morality, with little success or consensus, so we will not be able to solve the problem here. What anthropology brings to the discussion of morality is attention to diversity, to social construction, and to the relativity of language. First then, it is immanently obvious that morality actually exists as a widely varied congeries of *moralities*, just as religion actually exists as a widely varied congeries of *religions*. Accordingly, most studies of morality have been attempts not so much to describe and explain morality as to propose a—or *the*—“true” or “best” morality. In other words, most “moral theories” have in reality been advocacy for a certain morality. The idea of moral diversity has been generally lacking.

Yet, when we look crossculturally, we find, as the philosopher Nietzsche put it, 1,001 different tablets of good and evil. There are many moralities, each different in ways—some small, some great—from the others. In some societies, polygamy is regarded as immoral, and in others it is held as the ideal kind of marriage. Certain behaviors are immoral in one while the same behaviors are accepted and lauded in others. Even killing is tolerated or celebrated, at least in some forms, in virtually all societies. The Judeo-Christian tradition, while it forbids killing at one time (“Thou shalt not kill”), also makes time for killing at another (“A time to kill, a time to heal”), and most Westerners regard killing in self-defense and “just war” to be morally acceptable. Certainly, killing insects is of no moral consequence to most Westerners, but a Jain in India might find it a serious moral failing.

On closer inspection then, it is not clear what morality means. It is not even clear what is or is not a moral matter in the first place. In the USA, public nudity is a moral concern, but in other societies it is not. In the USA, premarital sex is at least a subject for moral argument, but in other societies it is not. In his portrait of Nuer religion,



Evans-Pritchard paints them as remarkably “Christian” in their attitudes and practices, but he also warns us that “we have to be more than usually on guard against thinking into Nuer thought what may be in our own and is alien to theirs. From this point of view the ethical content of what the Nuer regard as grave faults may appear to be highly variable, and even altogether absent” (1956: 188). For instance, he notes that what the Nuer judged as “grave faults, or even as faults at all,” may appear to a Westerner as “rather trivial actions” (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 189)—and no doubt the feeling would be mutual. Incest and adultery are major issues for both of us, but the Nuer injunctions against “a man milking his cow and drinking the milk, or a man eating with persons with whom his kin are at blood-feud” (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 189) seem oddly irrelevant to Westerners, as many traditional Judeo-Christian injunctions—such as prohibitions on eating meat on Friday or eating pork at all—would seem oddly irrelevant to them.

The claim that morality refers to “good behavior” is valid but vague. What is “good” is culturally and situationally relative. Further, there are degrees of goodness or badness and varying sets of standards for each, in any particular society. In Western society, not all undesirable actions are “immoral.” “Moral,” as an adjective, stands among other terms of judgment like “normal” or “ethical” or “legal” or “sane” and their negative counterparts. Not every action that is “immoral” is also “illegal” and vice versa (e.g., speeding is not immoral by any familiar standard). Ethics and morality are not completely coterminous, since we can speak of “business ethics” but not usually of “business morals.” Even etiquette and propriety shape our behavior and our evaluations of others’ behavior: It may be impolite, but not immoral, to refuse a handshake or to use the wrong fork. In other words, in the final analysis, morality is part of the social universe of right action, but exactly where to draw the lines in this universe is uncertain.

### **Sin and pollution**

Just as in the case of belief and symbol and myth (as we saw above) and sacrifice (as we will see below), the paradigm and idiom of morality in Western parlance, including much of anthropology, is the Judeo-Christian one. In this particular religious tradition, morality is generally perceived as explicit, formal (even written down), abstract, and legalistic. It is also typically seen as an individual (rather than collective) and “existential” matter, that is, a commentary on the person’s essential state of being. A crucial part of this language is the concept of “sin,” a condition of moral and spiritual fault of some sort. However, like these other terms, sin in particular and morality in general may be impositions of one religion’s worldview on others.

Sin is not only a concept that does not appear in all religions; it is also a concept with varied and evolving meaning in Judeo-Christian religion. One Hebrew root for sin in the scriptures is *chet* or *khate*, meaning going astray or missing the mark—literally, since the term is also used in archery for missing the target. Three varieties of sin are recognized: *pasha* or *mered* for intentional defiance of God’s laws, *avon* for lust or other strong emotions (which are “intentional” but not defiant), and *cheit* for

unintentional violations of law. (In fact, the first occurrence of the word “sin” comes in Genesis 4, *before* any specific laws had been instituted.) The Christian notion of sin consequently developed to include “original sin,” a congenital and, therefore, inescapable state of flaw or guilt, for which divine salvation is the only remedy.

However, in the original usages of the sin concept, congenital, permanent, and even “moral” connotations were not necessarily implied. Sin was often temporary, fading over time, or it could be removed and “cleansed” through specific ritual actions such as washing or sacrifice. In fact, many things that we remember as “sins” in the text were actually referred to as “abominations” or “uncleanness” and apply to areas of conduct that most modern Westerners would consider outside the scope of morality. Dietary laws, for instance, identified particular plant and animal species as fit or unfit to eat; likewise, men and women were instructed not to wear clothing of the opposite sex (Deuteronomy 22:5). A word meaning “unclean” (*niddah* or *tum’ah*) was employed to describe the effects of actions as disparate as touching a dead carcass or any prohibited animal, committing adultery, or merely giving birth. A woman was unclean for seven days (for a boy child) or fourteen days (for a girl child) after birth, and adultery with a brother’s wife was not immoral but unclean, resulting in childlessness (Leviticus 20:21).

According to Evans-Pritchard, the Nuer too had a notion of sin (*nueer*), but he admits “that Nuer do not express indignation at sin and that what they get most indignant about is not thought of as sin” (1956: 194)—in other words, “sinful” actions were not their greatest “moral” concern. Further, the threat of an act was not its “immoral” quality but the “state of grave spiritual danger” it engendered: For example, it was not wrong to kill a man in fair combat, but it was still spiritually dangerous. Thus, the real issue for the Nuer was not with “people’s morals, whether according to Nuer ideas they are good or bad people, but with their spiritual condition, though good or bad conduct may affect this condition” (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 195).

Notice that, for the Nuer, actions were not punished because they were “bad” but rather were bad because they were punished; the badness lay in the consequences, not the “morality,” of the behavior. *Kwoth* punished what *kwoth* punished, even (or primarily) “unwitting offences” which made people feel worried but not guilty. The consequences, of course, could be quite severe, including physical illness. However, the response to spiritual danger and punishment was *woc*, to wipe it away, through religious as well as “material” means, such as medicines and other cleansing actions, but especially through sacrifice.

As dissimilar as they are, the Nuer and Judeo-Christian views of sin and danger share two qualities. The first is that they result from violations of supernatural strictures. The second is that they are “infectious” in the sense that they infect or contaminate the individual and, potentially, the family, society, and physical world itself. Various terms that might be and have been applied to this conception are pollution, defilement, impurity, uncleanness, and profanation. (Recall that Durkheim suggested that the core of religion is the separation of the sacred and the profane.) Immorality in this sense is like a disease—but mostly a curable one—that corrupts the person, body or soul or both.

One of the first anthropologists to take seriously the idea of purity, cleanness, and “dirt” and their relation to religion and danger was Mary Douglas. In her *Purity and Danger*, she connects dirt with disorder, including social disorder. Notions of dirt or impurity, along with those of (physical and spiritual) hygiene, constitute “a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order” (1988: 35). Pollution or profanation “offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment,” both natural and supernatural (Douglas 1988: 2). In her most famous analysis, she explained the Jewish dietary laws, the so-called “abominations of Leviticus,” in terms of classification and exception from classification. Some animals, she reasoned, belonged to the category of species that “split the hoof and chew the cud,” and such animals were “clean” and proper to eat. Animals that deviated from this type were unclean and improper to eat. Likewise, a “true fish” had fins and scales, and any sea creature that strayed from these features, like shellfish, was not a fish at all and, therefore, unfit for consumption. As she concluded, “in general the underlying principle of cleanness in animals is that they shall conform fully to their class. Those species are unclean which are imperfect members of their class, or whose class itself confounds the general scheme of the world” (Douglas 1988: 55).

But, of course, the real point of such “moral systems” is not to classify animals or establish dietary rules. It is to impose order on experience and behavior, which can only be, for humans, a cultural matter. *Humans* experience, *humans* behave, and *humans* categorize. Society itself, Durkheim urged us, is a vast classification system, and religion in his view is the symbolic representation and re-presentation to its members of that social order. If so, then violation of this ordering scheme—of the rules and categories that comprise society—is a threat to that society. Mixing things that should not be mixed, doing things that should not be done, is *dangerous*. As Douglas, an admitted neo-Durkheimian, concluded, beliefs about impurity, pollution, and “sin” and the dangers thereof

are a strong language of mutual exhortation. At this level the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code: this kind of disease is caused by adultery, that by incest; this meteorological disaster is the effect of political disloyalty, that the effect of impiety. The whole universe is harnessed to man’s attempts to force one another into good citizenship.

(Douglas 1988: 3)

### **Morality and the demands of social living**

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While the details of morality or proper conduct differ greatly from human society to human society, some recognizable variation of morality appears to show up in all societies. Durkheim goes so far as to state:

Law and morality are the totality of ties which bind us to society, which make a unitary, coherent aggregate of the mass of individuals. Everything which is a

## Case study 6.1

### Food, sex, and pollution among the Hua of Papua New Guinea

As described by Meigs, Hua religion was centrally and almost solely composed of rules about pollution, mostly expressed through food regulations, related intimately with gender and to a more general ontology. The context was a firm ideology of male superiority; not only were men politically and culturally dominant, but women—especially their sexual organs and bodily fluids—were held to be “disgusting and dangerous” to men. This attitude was closely associated with their notion of *nu*, a semispiritual but also quite concrete substance carried by matter, including human matter such as “blood, breath, hair, sweat, fingernails, feces, urine, footprints, and shadows” (Meigs 1984: 20). Food conveyed *nu* as well and was “in some sense congealed *nu*” (Meigs 1984: 20). It also shared in the *nu* of those who acquired or prepared it, leading to an elaborate system of dietary and other restrictions.

For instance, some foods, by their own properties, were more associated with female qualities, *korogo* or soft, juicy, fertile, fast-growing and cool. Others were more masculine, *hakeri’a* or hard, dry, infertile, slow-growing, and hot (Meigs 1984: 79). Males needed to avoid feminine foods or foods prepared by women, but more so at certain times of life than others: They were especially vulnerable in late childhood and adolescence, when their maleness was building, but in adulthood there were fewer limitations and by old age almost none. Food, however, was not the only threat to men, since sexual activity also endangered their *nu*: men were relatively deficient in the substance to begin with, and intercourse was believed to deplete it. Women, on the other hand, with their surplus of *nu* were fertile, and their special quality was to feed others.

In order to maintain the separation between the substances of the genders, men would practice rituals for purging female influences from their bodies, including induced vomiting, sweating, and nose-bleeding. Bodily material and the *nu* it carried, when in the wrong place, was referred to as *siro na* or dirt or pollution. However, these substances were not exactly “immoral,” and even their polluting quality was affected by social relations and applications. For instance, a child’s *nu* was said to be polluting but not morally objectionable to the parents. Even more, seemingly *siro na* substances like hair, feces, urine, and dead bodies were sometimes incorporated into medicines and growth-promoting concoctions, and a man would smear “sweat, oil, and vomit over the bodies of his real and classificatory sons to increase their growth” (Meigs 1984: 109). As Meigs concludes, for the Hua, “pollution is not inherent in bodily substances, as in our own feces model. Instead a substance that in other situations may be nourishing may be temporarily polluting through the contexts of its production and distribution,” and one that in other situations may be polluting may be temporarily nourishing (1984: 113). In our own culture, someone’s saliva might be disgusting, but we would permit a little of our mother’s to slick down our hair or remove a spot of dirt from our face.

source of solidarity is moral; everything which forces man to take account of other men is moral; everything which forces him to regulate his conduct through something other than the striving of ego is moral; and morality is as solid as these ties are numerous and strong.

(Durkheim 1933: 398)

Morality in an important sense *is* society, or perhaps society *is* morality. That is, humans living in social arrangements will have normal, or at least “channeled” and habitual, ways of doing things because we must have them. Social normality depends on regularity and predictability in human affairs, such that I know what I am supposed to do, that I know what you are supposed to do, and that I can reasonably assume what you are going to do. It seems that social life without such traits would be virtually inconceivable, and that in their absence new ones would be quickly established.

This goes not only for human social life but the lives of all social species. Significantly, Charles Darwin made the observation in *The Descent of Man* that “any animal whatever, endowed with well marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience” (1882: 98). In other words, some sort of social-behavioral order is a necessity. We have seen that humans are not the only species with an “interaction code” that ritualizes behavior; an interaction code is one of the prerequisites of a social species. Accordingly, studies of human and nonhuman social animals alike have shown evidence of “moral” kinds of qualities, including attachment and bonding, cooperation and mutual aid (including altruism or “self-sacrifice”), sympathy and empathy, direct and indirect reciprocity, conflict resolution and “peacemaking,” deception and deception detection, concern with the evaluations of other members of the group, and an awareness of and responsiveness to group rules or norms. What humanity essentially adds to this list is self-consciousness of these traits and the ability to speculate on them and to elaborate or “theorize” about them—that is, to create moral “systems” or “interpretations” where moral “behavior” already existed.

This discovery supports Durkheim’s assertion that morality, “in all its forms, is never met with except in society” (1933: 399)—but also that it is *always* met with in society. Societies—of humans, apes, fish, or bees—are all “moral communities” in the sense that there are right and wrong things to do within them. Morality, in a fundamental way, is basically an effect of living in and being sensitive to a social group. Again, a social group without some “moral standards” (however tacit and unconscious, even instinctual) could probably not survive; its members would either kill each other or scatter.

But it is not just as a mundane order of human relations that society provides both form and substance for religious/moral concerns; “society also consecrates things, especially ideas” (Durkheim 1965: 244). That is, one of the properties or functions of society is to surround its social realities with what Geertz called an “aura of factuality” and (or perhaps by way of) an aura of sacrality. We will discuss this much further in the final section of this chapter. For now, let us think of Radcliffe-Brown’s notion not only of “social function” but of “ritual value.” He proposed that

the central function of any social fact, including religion or morality, is the contribution it makes “to the formation and maintenance of social order” (1965: 154). This order is itself a social fact: People really *are* in various relationships, groups, and institutions with various rights and responsibilities to each other. (Many of these social realities even predate *Homo sapiens* and spoken language, etc.) There *are* rules and norms and “customary” arrangements between individuals. He writes:

For every rule that *ought* to be observed there must be some sort of sanction or reason. For acts that patently affect other persons the moral and legal sanctions provide a generally sufficient controlling force upon the individual. For ritual obligations conformity and rationalization are provided by the ritual sanctions. The simplest form of ritual sanction is an accepted belief that if rules of ritual are not observed some undefined misfortune is likely to occur.

(Radcliffe-Brown 1965: 150)

Ultimately, then, human societies achieve ways of valuing, of “valorizing,” their actual practices, rules, and institutions. Morality in this sense is an extra layer of value and of obligation or coercion: The practices, rules, or institutions are not only valuable in themselves but “morally” valuable too. That is, they are not only real but also right. Even if those practices, rules, and institutions entail war, headhunting, or human sacrifice, they are important because they are done (and perhaps *only* because they are done), and they attain the status of “moral” duties or concerns.

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## The efficacy of religion: formation and transformation

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Morality is, ultimately, not just an idea or belief but a *practice*. Therefore, producing moral behavior means producing moral human beings, which, in turn, means producing individuals with particular values, attitudes, and habits. Or, as Geertz’s classic definition phrased it, the point of religion is to “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting mood and motivations” in people (1973: 90). We might say then that the power of religion is not so much to “inform” humans (to give them discursive “knowledge” or “beliefs”) as to *form* and *transform* them—to turn them into certain kinds of individuals who behave in certain ways. Religious “information” *in-forms* humans in the sense that it instills form in them; religious “instruction” *in-structs* in the sense of creating structure in them. And religion, among all the elements of culture, is particularly successful at this because it is presented as “the really real.”

Durkheim spoke fundamentally of the *effectiveness*, the *efficacy*, of religion: it *works* in some way *by* transforming human personalities. Through doing religion, “men become different” (1965: 241). They become stronger, more courageous, more certain. But that is not the most important point. Specific ideas, and still more so sentiments, are aroused and established in them. A society has—perhaps is—a set of such ideas and sentiments; that is what he meant by “moral community.” The “social

facts” (the families, lineages, clans, tribes, villages, etc.) are there. The members of society must not only *represent* these realities to themselves; they must also commit to them, be swayed by them.

Durkheim saw religion, or, more precisely, religious ritual, as the process by which this goal is accomplished. At the moment of ritual, a psychological force that he called “effervescence” is achieved, a state of excitement, suggestibility, and mental “contagion.” “In the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion,” he writes, “we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces” (Durkheim 1965: 240). At such times, “Every sentiment expressed finds a place without resistance in all minds, which are very open to outside impressions; each re-echoes the others, and is re-echoed by the others” (Durkheim 1965: 247). The entire experience is “ecstatic” in the sense of the individual getting outside of himself or herself and feeling the presence and power of a greater external reality, which is society.

Durkheim greatly exaggerated the unanimity of the mental results of ecstatic or ritual experiences; not all people—neither “primitive” nor “modern”—come away with exactly the same ideas and attitudes. It is not even necessary that they do. Nonetheless, his general approach has been adopted within anthropology. Radcliffe-Brown agrees, almost in the same words, that

an orderly social life amongst human beings depends upon the presence in the minds of the members of a society of certain sentiments, which control the behavior of the individual in his relation to others. Rites can be seen to be the regulated symbolic expressions of certain sentiments. Rites can therefore be shown to have a specific social function when, and to the extent that, they have for their effect to regulate, maintain, and transmit from one generation to another sentiments on which the constitution of the society depends.

(1965: 157)

And Malinowski, who is better known for elevating individual needs over social ones, concurs at least this far in discussing particular ceremonies, including initiation rites:

they are a ritual and dramatic expression of the supreme power and value of tradition in primitive societies; they also serve to impress this power and value upon the minds of each generation, and they are at the same time an extremely efficient means of transmitting tribal lore, of insuring continuity in tradition, and of maintaining tribal cohesion.

(1948: 40)

So, religion is a profound ingredient in the creation and perpetuation of social order by being a profound ingredient in the minds and experiences of the beings who make up (in both senses of the phrase) society. Religion is about the social realities and the social relationships in which humans find themselves, independent and regardless of their own actions or intentions. Religious reality is “just there” in the same way that social reality is.

The overall effect, to which Geertz refers in his definition, is to give these social and religious realities such an “aura of factuality” that humans take them for granted and encounter them as “really real.” Religion contributes to this effect by attaching social relations, including “moral” ones, to or founding them on a *nonsocial* ground. One of the best and strongest expressions of this idea comes from Marshall Sahlins (1976), who talks about “the culturalization of nature and the naturalization of culture.” That is, the source of, and, thus, the reason and justification for, culture are displaced from culture onto nonculture; they are certainly not human constructions but are independent and real. This need not only obtain in the religious domain. He discusses how Darwin’s theory of natural selection constituted a projection of nineteenth-century capitalist concepts and practices, particularly competition and the elimination of competitors, onto nature and, thereby, provided a basis for arguing that those very cultural concepts and practices are natural. Throughout history, before and since, people have appealed to nature for models of culture or to culture for models of nature, often if not usually unconsciously. Marx alleged to found his social laws and predictions on natural/historical laws, and even the Enlightenment spoke of “natural rights” as if these rights were something you could find in nature. The argumentative force of this approach is obvious: If your social and cultural principles are “natural,” they must be intellectually true and morally obligating.

Religion goes one step further. It appeals not only “below” human life and culture (to nature) but “above” human culture (to the supernatural) as well. So we should restate Sahlins’s proposition to include the culturalization of *supernature* and the *supernaturalization* of culture. The source, model, and authority of human relations, regulations, and institutions is then not merely nature, and certainly not humans themselves, but the supernatural agents and realities that religion posits to exist. Culture is extrahuman and superhuman, but, above all, it is *given* to or established for humans. Human society and culture is one dimension in a transhuman system, all of which dimensions reflect the same basic natural/supernatural truths.

The central implication for morality is that *the universe itself, nature and supernature alike, is a moral place*. Value, difference, goodness, etc., are part of the very fabric of reality, not mere human concerns, let alone mere human inventions. Morals are really real because they come from or are based on something else that is really real, be it gods, spirits, nature, or the “order” of the universe. Human morality, as well as every other human institution or practice, is a *dependent* phenomenon—dependent for its existence and its details on a reality that, by being nonhuman and extrahuman and superhuman, is more powerful, more compelling, and ultimately more real than the human one. Morality is projected and externalized: Every social standard becomes an extrasocial obligation or command, making literal the injunction of the philosopher Nietzsche that “everything you like you should first let yourself be commanded to do” (1976: 160).

Roy Rappaport (1999), finally, suggests that the key aspect of ritual and religion is not the acts and the “content,” let alone the doctrine or beliefs, nor even the meanings of the acts and symbols, but the attitude toward all of these things and what they stand for. In particular, the crucial attitude is *commitment*. He proposes that the



very doing of rituals, the very manipulation of symbols, generates moral states and expresses and attains commitment to them. For him, religion and its performance have two “offices.” The first is *acceptance*: to do or participate in a ritual or other religious form is to publicly accept its right if not its rightness. He is adamant that acceptance is not “belief” and can occur separately from or without belief. The point is to embrace the *obligations* that come with the ritual, the morality, the religion, and the culture. When one takes part in a ritual, one manifests that such behavior is the “right thing to do” and that those who lead the ritual have the right to do so. It recognizes not only obligation but also authority. The second office, then, is the establishment of convention, of “right things to do,” in the first place. Once established, the convention is endowed with importance, with “sacredness,” which makes it obligatory. Hence, the obligatoriness of the conventional behavior *becomes* morality: “Breach of obligation may, then, be *the* fundamental immoral act. [. . .] [F]ailure to abide by the terms of an obligation is universally stigmatized as immoral (Rappaport 1999: 132).” Here then is perhaps a theory of the very genesis of morality.

In Meyer Fortes’s description of Tallensi religion and morality, he finds exactly these forces in operation. The Tallensi observed an array of behavioral restrictions, some of which Fortes refers to as matters of propriety, while others were matters of “moral or ritual injunction.” Moral/ritual rules distinguished between “ritual custom” (*malung*) and “taboo custom” (*kyiher*), the difference being that “Fear of embarrassment is the sanction of the former. In the case of the latter it is the likelihood of mystical retribution” (1987: 125). Despite the differences, all of their customary regulations were “accepted as absolutely binding,” “moral imperatives complied with in acts of individual observances or abstention” (Fortes 1987: 126).

The observance of a taboo signifies submission to an internal command which is beyond question. [. . .] Transgression is tantamount to repudiating one’s identity, or one’s identification with a locality or office of status [. . .] [Such] taboos ordain rules of conduct that are binding on the individual, in the first place because he is the person he is in the situation he is in. Compliance with them means that he identifies himself with, appropriates to himself, the capacities, the rights and obligations, the relationships and the commitments that devolve upon a normal person of his status in his situation. He has, it must be remembered, been cast in these roles or in roles preparatory to them since childhood. Being with him all the time taboos keep him aware of his enduring identity, as a person in contraposition to other persons.

There is, however, a second factor of fundamental importance in these prescriptions. They are defined as obligations to the founding ancestors and to the Earth. [. . .] They represent acknowledgement of a particular form of dependence [. . .] to bonds that amount to inescapable bondage.

(Fortes 1987: 126–7)

## Religion and the “embodiment” of morals

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As Fortes indicated, humans are carefully and continuously groomed to take their place(s) in society and in religion. This means that, although they supposedly emanate from the nonhuman realm, religious concepts and morals are incarnated in real flesh-and-blood humans and real social institutions. The concepts and morals must become part of actual human minds and personalities as well as shared practices, relations, and institutions. This includes beliefs and other such intellectual components, but also emotional states—what we might call “habits of the heart” (Bellah et al. 1985) as opposed to habits of the mind—which lead to habits of behavior. The goal is to produce persons who think and feel certain things and, therefore, *do* certain things, and to suspend and bind them in social relationships that support these actions and that are in turn reproduced by these actions. This may include literally “inscribing” religion in or on the bodies of members.

For Durkheim, the key to the embodiment of religion and society is ritual: Rituals are the occasions when religious ideas and sentiments are given overt form and emotional force. Yet, this cannot be sufficient. For one, rituals are not always particularly informative: The Gisu from the last chapter explicitly did not communicate much “content” in their initiation rituals. For another, rituals do not always convey the seriousness that Durkheim attributes to them. There is no single “ritual attitude,” but, rather, rituals may be characterized by gravity, levity, and every emotion in between. Most importantly, it is *unnecessary* that ritual carry the entire weight of religious transformation, since ritual is not the only opportunity people have to experience their religion. Indeed, if it were, religion would be much impoverished, since people do not spend most of their time in ritual situations, and when they *are* in them, the words and gestures and objects they encounter would be new and meaningless.

Geertz is well known for emphasizing the role of symbols in religion and culture, which may lead us to conclude that he sees symbols as performing the role that rituals perform for Durkheim. However, Geertz goes on to state that religion and culture exist as a “traffic” of symbols (1973: 45) which does not only occur during ritual but incessantly in social life. We might say then that the meaning of symbols and the power of rituals are “overdetermined” in society: Long before a person undergoes a ritual, he or she has seen (at least parts of) that ritual before and has definitely heard about it. Very much training and preparation for ritual occurs repeatedly before and after its performance. People hear accounts of rituals, retell the myths that inform the rituals, and generally rehearse the skills and habits that are communicated by ritual. For example, while a wedding ceremony may be a rite of passage and establish a marriage, that ceremony is hardly the first occasion on which the couple has heard of marriage and its norms and expectations. They have probably attended other services, observed their own parents and other adults in marriages, and overheard an endless stream of discussion about marriage. Their nuptials “bring it all together,” but much of the knowledge and many of the habits that they will practice are already well known and well established.

To a very large extent, this acquisition of “moods and motivations” entails learning the appropriate attitudes and feelings for a person in this or that status in this or that society. This means literally training the mind, the emotions, the very body, to act and respond in certain ways. Hirschkind (2001) makes the point when he examines the behavior of listening to religious tape-recordings among Muslims in Egypt. Rather than following the typical method of studying the “big” moments of ritual, he instead looks at the repetitive, everyday activity of playing pre-recorded lectures and sermons and the effects of this behavior. What he concludes is that acquiring and practicing a religion is more—and less—than holding a set of doctrines or participating in formal rituals. A religion, like a culture in general, is a complex of “perceptual skills,” the ways that we think, feel, concentrate, emote, even sit or stand or otherwise use our bodies. The “practices” that people undergo and perform, trivial as they seem, generate a “sensibility” that is an effect of and a further cause of the practices. This is the same point made by Pierre Bourdieu (1977): A way of thinking and feeling and acting, a *habitus*, must be instilled in the person, and, once instilled, it will produce more of the same experiences, right down to how the senses and organs function. A “socially informed” body, in particular a “religiously informed” or “morally informed” body, will have been achieved.

Other versions of this social and moral in-formative process can be found. Coleman, for instance, emphasizes how the proselytizing practices of Swedish Christian Pentecostals achieve the same results. For the new convert, “telling and retelling conversion stories is a central ritual of faith, framing personal experience in canonical language and recreating that experience in the telling” (Coleman 2003: 16–17). Likewise, all of the day-to-day activities like knocking on doors, training bible-school students, making trips abroad, public witnessing, and so on—including consuming their own media like tape recordings, newspapers, and television programs—are part of the ongoing structuring of the self and the group.

In the Christian and Muslim context, respectively, John and Jean Comaroff (1991) and Michael Gilsenan (2000) have observed the role not only of everyday religious but also more pedestrian practices in constructing religious experience and “moral” attitudes. “Furniture, ways of sitting, modes of dress, politeness, photography, table manners, and gestures [. . .] are as important as any religion, and changes in them may be as dislocating as changes in belief. [. . .] We do not have to accept or impose the primacy of religion over social, economic, or political factors,” Gilsenan concludes (2000: 20). In even greater detail, the Comaroffs document the quite intentional “revolution in habits” that was introduced in Africa as part of the religious conversion project, from clothing styles to work ethic to gender roles to architecture. All of these contributed to new “moods and motivations” more congenial to Christianity, let alone colonialism and capitalism. We will return to this issue in our discussion of conversion to “world religions” in Chapter 8.

Minds, emotions, and bodies cannot be separated in our consideration of religious and moral behavior. Bodily comportment is a source and expression of experience. Standing, sitting, dressing, etc., constitute one dimension of bodily experience. Often enough, religion is more literally inscribed on or in the body. Scarification,

circumcision, tattooing, jewelry, body paint, and other decorations are among the forms by which the body itself becomes a religious object and by which religious states and orientations are produced in the body. Much of what we would regard as violence against self or other (see Chapter 9), such as sacrifice, asceticism and self-denial, and self-mortification, are ways of training the body and emotions to have conventional religious attitudes and motivations. In other words, it is not only—maybe not mainly—by shaping minds (with beliefs and concepts) that religious members are made but by shaping feelings and bodies too.

Our conclusion is this: Religion, in its grand forms and its small ones, particularly as expressed as morality, is less about doctrine than about preparing human individuals to act in certain ways and guaranteeing that they do. This may or does entail making those actions so real, so obligatory, so natural, that most people never seriously consider acting otherwise—in fact, never seriously consider the actions at all. Anthony Wallace seems to suggest this when he describes the function of religion as “quickly to prepare an individual or individuals to execute an action with maximum efficiency” (1966: 234). The very stereotypy and moral urgency of certain actions virtually (but not completely) guarantee their successful performance. All of social life is structured and organized, but religion “is orderliness raised to an extraordinary degree” (Wallace 1966: 238)—and given the sanction not only of man but of nature and supernature. In the end, the goal and function of ritual, morality, and religion “is to prepare a human being for the efficient performance of a task by communicating an image of a highly organized world system, already described in the belief system, and by suggesting a role during a ritual learning process” (Wallace 1966: 270) that the individual must play in this system.

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## Religion and the social order

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If mind, body, society, culture, nature, and supernature are all dimensions of an integrated system, then we should expect to find connections between and reflections of each in the others. We would expect the myths, rituals, beliefs, and values of a religion to relate to the kinship, political, and even economic practices and institutions of the society. According to Durkheim, this fact is not only not surprising but virtually mandatory, since religion is “a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it” (1965: 257). Society provides the “inspiration” for religion by being omnipresent, external, “real,” and coercive or at least inevitable; however, it also provides the particular “content” of the religion, being as it is the model upon which the group’s religion is based.

Durkheim’s theory is perhaps too simplistic and causal, but it is highly influential in the social-scientific study of religion and has been developed by anthropologists from Radcliffe-Brown to Mary Douglas. Most famously, in her book *Natural Symbols*, Douglas lays out a view of religion in which the quality of religious experience is shaped by the quality of general social experience, which she refers to as the “symbolic

replication of a social state" (1970: 82). Humans, therefore, not only get the idea of religion from society but get specific religious ideas or experiences from it. Society offers the sentiment from which religion springs but also the particular categories or order that fill religion in. In other words, "Religious forms as well as social forms are generated by experience in the same dimension" (Douglas 1970: 16), which is the dimension of everyday lived existence.

She identifies some variables of qualitative experience that have detectable impact on religious expression, called "group" and "grid." Grid, in her theory, refers to the individualistic or ego-focused experiences or categories, such as the available titles, roles, statuses, and names in a society, that is, the order within which individuals define their identity. In any particular society, "grid" qualities may be strong or weak. Group, on the other hand, stands for the macrosocial organizational patterns—such phenomena as class, caste, lineage, and other institutional or political structures to which individuals belong or in which they participate. Group can also be strong or weak. Thus, human beings live within a social context in which "personal"/grid and "structural"/group experiences intersect in some way: Grid and group may both be strong or both be weak, or one may be strong while the other is weak. The result is an overall "feel" or ethos to social existence. Societies with a particular combination of group and grid qualities will be prone to certain religious attitudes and practices, she argues, such as spirit possession, trance, and so on.

Finally, Douglas stresses a psychological process to link the personal, social, and spiritual dimensions. She names it *consonance*, literally "sounding like/with," to suggest that social experience and spiritual experience develop a harmony that almost becomes a unison. She writes that there is a "drive to achieve consonance between social and physical and emotional experience" (Douglas 1970: 149) and that it is this drive for consonance that explains "the power of social structures to generate symbols of their own" (1970: 151). People who live within a particular kind of psychological and social order are going to learn to think and feel in particular ways; their very bodies, as Hirschkind, Gilsenan, and the Comaroffs have suggested, will be trained and attuned to certain habits and sentiments. To have institutions or beliefs that are "out of tune" with the quality of their lives would create a kind of "dissonance." Hence, "Just as the experience of cognitive dissonance is disturbing, the experience of consonance in layer after layer of experience and context after context is satisfying" (Douglas 1970: 70). It is a very human way of bringing one's social order, emotional order, and spiritual order into one great consistent order.

Thus, we should expect to find some social organizations and some mythical/ritual/moral systems that co-occur and others that do not. Small, egalitarian societies do not tend to possess concepts of hierarchical religious arrangements—pantheons of judgmental gods, for instance. Societies tend to see their own economic and political institutions represented in their religions; the Dogon, a horticultural society, had an elaborate cosmology concerning grains, granaries, and blacksmiths, whereas pastoralists like the Nuer or Dinka saw cattle as central to their symbolic and ritual practice. Societies that have unequal or even tense gender relations have those relations reflected back to them in myth and ritual. For instance, the Barabaig, a

pastoral society with classic male-dominant institutions like polygyny, patrilocality, patrilineality, and bridewealth, also expressed gender tension and inequality in their ceremonies and their moral values. Men acquired a wife by “bride capture,” and her family mourned her loss as a “death”; at their own weddings, males did not participate but were regarded as outsiders, and new brides were instructed to resist the consummation of the marriage on their wedding night (Klima 1970: 71–2). Earlier we noted how gender and nature concepts enter the religion of the Hua.

Around the world and throughout time, human societies have included the religion and morality that suits and strengthens their social order. Chinese Confucian ideals of proper behavior or *li* (translated alternately as etiquette, propriety, morality, or ritual conduct) were expressed in and productive of the so-called five relationships—father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, older brother and younger brother, and ruler and subject. Each relationship reiterated the same pattern, a rightfully dominant but benevolent superordinate and an obedient and respectful subordinate. In fact, the Chinese character for the fundamental value of *jen* or “humaneness” is a composite of two characters, one meaning human person and the other meaning “two” (Brannigan 2005: 296) Thus, humaneness, morality, and social order are overtly about humans in social relations.

There are many other ways in which religion relates to its cultural surroundings. Greenbaum (1973) illustrates that there are strong correlations between spirit-possession and other cultural variables. Spirit-possession is a very common concept worldwide, but 86 percent of cultures that practice slavery, for instance, also have spirit trances, compared to 14 percent of cultures without slavery. Likewise, 58 percent of societies with a stratification system of two or more classes experience such trances, while 74 percent of those without class inequalities also lack trances. Societies that practice patrilocal marriage are twice as likely to include spirit-possession, and larger societies (more than 100,000 members) are more than twice as likely. Agricultural societies (87 percent), societies that practice bride price or bride service (89 percent), and societies with multiple levels of political power (83 percent) are all dramatically more likely to believe in possession.

Wallace (1966) indicates an even wider array of religious phenomena with social correlates. Witchcraft, for instance, is more common in societies that lack “political superiors” to administer punishments or in which social relations are not controlled by a higher social authority; this suggests that witchcraft provides the missing function. In addition, a concept of a “high god” occurs more often in societies with multiple distinct and sovereign subgroups and seldom in homogeneous societies. A pantheon of gods and a “supernatural sanction for morality” is much more associated with social stratification than with egalitarianism.

### **Legitimizing order**

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It is a well-known and well-established idea that religion legitimates the order of human relations and institutions; members of religious communities tend to believe that their institutions and practices (their language, their knowledge and

skills, their kinship arrangements, their political systems, etc.) were given by spiritual sources—perhaps the ancestors, perhaps the gods, perhaps “culture heroes” of some sort—which is *why* those institutions and practices are morally obligating. Indeed, their very lives and the shapes of their bodies were established in a supernatural way. The legitimation of the human order amounts in the end to the claim that the order comes from or pertains to the nonhuman reality as well—the natural and/or supernatural realms themselves. As Sahlins characterized it above, culture becomes naturalized (and supernaturalized), and nature (supernature) becomes culturalized.

There are many places to observe this effect. Perhaps the clearest and most complete expression is the caste system of India. The Hindu caste system was, and is, an immensely complex social phenomenon, actually not a single unified phenomenon at all but a diverse and intricate set of beliefs and practices distributed across the South Asian subcontinent and beyond (i.e., Bali and other “Hinduized” societies). It essentially involved the stratification of society through a holistic network of kinship, economic, political, and religious concepts and institutions. It may be the most fully worked-out moral-religious system in the world. Kathleen Gough (1971: 11), for instance, has given these characteristics of castes, although we must keep in mind that the system functioned differently in different areas of southern Asia:

- inherited by birth;
- endogamous, that is, in-marrying;
- associated with an occupation;
- ranked and hierarchical in prestige, power, and usually wealth;
- separated by “social distance” and sometimes by physical distance as well (e.g., living in different districts or neighborhoods of the same village);
- based on a notion of ritual purity and pollution.

Thus, all of the functional domains of culture are involved in this comprehensive system.

Most readers will be familiar with the four major “caste” categories, namely *brahmans* (the highest rank, of priests and scholars), *kshatriyas* (the second rank, of warriors and political leaders), *vaishyas* (the third rank, of merchants, craftspeople, and farmers), and *shudras* (the fourth rank, of laborers and servants). At the bottom of, or even outside, the system were the *panchama* or *pariah* class, sometimes called “outcastes” or “untouchables” (legally designated as *harijan* or “children of god” today), who did and do the absolutely most menial and dirty of work, such as cleaning streets and sewers, handling dead bodies, and so on. However, in reality, the system contained hundreds, if not thousands, of distinct occupational statuses called *jati*; fisherman is one *jati*, carpenter another, potter another, barber another. A caste category, then, included a host of various *jati*, which may be ranked against each other as well as against the other major categories.

Not surprisingly, caste status tended to affect wealth and standard of living. Gough writes that in the southeast Indian village she studied, *brahmans* were typically much richer than the next three castes, who were in turn slightly richer than the bottom-

dwellers, called *adi dravidas* or “original Dravidians” in her setting. Not only did each category tend to be residentially segregated, it also possessed its own norms and morals: *brahmans* notably practiced cremation, widow celibacy, proscription of divorce, avoidance of animal sacrifice, and other specialized behaviors. They also could interact with some lower castes but not the very lowest; the most degraded *jati*, the Pallan or landless serf rank, could not even stand within several feet of a *brahman* nor walk on the street in a *brahman* neighborhood, let alone enter one of their houses, and vice versa (Gough 1971: 53–4).

It is obvious that there is something more than occupational specialization going on here. As Gough explains, the gap between castes (especially the highest and the lowest) was a *ritual* as well as a natural one. *Brahmans* were not merely socially or economically superior to their underlings but spiritually better too. This is captured in the Hindu concept of ritual purity, based not only on the individual’s knowledge of sacred literature and occupation of ritual offices but also on their personal and collective spiritual condition. A *brahman* was a higher spiritual incarnation of human being, burdened by comparatively less *karma* and closer to the attainment of the goal of religion. “Naturally,” they deserved the status and the advantages that they enjoyed, for truly they were better human beings. As Gough points out, one’s wealth and power did not confer caste status but rather one’s caste status conferred wealth and power; “Ritual rank inheres in castes by virtue of birth, and has connotations of worth. A high caste is often called a ‘good’ caste, and a low caste a ‘bad’ one. [. . .] A rich or powerful man is not thereby a ‘good’ man but a ‘big’ man; a poor or powerless person not a ‘bad’ man but a ‘small’ one” (Gough 1971: 51).

The most revealing aspect of the legitimating value of religion is how it adapts to changes in social institutions and relations. Society is not written in stone, so, therefore, neither can the religious sources of society be. Australian Aboriginal groups had mechanisms for sharing, trading, and redistributing religious knowledge as well as religious sites, as we will discuss in the next chapter. Beidelman gives another example of religion flexing to keep up with and to legitimate changing social realities. Among the Kaguru, clans owned particular parcels of land and performed annual rites (*tambiko*) to rejuvenate the land, guaranteeing rainfall and fertility largely through the agency of clan ghosts (*misimu*). However, he also reports:

These annual rites are a useful means by which the members of an owner clan enforce their rule upon the other residents in their land. Although Kaguru always speak of this enforcement in mystical, ritual terms, however, these activities are invariably the expression of the power relations within a local area; when in the past these relations changed and a clan’s power was lost, ritual was usurped by others, who quickly put forward a new legendary justification for their powers. (Beidelman 1971: 34)

Observers of modern religions have noticed this property again and again—how a group that embarks on new relations, especially occupying new territory, develops



mythico-ritual bases for their circumstances. Often the newcomers will appropriate part of the displaced group's beliefs and practices; sometimes they will superimpose their rituals or myths on the prior ones, for instance, adopting the same days for ritual activities (the Christian use of Sunday for its sabbath was an appropriation of the pagan Roman sun cult, as was the adoption of December 25 as their incarnated god's birthday, an old fact from Mithra worship), or literally locating their sacred sites on top of previous sacred sites (the Dome of the Rock on the Jewish Temple Mount in Jerusalem being a prime example). Then, the transfer of divine legitimation from old to new goes along relatively unproblematically.

### Case study 6.1

#### Legitimizing the state in Japan

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Shinto is widely recognized as the traditional religion of Japan. However, as Holtom argues, it is particularly treacherous to attempt to define or classify Shinto; it has been described as

the indigenous religion of the Japanese people; it is the Way of the Gods; it is "*kami*-cult," a form of definition in which *kami* signifies the deities of Japan as distinct from those brought into the country through foreign contacts; [ . . . ] it is the racial spirit of the Japanese people (*Yamato Damashii*); it is the sacred ceremonies conducted before the *kami*; it is the essence of the principles of imperial rule; it is a system of correct social and political etiquette; it is the ideal national morality; it is a system of patriotism and loyalty centering on emperor worship ("Mikadoism"); it is, in its pure and original form, a nature worship or, over against this, Shinto, correctly understood, is ancestor worship; or, again, it is an admixture of the worship of nature and of ancestors.

(Holtom 1965: 5–6)

Most likely it is all of these at once.

Holtom characterizes Shinto as having four simultaneous field of activity: domestic or household worship, sect observances, "state" ceremonies at public shrines, and the rituals of the imperial residence. The earliest Shinto shrines were locations or objects in nature, and the religion evinces a clear relation to agriculture; in fact, "The ancient interests of the rice culture in which the lives of these ancient people centered have penetrated Old Shinto deeply" (Holtom 1965: 101). However, as the unified Japanese state under the hereditary emperor coalesced, Shinto came to reflect and support this political reality. According to Bellah,

The earliest records we have of Shinto indicate the emergence of a state cult out of what is clearly a primitive tribal religion. The Yamato people consolidated their hegemony over central Japan in the early centuries of the Christian era and apparently in connection with this political predominance, they managed to establish their own version of the mythology.

(1957: 86)

In this mythology, the Sun-Goddess Amaterasu-Omikami plays a prominent role: she “has become the symbol of practically everything that is most precious and most characteristic in the evolution of the Japanese people” (Holtom 1965: 124). This includes, significantly, the imperial family itself; the emperor is a direct descendant of the goddess. Holtom quotes a Japanese school text which taught that the goddess herself proclaimed, “This country is a land over which my offspring shall rule. Do thou, Imperial Grandson, go and rule over it. And the prosperity of the Imperial Throne shall be as everlasting as heaven and earth” (1965: 127). In terms of ritual practice, the public/state cult is designed to represent and instill key Japanese values, particularly military ideals, honor and loyalty toward superiors, and respect for the emperor. Not surprisingly, with the revised and modernized state of the Tokugawa (1603) and Meiji periods, Shinto was elevated and edited to become what Bellah termed “a sacred form of nationalism” (1957: 53).

### **Inverting order**

Order is a necessary and recurrent condition in human society, but, as Turner among others has reminded us, it is not the only condition. Humans also experience and actually require some disorder too, or at least disorder is an inevitable concomitant of order. Also, as Turner has hypothesized, disorder can have its own functions, positive or negative. In some cases, inversions or transgressions of social order may actually be reaffirming of that order. In others, such violations may be the explanation for the problems in society, providing a “solution” to those problems.

Turner himself explores how structured exceptions to structure can themselves be structuring, generally in the concepts of liminality and *communitas* and, specifically, in the case of socio-political rituals such as those involved in installing a new leader or in renewing that leader’s power. The leader must be respected and obeyed most of the time, but there may be instances when a controlled overthrow of the hierarchy is allowed or even required, during which the leader is mocked, ridiculed, perhaps even attacked. However, the chief or king (almost) always emerges from the event well—and restored to power.

Even in situations where there is no formal reversal of social relations, there is always an uncertain and liminal aspect to transitions of power. Beattie writes that the Bunyoro kingdom of Africa conducted coronation and “refresher” ceremonies

for its kings. The reigning king or *mukama* was always, according to belief, descended from the original king in an unbroken patrilineal succession (thus establishing the religious charter for kingship, flowing from the first family of humans). When a king died, there was an institutionalized period of chaos and social disturbance, during which sons of the deceased king were supposed to fight to the death for the throne. The king's demise was deliberately concealed to allow time for the succession competition to play out. When the new king was finally installed, his ascension was surrounded with ritual, including "the placing on the throne and the subsequent killing of a 'mock king,' who would, it was believed, attract to himself the magical dangers which attended the transition to kingship, protecting the real king" (1960: 28).

In the case of Shilluk kings, the violent confrontation was more protracted but also more symbolic, although the conception of a religious continuity in the institution of king was similar. All kings inherited the place and power of the first great king, Nyikang. In fact, as Evans-Pritchard describes it, "it is not the individual at any time reigning who is king, but Nyikang who is the medium between man and God (*Juok*) and is believed in some way to participate in God as he does in the king" (1962: 201). Accordingly, the installation of a new king involved a symbolic war between the king-to-be and Nyikang himself, present in effigy. Priests displayed the effigy of Nyikang, which traveled through the northern part of the kingdom, literally collecting up the subjects of the mythical king. Finally, the army of Nyikang met the army of the king-to-be.

The army of the king-elect is defeated and he is captured by Nyikang and taken by him to the capital. The kingship captures the king. There Nyikang is placed on the royal stool. After a while he is taken off it and the king-elect sits on it in his stead and the spirit of Nyikang enters into him, causing him to tremble, and he becomes king, that is he becomes possessed by Nyikang.

(Evans-Pritchard 1962: 205)

In an important and symbolic sense, after and thanks to the confusion and disorder, order was reestablished—and it was the same order (literally the same royal spirit) as before.

Another noteworthy illustration of limited liminality and constrained communitas is the practice of "carnival," as seen in its lingering and pale instantiations of Mardi Gras and, perhaps, Halloween in the USA, where the strange, the evil, and the immoral are enacted and celebrated. In other times and places, the purpose and practice of carnival has been much more serious. Stallybrass and White (1986) have done some informative work on the social meaning of such intentional inversions. Carnival, for instance, was an opportunity to step out of the mundane state of affairs, put on a mask, play a different role, sometimes break the everyday rules and indulge in the different, the grotesque, even the immoral. They follow Mikhail Bakhtin, who opined that an event like carnival "celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truths of the established order; it marks the suspension of all

hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete" (1968: 109). Even in the USA today, people put on masks of often ghoulish characters one night each year, although the ritual has been mostly consigned to children, and almost all of its transgressive meaning has been lost in favor of the quest for candy.

The point of the analysis by Stallybrass and White is that the "high" culture and the "low," the ordered and the disordered, even the moral and the immoral are not detachable but are mutually dependent. The normal social order often tries to deny or at least ignore this fact: Kings are kings, rules are rules. However, at moments, the "official" independence of order and disorder is truly actualized, and disorder temporarily rules; kings may be pulled down, institutions (even priests and gods) may be parodied, tricksters and pranksters may be celebrated (hence "trick or treat"), and major taboos may be broken. Rightly they refer to carnivalesque events as inversions, hybrids, reversals, transgressions, and rites of reversal.

However, two facts are certain. First, the transgressive moment will end. Ideally, it was never really a danger to order at all. It was always, as Eagleton put it, "a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony" (1981: 148). The authorities usually even sanctioned and condoned it and provided security so that it could take place but not get too rambunctious. The order allowed a symbolic inversion, perhaps so that a real inversion did not occur. Second, as the recent marketing slogan goes, "What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas." People are expected not to carry their transgressions across the line that separates carnival from "real life"; that would be a *real* transgression. Instead, symbolic inversion remains a game played on a circumscribed field—a game, potentially, with real and positive effects but one that is not allowed to continue outside of the time and place set aside for it. It is, in the end, a legal illegality, an ordered disorder, a moral immorality.

Not all immorality or transgression is so playful and contained, though. There are real social and moral inversions, with usually negative consequences. One of the clearest and most common forms is witchcraft and sorcery. We have seen that many, if not most, societies have attributed much or all of human misfortune to supernatural forces, including the gods and dead ancestors; by no means are these religious phenomena always benevolent. The malevolent spiritual beings also include especially powerful and malicious humans, who, in some ways, violate or invert the normal order of things.

As we have discussed previously, sorcerers were ordinarily people who used objects and techniques to achieve (often negative) supernatural results. By engaging in such behavior, they were acting antisocially and immorally (in most instances—some few societies considered it normal for people to attempt to injure each other). Witches, however, were a different story; they were often humans with an inherent spiritual badness to them, or even nonhumans in a human guise. The Barabaig claimed that a witch was a person whose very presence caused trouble (Klima 1970: 100). The Kaguru, more extremely, believed that witches were innately evil, or even worse, "the physical opposites of humans even though they may appear to be like

ordinary humans” (Beidelman 1971: 37). They were thus some kind of perversion or corruption of human nature. Most revealingly, they were said to be “backward,” literal opposites of human normality: They were cannibals, they “walked and danced upside down,” went about naked, committed incest, and did their work at night.

All this is the reverse of what is normal for humans; they confound humans with animals, kin with nonkin, up with down, day with night, and shame (clothing) with shamelessness (nakedness and incest). What Kaguru seem to be saying is that witches do not recognize the rules and constraints of society, and those accused of witchcraft are those who do not seem to fulfill their basic social obligations to other humans.

(Beidelman 1971: 37)

If abnormality is the inverse of normality, witches represented that inversion to the ultimate.

The social dimension of witchcraft has been commented on by various observers. For one thing, witchcraft talent was often believed to be inherited, so there was a kinship aspect to it. The Swazi of Africa, for instance, maintained that a female witch passed her abilities on to her children of both sexes (although a male witch did not). And not only were the practitioners of such evil socially structured but so were the victims: Kuper writes that Swazi witchcraft was “usually aimed at persons who are already connected by social bonds” (1963: 66). For them as for many societies, the “automatic” character of witchcraft was invoked in situations of “hatred, fear, jealousy, and thwarted ambition,” all social emotions. Basso says of the Apache that people who were “suspected of witchcraft are by definition guilty of hatred” (1970: 87). It should be no surprise, then, that witchcraft tended to be suspected or perpetrated more often against neighbors and family than against those who were “farther away” physically and socially.

A particularly illuminating case of witchcraft belief comes from the Apache, who thought that *itkasn* were the most dangerous kinds of witches. Male *itkasn* were more common than female for the reason that men felt more *kedn* or hatred than women. There were both structural and personal signs or indications that someone was a witch. The structural elements included being in a category of “power” (such as shaman or rich man), belonging to a clan other than that of the victim, and being older than the victim (since younger people did not usually have power over older ones). The personal and behavioral elements of witch suspects were still more telling: They included selfishness, anger, bellicosity, meanness, dishonesty, gossip, threats, adultery, and thievery—all clearly “wrong” and antisocial and immoral acts (Basso 1970: 81).

Obviously, one consequence of the idea of witchcraft in a society is that it offers a reason for people to conform to the behavioral norms; those who are antisocial stand a chance of being accused as witches. However, there is one final way that this feature of social control can work. Among the Menomoni, the Spindlers found that witches were not the usual antisocial deviants but the category in society with the most power and prestige, the elders. They write that “social control is achieved [. . .] by

the threat of witchcraft by power figures rather than through accusation of the witch by the community” (1971: 73). All elders were believed to be potential witches, which, in a society of relative equals, was one of the few “power relations” available. One way or another, witchcraft represented a potent ideology: Conform and be good, or the witches will get you.

### **Mystifying order**

One of the crucial aspects of the legitimation of society is that humans must not recognize that they themselves originated the order, nor that their behavior perpetuates it. The very authority of the order comes from its “givenness,” the fact that humans are more or less passive recipients of it. This is especially true when the relations of society are unequal, even exploitative or oppressive. If humans made the system, they could question it and unmake and remake it. However, if the system is natural or supernatural—“just the way it is” or “ordained from on high”—it is obligatory, and there is nothing humans can do about it. In fact, as the Hindu or Tallensi perspective demonstrates, struggling with and attempting to “reform” the system would be tantamount to immorality itself—rejecting one’s social and spiritual duties.

The very process of naturalizing and supernaturalizing culture and of culturalizing nature and supernature purportedly removes culture from the realm of human doing. There is a “moral” value in this move, in that it gives people a stronger reason to conform to cultural norms and makes those norms themselves more normal, those morals more moral, those values more valuable. However, from a social-constructionist perspective, the naturalizing/culturalizing dialectic also hides the social basis of culture and morality from people, leading them to believe that their culture and morality are natural or supernatural. For some scholars, this amounts to a “mystification” of social realities, making those realities more mysterious and opaque than they would otherwise be. This is a particularly significant factor when we consider two things: First, that social realities continually change and the natural and supernatural justifications change with them, and, second, that some of these realities are exploitative or even oppressive and the natural and supernatural justifications make them seem necessary and unquestionable.

Marx was one of the harshest critics of the mystifying power of religion. For him, society is founded ultimately on practical and material activity, which gives rise to particular social relations (the “relations of production”). These relations have evolved over time, as the “means of production” have evolved; however, while many philosophers and social observers saw the relations—and even the ideas and beliefs—of society driving the practical actions, he saw it precisely the other way around. The means of production were the “most real,” the relations of production were the “next most real,” and the ideas, beliefs, and values were the least real, mere epiphenomena to explain and legitimate the means and relations. He expected that, if people would pierce the mystery and understand the real foundations of their society, then they would no longer need religion, nor would they accept the

unproductive sacrifices (such as supporting an idle class of priests) that it demands (see Chapter 10).

Not all students of religion do or need to follow Marx. However, almost all have noted what he noted, that religion is an effective discourse for representing and justifying society to itself. This is the essence of Durkheim's entire approach, although he ends up much less critical, even saying that all religion is "true" after a fashion. But still society is the ground and religion is the reflection of that ground. Malinowski too wrote that religion can associate itself with and legitimate "any form of social power or social claim. It is used always to account for extraordinary privileges or duties, for great social inequalities, for severe burdens of rank, whether this be very high or very low" (1948: 84).

We see this process at work across cultures and throughout time. The Hindu system illustrates it well. Similarly, the European concept of "divine right of kings" made a good explanation of and basis for the sovereignty of a single individual in a more or less elaborate hierarchy of personal power and privilege: Individual kings—and the very institution of kingship—were chosen by God, not made by human social practices (like war or class). Traditional Chinese politico-religious thinking had a corollary in the "mandate of heaven," which asserted that an emperor ruled with the blessing of the gods and that he could be removed only by someone else whom the gods had selected over him. The Bunyoro and Shilluk cases above portray the same phenomenon: The new king is the old mythical king, making his claim stronger and more unimpeachable. Finally, the concept of *tapu* in Polynesian societies provided a supernatural foundation for the power and success (or the weakness and failure) of powerful persons, including chiefs and kings.

Some analysts have pushed the argument much further. Maurice Bloch (1979), for example, in discussing kingship in Madagascar, insists that mystification, inversion, and legitimation are all intimately linked. The relationship between the king and the society (and the land itself) in the Merina and Betsileo kingdoms was based on the idea of *hasina*, an animatistic force not unlike *tapu* or others encountered around the world. *Hasina* was a supernatural power associated with life and reproduction, both human and natural (e.g., farming). Like *tapu* or the Apache concept of *diyí*, some people possessed more of it than others, and those who did were more important and more influential both on society and on nature itself.

Possessing or controlling *hasina* thus entitled a person to greater honor and greater authority, as the application of this mystical power helped society and nature itself to function better; the little people depended on the holders of *hasina* in a way that was not reciprocal. Or so the system said. Bloch reinterprets the relationship between *hasina*-holder and *hasina*-needer as an obfuscation of real social and political relations. Supernatural power allegedly flowed "down" from the kings, but social/political power actually flowed "up" from the people, in both symbolic (obedience and other obligations) and literal (wealth and gifts) forms. The same thing can be seen in Hinduism in the transactions between *brahmans* and non-*brahmans*: The highest caste performed ritual functions for the lower castes, and the lower castes offered deference and respect—and money—to their betters.

Thus, Bloch concludes that *hasina* created an illusion of rank and an illusion of the necessity and truth of rank distinctions. Specific politico-religious rituals in which the king and his subjects interacted communicated and reconstituted the unequal relations between them, making those relations appear to be natural and supernatural rather than cultural and historical. They represented social realities, as Durkheim thought, but also *misrepresented* them, as Marx thought. The result, in the Madagascar case as in many others, is that the political system and the religious system, while clearly interrelated, actually become disconnected for the people who participate in it, and the direction of social production is reversed: Rather than rulers and subjects creating and maintaining the stratified system, the natural and supernatural stratification seems to create rulers and subjects. And the ritual and mundane interactions of the various strata, conducted in terms of mystical giving and taking, reproduce the system continuously.

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## Conclusion

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Every society gives its members a sense of the correct, valuable, or good things to do, and not only through religion. As discussed in the previous chapter, religious ritual falls on a continuum of other more general forms of socially appropriate behavior. The same is true of morality, which is itself a form of social sanction specific to certain cultures and religions. The very concept of “morality,” not to mention the details of moral conduct, is relative, but the underlying force and motive perhaps are not. Different cultures and religions ordain different behavioral standards, but the key is that all cultures have such standards and that these standards *are ordained*—religion being the most profound source of ordination. What precisely humans are supposed to do is less important than the fact that there is something to do and that humans are supposed to do it. Herein lies religion’s “charter” function, its “model of/for” function, and its function to in-form and in-struct individuals, groups, institutions, and society as a whole. Religion communicates that the relationships and orders of the social and natural world are “given”—they have been established, and this establishment comes from outside, from the supersocial and supernatural realm. Human life is, thus, based ultimately on *obligation*, on *commitment*, and not only are humans pressured to acknowledge and comply with these standards, but they are given continuous opportunities to experience and practice them. Society depends on it.



## Religious change and new religious movements

### The anthropology of religious change

The invention of “traditional” religion

From religious change to religious movement

Toward a typology of NRMs

### Religion and revitalization: using religion to bring society back to life

Revitalization movements

Types of revitalization movements

*Syncretism*

*Millenarianism*

*Messianism*

*Irredentism*

*Modernism/vitalism*

*Nativism/fundamentalism*

### Revitalization movements, traditional and modern

A traditional revitalization movement: cargo cults

A modern revitalization movement: Cao Dai

### Conclusion

Religion is often perceived as a mainly or even totally conservative force. That is, religion seems—or claims—to establish an order of things and a system of meaning and morality that is settled and closed once and for all and to sustain and guarantee that order and system against all threats and innovations. It might be more accurate to say that part of the *ideology* of religion, of its self-perception and self-representation, is that it is conservative and “given.” Critical to the legitimating function of religion is its assertion of the “really real,” that which has not changed and cannot change, at least since it was set down in the paradigmatic acts of the past. Continuity with this past, and a human moral obligation to be faithful to this past and to perpetuate its models of life, lie near the heart of religion.

However, it is also immanently clear that religion changes and that it always has. Every religious tradition was at some point in time a religious novelty—even if it

attempts to portray itself otherwise. Christianity and Islam, as we will describe in the next chapter, were once new religions, although each tried to offer and succeeded in offering itself as a continuation of an older religious truth. And we are very aware of the proliferation of religions in the modern world; according to one source, two or three new religions are invented every day (Lester 2002: 38). Some of these religions appear to be created almost out of thin air, but much more often they are branches off the tree of an existing religion or amalgamations of available religious resources. And being a modular phenomenon, many types of resources contribute to the ongoing invention of religions—elements from other religions certainly, but also elements from nonreligious sources, from politics to popular culture to technology to UFOs.

Rather than seeing religion as a static and strictly conservative force, we should see it as a dynamic and basically adaptive one. The dynamics of religion, as of all culture, may reproduce the ideas, moods, relationships, and institutions that produced it. However, for various reasons, religion is often unable or unwilling to do so. Contact with or outside interference from another society or religion may make it impossible or undesirable to reproduce the old systems. Changing social, technical, or even environmental circumstances may alter the practices, and the simple passing of generations may bring new ideas or new interpretations of old ideas.

In this chapter, we will explore the ongoing invention of religion, most associated with but by no means exclusive to modernity. Even “traditional” religions were dynamic, and we cannot take any particular moment of such religions as the “true” or “traditional” one. Further, as we have already noticed, by the time anthropologists arrived on the scene, many religions consisted of religious fields in which multiple religious ideas and practices interacted in various ways, from cooperation to conflict. In more recent times, the processes of religious change have accelerated, as and because the more general processes of cultural change have accelerated. We will find that our anthropological concepts apply just as effectively to modern, changing religion as to “traditional” religion—and that the same warnings apply as well. We must be wary of supposedly analytical concepts such as “cult” or even “tradition,” and we must reject any notion of the “purity” or “essence” of a religion—or of religion as such.

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## **The anthropology of religious change**

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Anthropology has often been burdened by—and burdened itself with—the impression that it is the science of “traditional cultures” or, worse, of pristine and untouched cultures. If this were true, then anthropology would be finished, because all cultures, no matter how remote, have been touched by outside or even global cultural forces, and the pace of this contact has only accelerated in recent decades. As Malinowski noted long ago, “The figment of the ‘uncontaminated’ Native has to be dropped from research in field and study. The cogent reason for this is that the ‘uncontaminated’ Native does not exist anywhere” (1961: 2). Therefore, “the

scientific anthropologist must be the anthropologist of the changing Native” (Malinowski 1961: 6). In the realm of religion, the scientific anthropologist will then be the anthropologist of changing religion. This means that religious change is a species of cultural change in general, which Malinowski defines as “the process by which the existing order of a society, that is, its social, spiritual, and material civilization, is transformed from one type to another” (1961: 1). The significance of this appreciation is twofold: that changes in religion will be holistically related to changes in other aspects of culture, and that the same basic change processes will be operative in both.

In religion specifically and culture generally, the two most basic change processes are *innovation* and *diffusion*. In the former, an individual or group within the society invents or discovers some new idea, object, or practice—in the case of religion, a new entity to believe in, a new myth to tell, a new symbol to use, a new ritual to perform, etc. In the latter, an idea, object, or practice from another society is introduced into the first society, which entails further cultural processes such as contact, migration, intermarriage, invasion, or conquest. Whichever is the ultimate source of novelty, the course of change only begins with the appearance of the new item, as we will see below.

We can be considerably more precise about the forms and outcomes of religious and cultural change. The result may be *addition* of an item to the preexisting repertoire. Evans-Pritchard comments, for instance, that several aspects of Nuer religion appeared to come from outside Nuer society, specifically from their Dinka neighbors. The *kwoth nhial* or “spirits of the air,” according to informants, “had all ‘fallen’ into foreign lands and had only recently entered into Nuerland and become known to them” (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 29). Beliefs about totems, nature sprites, and fetishes were also often attributed to the Dinka. Conversely, *deletion* may occur when an item is dropped from the repertoire, as when a society stops performing a certain ritual. Often, a *reinterpretation* of previous beliefs and practices takes place, with old forms given new meaning; this can occur due to changing social circumstances and experiences or the mere passing of the generations, new members bringing new perspectives. Other outcomes, or perhaps versions of the reinterpretation, include *elaboration*, in which a preexisting notion or practice is extended and developed, sometimes in quite unprecedented directions; *simplification*, in which a preexisting notion or practice is trimmed of detail or sophistication; and *purification*, in which members attempt to purge (from their point of view) false or foreign elements and to return to the “real” or “pure” form.

One of the most common and well-studied change processes is *syncretism* (see below), in which elements from two or more cultural/religious sources are blended, more or less intentionally, to create a new culture or religion. The result may not be a simple combination of sources but a truly original and creative product; in the same way that an alloy of two metals is not merely an intermediate of its constituents, so alloys of cultures or religions can also generate new and unique properties. For any number of reasons, the consequence of religious processes may be *schism* or *fission*, the speciation or proliferation of religions by branching from prior beliefs

and traditions, leading to “sects” and “denominations” and, ultimately, entire religions; a classic example would be the schism of Protestantism from Catholicism in Christianity. In some cases, the result of all of these processes may be the *abandonment* of a religion and its replacement or substitution by a new or foreign one, leading, perhaps at the extreme, to the *extinction* of the former religion.

### **The invention of traditional religion**

An important popular and sometimes academic prejudice is that “traditional religions” were static and resistant to change, while “modern religions” are dynamic and open to change. This picture cannot be sustained on either count: Our contemporary understanding of premodern religions shows their lively and evolving nature, and many modern religions are hostile to at least some aspects of change, leading to the phenomenon known as “fundamentalism” (see Chapter 11).

If there is a paragon of “traditional culture,” it is Australian Aboriginals. In fact, Durkheim used them explicitly as his model for “elementary religion”—the simplest, oldest, most unchanging, and, therefore, “purist” religion (even the name “Aboriginal” derives from the roots *ab origine* for “from the beginning”). Indeed, Aboriginal societies themselves often present their religions as models of immutable relations between the spiritual, human/social, and physical worlds, expressed by the Warlpiri, for instance, in terms of the *jukurrpa* or Dreaming. The Warlpiri told me personally that “the Law” (their English-language gloss for religious knowledge and order) cannot be changed, and Dussart states: “If one asks the Warlpiri whether the *Jukurrpa* [. . .] is susceptible to change, they will say, point blank, that it is not” (2000: 23). Waterman and Waterman argue that Westerners have been seduced by this indigenous attitude to think that “Aboriginal culture is set up in a way calculated to stifle inventiveness” (1970: 101). However, such timelessness and immutability is not a description of their religion but *part of the ideology* of their religion. In reality, Aboriginal religions have been remarkably flexible and have even included “traditional” methods of innovation and change. We might go so far as to insist that innovation and change are Aboriginal religious traditions.

There were three processes by which novelty could be introduced into Aboriginal religions without appearing to be novelty at all. The first was revelation. While it would appear that the *jukurrpa* is closed and that no new knowledge or practice could come from it, the Aboriginal view was that there were always more spiritual truths to know. One obvious doorway through which new knowledge could come was dreams. *Jukurrpa* also literally meant “night-time dreams” among the Warlpiri, so a person could dream a song or dance or symbol or design or entire ritual, and that person was “seeing” a previously unrevealed piece of the Dreaming. Individuals were not regarded as the personal “authors” of these bits of religion but as recipients of the ongoing and never-completed revelation of the Dreaming. Humans could also discover previously unknown religious sites or objects. At the same time, old content could be dropped out. As Dussart says, “If, however, you ask them whether a specific Dreaming segment [. . .] can be forgotten, they will readily admit that such amnesia

is quite common" (2000: 23). This, like addition, does not affect the *jukurra* itself but only people's knowledge of it.

The second process was diffusion and exchange. Aboriginal Australia was a huge trading sphere of religious ideas, material resources, and entire complexes of spiritual (and other cultural) knowledge and practice. Micha (1970) finds evidence of trade and diffusion of different types of stone, of techniques like tool-making, and of cult objects, myths, and rituals. It was only too clear that major religious phenomena like the myths of the Wawilak sisters, or the Rainbow serpent, or the Kunapipi, or the Kurangara cult, were sweeping Aboriginal Australia by the mid-twentieth century. Poirier (1993) details a particular exchange of knowledge and ceremonial forms, focusing on two women's rituals called Tjarada and Walawarra. In March 1988, thirty women from the Balgo area traveled to a Pintupi community called Kiwirrkura to transfer the Tjarada ritual to the local people there. Apparently, this was the final stage in a long, multistage process of ritual exchange between the two groups, one moment in "an ongoing process that involves the participation of various groups from different cultural areas, and in which the fulfillment of any exchange in its entirety might last for years, sometimes even for decades" (Poirier 1993: 758). Accordingly, the Walawarra ritual, which had been traveling at least since the 1950s, was simultaneously being passed northward to Kiwirrkura. In the final analysis, circulation of "traditional" religion was the norm; in fact, she argues that "the very possibility of long-term 'ownership' or 'accumulation' of such bodies of knowledge appears to be ruled out, and groups seem to insist upon an ongoing circulation" (Poirier 1993: 771).

The third process of novelty was social distribution and interpretation of religious knowledge. Poirier notes that religious forms "are 'open,' and that new sequences and elements can be added to an already existing corpus" (1993: 758), just as older material "might pass into oblivion" (1993: 772). In other words, one society could and almost certainly would and must adjust the ceremonies and attendant mythology to their own circumstances, and if and when they transferred that corpus to another society, the new recipients would do the same. Even with a society's "own" beliefs and practices, such reworking could occur, and Australian Aboriginal notions about knowledge almost guaranteed it. In order to understand this, it is important to grasp the nature of Aboriginal knowledge, which was located in a context of "ownership" and "rights" that had a profound impact on its construction and constitution. Different individuals and social and local groups had different kinds and degrees of rights over knowledge and objects, depending on various factors and determining various outcomes.

Morphy gives a sense of the complexity of rights over paintings, from "ownership" to "the right to produce certain paintings, the right to divulge the meanings of a painting, and the right to authorize or restrict the use of a painting" (1991: 57–8). The effect on religious knowledge was necessarily a kind of distribution: Different individuals had access to different parts of it and/or arrived at different meanings depending on a variety of social factors. Two key factors were, of course, age and gender. Much of Aboriginal religion was strongly gender segregated; also, younger

people had less knowledge and less right to knowledge than elders. Beyond that, individuals and social groups—families, “clans,” Dreaming “lodges,” and local/residential groups—had different access to knowledge of and interpretations about religious matters.

So Aboriginal religious knowledge was not only distributed but restricted, or what Morphy calls “layered.” In Warlpiri society, this layering of knowledge was captured in the indigenous classification of “cheap,” “halfway,” and “dear” knowledge and performance (Dussart 2000). “Cheap” was public, relatively nonpowerful, and therefore without spiritual risk, and available to all. “Halfway” was somewhat powerful and dangerous and, as such, restricted to ritually active members of both sexes. However, “dear” knowledge, objects, or practices were very powerful and dangerous, secret, and restricted only to initiated men. Interestingly, the very same object or ritual or tale could be cheap or halfway or dear depending on how much of its “inside” detail and meaning were revealed; that is, the power and significance of a religious item can be “hidden in plain sight.”

### **From religious change to religious movement**

Despite the fact that “traditional” religions like the Warlpiri were anything but static and traditional, there is a qualitative and quantitative difference between those processes and products and the processes and products we see in the present. Even for the Aboriginals today, religious (and other cultural) change comes faster and diverges more greatly from traditional patterns. In other words, indigenous Aboriginal cultural processes did not create completely new religions but permutations of recognizably “traditional” forms. At a certain point, however, a conspicuously new *kind* of religion enters the picture, which is widely referred to as a “new religious movement.”

The study of new religious movements (NRM) is even more problematic than the study of religion in general. For one thing, what does “new” mean? It is unclear how *recent* in time and how *unique* in doctrine a religion must be to qualify as a “new religion” and, therefore, when a religion ceases to be “new” and becomes “established” or “orthodox.” For another, it is not always obvious what is “religious” about NRMs. Many NRMs integrate nonreligious as well as religious elements or modules, like Scientology, “Heaven’s Gate,” and Raelianism (see below for some examples). Many NRMs also express nonreligious as well as religious goals, including political, economic, and personal/psychological ones. In his study of “cargo cults” (see below), Lawrence goes so far as to analyze them as incipient political movements, which gave members “a sense of unity they had never known before European contact and, especially, its last stage, developed into a form of ‘embryonic nationalism’ or ‘proto-nationalism’” (1964: 7). Others like the Taiping “Rebellion” in China expressly combined spiritual and political and even military ends.

## Case study 7.1

### The Taiping Rebellion

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The Taiping Rebellion in China (1850–64) was one of a number of such movements after the Opium Wars and during the carve-up of China by colonialists which together may have cost 60 million lives. The Taiping movement (from the Chinese *Taiping tien-quo* for Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace) had its source in one man, Hung (or Hong) Xiuquan (or Hsiu-chuan), who had a vision of the future and his role in it. By the early 1800s, Christian missionaries were active in China, which was coming increasingly under European domination. The old and widely hated Ching or Qing dynasty, a foreign government of Manchu invaders, could not prevent European penetration nor command obedience among native Chinese. The time was ripe for revolution. In 1836, Hung sat for the first time for the state civil service exam and failed it; however, while in the city of Canton, he received a Christian tract entitled “Good Words for Exhorting the Age.”

In 1837, after failing the tests again, he collapsed into a stupor, in which he had a vision (Spence 1996). In his vision, he was about to die, but he received new organs to replace his old. He also met his true mother and father, who were none other than the Christian God and God’s wife. God explained to him how the “demon devils” had led people astray and how he was God’s second son, the younger brother of Jesus. Armed with a divine sword and a seal, Hung battled the demons until he slew the king of the demons. God then sent him back to Earth, where the demons—including Confucianism and the Qing emperor—still reigned. By 1846–7, Hung had sufficient followers to instigate the *Bai Shangdi Hui* or God-Worshipping Society. As the movement began to take form, he enumerated six rules for his believers: do not lust; obey your parents; do not kill; do not steal; do not engage in witchcraft and magic; and do not gamble. However, encountering resistance from the government and from local bandit groups, in 1850 he began to talk about reconstituting the movement as an army, with all the trappings of a military organization at war, including “tactical planning, feeding, and other logistical support [as well as] set piece attacks on prepared ‘demon’ positions” (Spence 1996: 117).

They started to stockpile not only food but weapons and gunpowder. Fighting units were assembled, with generals leading divisions of 13,155 troops organized down to the four-man squad level. A system of signal-flags was created. Perhaps most importantly, Hung himself was finally elevated to Heavenly King, began to wear imperial robes, and was instructed by Jesus himself to “fight for Heaven” and to “show the world the true laws of God the Father and the Heavenly Elder Brother” (Spence 1996: 126). Accordingly, in March of 1851 Hung ultimately decreed the existence of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, with 1851 being Year One of the new age.

On 25 September 1851, God's army conquered its first major city, Yongan. Heading generally northeast, they finally reached and conquered Nanjing in March 1853. Nanjing served as the capital of the new Heavenly Kingdom for eleven years, where the social order and morality ordained by God and Hung was instituted. All land was divided among the people—one full share for each adult man and woman, one half-share for each child. Opium-smoking was outlawed, as were gambling, tobacco and wine, polygamy, slavery, and prostitution. Gender equality was fostered, with an end to female footbinding and the selection of women as administrators and army officers. However, homosexuality was punishable by death. Sabbath observance was mandatory, and young boys were commanded to attend church every day.

By mid-1863, Taiping armies were being defeated consistently at great loss. Hung could not even conceive of failure, believing that God had granted him victory and would send sufficient divine forces to prevail. In April 1864, Hung became ill and eventually announced that he was going back to Heaven with the Father and the Elder Brother, which he did on 1 June. The city of Nanjing fell to the Chinese imperial army in July 1864, and the Heavenly Kingdom was vanquished.

Third, and finally, NRMs are not conceived merely as religions but as religious “movements.” As such, they represent a class of social movements or even “mass movements,” which tend to have certain common features. Primary among them is the social condition out of which they emerge. McFarland, in his investigation of new religions in post-World War II Japan, calls them “crisis religions,” fashioned “to shelter the masses from the impact of a threatening world” (1967: 13). The same pattern is reproduced in other times and places: NRMs arise as responses, accommodations, or protests to new and unsatisfactory social circumstances. So, as he urges, to explain them is “to explore the dynamic relations between these religious movements and the emergent society” in which they occur (McFarland 1967: 13). In other words, each movement is a unique product of various social factors, including the particular society where it transpires, the particular external forces that impinge on it and the particular ways in which those forces are manifested, the particular individual(s) who offer the response, and the particular intersection of all of these factors.

Despite their diversity, NRMs in the modern world tend to share some qualities. McFarland finds seven such qualities in Japanese new religions, which are more or less typical:

1. charismatic leadership, with a founder or prophet who claims or is endowed with supernatural authority and/or power;
2. concrete goals, or a program for improving individual or collective life, including health, happiness, success and wealth, etc.;



3. community identification, which often involves seeking recruits among the “hopeless and lonely,” the “disinherited” of society, and forming them into a new group;
4. highly centralized organization, frequently quite controlling and “undemocratic”;
5. ambitious construction projects, such as headquarters for the movement;
6. mass activities, not the least of which are aimed at proselytization;
7. syncretism, mystery, and novelty, such as a sense of chosenness or possession of a special revelation or message or responsibility.

Finally, the ways in which the general public, and often enough the academic community, talks about such movements tends to evidence two prejudices: First, a negativity toward such groups and, second, a distinctly Western/Christian bias. NRMs, which are usually small and almost by definition “unorthodox,” often receive the designation of “cults,” with accusations of “brainwashing,” abuse, exploitation, extremism and antisocial tendencies, and even violence, and of course sheer falsity and delusion. People forget all too readily that the “orthodox” religions were new religions at first, held in as much contempt by their surrounding societies as “cult” groups are today. Christianity was a cult to the ancient Romans, and early Protestantism was a cult (or a collection of cults) to the Catholic Church. Every new Christian sect—from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or Mormons, to Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Branch Davidians, the various Pentecostal churches, etc.—has been called a cult by someone, and less mainstream religions like Scientology, Aum Shinrikyo, and Raelianism frequently still are.

It should be obvious that “cult” is not a technical term but a judgment. In popular language, it is a pejorative term used to indicate disapproval of certain kinds of “strange” or “unacceptable” or “bad” religion. Nobody ever describes their own religion as a cult; it may be unorthodox, but it is not spurious from their perspective. The academic treatment of cults has too often and closely followed the popular one, which itself is dominated by sectarian opinions. The Christian apologist Jan Karel van Baalen literally named a cult “any religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious” (1956: 363), a usage which has found its way into some dictionary definitions. Not surprisingly, he equated orthodoxy to mainstream Christianity. Walter Martin makes his definition even more dependent on Christianity, calling a cult “a group of people gathered about a specific person or person’s interpretation of the Bible,” such that cults “contain not a few major deviations from historic Christianity” (1976: 11). Under this definition, most cults would not be considered cults at all, since they have little or nothing to do with Christianity—and many or most Christian groups would be considered cults.

The great sociologist Max Weber associated cults with pre- and non-Christian religions, which were antirational and mystical. William Mann in *Sect, Cult, and Church in Alberta* characterized cults as groups or movements that “blend alien religious or psychological notions with Christian doctrine” to create “a more adequate, or modern faith” (1955: 6). Finally, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) regard cults as deviant

religious organizations with their own novel beliefs and practices that are not derived or split from some already-existing religion; this much narrower definition would exempt from cult status any new religion based on, say, Christianity, no matter how deviant.

Things are not much better with terms like “sect” and “denomination” and “church.” Weber characterized a sect in terms of its exclusivity of membership; however, this cannot do, because not all sects are exclusivistic, and virtually all religions are in some sense. Benton Johnson (1963) saw a sect as a religious group that rejects the social environment in which it exists, either a deviant group or a countercultural group. Stark and Bainbridge elaborated on this approach, regarding a sect as a deviant religion but one with traditional beliefs and values. Probably the most useful definition of a sect is the one adopted by *Religioustolerance.org*, which calls it “a small religious group that is an offshoot of an established religion or denomination. It holds most beliefs in common with its religion of origin, but has a number of novel concepts which differentiate them from that religion.” As such, they notice that sects are a normal phenomenon in the process of religious change and evolution. In fact, to go further, it might be true to say that *all* religions beyond a certain size are or consist of sects, that is, sections or subsets of a general religious thought-system. Religions like Christianity are not monolithic and homogeneous but internally diverse, and the unit of diversity is the sect; all of the units have some things in common but other things that distinguish them (see Chapter 8).

Denominations, from the Latin for “to name,” are often distinguished from sects. Richard Niebuhr (1957) thought of a denomination as somewhere between a church and a sect. More established than a sect but less universal and exclusivistic than a church, a denomination was one religious organization among others within a greater religious tradition that shared and coexisted within a given location. Thus, Baptism and Methodism would be denominations of a more general Christian tradition. *Religioustolerance.org* follows a similar practice, calling it “an established religious group, which has usually been in existence for many years and has geographically widespread membership.” If so, then the only real difference between a sect and a denomination is its age and success as well as its distribution. Also, a denomination would be somewhat more acceptable than a sect. In reality, probably the most important difference is that a sect could be within or outside of an established tradition, while a denomination is necessarily one “form” or “community” within such a tradition. In many cases—but not all—sect and denomination are synonymous.

Finally, in its original sense, a “church” was a believing community, as in Durkheim’s usage: The church is all of the people who share a certain belief. More specifically, for Weber, a church is a religious institution that is universal and inclusive; hypothetically, it would claim to include the entire population within its territory. By this definition, there are few if any churches in the world. Johnson conceived of a church as a religious group that, unlike a sect, accepts the social environment where it finds itself. Perhaps Stark and Bainbridge’s definition is closer to home: a conventional religious organization, one that *is accepted by* its social environment

rather than accepts it. Of course, “conventional” is purely relative: What is conventional in one place and time may be unconventional, even radical, in another. In other words, all of these everyday terms express something about new religions—but most of what they express is not only specific to our own culture but also to particular religious viewpoints within our culture.

### **Toward a typology of NRMs**

If the only significant difference between an NRM and a church or religion is a few years and a few members, still NRMs have their own distinguishing characteristics and processes. There have been many attempts to differentiate the types of new religions and their unique traits and qualities. Even the basic approach to a categorization or typology of NRMs can vary, from functional to historical to substantive, as we will see. No single typology solves all of our problems, but each sheds light on one or more interesting facets of the field.

One approach to the organization of NRMs is to relate them to the source, either in time or in space, from which they draw their primary inspiration or direction. For example, Charles Glock and Robert Bellah (1976) classified new religions into three groups: NRMs in the Asian tradition, NRMs in the Western tradition, and new quasi-religious movements. Robert Ellwood (1973) elaborated on the approach, with six categories:

1. groups in the Theosophical and Rosicrucian traditions (new vessels for the ancient wisdom);
2. spiritualism and UFO cults (the descent of the mighty ones);
3. initiatory groups (the crystal within);
4. neopaganism (the Edenic bower);
5. Hindu movements in America (the Ganges flows west);
6. other Oriental movements (the East in the golden West).

In later work, he revised and refined his classes, increasing their number to nine:

1. Theosophical, Rosicrucian, and gnostic;
2. new thought;
3. spiritualist/UFO;
4. occult/initiatory;
5. neopaganism;
6. Eastern religions from India;
7. Eastern religions from East Asia;
8. Eastern religions from Islam;
9. Christian movements.

Another approach to the classification of NRMs emphasizes their “function,” that is, exactly what they are trying to accomplish for their members or for society, their

“goals.” David Aberle’s influential analysis (1982) in his description of the Peyote Cult first identified two dimensions of desired change sought by a movement—the locus (individual versus social) and the amount (total versus partial). This gave him four classes of movements:

1. transformative: aimed at total change of the supraindividual or social system;
2. reformative: aimed at partial change of the supraindividual or social system;
3. redemptive: aimed at total change of the individual;
4. alterative: aimed at partial change of the individual.

A final way of sorting NRMs refers to their “contents,” their specific beliefs and practices and organizational structures, etc. At the simplest level, Roy Wallis (1984) proposed three types, depending on their orientation to the existing society and universe. These he dubbed *world-rejecting new religions*, *world-affirming new religions*, and *world-accommodating new religions*. Dick Anthony et al. (1987) highlighted the response to the breakdown of norms to which they attribute such movements. Accordingly, movements that reaffirm or reestablish “traditional” moral absolutism are called *dualistic*, including *neo-fundamentalist* and *revisionist syncretic* subtypes. Those that create or affirm “relativistic” or “subjective” moral systems are called *monistic*. These in turn differed along two axes: First, whether they approach their “enlightened” goals through *technical* or *charismatic* methods, and, second, whether they identify a *one-level* state of inclusiveness for all members or a *two-level* state of differential enlightenment for the “ordinary” and the “adept” members. The final result is a fairly complex set of possibilities, including “monistic charismatic one-level movements,” “dualistic charismatic one-level movements,” and so forth.

Frederick Bird (1979) based his categories on the types of adherents or followers and their relation to the movement. He distinguished *devotee groups* where members attach themselves to an individual spiritual leader, *discipleship groups* where members dedicate themselves to a spiritual discipline (such as yoga or meditation), and *apprenticeship groups* where members practice and master a certain spiritual or mental skill (as in est or Scientology). John Lofland and James Richardson (1984) developed a much more intricate system based on several criteria assessing their “corporateness,” that is, the extent to which they advocate and promote a collective lifestyle. These criteria included whether they share income and labor, residence, consumption/communal dining, family and emotional support, cognitive orientation, and “idealism” in regard to the organization. The resulting types, in increasing order of corporateness, were then *clinic*, *congregation*, *collective*, *corps*, and *colony*.

Another way that Stark and Bainbridge distinguished movements was in terms of the “service” that the movement provides its members. *Audience cults* are those in which the primary “activity” of the followers is “consumption” and “entertainment,” as in the case of astrology for most people; adherents constitute spectators of the movement’s message, through newspaper columns and such, but do not “belong to” the movement. *Client cults* are ones in which participants comprise a clientele or virtually a “patient” group for some “therapeutic” or “healing” process; there may be

significant interaction between individual devotees and leaders or “providers” but little or no “communal” activity. *Cult movements* proper are engaged in practicing a belief and ritual system and constitute sects or churches of a new type, like the Unification Church (popularly known as “Moonies”) and very many others.

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## **Religion and revitalization: using religion to bring society back to life**

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Throughout history, societies and their religions have found themselves in crises of various kinds—wars, disasters, contact with hostile or merely different peoples and religions, and the like. Sometimes they have simply discovered that their expectations did not match reality or that their predictions or their practices did not produce results. From that experience, a kind of innocence was lost, and tough new questions were thrust upon them. Even more profoundly, individuals and societies have often found themselves exposed to forces well beyond their control and their comprehension, world-historical forces like urbanization, colonialism, capitalism, industrialization, and “detrribalization.” Their “moral communities” may be smashed and atomized, or at least mixed and remixed, by these forces. Without “traditional” moral communities, the solutions adapted for such communities will not suffice. New ones must and will be found.

Humans in these situations may feel a disconnection, a sense of loss, a cultural (and often enough literal) death of their way of life, their people, and their very world. They may also see themselves reduced to an impoverished group, a minority or lower class in a larger social system not of their making and not in their interest. They may experience “deprivation”—deprivation of independence, of meaning, of wealth, of control, of life itself. Many such societies have long since disappeared from human history, physically or culturally. Many individuals have been absorbed into larger, “modernizing” entities—cities, states, mass movements, world religions, etc. However, there is always the possibility and hope of new life, new community, and new meaning. This is why many religious (as well as nonreligious) movements take the form of some type of “revival” or “revitalization.”

### **Revitalization movements**

Such activities to revive a moribund culture or to modify a dissatisfying one often take the form of revitalization movements. Anthony Wallace defines revitalization movements as “deliberate, conscious, and organized efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (1956: 265). They are, therefore, a subset of culture change, specifically a type of directed change in which people more or less consciously set out to effect changes which they think will be beneficial in some way. No one may write a proposal for revitalization, but someone will propose a specific change or set of changes. Like all innovations or diffusions, revitalization efforts have certain regular characteristics.

According to Wallace, revitalization movements emerge when individuals find themselves in chronic psychosocial stress, caused by the mismatch between their existing beliefs and behaviors and the workings of their new social world. In other words, social conditions change first, and religious conceptions and practices adjust to try to establish some new consonance. The first inclination of humans is to make the new conditions conform to the old conceptions or to assume that they do, but often this simply will not work. At a certain point, perhaps (and usually) one person will arrive at a new idea, a new interpretation, a new view that is intended to lead society out of its impasse and into a better tomorrow. This is the revitalization.

Wallace describes a regular pattern among such movements, starting with the original cultural situation before jarring social change appears. He calls this the “steady state” (although we know that this “traditional” state was not always so steady nor so traditional): The worldview of the society fits the world adequately enough, and any threats to that worldview or society can be accommodated within the existing beliefs and practices. However, for reasons of contact, conquest, disaster, globalization, and so on, a period of *increased individual stress* begins; changes in the real-life, on-the-ground conditions no longer match the traditional worldview or beliefs. People may continue doing what they always did but with diminishing or no effect. Their traditions are clearly failing them, and their world does not quite make sense.

This is followed by a phase of *cultural distortion*, where the prolonged and serious stress of cultural failure may lead to negative responses like alcoholism, depression, violence, neurosis, suicide, and the breakdown of social institutions. People perceive that things are going wrong fast, but most do not know how to respond effectively. Many give up, perhaps integrating into another social system, often the one that brought the disjunction in the first place; for instance, after conquest by Rome, ancient Israelites sometimes chose to collaborate with Rome or even become Roman citizens. No doubt, in many other cases the society simply disintegrated.

However, in more than a few instances in human history, a response has emerged; this is what Wallace calls the *period of revitalization*. This phase of cultural or religious innovation has several significant subphases:

1. **Cultural/psychological reformulation.** Existing elements of society and/or new elements are put forth by a creative individual, a prophet or a leader. It is extremely noteworthy that the innovator usually is a single individual, someone who has a “moment of insight, a brief period of realization of relationships and opportunities” which seems to him or her and to others as a revelation or inspiration—a gift from outside (Wallace 1956: 270). Often enough, this insight comes from a dream or vision, a purportedly supernatural or spiritual experience in which the innovator is shown or taught something (like Hung in the Taiping case). The dream or vision may be apocalyptic or utopian; Wallace suggests that “such a dream also functions almost as a funeral ritual: the ‘dead’ way of life is recognized as dead; interest shifts to a god, a community, and a new way” (1956: 270). What kind of person is prone to such experiences? The potential revitalizer

is a person in crisis, perhaps someone given to visions and dissociative breaks. He or she is very often someone who suffers a serious, even life-threatening illness or other personal failure. But, whatever the impetus for the experience, they “come back” with some specific “content”—some suggestions for what to do, what to believe, and how to live. These suggestions can be more or less articulate and thorough, but they are often remarkably so.

2. **Communication.** In the next step, the innovator must express and spread his or her vision of things to come: What is wrong, why is it wrong, and what must we do to remedy it? The prophet may achieve a kind of prestige from having survived the illness—having “come back from death’s door.” Two recurring themes in this “proselytization” phase are the establishment of a new community under the care of the spirits and a promise of success (in whatever terms) for the members of that community; they may attain material wealth, or regain control of their land, or bring back the dead ancestors, etc. The precise methods of communication can and will vary, and, of course, many a revitalization program has no doubt been offered but found no takers.
3. **Organization.** Usually, a small number of converts becomes the core of the new movement; often this is the family of the prophet. A basic organizational structure emerges: leader, “inner circle” of disciples or apostles, and the rest. Often enough, effective leadership of the movement may pass into the hands of “men of action,” practical “political” leaders who act for or in the name of the spiritual messenger. As the movement gains momentum—and numbers—it will have to reorganize again, since the simple “primitive” community cannot handle its own success. It must often “bureaucratize” to cope with its growing membership and its growing influence in society.
4. **Adaptation.** Like any instance of culture change, a revitalization movement may not and most likely will not remain the same—doctrinally, behaviorally, or organizationally—over time. It will encounter resistance, incomprehension and miscomprehension, challenges and failures, and rivals and threats, since there may be more than one revitalization effort in any society at any time. The movement, if it achieves any growth at all, will employ a variety of adaptations, including “doctrinal modification, political and diplomatic maneuver, and force” among others and in various combinations (Wallace 1956: 274). Modifications may adjust it to the tastes, preferences, and preconceptions of the believers as well as to changes in the social context since the movement first appeared. Often enough, hostility from some or all of the society (and forces outside the society) radicalize the movement, transforming it “from cultivation of the ideal to combat against the unbeliever” (Wallace 1956: 275). Those who resist or fight the movement, or simply fail to join it, may be branded as demonic or subhuman.
5. **Cultural transformation.** If the movement achieves sufficient proportions, a new cultural pattern is created by and around it. A sense of excitement, of reversal of fortunes and of ascending power and success, can arise. The previous deterioration seems to have ended. However, this new plan and culture “may be more or less realistic and more or less adaptive: some programs are literally suicidal;

others represent well conceived and successful projects for further social, political, or economic reform; some fail, not through any deficiency in conception and execution, but because circumstances made defeat inevitable” (Wallace 1956: 275).

6. **Routinization.** If the movement survives all of the traps and pitfalls above, it will and must eventually settle into a routine pattern. The initial “revolutionary” spirit cannot be sustained for ever, and probably should not be (recall Turner’s warnings of the dangers of liminality). Organizational structures are put into place, lines of succession are established, and doctrines are worked out and formalized. If the movement is sufficiently successful, it can even become the “new orthodoxy.” What was once innovative and radical becomes familiar and mainstream.

Having passed through all of these stages, the final destination of a revitalization movement is *the new steady state*, in which the movement has not only institutionalized itself but also matured into a culture and worldview that solves the problems it set out to solve, giving people that sense of security, certainty, and satisfaction that they so palpably lacked in the premovement era. However, Wallace maintains that the vast majority (99 percent) of such movements fail, that the most likely place to fail is the “cultural transformation” phase, and that most of those that survive remain small segments in their respective societies, not dying out completely, but stalling as minority or alternative systems—“sects,” “denominations,” or even “cults”—in a greater religious field. It stays on the “fringe” of society as yet one more religious and social alternative.

### Types of revitalization movements

Anthropologists have distinguished a variety of different “types” of revitalization movements, based on their aims and methods. But, as in all of the typologies we have examined above, these types are not pure or mutually exclusive types. An actual movement can and generally does show qualities of two or more of these categories; it may also not show all of the qualities of any one category. They are also not exclusive to religion. Still, the categories are analytically useful.

#### Syncretism

Syncretism (from the Greek *syn* for “with” or “together with”) refers to an attempt to mix or blend elements of two or more cultures or belief systems to produce a new, third, better culture or system. In syncretism, an individual or group devises a particular mixture of cultural elements and offers it to the wider society as the “new way.” In a very real sense, all culture, and certainly all religion, is syncretistic. It might even be argued that the most basic and universal cultural and religious process is syncretism: Humans are forever borrowing from various sources and combining them in ways to produce whatever it is we call “our culture” or “our religion.” Of course,



this borrowing and combining is not always as deliberate or as clearly perceived as we are describing here, but no culture, religion, or any other human activity is “pure” or “original” in any significant or meaningful way. All of us live in a melting pot of culture.

Religious syncretism can obviously draw from diverse religious sources. Cao Dai, a new religion that originated in Vietnam in the early twentieth century, overtly incorporated conceptual and organizational elements from Buddhism, Chinese religions (especially Confucianism and Taoism), and Christianity (especially Catholicism). Aum Shinrikyo, the group responsible for the subway gas attacks in Japan in 1995, also merged Hindu-Buddhist with Christian components. Smaller-scale or so-called “tribal” movements, like cargo cults, the Ghost Dance, and the Handsome Lake movement, tended to intermingle traditional beliefs and practices with those of the invading religion, frequently Christianity.

Syncretism, even in religion, can and often does draw upon other nonreligious sources too, which can contribute modules to a new religion. Aum Shinrikyo included aspects of Nostradamus together with modern technology (like preparing poison gas) and “Y2K” or turn-of-the-millennium concerns. The suicidal group popularly known as Heaven’s Gate but formally as TELAH (The Evolutionary Level Above Human) borrowed from computer technology and the Internet as well as UFO beliefs. Scientology not only got inspiration from but actually started out as a psychological and health movement. Finally, the women’s spirituality movement, in various forms, exhibits qualities of many different religious traditions joined with political, psychological, and gender issues and goals (see Chapter 12).

### Millenarianism

Millenarianism (from the Latin *mille* for thousand) is a familiar concept to those versed in Christianity, which is an inherently millenarian religion. Christianity teaches that at some point in the future, the world as we know it will end. Opinions about the specific order of events, and what is to follow, vary between denominations and sects, but it is generally agreed that the transformation will not be easy or painless. Naturally, not all religions contain such eschatology (see Chapter 2), and most that include a prediction do not conceive of it in thousand-year terms; this is an artifact of the base-10 system of the West (in which 1,000 is  $10^3$ ). Societies that do not operate in base-10, like the ancient Maya, or that start their calendars on different dates, do not reckon time the way we do. So the point of millenarianism is not literally the thousand-year period but the notion that the world proceeds through historical or spiritual periods, the current one of which will end—and often soon. Thus, millenarianism as a general cultural phenomenon is a type of movement based on the conception that the present age of the world (an inferior, unhappy, or wicked one) is about to end and that a superior age is about to begin. The followers of the movement must either prepare for the coming change (which may be opposed by the forces of evil and darkness or by the human forces of power and wealth) or act to set the change in motion.

Although not universal, millenarianism is a surprisingly common dimension of NRMs. There are probably two reasons for this. One is the global influence of Christianity, which has transported the expectation to other cultures. The second reason is the general “protest” nature of many NRMs, which are explicitly aimed at modifying or eliminating the reigning religious and cultural circumstances. The Taiping Rebellion was clearly millenarian (as well as syncretistic), expecting and determining to achieve a new divine society. Many, if not all, cargo cults have a millenarian ring, as did TELAH and Aum Shinrikyo and older movements like the Ghost Dance. In fact, if there is one thing that new religions commonly anticipate—and seek—it is the end of “life as they know it” and the establishment of a better life, at least for followers.

### Messianism

Messianism is another term drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which believes that a *messiah* or “anointed one” will appear (or has appeared) to lead the society to victory and happiness. As such, it is probably either a subtype of millenarianism or a concomitant of it: When the millennium comes, a messianic figure will be the one who ushers out the old and ushers in the new. Perhaps one of the key traits of a messianic movement is the belief that some individual will appear to found and/or lead the movement. This figure may not always be a *messiah* but is generally a prophet or innovator or founder of some sort.

Various characters, ancient and modern, have claimed or have been seen as messianic figures. In Christianity-inspired movements, the messiah-figure is often believed to be an incarnation of Jesus; such was the case in the Branch Davidian sect, where David Koresh (who had even changed his name for the occasion) was accepted as more than a religious leader but as literally *the* messiah returned to carry out the promise. In Mormonism (formally, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, or LDS), Joseph Smith played the role of founder and prophet, and all subsequent leaders (and even regular members) are prophets. Hung was the prophet and founder of Taiping, and Shoko Asahara performed the function for Aum Shinrikyo. In fact, since movements are almost always the inspiration of an individual, there is almost always a single identifiable founder. In Seventh Day Adventism, it was Ellen Harmon White; in Scientology, it was L. Ron Hubbard; and in the Unification Church, it was Sun Myung Moon (significantly, a name meaning, at least in some translations, “he who has clarified the Truth”).

The role of the founder, and of his or her personal qualities, has been noted since Max Weber, if not before. Weber regarded “charisma” as a critical nontraditional as well as nonrational form of power and authority, based on the extraordinary and even supernatural characteristics of the leader—his or her ability to perform miraculous acts, display wisdom and answer questions, prophesy the future, and achieve results. Worsley stresses charisma in his investigation of cargo cults, noting that charisma as a personality trait is never enough to sustain a movement; it must be institutionalized, crystallizing “individual beliefs into a belief *system* and believers

into a social collectivity, the perceptions [of which] must further generate a disposition to behave in socially meaningful and causally significant ways, and to do so in coordination with others in a goal-directed and normatively controlled fashion” (1968: xii). In other words, while a charismatic movement “is non-routine behavior par excellence” (Worsley 1968: xlvi), it must settle into an organization or institution—and not only that, but also produce some effects. “This is why ‘signs,’ ‘proofs,’ the behavioral acting out or demonstration of the abstract ‘promise’ are a *sine qua non* for the continuation of the movement” (Worsley 1968: xii–xiii).

### Case study 7.2

#### A messianic, millenarian, syncretic movement: the Ghost Dance

The Ghost Dance was described most immediately by James Mooney (1896) in its Sioux or Lakota manifestation and was declared by him to be an unprecedented religious development in Native American culture. However, others, including Spier (1935), show convincingly that it was related to previous revitalization activities as well as traditional Indian beliefs and rituals far from the site of the 1890 incident at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. There had been an earlier wave of Ghost Dance activity in 1870 in northwest USA, specifically the Oregon area, affecting the Modoc, Klamath, and Paviotso peoples. However, going back even further in time, Spier discusses the “Prophet Dance” and the apocalyptic views of various Northwestern tribes. He relates the Southern Okanagon belief in natural disasters (earthquakes, falling stars, etc.), dreams or visions of god or the land of the dead, a “doomsday” when the world will end, and dances and songs aimed at human salvation at the end-time. Seers would dance for days at a time until the crisis passed, returning to their normal lives until such time as another visionary issued another warning. He also mentions the “confession dance,” which would spring up at some perceived sign of the final days, during which the people would stand swaying in a circle confessing their sins. The “circle dance” would emerge as a key element of the Ghost Dance.

Whatever its roots and precedents, there is no doubt that the beliefs and practices spread into previously unaffected regions in the late 1800s. Those were dark years for Plains Indians. The initial incursions of the whites into Indian territory had been followed by treaties and wars, leading to the final defeat of formerly independent tribes. Not only were the people crushed and consigned to reservations, but nearly the entire population of buffalo was wiped out. By the 1880s, even reservation lands, small and dismal as they were, were being carved up and distributed under the policy of “allotment.” On the remaining reservation land, people suffered hunger, contagious diseases, and general cultural dislocation. Obviously, enormous numbers of indigenous people had been sent off to join their dead ancestors.

The prophet of the Ghost Dance is generally known as Wovoka (the woodcutter), probably a variation of *Quoitze Ow* or *Kwohitsauq*; he was also called Jack Wilson. As a youth he expressed interest in religious matters and even purportedly participated in a Baptist Temperance Society in his adulthood; he may have been prone to minor religious experiences. Then, as Hittman (1997) recounts from primary sources, on January 1, 1889, he supposedly heard a "great noise" while out chopping wood, causing him to faint. He had a near-death experience and was unconscious for an unspecified time, regaining consciousness simultaneous to a solar eclipse. Other Indians viewed his recovery as a spiritual cure by the Sun, reasoning that he had saved the world from destruction according to beliefs like those just mentioned. He declared that he had visited Heaven during his coma and talked with "God." In Heaven, all the dead ancestors were alive and young again, dancing and happy. God then gave Wovoka power over nature, along with a moral code including rules against lying, stealing, and fighting. Finally, he was given a dance—the Ghost Dance—and promised life and youth in Heaven for compliance.

Apparently, the prophet had some successes in his prophecies and natural powers, for his fame spread; not only did he send representatives to other tribes with the good news, but as many as thirty tribes sent delegations to him to learn the news. Among these were the Lakota or Sioux, who sent Good Thunder, Cloud Horse, Yellow Knife, and Short Bull to meet Wovoka in 1890. When the Lakota received it, their conditions, having just been settled onto reservations, were very different from other tribes, including the prophet's own. Nevertheless, much of Lakota Ghost Dance belief and practice was consistent not only with Wovoka's instructions but with the Northwest apocalyptic tradition described above. They danced in a circle, or several concentric circles, in a shuffling step holding hands. They anticipated the restoration and rejuvenation of earth and society, as soon as spring 1891. At that time, they would be reunited with their dead ancestors; presumably the whites would be eliminated, for the Lakota had a more aggressive tradition than the Paiutes or the Northwestern tribes, not to mention a more violent recent history.

One innovation that may have been original to the Lakotas was the Ghost Dance shirt, a garment not only attributed with spiritual significance but also magical power. It was believed at least by some to protect the wearer from harm by bullets. It was allegedly believed, both by the prophet and his followers, that he himself was invulnerable to arrows or bullets, but it is unclear whether this was through any special clothing or merely through his own unique spiritual person. Either way, when the Lakota commenced their Ghost Dance activities in view of reservation authorities (as secret as they tried to be), a sense of alarm was raised among the whites, since a mobilized Indian population, together with no more susceptibility to or at least fear of soldiers' bullets, presented a dangerous situation for the whites. Two days before the end of the year, following an attempt to arrest the great chief Sitting Bull, during which he had been killed, tension erupted into violence as guards fired on a crowd of men, women, and children at Wounded Knee, killing 300 in the last "battle" (or massacre) on the Plains. It was the end of Lakota resistance and of the Ghost Dance.

### Irredentism

Irredentism (from the Italian *irredenta* for unredeemed) is another recurring, if less familiar, feature of movements. Irredentist movements are efforts to reclaim and reoccupy a lost homeland; not all are religious in nature, but religion can serve as a mighty justification for the movement. They are at the heart of many of the ethnic conflicts in the modern world. The Sinhalese/Tamil struggle over Sri Lanka is a sort of irredentist movement: The Tamils claim to be fighting for their former homeland, Tamil Eelam, which they justify on the basis of their distinct culture, their prior occupation, and their present-day majority status. We can also appreciate the irredentist aspects of the 1990s Yugoslavian wars, in particular the Serb demands for chunks of Bosnia and, even more so, for Kosovo.

The Zionist movement, beginning officially in the late 1800s but with much older roots, set as its goal the recreation of a Jewish national state in the Jewish “holy land.” On the basis of a variety of justifications—divine intent and “covenant” (the “promised land”), prior occupation and political control (the ancient kingdom of Israel), right of conquest (the biblical Hebrews under Moses and Joshua had fought to take the land they were promised), and, in the modern context, cultural rights and cultural survival (living in Europe had proven to be a risky proposition)—Zionists like Theodore Herzl, author of the *The Jewish State*, set about reclaiming their lost homeland, from which they had been dispersed (referred to as the Diaspora) for nearly 2,000 years. The subsequent establishment of the modern state of Israel in Palestine in 1948 was the end result of this movement, and contemporary Zionist extremists such as the organization called Gush Emunim envision a day, based on scriptural and historical grounds, when all of ancient Israel and beyond—“from the Euphrates River in Iraq to the Brook of Egypt” (Aran 1991: 268)—will be returned to the Jewish people (see Chapter 11).

### Modernism/vitalism

Modernism or vitalism seeks to import and accept alien cultural ways, in part or in total. Modernism does not always take the form of religion. For instance, when Japan was finally “opened” to the West in 1854, it began to adapt itself to this new contact by appropriating much from the Western world. Technology, military organization, language, and styles of dress and music were absorbed. By 1868, a “revolution” known as the Meiji (Japanese for enlightenment) was underway. A modern constitution was written, establishing the emperor as the head of state. The feudal system was abolished, mass state-sponsored education was put in place, and concentrated efforts to industrialize and to modernize the army were made.

The most complete version of modernism is conversion, the wholesale acceptance of a foreign set of beliefs, values, and practices, and, in the realm of religion, this means conversion to a foreign religion, especially a “world religion” and proselytizing religion like Christianity or Islam. We will have much to say about this process in the next chapter. Indigenous religions can also modernize themselves by incorporating

aspects of new and foreign religion and culture, in particular, beliefs in a single god or in an apocalyptic end-time, or values and practices like monogamy or avoidance of alcohol. Members may go so far as to condemn and reject their traditional religion and associated practices and institutions (often under the influence of foreign agents of change like missionaries).

At the same time, probably all movements show some quality of modernism, even if only in the adoption of modern technologies to preserve and propagate old beliefs and practices; many indigenous societies, for instance, maintain web sites and use cell phones, automobiles, and airplanes. Thus, modernism/vitalism is not a total phenomenon; rather, ordinarily we find a combination of old and new—and new seen through the eyes of old—in unique and surprising ways.

### Nativism/fundamentalism

At the opposite end of the revitalization spectrum are nativist or fundamentalist movements. Nativism or fundamentalism is a form of movement that emphasizes indigenous or traditional culture and resistance to or even expulsion of alien culture. Linton defined a nativistic movement as “[a]ny conscious, organized attempt on the part of a society’s members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture” (1943: 230). This is a significant definition, since it indicates that nativism or fundamentalism is not merely “tradition” but tradition *selectively and intentionally revived or perpetuated*. Thus, it can never be entirely traditional, in spirit or in content: For instance, the Ghost Dance emphasized certain aspects of traditional culture but also specifically embraced “the use of cloth, guns, kettles, and other objects of European manufacture,” which, they were guaranteed, would be theirs when the whites were “swept away” (Linton 1943: 231).

Linton further identified four subtypes of nativistic movements: (1) revivalistic-magical; (2) revivalist-rational; (3) perpetuative-magical; and (4) perpetuative-rational. In terms of their goals, revivalist movements strive to bring back lost cultural elements, while perpetuative movements struggle to keep alive existing ones; in both cases, there are no strong claims that the elements of interest are particularly ancient or pristine. In terms of their attitudes or practices, magical movements resemble the sort we have been discussing—often promoted by a prophet or charismatic founder with “supernatural and usually [. . .] apocalyptic and millennial aspects” (Linton 1943: 232). Items of culture are focused on

not [. . .] for their own sake or in anticipation of practical advantages from the elements themselves. Their revival is part of a magical formula designed to modify the society’s environment in ways which will be favorable to it. [. . .] The society’s members feel that by behaving as the ancestors did they will, in some usually undefined way, help to recreate the total situation in which the ancestors lived. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are attempting to recreate those aspects of the ancestral situation which appear desirable in retrospect.

(Linton 1943: 232)

On the other hand, rational movements are primarily psychological and self-consciously “symbolic” and social: Their function is to provide self-esteem to the individual members and to maintain solidarity for the collective society. Interestingly, Linton concludes that all of the subtypes are quite common except perpetuative-magical, of which he claims to know no examples. At any rate, we will return in Chapter 11 to fundamentalist movements, of which there are many in the modern world; indeed, fundamentalism may be one of the most frequent forms, if not the most frequent form, of religious revitalization forms in the present.

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## **Revitalization movements, traditional and modern**

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As can be imagined, the sheer number and variety of NRMs and revitalization movements is daunting, and we cannot hope to survey all—or even a representative sample—of them here. In fact, Lanternari dedicates his entire book *The Religions of the Oppressed* (1963) to a few dozen examples, and history has been littered with—and made by—dozens or hundreds more. Although anthropological attention focuses on recent and contemporary manifestations, new religions have been forming since ancient times, and no doubt innumerable more will form in the future. We present two instances here, from vastly differing social contexts, and we will have occasion to mention some additional instances in the final chapter, Chapter 12, on American religion.

### **A traditional revitalization movement: cargo cults**

Among the most colorful forms of syncretistic movements in the anthropological literature are the so-called “cargo cults” that swept through the Pacific Islands, particularly Melanesia and the southwest regions, between about 1900 and 1950. In some parts of the South Pacific, colonialism and even contact with Europe had been intermittent to minimal before then. However, two epochal events occurred in this period to change all that—the two world wars. These conflicts brought foreign men and foreign goods to areas like these in quantities never seen before. Thousands of soldiers and other strangers came ashore and unloaded caches of goods the likes of which no one had ever imagined. Indigenous islanders could have no idea where these people, and even more so their goods, came from; the one thing they knew was that the strangers had a lot of “cargo” and that the whites never seemed to work for any of it. The strangers stood around, marched around, sat around, but they never produced anything—yet they had an inconceivable largesse of stuff. Cargo cults were an indigenous attempt to make sense of this new situation and to acquire some goods for themselves; not surprisingly, their initial interpretation was religious. As Lawrence puts it, the cults were “based on the natives’ belief that European goods (cargo) [. . .] are not man-made but have to be obtained from a nonhuman or divine source” (1964: 1). However, in the wake of the disruptions of large-scale foreign

contact, the movements were much more than that. BurrIDGE argues that the key theme in the cults “seems to be moral regeneration: the creation of a new man, the creation of new unities, the creation of a new society, of which wealth or material gain is but a part” (1960: 247).

One of the first and best-known examples is the “Vailala madness” that “broke out” in 1919 among the Elema people of Papua. Missionaries, particularly the London Missionary Society, had been active on the island for some time, and soldiers occupied the area during the war with all their material goods. At least some of the missionaries had condemned and suppressed traditional religion, and land and labor had been expropriated from the natives; Worsley (1968) points out that most of the adherents of the Vailala movement had been “indentured laborers” and were at least partially acculturated, often speaking English. Even worse, in the gold rush of 1910, nearly one-fourth of the native workers had died in the first half of the year, and the discovery of oil near Vailala River in 1911 only aggravated conditions. Overall, the effect was to expose the Papuans to a “mysterious and irrational” European system which they at once resented, coveted, and misunderstood (Zamorska 1998: 3).

The founding of the Vailala madness, or what the followers called the *kava-kava* or *kwarana giro*, *kwarana aika*, or *haro heraripi* (“head-he-go-round” in pidgin English, indicating the dizzying nature of the experience), or *iki haveve* (“belly don’t know,” another local expression for dizziness or ecstatic trance-like feelings), is usually attributed to a man named Evara, an elder who both enjoyed some degree of acculturation and some talent for trance and dissociation. When his father died many years before the present outbreak, he had experienced his first “madness.” He experienced it again when his younger brother died, and this time he told others about it and it spread. Naturally, it was not the dizziness or madness alone that captured his and others’ imagination but the specific “revelations” acquired during it. He learned, while in trance, that a steamship would be coming for the natives, carrying their dead ancestors as well as stashes of cargo. In initial revelations, rifles were mentioned among the cargo, although later ones emphasized food and other trade goods like tobacco. When these events came to pass, the whites would be expelled, and the indigenous folk would be restored to their independence and rightful ownership of resources.

The movement expressed a certain kind of native self-loathing (Evara claimed that “brown skins were no good [. . .] he wanted all the people to have white” [Worsley 1968: 82]), alloyed with traditional views that the ancestors were whitish. As it progressed, it developed a more elaborated doctrine with a visibly Christian aspect. Many members referred to themselves as “Jesus Christ men,” and garbled notions of Heaven and God emerged. God was called *Ihova*, and Heaven was named *Ihova kekere* or Jehovah’s land. Others occupying Heaven with *Ihova* included *Noa*, *Atamu*, *Eva*, *Mari* (*Atamu*’s daughter), and two of *Ihova*’s children, *Areru* and *Maupa*. An old decayed picture of King George V was offered as the likeness of *Ihova Yesu-nu-ovaki*, that is, Jehovah, the younger brother of Jesus. Obviously, the movement was not only syncretistic but also millenarian, expecting a new age to dawn when the ancestors



returned and deposed the Europeans. This was entirely in keeping with traditional focus on the ancestors, but the result was an opposition to the old rituals: Masks, artifacts, and ceremonies were deliberately banned and destroyed.

New behaviors and rituals were established in their place. Tables with benches around them were set up in the center of villages. At these tables, villagers sat for feasting to the dead ancestors, men sitting on the benches and women and children sitting on the ground around them. Additionally, ceremonial houses, called *ahéa uvi* or “hot houses,” were constructed, also with tables and benches inside. Only practitioners of the movement entered the houses, which were seen as meeting places for the dead and the members as well as places for the members to retire for inspiration, waiting for that characteristic feeling in their stomach to indicate the onset of the “madness.” Finally, a pole or flagpole played a prominent role, apparently used as a communication device with the ancestors: Energy or revelation would pass down the pole, into the ground, and then up into the bellies of the communicants, inspiring their trance experience. There were also ethical or moral proscriptions associated with the cult, including rules against stealing and adultery and violating the sabbath. However, in keeping with tradition, the worst behavior of all was neglecting the dead and the feasts that they needed or demanded. Some of the leaders of the movement also claimed or were claimed to have powers of divination, especially to see the causes of illness.

Zamorska writes that such cargo cults “were ways of adaptation, adjustment to a new situation, attempts to find a new place in the changing world and ways of searching for a new definition of Melanesian culture and a redefined cultural identity of the native people (1998: 7). In particular, she characterizes this attempt as a kind of “magical leveling”—restoring parity, or even superiority, to the local people through religious/spiritual agencies. Finally, these movements also represent a *first* response, which is still a community-based response, to the challenges and threats. They were a means of achieving “increasing unity and integrity” (Zamorska 1998: 6), which were bound to fail and did fail; however, they were a first step in working out a new program of “modern” mobilization that could eventually lead to the creation of new identities and new communities, probably following the individualization of the indigenous community, as Lawrence cited above.

### **A modern revitalization movement: Cao Dai**

Vietnam had come under French colonial authority by the time that Ngo Minh Chieu was born in 1878 as the only child of a poor family. Exposed early in life to Chinese religious notions, in particular Confucianism, as well as to French culture (working in the headquarters of the governor general of Indochina in 1903), he stood at the crossroads of cultures and religions. He studied not only Asian traditions as well as Western ones but also practiced spiritism and séances; at one of these events, he received a spiritual message that purportedly cured his mother of her illness. At a subsequent séance in 1920, he was visited by Duc Cao Dai, the Supreme Being, in a series of revelations that would lead to a new religion.

Following three years of ritual vegetarianism, Chieu began to spread his lessons around Saigon. He met with great success, especially among the lower class of peasants; Werner (1981: 4) concludes that the new religion “claimed more followers within a year of its founding than Catholicism had gained in over three hundred years of proselytization.” On October 7, 1926, when the “Declaration of the Founding of the Cao Dai Religion” was signed, 247 members were present, and the congregation grew rapidly. The original name of the movement, Dai Dao Tam Ky Pho Do or “The Third Great Universal Religious Amnesty,” illustrated how the new religion saw itself as a continuation or renewal of much older traditions.

Chieu soon withdrew from daily administration, and Le Van Truong came to act as the “pope” of the church. Not only that, the new church took on some of the structural characteristics of the Catholic Church, with one *giao-tong* (pope) presiding over a “college” of church administrators (*cuu-trung-dai*), considered to be the “executive branch.” Three *chuong phap* or “legislative cardinals” headed up the three “legislative branches,” one for each of the old Asian religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism). Underneath that, thirty-six *phoi-su* or “archbishops” (twelve for each “branch”) held authority over 1,000 *giao-huu* or “priests” each, with *le-sahn* (“student priests”), *chuc viec* (“lay workers”), and *tin-do* (“adepts” or followers) arrayed in an elaborate order.

Doctrinally, Cao Dai was an ecumenical, universalist syncretism. Although resembling Catholicism institutionally, its explicit agenda was to unify the great Asian religions. It was monotheistic, believing in God the Father (Duc Cao Dai) but also a Universal Mother. It recognized a number of divine beings including Siddhartha, Confucius, Lao-Tzu, and Jesus. According to Bui, its cosmogony and theology were probably closest to Taoism:

At the beginning, there is nothing but one principle, one monad, no heaven, no earth, no universe. This monad is Dao or God. God has no name, no color, no beginning, no end; God is invariable, unfathomably powerful, everlasting, and is the origin of all. After creating the universe, God has divided His spirit and with it made all creatures, plants, and materials.

(Bui 1992: 22)

The new religion then explicitly mixed the teachings of its three predecessors—the “three jewels” (matter, energy, and soul) and the “five elements” (mineral, wood/vegetable, water, fire, and earth) of Taoism, the “three duties” (king and subject, father and son, and husband and wife) and the “five virtues” (love, justice, good behavior/politeness, wisdom, and loyalty) of Confucianism, and the “three refuges” (Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*) and the “five prohibitions” (no killing, no stealing, no alcohol, no luxuries or temptations, and no bad speech) of Buddhism. The end goal of the religion was basically that of Buddhism: to achieve enlightenment through the careful management of one’s karma, by avoiding bad action and engaging in good, including the teaching of others about the right path. Reincarnation in a higher state or ultimate escape to a better reality, heaven or nirvana, was the reward.

Cao Daist practice combined worship of the one God, spiritism, and veneration of the ancestors. Observances could take place at home or at a local temple. These daily rituals involved four ceremonies at sunrise, midday, sunset (roughly eight o'clock), and midnight. At the beginning of the (lunar) month, calendrical rituals were performed along with ones for the Father, the Mother, and the other Divine Beings. Even more propitious was carrying out one's ceremonial duties at the "mother temple" located at Tay Ninh. The temple, called the Holy See, was constructed in 1928 and houses a mural of the Three Saints of Cao Dai, who are Trang Trinh (a fifteenth-century Vietnamese nationalist poet), Sun Yat-sen (the leader of the 1911 Chinese nationalist revolution), and Victor Hugo (the French writer). These three figures not only represented the "Third Alliance" of Vietnam, China, and France but communicated with followers during séances. Séances, in keeping with Chieu's early personal experience, made up a critical part of religious practice, using Ouija boards or having spirits tap out messages on tables or write them with ritual pens. Mediums are obviously necessary officiates at such events.

These outward demonstrations of religion comprised the "exoteric" side of Cao Dai, but there was also an "esoteric" side. The "inside" version, as in all traditions, was more demanding and more "advanced," and it followed the example set by Chieu himself when he withdrew from outward observance into deeper practice and insight. Esoteric Cao Dai required thorough vegetarianism, meditation, and asceticism. This path was not for the faint of heart and was mostly adopted by the priests.

Cao Dai met with initial official resistance, but by 1935 it was tolerated as a religion. In 1941 the French administration closed the Holy See and tried to eradicate the movement, and the coming of Communism in the 1940s only steeled the faithful more. On 7 February 1947 a Cao Dai army was introduced under the rubric of the "Great Community for Guarding Righteousness and Humanity"; followers were recognized as "Soldiers of the Heavenly Path." The Cao Dai militia grew to 10,000 men and fought both the French and the Communists. The end of the Vietnam war in 1975 with the victory of the North Vietnamese Communists meant the abolition of all observable religion and "re-education" of believers as socialists. Even so, Cao Dai claims some 5 million believers internationally, with at least 1.5 million in Vietnam, making it the third-largest religion in the country—and a new "world religion."

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## Conclusion

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Religion, like all of culture, is in a constant state of change, or it might be better to think of it, like all of culture, as dynamic. Social and cultural processes and practices continuously produce and reproduce religion; but when they reproduce it as it was previously, we have "religious stasis" or apparent stability, but when they reproduce it with modifications, we have "religious change." Religions have a tendency, indeed a vested interest, to portray themselves as unchanging, eternal, and immutable, but this is part of religious ideology rather than a fact of religion. The apparent

permanence and stasis of religion allows it to claim the “prestige of the past” that Eliade mentioned. Even new religions typically claim to perpetuate or perfect previous beliefs and practices, or else they assert that they receive their new messages and revelations from “beyond,” from some extrahuman source. Thus, in the phenomenon of religious change, we observe not only the holistic relationship between a religion and its socio-cultural and historical environment, as well as the convergence of the personal/ psychological and the social/institutional, but also the essential process by which culture—here, change in culture—becomes supernaturalized while the supernatural becomes culturalized.

# 8

## World religions

The anthropology of the “great transformation”  
“Conversion” to world religions  
Conversion and the colonization of everyday life  
World religions in the religious field  
The diversity within world religions  
Christianity  
Islam  
Conclusion

Among the thousands of religions in the world, relatively few have achieved the status of what we commonly dub “world religions,” including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism. Actually, according to Barrett et al. (2001), there are nineteen world religions with up to 270 major subdivisions and many other smaller subgroups. The number of such religions will depend on how “world religion” is defined, and estimates of their memberships vary somewhat, but a typical tally tends to fall within the following parameters:

Christianity: 2.1 billion, or 33 percent of the world’s population  
Islam: 1.3 billion, or 21 percent  
Hinduism: 900 million, or 14 percent  
Chinese religions (Confucianism and Taoism): 394 million, or 6 percent  
Buddhism: 376 million, or 6 percent  
Sikhism: 23 million, or 0.36 percent  
Judaism: 14 million, or 0.22 percent  
Baha’i: 7 million, or 0.11 percent  
Jainism: 4.2 million, or 0.06 percent  
Shinto: 4 million, or 0.06 percent  
Cao Dai: 4 million, or 0.06 percent

(Source: <<http://www.adherents.org>>)

Between these eleven religions, the vast majority of the world’s people (almost 81 percent) are accounted for.

It might seem at first thought that anthropology would be particularly ill suited to study religions of this sort and scale. After all, anthropology is purportedly the science of small-scale or “local” human activity and of diversity, whereas world religions—almost by definition, it would seem—are large scale and, potentially if not actually, “global” based on orthodoxy and standard belief. However, not only have anthropologists made valuable studies of world religions, but we have also discovered that such religions, while they claim or aim for internal homogeneity and orthodoxy, actually contain vast internal diversity. Furthermore, all of these religions qualify at one point in their development as NRMs, some within the past century. World religions begin as and, therefore, depend on the processes of new religions and religious movements, and many of them maintain those qualities into the present. Thus, there is no absolute quantitative or qualitative distinction between a world religion and an NRM: A world religion is, we might say, a particularly successful NRM.

Ultimately, the anthropological study of world religions raises issues that we have encountered repeatedly in this book. One issue is that all such religions, in their actual local lived manifestations, are adapted to and more or less consonant with their local social and cultural environment. However “orthodox” or even “universal” it alleges to be, the reality is intrareligion diversity. Furthermore, where world religions exist, they often share the religious field with other religions, including “native” or “traditional” religions, other world religions, other sects or denominations of the same world religion, and other NRMs. And, contrary to the expectations and demands of world religions, individual people may not identify exclusively with one but may mix or alternate participation or affiliation in complex ways. In the end, as we have seen before, such concepts as “membership” or “religious identity” or, especially, “conversion”—perhaps even “world religion” itself—may be more relative and Western than we suppose.

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## The anthropology of the “great transformation”

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Until recently, we could speak of “the world’s religions” but not of “world religions.” There were literally thousands and thousands of religious beliefs and practices and myths and rituals and specialists; in fact, virtually every identifiable social entity had one of its own. Or, to say it another way, there were literally thousands and thousands of societies, each with a distinct religious or spiritual tradition. Religion was “local.” A few anthropologists have proposed that, at certain times in certain places for certain reasons, a “great transformation” occurred: In addition to, or out of, some local “traditional” religions, not only new religions but *a new kind of religion* grew. These theories depend on a considerable amount of crosscultural generalization, but they are interesting and important.

Robert Redfield (1953) was one of the first to attempt a comparison of local and world religions, or what he called “small traditions” and “great traditions.” According to him, small or local religions were products or experiences of a specific kind of society, the kind that all societies arguably once were. Small and isolated communities,

“self-contained and self-supported,” they were socially homogeneous, with a strong sense of group solidarity. Kinship was the basic organizing principle, so social relationships were personal and informal. Social control was, therefore, informal and almost unconscious: People behaved in particular ways “because it seems to the people to flow from the very necessity of existence that they do that kind of thing” (Redfield 1953: 14). Religion provided the glue or the threads that held society together and made it seem necessary and self-evident; in fact, religion was and perhaps depended on being largely unreflective and unsystematic. The result was a “moral community” of the sort described by Durkheim; as Redfield puts it, “the essential order of society, the nexus which held people together, was moral” (1953: 15). “‘Moral order’ includes the binding sentiments of rightness that attend religion, the social solidarity that accompanies religious ritual, the sense of religious seriousness and obligation that strengthens men, and the effects of a belief in invisible beings that embody goodness” (Redfield 1953: 21).

But all of this changed when social and political circumstances changed. The experience of living in a “great society,” what he calls a “civilization,” requires a different religious ethos. Civilizations are characterized by large and/or interconnected communities which are socially heterogeneous. Social relationships cannot remain personal but become “practical” and “rational.” (Weber said the same thing about modern societies, as we will consider in the next chapter.) Kinship as an organizing principle gives way to “politics,” in the shape of formal government, contractual relations, and the stratification of power and wealth. Specialization and differentiation within the society comes to include religion itself, which becomes an institution among other social institutions, albeit one that supports the political institutions. In the process, religion becomes more “professional,” with religious specialists, and more reflective, self-conscious, and systematic. The old moral order cannot integrate such a society, but neither can a new moral order of the old variety. Instead, “In civilization the moral orders suffer, but new states of mind are developed by which the moral order is, to some significant degree, taken in charge. The story of the moral order is the attainment of some autonomy through much adversity” (Redfield 1953: 25).

Milton Yinger (1970) suggests that the answer is a “universal,” or at least *universalizable*, religion, a system of beliefs and practices that does not belong or relate to only one society but potentially (and ideally) to all. “Small traditions” of the sort identified by Redfield tend to be associated, even literally attached, to a people and a place: The ancestors are the ancestors of *these people*, the spirits are spirits of *these places*. Such religions are socially and geographically “bound.” However, a new kind of religion that is “detached” from people and place, that is “unbound,” and that is, therefore, *portable* can and does and perhaps must arise in these new social conditions. Yinger concurs with Redfield that “a universal religion will be invented only in a particular sociocultural context. There must be extensive social differentiation, religious specialists, culture contact, and a long period of frustration of major needs and aspirations” (Yinger 1970: 474). Out of this soil, fertile to all new religious movements, will emerge “individuals peculiarly sensitive to these influences and

qualified, by personal makeup, to deal with them in religious terms” (Yinger 1970: 474). What they will offer is a religious vision capable of “challenging and contradicting limited political claims”—of integrating or subsuming or *replacing* more parochial cultural and religious beliefs, practices, and identities and advancing a new model of and for society.

Most recently, and perhaps most robustly, Ernest Gellner has explored this hypothetical break between traditional and world religion. Traditional religions, he opines, “took the overall meaningfulness of the world for granted, even though they had done so much to maintain it. They did not feel obliged to supply guarantees of the overall goodness of the world. Meaning was conferred on the world absentmindedly, without a codified revelation” (1988: 91). They were “concrete,” not particularly given to “speculation” and intense philosophical introspection. Rather, they “take for granted” the truth of their beliefs and the efficacy of their actions as “self-evident.” So they were more “ad hoc,” in the sense that they dealt with specific spiritual or practical problems when those arose rather than establishing a permanent self-sustaining “institution” and “orthodoxy.” In particular, they were noncodified, not written down or “settled” into a “canon” of official dogma. Instead they were “patently social,” by which he means that, while all the details may not be worked out in rationalized completeness, nevertheless the religion and its society were tightly interwoven. People did not so much *believe* their religion as *do* it. The “beliefs” of the religion mirrored and reinforced the “morality” or behavioral imperatives of it, which themselves were embedded in cultural practices and social institutions.

In what Gellner calls one of the “big divides in human history,” a small set of religions began to move out from their original sources to other and potentially all places, peoples, and times. These religions, sometimes also designated as “high” or “universal” religions, were not only “bigger” than the traditional ones but different in some fundamental aspects. The main factors in the creation and diffusion of a “world” religion include, as we noted, its detachment and separation from place. This is not to say that a world religion cannot have sacred places; they can and do. However, a religion that can only be performed in one location is hobbled in its aspiration to be a world religion.

World religions are nevertheless “uprooted” from their original social context to become traveling and often enough missionizing and proselytizing religions. After all, there are no members of the proto-world religion at first, and it must recruit members and found for them a new community and sometimes a new identity. World religions, therefore, tend to be *voluntary* movements or churches which individuals can join by intentional decision. This leads to another common trait of world religions—that they tend to be “individualistic” in a critical sense. This is not to say that there is no religious community nor that the individual can think or do whatever he or she likes. Rather, it is to say that individuals may have to choose to join the religion and to accept its doctrines as his/her own. It follows that world religions will be deeply concerned with doctrine, with dogma, with belief (“orthodoxy” deriving from the root for correct or straight belief). In a very real way, what holds the religion together and makes it a religion and a community is doctrine. It is, thus, crucially



important that those doctrines be clear and, more so, accepted without diversity or dissent (a divergent or dissenting belief being “heresy”).

One of the fundamental requirements for this elaboration and dissemination of orthodoxy is writing—and, specifically, the writing of a standard, official body of religious literature, that is, a *canon*. In preliterate societies, varying versions and interpretations could coexist. For example, ancient Greek myths could and did exist in varying forms that further varied from performance to performance. However, once they were set down in writing, the tales became “fixed” or “frozen” into an orthodox version. Likewise, differing versions or pieces of Christian and Muslim texts existed (and still exist) before they were “settled” into the canonical literature that became the Bible and the Qur’an respectively. Other variant versions or writings became unorthodox at best and schismatic or heretical at worst. Along with the settlement of an official doctrine based on an official written work, a “scripture,” came a specialized class of individuals to study, represent, perform, and preserve those doctrines—that is, an *ecclesiastical institution* of priests and other officials. Religion thus became institutionalized and professionalized in unprecedented and fateful ways.

### Case study 8.1

#### Can a traditional religion become a world religion?

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One of the key debates in the historical study of religion is whether there was something unique about the religions that “took off” to become world religions. Specifically, could *other* religions, including “traditional” ones, give birth to world religions spontaneously? The question was raised primarily because most of the growth of world religions in the past few centuries occurred as a result of the diffusion of existing ones, like Christianity or Islam, especially as a concomitant of colonialism. It was observed by anthropologists and others that most local people (who did not cling to their traditional religions) either joined the introduced religion or participated in NRMs related to it. However, we now know that the question as initially asked is moot, since (1) many of these NRMs have gone on to become “world religions” (like Cao Dai or, centuries ago, Sikhism) and (2) that the dominant world religions *did* grow out of earlier and more “local” and traditional ones.

To advance the debate, Robin Horton (1972) suggested a “thought experiment.” Imagine, he invited, that changing social and cultural circumstances reached Africa *without* the accompaniment of Christianity or Islam; that is, the local people found themselves in a social reality resembling the “great transformation” but without a prefabricated religious solution—“the modern situation, *minus* Islam and Christianity” (Horton 1972: 102). Would they independently arrive at their own

version of a world religion? He answered yes, that African religions had the potential to develop into a world religion in their own right.

First, he believed, "faced with the interpretative challenge of social change, [a traditional religion's] adherents do not just abandon it in despair. Rather, they remold and develop it" (Horton 1972: 102). In particular, he identified what he regarded as a universalizing potential in African religions in the form of a two-tiered belief system, made up of lower and lesser spirits (who, he argues, represent the local or "microcosmic") and of a higher or supreme being (who represents the global or "macrocosmic"). Over time, he expected that people would ignore the lower spirits and "develop a far more elaborate theory of the supreme being and his ways of working in the world, and a battery of new ritual techniques for approaching him and directing his influence." In addition, they would "begin to evolve a moral code for the governance of this wider life. Since the supreme being is already defined as the arbiter of everything that transcends the boundaries of the microcosms, he is seen as underpinning this universalist moral code. From a position of moral neutrality, he moves to one of moral concern" (Horton 1972: 102).

Horton's conclusion was that religious change in traditional Africa was inevitable, with or without preexisting world religions. In fact, he "reduces Islam and Christianity to the role of catalysts—i.e., stimulators and accelerators of changes which were 'in the air' anyway" (Horton 1972: 104). This explains, he argues, why encroaching world religions have so little success in converting locals in the absence of wider social changes (as when lone missionaries enter strongly "traditional" social situations). It also explains why, even in the context of wider changes, locals are not attracted to the foreign world religions, or why they do not understand them as foreigners desire them to, or why they do not "convert" to and affiliate with them as foreigners desire them to.

Horton has come under scathing criticism (e.g., Fisher 1973) especially for his rationalist/ intellectualist approach and for minimizing of the contributions of Islam and Christianity in Africa. He also greatly underestimates the diversity of "Africa religion." Whatever direction the debate takes in the future, it is certain that the contemporary world religions *did* arise out of the grounds of "traditional religions"—sometimes in contact with other world religions—and that NRMs will continue to rise, some of which will join the ranks of world religions.

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## **"Conversion" to world religions**

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Despite the fact that many religions have the potential to transcend their local social and spatial contexts and that many religions *have* achieved such transcendence and more undoubtedly will in the future, the truth is still that most people who participate in world religions receive them "from the outside." Since the people and societies

who practice world religions invariably practiced other religions before, the acceptance of these world religions involves a process of change, which is usually referred to as “conversion.” At some point in time, a person follows one religion; then, at another point in time, he or she follows another religion, with other and often widespread personal and social consequences.

The standard model of religious conversion is represented by A. D. Nock (1933), who anticipates many of the comments of Redfield, Yinger, and Gellner. What he calls primitive or organic religion is “the collective wisdom of the community [. . .] Those who follow such a tradition have no reason to interest themselves in other traditions, and no impulse to commend their own tradition to others” (Nock 1933: 2). In other words, members of “traditional” religions do not convert to them or seek to convert others. In contrast, new religions—which he characterizes as “prophetic religions”—are different. They are not traditions but *movements*. Since they are new, they tend to stand out from, and sometimes actively oppose, the past and “tradition.” And since they do not initially have a community, they must create their own community by drawing individuals away from preexisting religions. From the individual’s point of view, then, to participate in a new religion represents a *choice*, a decision to break from tradition and try something else. To do so, it must operate on the individual at a psychological level, “to create in men the deeper needs which it claims to fulfill” (Nock 1933: 9). That is to say, “traditional” individuals would not be attracted to “new” religions; the person must be transformed before the religion can be transforming.

Still, Nock finds a distinction between traditional and even most ancient religions and the few religions that would evolve to become “world religions.” Most religions have been more absorptive than substitutive: Elements of foreign systems could be integrated into an existing religion without radically altering it, and (as in the case of Roman religion) entire foreign cults could be added to existing religion to simply produce “more religion.” Such religious attitudes

led to an acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes, and they did not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old. This we may call *adhesion*, in contradistinction to conversion. By *conversion* we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.

(Nock 1933: 7, emphasis added)

Thus, the process of conversion is seen not just as a modification or addition of religion but a total replacement of religion. Further, this process is generally seen to be *sudden*, *total*, *exclusive* (that is, the individual can only affiliate with or “belong to” one religion), *irreversible*, “*doctrinal*” (that is, based on the acceptance of the “truth” of the new religion), and *personally profound*.

Nock's ideal model of religious conversion is Augustine, who converted to Christianity in a wrenching personal struggle in the early fifth century. However, this choice exposes two critical problems with his model. First, by his own account, Augustine's case does not fit it: He did not convert suddenly from "paganism" to Christianity but rather arrived there after a long search process with many other stops along the way. Second, even if Augustine is the paradigm of conversion, the concept may still therefore be one *pertaining and appropriate to one religious perspective* rather than general or universal.

That the standard model of conversion is distinctly Judeo-Christian is without doubt. As Lichtenstein (2001) describes the Jewish concept of conversion or *gerut*, its essence "is its being a turning point. Its foundation is a radical transformation: an uprooting from one world to strike root in a different one." It is a "total metamorphosis," compelling the convert "to abandon his past background" as a result of some intense and life-changing religious experience leading to commitment to a new belief. As such, the process "is private and personal." It is understandable why Judeo-Christian members and scholars would hold such a position, since in that religious tradition—especially its Protestant version—conversion really is understood as a private and personal thing, an individual metamorphosis and choice of not only religion but world.

Nevertheless, anthropological studies have shown that the standard, Judeo-Christian model does not relate to all "religious conversion" situations. As Austin-Broos states it, conversion is not a "singular experience, paranormal or otherwise, or an absolute breach with a former life. [. . .] [Rather] conversion is a passage: constituted and reconstituted through social practice and the articulation of new forms of relatedness" (2003: 9). As a social process, it may be more or less successful, more or less complete, more or less personal, and more or less permanent. Marshall Murphree's (1969) study of the "conversion" to Christianity of the Shona in southern Rhodesia makes the point clearly. Not only did locals interpret and construct conversion differently, but Christian sects also presented it differently. Methodist missionaries emphasized personal ecstatic experiences; for Catholic priests, on the other hand, "conversion involved not a subjective experience, but rather commitment to a given system of beliefs and practices, coupled with loyalty to the organization" (Murphree 1969: 80). Since Methodism entailed a mature religious experience, adults were its focus, while Catholicism focused on children, who could be recruited and socialized into the religious institution.

As Catholic practices indicated, conversion did not always require prior training in or acceptance of Christian doctrine and probably seldom required or proved real understanding or orthodoxy of beliefs, let alone a personal transformation. Often, the ritual of baptism was conversion in the Catholic view, so one could be baptized first and educated later. As Maia Green (2003) notes, in the 1920s in southern Tanzania most of the baptisms were infants, and as late as the 1950s the majority of "converts" were either children or the dying—or even the dead, who were past having any conversion experiences. Christopher Vecsey reports the same phenomenon in the Americas, where most of the baptisms in the 1500s "occurred

prior to religious instruction, and whatever efficacy was delivered through the sacramental grace, no one could suggest that these Indians yet understood Christian doctrine or possessed intelligent Christian faith" (1996: 17).

The inevitable result of these "conversion" practices was, to say the least, religious heterodoxy and sometimes a total lack of comprehension or serious concern for right doctrine. In Murphree's research, as elsewhere, precontact religious beliefs and practices survived and even provided the lens through which new religions were perceived. He informs us that many Shona Christians continued to believe in traditional spirits, while some Shona non-Christians absorbed concepts such as heaven. Some people, like a sub-chief he interviewed, explicitly claimed to practice tradition and Christianity: "'It is best,' he says, 'to believe it all'" (Murphree 1969: 132)—a thoroughly unorthodox, if not heretical, position according to Christianity.

Not only was conversion less than complete among the Shona, but it was also often not irreversible. Murphree found that many people converted more than once and in multiple directions—from traditional to Christian, or from Christian to traditional, or from one Christian sect to another or to some other religious movement. In fact, he rejected the concept of conversion at all in this case, preferring to discuss "religious mobility" (Murphree 1969: 137). Worse, individuals regularly did not grasp or share the notion of an exclusive "religious affiliation" or "religious identity" at all. Rather, "a person, *at certain times and in given circumstances*, moves out of the pattern of beliefs and practices standard for his religious group, and temporarily and for specific purposes aligns himself with that of another" (Murphree 1969: 140), for instance, on occasions when a Christian had to partake in a traditional ceremony or vice versa.

When a person did convert in the more or less familiar sense, this result did not always follow a life-changing agreement with the doctrines of the new religion. There were many reasons for apparent conversions: "a wish for the subjective experience, an appreciation of [. . .] moral values, an awareness of practical advantages (i.e. the attainment of education, etc.), [. . .] a desire for the prestige and status conferred by the Church, the attraction to the corporate life of the Church, and, in the case of children, pressure from their elders" (Murphree 1969: 65). As Green points out, conversion—or at least voluntary proximity—to the new religion sometimes flowed from beliefs in the powers of the foreign specialists. The Tanzanians in her research thought that the Christian priests controlled energies, literally substances or "medicines," which were supernaturally present in waters and oils employed by priests. Accordingly, they might seek out baptism or other sacraments not for their Christian spiritual meaning but for their (traditional) practical effects, "to incorporate Christian substances and objects into themselves" to promote growth, wealth, success, etc. (Green 2003: 67). In still other situations, foreign religious authorities held literal control of resources like food and money, as well as of institutions like marriage, employment, education, and even government; in Tanzania, the Church interjected itself into marriage arrangements and bride-wealth payments in order to influence who married whom and how (specifically, to make sure that Christians married Christians within the Church).

In some final cases, new and foreign religions have had little success in winning converts, encountering either passive indifference or active resistance. Yengoyan (1993) discusses an instance of the former in Aboriginal Australia, where he insists that the moods and motivations of Christianity were simply too foreign for them. He discovered that during the 1960s to 1980s, only eight to ten real conversions were made among the Pitjantjatjara; most people found Christianity “incomprehensible,” although many others hung around the church because they enjoyed the singing. He suggests that Christian concepts like salvation, damnation, and sin had no resonance for the locals; that the notion of a “single omnipotent force” with no “physical referent” (Yengoyan 1993: 248) made no sense to them; and that their lack of “individualism” made religious “choice” unappealing. For these cultural and religious reasons, “it is apparent that the Pitjantjatjara and other desert-dwelling Aboriginal societies simply do not convert to Christianity” (Yengoyan 1993: 244).

Keyes (1993a) finds the Thai resistant to Christianity for very different reasons. In this case, Christian missionaries had failed to compete successfully with another world religion—namely, Buddhism—for converts among the traditional villagers. Keyes proposes that the reasons are two. First, “conversion to Buddhism does not require that people radically reject their previous beliefs” (Keyes 1993a: 268); resident and visiting monks emphasized that local spirits are not false but that they are subject to Buddhist concepts like *karma* too. Once villagers had had their traditional beliefs subsumed by Buddhism, Christian missionaries were unable to persuade them that Christianity “offers greater insight into ultimate Truth than does Buddhism” (Keyes 1993a: 277). Second, the local political and economic institutions were sufficiently strong and independent to prevent Christian penetration and domination; with no way to control and exploit resources and opportunities—and no way to “institutionalize”—Christianity had no way to gain a foothold in the villages.

Clearly then, conversion is a much more complex, contingent, and ongoing social phenomenon than is usually supposed or represented, with a diverse range of local responses and eventual outcomes. With reference to the Christianity in the Americas, Vecsey’s summary of the range of diversity applies equally well to other religions and areas of the world:

Some adopted a Christian worldview, identifying elements of Christianity as equivalent or complementary to analogous elements of the aboriginal religions. This adoption of Christian elements might result in a complete conversion to Christianity. [. . .] For most Indians of this sort, however, conversion did not rule out the observance of indigenous customs. [. . .] For other Indians the process of conversion remained incomplete. They were impressed with the claims of Christianity but did not understand them adequately, or understood them according to indigenous premise. [. . .] Some of these Indians separated and compartmentalized their native and Christian religious forms, participating in one, then the other, according to need and situation, and using the two systems of explanation alternately. [. . .] Some Indians went through the motions of conversion but were indifferent to Christian theology and participated in

Christian rituals only casually. Still others resisted Christianity more fully, either refusing baptism or acquiescing in the most minimal forms while continuing to engage actively in paganism, and in some instances working toward rebellion against their conquerors. [. . .] Finally, many Mexican Indians came, consciously and unconsciously, to join together elements of the aboriginal and Christian traditions into a syncretistic pattern of religious life.

(Vecsey 1996: 29–30)

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## Conversion and the colonization of everyday life

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Conversion, if and when it occurs, is a special type of religious change, and religious change is a special type or product of religion or dynamic religious processes. It follows, therefore, that all of the cultural processes identified by anthropology apply to it. This means that conversion is *diverse, local, practiced, constructed, and modular*. It need not be total or sudden, and it will necessarily be part of larger—and not specifically religious—cultural developments. In particular, in most cases over the past few centuries, previously insulated societies have been exposed to world religions in the much wider context of colonialism, which has not aimed to introduce or modify religion alone. Likewise, religious change has not resulted from efforts to change religion alone but to change the social structures and the lived experiences upon which religion stands. This realization shines a new light on conversion, which becomes “a more gradual and ambiguous socialization into shared linguistic and ritual practices,” among other even more routine ones (Coleman 2003: 16).

Hefner stresses that the unique and powerful nature of world religions is not just doctrinal but “social-organizational” (1993a: 19). In other words, while the “message” of world religions is novel, what is really important and effective about them is their capacity to *institutionalize*, to establish and maintain “institutions for the propagation and control of religious knowledge and identity over time and space” (Hefner 1993a: 19). But it must dominate more than *religious* knowledge and identity, which entails that it must establish—or at least establish interdependencies with—non-religious knowledge and identity as well. This will implicate political, economic, educational, and many other domains and institutions. Failure to institutionalize in the nonreligious realm can contribute to failure in the religious realm, as in the Thai case above.

Michael Gilson (2000) was one of the first to emphasize the role of nonreligious, even ordinary and mundane, practices in the perpetuation or change of religion; as we mentioned in Chapter 6, he sees religion as not only dependent upon everyday forms and practices—down to “furniture, ways of sitting, modes of dress,” and such—but as even secondary to them. So, when foreign and novel models of these cultural phenomena burst on the scene and penetrate the scene, religion cannot help but be affected. Sometimes, as in colonialism, agents of change more or less intentionally manipulate these nonreligious factors for religious ends.

John and Jean Comaroff have paid special attention to this development. Colonialism, wherever and whenever conducted, involved changes to and domination of the political and economic aspects of subject societies, together with religion and other cultural habits like dress, speech, marriage, gender roles, and so on. All of these forms and practices, and not merely religious doctrines and rituals, carried messages about what is true, good, important, and possible. In fact, as anthropologists have increasingly realized, much of cultural and even religious “knowledge” is not explicit and formal but implicit and informal, embedded in the big and little things we do all day everyday—what Jean Comaroff called “the signs and structures of everyday life” (1985: 80). Therefore, the conversion process was designed to effect a change in these signs and structures, a “revolution in habits,” “a quest to refurnish the mundane: to focus human endeavor on the humble scapes of the everyday, of the ‘here-and-now’ in which the narrative of Protestant redemption took on its contemporary form” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 9). They have also described this struggle as “an epic of the ordinary” and “the everyday as epiphany”:

it was precisely by means of the residual, naturalized quality of habit that power takes up residence in culture, insinuating itself, apparently without agency, in the texture of a life-world. This, we believe, is why recasting mundane, routine practices has been so vital to all manner of social reformers, colonial missionaries among them.

(Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 31)

They discuss in great detail a number of cultural realms in which European/Christian habits of mind and body took residence. An important one was economics, literally farming techniques. Missionaries offered a model for “civilized cultivation” in the form of the “mission garden”; a major aspect of this new model was a reversal of traditional gender roles, in which women had done the bulk of horticultural work. The plow became a potent symbol of Western-style farming; fences introduced conceptions of “enclosure” and property; and inequality of output, related to intensity of labor, generated Western-style differences in wealth and status as their reward. But economic change went beyond horticulture to new institutions like markets and money. Modern labor and cash were part of a new “moral economy,” stigmatizing idleness and “primitive production” and promoting “the kind of upright industry and lifestyle that would dissolve [tradition’s] dirt” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 189).

Yet more mundane areas like clothing and household practices were valued for their civilizing and Christianizing effects. Clothes not only meant covering heathen nakedness but also teaching locals the proper wear and care of these articles; native clothing, it seemed to colonists, was dirty, too “natural,” and lacked the necessary markers of social—especially gender—distinctions. For this purpose, old used clothes were shipped from England to clothe, and thereby transform, the pagan body, teaching them shame and pride at the same time. And, as already suggested, proper (that is, Western/Christian) gender behavior was essential: Women needed to be covered modestly and reassigned to the home. Home became a “domestic” sphere,



which became woman's sphere, where she would literally sit, sew, and serve. But the traditional native house would not do; the house and the community had to be transformed from what the Europeans perceived as "a wild array of small, featureless huts scattered across the countryside" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 282). Missionary houses and buildings again acted as the model: With right angles, specialized spaces (e.g., a room for eating, a room for sleeping, etc.), doors and locks for privacy, and modern furniture, the mission structures "became a diorama" for how people should live (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 292). The collection of residences that became the "town" differentiated public from private spaces, all set in a universe of square blocks and broad streets. In these and many ways, the foreigners were doing much more than bringing a new religion; they were "teaching [them] to build a world" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 296), one in which civilization itself was expressed "in squares and straight lines" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 127).

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## World religions in the religious field

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Despite the ideal of complete and unambiguous conversion, the reality is that world religions tend to join rather than replace local "traditional" religions in most circumstances, leading to a complex multireligious field. The relations between the various religions in this field can take many forms, and, of course, each religion is affected by the presence of the other(s), such that no religion in the shared social space is entirely pure. Some or all of the religions may even still harbor aspirations of being the only or official or dominant one, but in other instances they may work out a compromise, an accommodation, or a division of the spiritual labor of the society.

One example of this coexistence within a religious field (see Chapters 2 and 5) is Tambiah's description of the Thai village of Baan Phraan Muan. In this setting, the world religion of Buddhism not only shared the religious domain with local or traditional religion but actually cooperated with it in various ways. Buddhist and pre-Buddhist spirits, specialists, concepts, rituals, and institutions both had their place in the overall religious system. In some ways, the two religious views operated parallel to each other: Local spirits (*phii*) coexisted with Buddhist beings (*thewada*), and a local Thai conception of the soul (*khwan*) existed beside a Buddhist notion of it (*winjan*). Buddhist monks (*bhikkhu*) were only one of a myriad of types of religious specialists, most of them focusing on the "traditional" spirits and spiritual matters. In fact, part of the survival of parallel religious systems was based on the literal physical separation of the Buddhist monastery (*wat*) from the village: "monks and novices live apart—the villagers visit them rather than the villagers. A monk keeps his visits to the village settlement to a minimum; he does not socialize with villagers and he enters a home primarily to conduct rites," particularly funeral rites (Tambiah 1970: 141). Other rituals that concern life events like marriage or sickness, the *sukhwan* ceremonies (obviously related to the local concept of *khwan*), were handled by other specialists, significantly known as *paahm*, a name derived from the word *brahman*

for a Hindu priest. And the role of the *paahm* was “reminiscent of the classical *brahman* priest” (Tambiah 1970: 254), including making vegetarian offerings called *kryang bucha* after the Hindu word *puja* for sacrificial offering. Thus, precontact roles and practices had clearly been influenced by postcontact ones.

But, as distinct as they are, the two religions also intertwined with and supported each other. For instance, ordination as a monk was a common but temporary arrangement for most young males; Tambiah emphasizes that “the vast majority” of males left the monastery after a short period and returned to “lay life, marriage, and the founding of a family,” which he recognizes as a “remarkable divergence” from Buddhist orthodoxy (1970: 99). The brief tenure of monkhood was viewed as a sort of rite of passage for males, as well as a “rite of instruction” in which they would acquire some literacy and other education. Finally, as a religious mission, both laypeople and the monks themselves understood the period of monkhood as primarily a service to their elders: “becoming a monk confers merit on one’s parents,” with the first year’s merit going to the mother and the second year’s going to the father (Tambiah 1970: 102). On the other hand, the elders provided services to the young. Thus, there was reciprocity of roles and rituals, in which “village youth become temporary monks before marriage to make merit for their elders and community members [. . .] While the young are going through monkhood it is the elders and householders who support them and who play the leading lay roles in Buddhist rites,” including bringing food to the *wat* (Tambiah 1970: 259). Beyond that, in exchange for Buddhist ceremonies, the elders offered *sukhwan* or “life-affirming” rituals, through which “the parental generation initiates the young into various statuses and helps them assume the role of successful householders” (Tambiah 1970: 259). Ultimately, the boundaries between the two religious dimensions were not even strong, as a traditional *paahm* specialist would be a former *bhikku*. Thus, in more ways than one, Tambiah concludes that the various roles and rituals were “differentiated and also linked together in a *single total field*” (1970: 2).

Reporting from Africa, Murphree insists that Christianity did not oust pre-Christian religious notions among the Shona but found a place among them. He describes a field consisting of four religions or sects, including two different forms of Christianity. Both Methodism and Catholicism had landed in Shona country before his research, each bringing a variation of Christianity and each establishing its own religious community—not to mention other smaller sects like Seventh Day Adventist and Apostolic Church of Pentecost of Canada. However, he finds that 70 percent of local adults still had no official affiliation with any Christian denomination (Murphree 1969: 30). Most continued to practice some form of “traditional religion” based on beliefs and practices concerning individual “soul” (*mweya*), ancestral/lineage spirits (*mudzimu*, pl. *midzimu*), a spirit of the tribe (*mhondoro*), and a “high god” named Mwari. The concept of “religion” did not even quite exist for them; Murphree reports that a practitioner of tradition would simply say, “*Ndinonamata midzimu*,” meaning “I pray to the ancestors” (1969: 31).

We have already discussed how Christianity in its two main variants penetrated Shona society; Methodism and Catholicism each took different approaches to

traditional religion but in neither case condemned or displaced it completely. Methodism incorporated Mwari as the local name of the Christian god, while Catholicism rejected it. Methodism emphasized ecstatic personal experiences (also part of tradition), while Catholicism downplayed them in favor of ritual. However, both Christian sects criticized beer and smoking and polygamy, although these behaviors were accepted and important in local culture. Finally, each brought a different organizational form: Methodism established forty-one small congregations (twenty to 250) with almost completely indigenous staff, while Catholicism meant one centralized church with no indigenous officials.

The fourth component of the religious field was a new religious movement known locally as Budjga Vapostori, a branch of the Apostles of Johanne Maranke, a group with 50,000 members in Zimbabwe at the time. It had been founded in 1932 by Muchabaya Ngamberume, a lay Methodist, who adopted the name Johanne. It represented an interesting syncretism of Methodist, Catholic, and pre-Christian beliefs and practices. From Methodism it got its hymns and its stress on the Bible and revelation. From Catholicism it borrowed the name Jehovah, rituals like eucharist and confession, and ceremonial clothing. It preserved elements of spirit healing and polygamy from traditional culture. It had succeeded, by the time of research, in creating a new and largely insulated community, much more so than the orthodox Christian groups, through which it enforced “conformity by a maximum of contact within the group” (Murphree 1969: 109).

Despite these disparate beliefs and communities, Murphree concludes that there were not four Shona religions but really one religious field with

four religious orientations, each with aspects which attract certain segments of the Budjga population at the same time as they repel others, and none of them able to meet the whole range of religious needs in contemporary Budjga society. [. . .] Each group is therefore best understood as a modality on a religious spectrum which they must all share. No single one of them in itself represents “Contemporary Budjga Religion”; Budjga religion is the complete religious spectrum itself, of which they are only related parts.

(Murphree 1969: 150–1)

So, the society had not turned into “a battlefield for conflicting religious systems” (Murphree 1969: 147), but neither had it developed into a homogeneous religion dominated by a world religion. The reality, more complex and interesting than either of these possibilities,

challenges the assumption that “the religion” of a society must be an integrated, logically consistent set of beliefs expressed in a unified and organized pattern of ritual. There is such a thing as “Contemporary Budjga Religion.” This entity is not the traditional religion of the Budjga of pre-Occupation days, nor is it Christianity; these are only the component parts of a contemporary religion

which by the circumstances of its development and environment is something different from, and more than, the sum of the two.

(Murphree 1969: 151)

Examples could be multiplied in great quantity, but one more issue must suffice. In some, and increasingly more, situations, the field is not composed exclusively of a world religion and a traditional religion, or even of various sects of a world religion and a traditional religion, but of two or more world religions. In many locations, for instance, Christianity may have entered a scene where Islam was already ensconced, or vice versa. We mentioned briefly above how Christianity and Buddhism compete in Thai villages, where they may some day achieve an accommodation, sharing the religious space with each other and older local religions. In still other places, Hinduism and Islam have converged, as in Southeast Asia, especially the island of Java. And, of course, perhaps the original clash of world religions was in India, where Buddhism was born and faced an entrenched Hindu system.

David Gellner (1992) details the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism in the context of Newar society in Nepal. Newar religion, like that of many societies, was the product of several layers of historical and demographic change. The result was a complicated social and religious field in which the Newar constituted a Buddhist ethnic minority (around 6 percent of the population) within an officially Hindu kingdom. The culturally and politically dominant group was the Parbatiya, from among whom the king came.

Although the Newar were associated strongly with Buddhism (specifically of the Mahayana type), there were also Hindu Newars. However, Newars sometimes claimed that they were both Hindu and Buddhist, which led some observers to determine that the Newars were either confused about their identity or possessed a corrupted one. Rather, Gellner proposes that the notion of a single total religious identity is “a Judeo-Christian definition of religion and religious allegiances, which hinders comprehension of Asian realities” (D. Gellner 1992: 42). Within the Newar perspective, it was neither contradictory nor confused to follow two religions at once. For practical purposes, “the terms ‘Hindu’ and ‘Buddhist’ are almost irrelevant. When Newars seek an urgent cure for some worldly ill, they usually do not stop to consider whether it is Hindu or Buddhist” (D. Gellner 1992: 68).

Beyond this, Gellner explains that the people themselves distinguished between three kinds of *dharma* or religion. One was the religion of salvation, the Hindu-Buddhist focus on escape from the cycle of life and death. Another was “social religion,” including the key moments of nature and human life, like birth and marriage. The third was “instrumental religion,” referring to “magic” or efficacious ritual, such as healing. Salvation and instrumental religion were more individual, while social religion, as the name suggests, was more public and group-oriented. In addition to the two world religions and the three kinds or approaches to religion, we cannot understand Newar religion without some reference to caste. Like many South and Southeast Asian societies, the Newar were divided into occupational and religious castes. Certain castes were more closely associated with one religion

than the other. The two “most Buddhist” castes were the Vajracaryas and the Sakyas, which occupied a top rung in society. However, a parallel top rung was occupied by Sresthas, who were Hindus, including their priestly component called Rajapadhyayas. Below this upper level of castes were the Maharjan, who could be either Hindu or Buddhist.

Vajracaryas and Sakyas were unambiguous Buddhists, but this was because they were actual or figurative monks—what Gellner calls “hereditary monks” (1992: 162). They might or might not actually take the vows, and even as monks they were part-time specialists and usually married, but they were “monks by birth,” however they lived their lives. They belonged to monastic communities and received alms from laypeople. For the laity, religious identity (if such a conception makes sense in their context) was determined by the individual’s or family’s hereditary priest. Some families were associated genealogically with Vajracarya priests, in which case they were *buddhamargi* or “followers of Buddha,” and other families were associated with Rajapadhyaya priests, in which case they were *sivamargi* or “followers of Shiva.” This arrangement ought to make religious affiliation fairly straightforward; however, since traditionally priests of both followings “inherited and sold rights over parishioners like other property” (D. Gellner 1992: 53), a person or family could find themselves Buddhist one day and Hindu the next, or vice versa. The Newar religious attitude was best summed up in a proverb, “*Jasko sakti usko bhakti*,” which meant roughly, “One tends to adopt the religion of whoever holds power” (D. Gellner 1992: 54).

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## The diversity within world religions

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Just as any world religion may exist within a diverse religious field, so diversity may exist within any world religion. While we are accustomed to thinking of a world religion as a monolithic, homogeneous entity, the truth is that it is really an assortment of more or less closely related local variations. In each particular society, sometimes in each particular community within a society, the world religion will be “refracted” by local conditions, including but not limited to the traditional religion upon which it intrudes, the specific sects or denominations that arrive, and the other world religion(s) nearby. Individuals, families, and communities will also make their unique interpretations of and responses to the world religion, generating a distinctly local version of it. In the final analysis, while many commentators have come to see world religions as the “macrocosm” in contrast to the traditional “microcosm,” the reality is that world religions are “much *less* macrocosmic than the conventional model supposes” (Ranger 1993: 89). A world religion, at the ground level, is a congeries of local variants, of which none can be said sensibly to be the “correct” or “real” one.

## Case study 8.2

### Buddhism in two societies

We have already considered the manifestation of Buddhism in Thai and Newar societies. Sherry Ortner (1978), in her study of Sherpa ritual, not only describes the parochial version of Buddhism there but also explicitly contrasts it to the Thai case given by Tambiah. The Sherpas had a very different social structure and moral/value system (see Chapter 5 above), so, predictably, their Buddhism would be very different. In the Thai case, virtually every male became a monk but only temporarily; among Sherpas, followers of the Nyingmawa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, monkhood was a lifetime commitment that only 2–3 percent of males made. Further, while the Thai monastery was set apart from the village, villagers did come to it for rituals and to make offerings, and monks came to the village for ceremonial purposes. The Sherpa temple was almost entirely

separate from village lay life and village religion. Monks neither officiate at nor attend village ceremonies with the exception of funerals, when it is considered essential to have monks as well as village lamas reading the texts. And villagers rarely attend monastery ceremonies, with the exception of the big annual monastery festival of Mani Rimdu.

(Ortner 1978: 31)

Other contrasts to which she points include the focus on “merit-making” in Thailand, which was not shared by Sherpas. Mainly Sherpa monks pursued their private salvation quests, only occasionally “performing” their powerful chants for ordinary people. In fact, Ortner presses the point that Sherpa religion, like Sherpa society, was more individualistic, even “anti-relational,” than Thai, rendering the notion of making merit for someone else less compatible. Indeed, she affirms that “the individualistic bias of Sherpa Buddhist orthodoxy is grounded in the structures of the Sherpa social world” (Ortner 1978: 161). Sherpa religion and Sherpa social reality alike were “designed to produce true Buddhist individuals, socially detached, expecting nothing from others and giving nothing to others” (Ortner 1978: 169)—starkly different from the reciprocal services rendered not only within Thai Buddhism but also between it and traditional village religion.

The end result is a Thai Buddhism that was transformed into a “social religion” versus a Sherpa Buddhism that was entrusted almost solely to individual salvation functions. As such, the former engaged and participated in popular life, as when the monks helped set off the rockets for the festival of *Bunbangfai*, a ceremony addressed to the guardian spirit of the swamp near the village. Sherpa monks did not participate in nonmonastic life to any similar degree; in fact, if anything, Sherpa monks acted

continued

less like the people than the people acted like monks. Specifically in the Nyungne ceremony, but other times of the year as well, lay people would accept some of the renunciations normally reserved for monks, through which they would “approximate the ideal of asceticism” that only monks were fully committed to (Ortner 1978: 32).

In this final section, we will focus on the two largest and most widely distributed world religions, Christianity and Islam. Comprising together over one-half of the world’s population, spreading and diversifying rapidly, and finding their way into every social niche on earth, they provide the best opportunity to observe the processes of fission, innovation, and adaptation among the world religions.

### **Christianity**

Christianity has never been a unified, monolithic religion, and, despite attempts to establish or maintain unity and orthodoxy, it remains diverse and fractious today. It can minimally be analyzed into its three major “schools” or varieties—Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant—each with its own theology, organizational structure, and relationship to the surrounding society. Catholicism has achieved the greatest success in preserving a globally centralized system; it has a pan-national organization and identity, although local Catholicism still varies in numerous ways. Eastern Orthodoxy, a schism from Catholicism over doctrinal and political differences dating from 1054, takes a more “national” approach, consisting of more or less autonomous national churches, such as Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and so on. Protestantism is the least centralized, not being a church at all but an assortment of completely independent churches associated only by history and a certain attitude toward authority, the Catholic Church, and the Judeo-Christian scriptures.

The decentralized ethic of Protestantism has led to the formation of many specific churches, such as Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Quaker, and others (see Chapter 12). Within these groups there are also varieties of “style” or attitude, from more “liberal” versions to “evangelical” ones to “fundamentalist” ones. In addition, in recent history, Christian sects have continued to emerge which perhaps do not belong entirely within the Protestant school, such as Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism, and many others. Finally, in the Western as well as the non-Western world, syncretistic new religious movements with Christian components and themes are a regular phenomenon, making it problematic to determine when a religion is “Christian” and when it is not. Altogether, Barrett et al. (2001) calculate that there are some 34,000 international Christian groups, more than half of them not directly affiliated with major denominations.

Given its global span and its inherent tendency to schism, Christianity has been conspicuous in adapting to society and adapting society to it. The classic statement on the relation between a form of Christianity and a local society and economy is Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, appearing in 1904. According

to Weber, Calvinist Protestantism fueled a certain attitude toward money, work, individualism, and success that shaped European capitalism. Earlier Catholicism, with its static social system and its otherworldly theology, was not compatible with material success, industry, and individual entrepreneurship. However, Weber argues, Calvinism's doctrine of "predestination"—that each individual was preselected either for salvation or damnation—made people eager to discover or display their destiny, and one medium for this was worldly success. At the same time, while excess and luxury were disparaged, values such as labor for its own sake (almost as a sacrament), discipline, and frugality not only forged a new capitalist personality but also contributed to the further and continuous growth of the economy. Note that such was precisely the personality and worldview that missionaries were trying to instill in South Africa, according to John and Jean Comaroff. Thus, Weber concludes that Protestantism both appealed to and helped construct an emerging "middle class."

When Christianity has hit previously non-Christian societies, the results have been yet more dramatic and diverse. For one thing, any one or more of the particular Christian denominations or sects might descend upon the local scene. Even within a denomination, variation existed; for instance, colonial Spanish Catholicism was overtly carried out through a number of agencies and orders, such as the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Augustinians, and the Jesuits. The specific religious group(s), the specific social circumstances that they walked into, the specific individuals who "converted," and the specific interpretations and accommodations that each made to the other all complicated and diversified the actual local religion. For instance, Pollock analyzes early Catholic activities in Brazil, where Tupi and Guarani peoples were first contacted by Jesuits in 1549. Jesuit missionaries were not the first Europeans met by the natives. Therefore, in this case, Pollock reports, the priests were welcomed by the locals, "who sought refuge from brutal Portuguese and Spanish soldiers and merchants" (1993: 167). As a consequence, "Indians were happy to perform meaningless rituals in return for protection from the colonists, gifts from the missionaries, and the supernatural benefits of the powerful European shamans" (Pollock 1993: 167). Much more recently, the Siriono accepted Protestantism for similar reasons—not out of commitment to Christian doctrines or love of Christian missionaries, but "as a means of strengthening social and cultural boundaries between themselves and non-Indians" (Pollock 1993: 173). Conversely, the Kraho of central Brazil firmly resisted Protestantism for its hostility to traditional religious and cultural practices but accepted a few elements of Catholicism, such as baptism and "ritual sponsorship" (the "godparent" relation), which resembled their own practices (Pollock 1993: 174).

The possible modes of accommodation between Christianity and native religion are numerous. In the case of the Uiaiku, a Papuan community, Anglican contact beginning in 1891 resulted in a segregated system and "continuing coexistence of two social environments, the mission station and the village" (Barker 1993: 199). The missionaries typically sought to incorporate the people into the religious and colonial project of the West, through education and schools, employment, and political authority. Despite these more or less successful efforts, the physical fact that the



mission was located outside the village meant that village life could persist along more indigenous lines. The outcome was a dual cultural and religious universe, in which individuals grew and lived in a tradition-oriented village but “also grew up attending school and church and model their roles (if not always their moral attitudes) on the teachers and on their ideas of Europeans” (Barker 1993: 209). No more than a few actually converted or had “more than the vaguest notion of church doctrine; most villagers are firmly convinced of the reality of local bush spirits and sorcerers; and individuals frequently disregard church strictures on marriage and divorce” (Barker 1993: 209). When they did think about Christianity, they inevitably thought about it through traditional lenses. For instance, Christian spiritual beliefs did not displace local ones; traditional village beliefs became the “microcosm” which people could know and experience directly, while Christian beliefs represented a “macrocosm” that was revealed by missionaries. The entire relationship between villagers and missionaries was understood through traditional social concepts like the *kawo-sabu* relation, in which *kawo* or higher-ranking groups had rights but also obligations to look after *sabu* of lower-ranking groups, who owed their superiors respect but could expect care in exchange. So the locals exchanged church attendance, labor, and support in the form of food and money for the rituals, baptisms, and knowledge that the church provided (Barker 1993: 212).

In many places and in many ways, the assimilation of Christianity by locals *and the assimilation of local religion by Christianity* led to novel religious arrangements. As Vecsey describes,

Catholic priests used Aztec pictographs to teach the Indians Christian theology. Indians filled churches with images of saints who delivered miracles, as the gods had done in the olden days. Aztecs took a Christian name at baptism, but also the name of the Aztec god upon whose day they were born. When a Catholic feast took place, it was also fitted to the Aztec calendar, and Aztec gods were worshipped through the Christian calendar. Catholic saints and Aztec gods were fused in conception and iconography, e.g., St. Anne (the mother of the Virgin Mary), whom the Indians associated with the Goddess Toci (the grandmother of the Aztec gods). On Christian holy days, such as All Saints, the Indians offered sacrifices of wild animals, continuing ancient Aztec practices, and the Day of the Dead, celebrated throughout Mexico, combined pre-contact rituals and Spanish Catholicism, as the folk commemorated their ancestors, both Indian and European, in a religiousness not strictly pagan and not strictly Catholic, but a fresh evolving combination of the two traditions.

(1996: 60)

The Mexican figure of the Lady of Guadalupe is only the greatest manifestation of this religion-making process.

We have already mentioned Maia Green’s study of Tanzanian Christianity, in which conversions were often claimed by the church without any real (or any at all) transformation in the person, and in which locals understood the new religion in

largely traditional and unorthodox ways. Despite the efforts of missionaries to insinuate themselves into every aspect of local life, the people persisted in grasping Christianity in their own way and in resisting it to a large extent. Even in her writing, she insists that the mission institution “is still regarded as foreign, and Christianity as the ‘European religion’” (2003: 57). In fact, she claims that what little early success Christianity enjoyed owed less to theology than to politics, namely the close relationship between German colonial power and the Benedictine mission: Only after a military headquarters was established in the region did missionary penetration become “viable.”

Even so, local understandings and opinions of Christianity were not what the missionaries hoped. As religious specialists, the priests were seen essentially as new and more powerful shamans, wielding efficacious forces and “medicines.” Traditional spirits remained more “social” and immediately relevant to people’s lives, while the Christian god and Jesus were viewed as remote and “largely asocial” (Green 2003: 70). Even worse, the priests were disliked for exploiting and cheating the people (selfishly monopolizing wealth, food, and resources like vehicles), and Christianity was perceived as a European world, “linked inextricably to the amoral and exploitative world of market relations transacted through the medium of cash” (Green 2003: 57). No doubt the missionaries would have been unhappy to hear the natives refer to Christianity as *dini ya biahara*, “the religion of business” (Green 2003: 49).

In other cases, the economic and political foundations of conversion to Christianity were still more overt and intense. Hefner tells that Christianity in Java, a predominantly Muslim society in recent centuries, can be connected in some instances to the Communist struggle in Indonesia through the 1960s. Although Christianity had been known prior to this time, many converts in the 1980s had been children or other kin of Communists from the previous decades. During the 1960s, extensive violence had occurred between Muslims and Communists. Descendants of the Communist victims of this violence often turned to Christianity as an alternative to Islam or Communism and as a protest against traditional village life: “With Christianity these youths declared their independence from a village social order that, in their eyes, had brought their families pain and humiliation” (1993b: 116). Not surprisingly, these converts were among the best educated and most “modern” of Javanese, constituting perhaps an incipient “middle class,” attracted by the individual freedom and social opportunity that the new religion represented.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, one of the most important and interesting developments in global Christianity is the growth of Pentecostalism, especially but not exclusively in areas historically dominated by Catholicism. Pentecostalism is a style of Christianity that emphasizes the “gifts of the Holy Spirit,” including speaking in tongues and spiritual healing, in addition to the familiar Protestant focus on the Bible. It is not new in Christianity: Many early Protestant sects exhibited Pentecostal tendencies, at least in their initial stages (which is where “Quakers” and “Shakers” got their monikers). And Pentecostalism is by no means the only non-Catholic denomination on the rise; Dow maintains that Mormonism grew extraordinarily in Mexico from 1980 to 1999, from 241,000 adherents to 783,000,

and that Protestant sects increased in many Latin American countries since the 1980s: Honduras from 9.9 percent to 16.9 percent, Costa Rica from 7.7 percent to 12.1 percent, and Guatemala from 20.4 percent to 26.4 percent (2001: 4). In fact, much of the attention paid to Protestant and Pentecostal expansion has centered on Latin America.

This is a particularly interesting development because Latin America had been supposed to be securely Catholic. On the contrary, David Martin, one of the leading scholars of Pentecostal growth, posits that “the culture of the people [of Latin America] has been quite resistant to Catholic teaching” (1990: 57). Our discussions above have suggested that Catholicism has been a long and strong force in the region, but that affected cultures have made various responses to it, from outright acceptance to outright rejection, with mostly diverse degrees of accommodation and reinterpretation. In Latin America, Catholicism has certainly proclaimed dominance and has institutionalized itself as far as possible. However, not only has the Church never been as pristine and potent as it thought, but it has also often been associated—in the minds of the people if not in actuality—with social forces of political oppression and socioeconomic stratification.

Thus, unlike Weber’s vision of a Protestant ethic coming from and leading to a middle class, Dow finds that much of the success of it and its Pentecostal variant occurs among marginal peoples, the poor and, especially, the indigenous. The new religious form is successful in such communities “because it is clearly anti-Catholic. This anti-Catholicism appeals to the native themselves because it gives them a more independent identity. It also identifies them with a powerful group in and outside of their country, the Americans” (Dow 2001: 11). In fact, he decides that the religious change “looks like a peasant movement rebelling against a central authority. It breaks allegiances and asserts its independence in non-violent forms” (Dow 2001: 16)—an independence from what he calls the established “civil-religious hierarchy” (Dow 2001: 17).

Ethnographic accounts suggest that the reality is not simple. In O’Connor’s (1980) discussion of the Mayo in Mexico, religious conversion was implicated in ethnic mobility. The Mayo were the original inhabitants of the valley south of the Arizona border; through colonization, they had been dispossessed of their land and transformed into wage laborers, with ethnic competition and conflict against local mestizos. One of the “ethnic markers” of Mayo identity was a kind of folk-Catholicism. Mayo who sought to enhance their social status might convert to orthodox Catholicism, which was regarded as ethnic change as much as religious change. However, other new options existed in the form of three Protestant churches in the area, two of them Pentecostal. Of the Pentecostal sects, the Iglesia de Dios Evangelio Completo was the more “middle class”; the Iglesia de Jesucristo Unida contained some of the poorest folk in the valley and was strongly apocalyptic and secretive, as well as particularly egalitarian. Thus, there was not one path of conversion but *three*: folk-Catholic to orthodox Catholic (which entailed a change of ethnic identity); orthodox Catholic to Protestant (which did not entail an ethnic change); and folk-Catholic to Protestant (which was the most radical ethnic change).

In other situations, the course of Pentecostalism has been related to micro-social factors, like family relationships. It is a truism that people often convert to a religion because a family member (especially a husband or parent) does. In his study of a village in Belize, Cook (2001) encountered a context in which the most “traditional” and the most “modern” members of society had held onto their Catholicism—in fact, some of the most educated individuals had actually organized to preserve “tradition,” which included Catholicism against the Pentecostal threat. However, a few people—or more accurately, a few families—had converted to Pentecostalism. The four main Pentecostal families were the Pol, Cal, Tunche, and Pech. Most of the main congregations (all quite small) contained a disproportionate number of one of these families, and the three largest were headed by a Cal, a Pech, and a Pol, respectively. Moreover, each congregation was largely endogamous and patrilineal; it was essentially a set of related brothers. Cristo Rey, the biggest group, contained several generations of brothers, one of whom had splintered off to establish Palabra Vivienda. On the other hand, Pech brothers tended to belong to Rey de Cielo. In other words, Pentecostalism was a form of community/kinship segmentation by which male leaders could create and sustain their own socioreligious units.

Finally, in some instances, the appeal of Pentecostalism was specifically religious, but not always because of its “novel” elements. Pentecostalism offers a “charismatic,” frequently emotional, generally egalitarian, and often enough “total” religious experience. The egalitarianism and intimacy of the congregations (many of which are home-based) could be quite a release from rigid, hierarchical religious and social arrangements, in which locals may not be able to hold important office. Pentecostalism also regularly includes “practical” elements like healing; indeed, healing is a centerpiece in many groups and services.

As such, several scholars have noted the consonance between Pentecostalism and “traditional” religion. Conway compares Haitian Pentecostalism to traditional Vodoun (“voodoo”). While Pentecostalism explicitly, and often fervently, condemned non-Christian spiritual practices like Vodoun, it still had much in common with them. Both valued trance and spirit possession, and both incorporated drumming, hand-clapping, and ecstatic dancing. Both also emphasized healing, and, for many individuals, Pentecostalism was a sort of “last resort” after the powers of Vodoun had failed. Interestingly, Pentecostals did not deny that Vodoun spirits (*loua*) existed; they merely insisted that these spirits were evil. In fact, “no one in Haitian communities proclaims more publicly the existence and power of the *loua* and of other Vodoun forces” than the anti-Vodoun Pentecostals (Conway 1980: 13).

Likewise, in Trinidad, Glazier suggests that “the appeal and subsequent ‘growth’ of Pentecostalism may be attributed partially to its handling of traditional, and decidedly unmodern, beliefs concerning Obeah and demon possession” (1980: 67). Obeah was a local religion on the island concerned with (mostly bad) luck, in which practitioners cast evil spirits into people, usually at the request of a client. The only remedy for an Obeah spell was exorcism by an even stronger practitioner, and Pentecostals claimed to be more spiritually powerful and able to combat demons and pagan spells. Significantly, not only did Pentecostals perform exorcisms but so did

Methodists, Presbyterians, Seventh Day Adventists, and Catholics—each religion adapting to local situations—and locals turned to all of them, although Pentecostal rites had become the preferred solution (Glazier 1980: 70).

So, Pentecostalism in particular and Christianity in general have been accepted in various places for various reasons with various results, not always supporting Weber's view of the middle class and modernization. In some instances, it has been the religion of the emerging middle class; in other instances, it has served as a protest against domination and exploitation by the middle class. As Flora summarizes in her study of Colombia:

Pentecostalism flourished where social dislocation was greatest and where the traditional Colombian power sectors of the church, the economy, and the polity were most disorganized. It grew in areas of foreign capital penetration, which were often areas of high in-migration as well, as landless Colombian peasants sought a better way of life. Further, the individuals that became Pentecostals tended to be those that were also outside the social, economic, political, and religious nexus. They were migrants, who had migrated without the help of kin. They were outside political groups and outside mainstream economic employment. They were marginally employed and marginally tied into social networks. Pentecostalism provided for them an instant worldview explaining their situation. It also provided a supportive social network that gave each person worth and dignity in a situation that despised the poor, the dark-skinned, and the unemployed.

(1980: 84)

This, together with the role that sects of Christianity play in relation to the “premodern” social and spiritual scene, suggests that Weber's analysis of Christianity, capitalism, and modernization is not a universal one but a local European one universalized.

## **Islam**

As the world's second largest religion, Islam also displays tremendous local variation and adaptation. Like Christianity, Islam is fundamentally divided, in this case into two main branches known as Sunni and Shi'a. This schism traces back to the earliest days of Islam, when some followers supported a descendant of Ali (the *Shi'a Ali* or “Partisans of Ali”) to succeed as leader of the religion over the men—and ultimately the dynasties—that actually did come to rule. Those who accepted the practical realities, compromises, and traditions of religion and politics became known as the *Ahl as-Sunnah* or “People of the Path,” or the Sunnis, who comprise 90 percent of all Muslims. Each of these main branches is further divided into numerous schools of interpretation and jurisprudence, and although Shi'ites make up a small minority internationally, they are a significant group or even a majority group in some countries (like Iraq and Iran, respectively).

Geertz was one of the first to appreciate the internal diversity of Islam, explicitly comparing the religion in two widely separated contexts, Morocco and Indonesia. He firmly reminds us that a world religion like Islam,

even when it is fed from a common source, is as much a particularizing force as a generalizing one, and indeed whatever universality a given religious tradition manages to attain arises from its ability to engage a widening set of individual, even idiosyncratic, conceptions of life and yet somehow sustain and elaborate them all.

(Geertz 1968: 14)

In these two particular countries,

Islamization has been a two-sided process. On the one hand, it has consisted of an effort to adapt a universal in theory standardized and essentially unchangeable, and unusually well-integrated system of ritual and belief to the realities of local, even individual, moral and metaphysical perception. On the other, it has consisted of a struggle to maintain, in the face of this adaptive flexibility, the identity of Islam not just as a religion in general but as the particular directives communicated by God to mankind through the preemptory prophecies of Muhammad.

(Geertz 1968: 14–15)

Accordingly, what emerged was a distinctly Moroccan Islam as opposed to a distinctly Indonesian Islam, each consonant with its local culture, politics, and history. In Morocco, the basic style of life—and, therefore, of religion—was “strenuous, fluid, violent, visionary, devout, unsentimental, and above all, self-assertive” (Geertz 1968: 8). “Activism, fervor, impetuosity, nerve, toughness, moralism, populism, and an almost obsessive self-assertion” being cultural norms (Geertz 1968: 54), it is no surprise that “holy-man” piety evolved to match strongman politics. The central figure was the saint or religious leader (*marabout*) who possessed blessing or divine favor (*baraka*). Followers organized into brotherhoods (*awiyā*) around such leaders, and dead saints (*siyyid*) and their tombs were religious foci. The basic Indonesian style of life was “remarkably malleable, tentative, syncretistic, and most significantly of all, multivoiced” (Geertz 1968: 12), leading to norms of “inwardness, imperturbability, patience, poise, sensibility, aestheticism, elitism, and an almost obsessive self-effacement” (1968: 54). Indonesian Islam did not seek purity of religion or a single dominant figure; instead it produced “a proliferation of abstractions so generalized, symbols so allusive, and doctrines so programmatic that they can be made to fit any form of experience at all” (Geertz 1968: 17).

Islam came to societies in a variety of ways. Invasion and conquest were part of Muslim practice as surely as Christian. At other times, trade and commerce brought religion along and helped to establish it as a transcultural phenomenon—something

that traders on both sides could share. This was a critical component of the Islamization of Indonesia and Malaysia as well as of parts of Africa. As Richard Warms points out, the common religion “bonded the members of the merchant community together and differentiated them from animist non-members” (1992: 485). In addition to being a “boundary maintenance device,” it also provided a legal and moral model for commercial practices and interpersonal relationships, including the institution of credit. In yet other circumstances, Islam forged connections with political or military authority, creating what Kaba called an “alliance between the scholars and the soldiers, or [. . .] the association of the power of the pen with that of the sword” (1984: 241). In the case of the Songhay kingdom in West Africa prior to European colonialism, this alliance of Muslim clerics and military leaders, together with urban merchants, brought about a revolution and an ascension of Islam to power in the late fifteenth century.

The result of such social forces was a widely distributed but internally quite heterodox Islam. As Ahmed and Hart discuss in their comparative study of tribal Islamic societies, these various societies “consider themselves to be ‘purely’ Islamic, although they are often illiterate and may even be unorthodox in form. Subjectively they all regard themselves as ‘pure’ Muslims” (1984: 3). The Berti of Sudan are a clear case of this phenomenon, which Ladislav Holy (1991) uses effectively to dispel the notion of the monolithic “great tradition.” The Berti, originally called the Siga, were an independent society integrated into the Islamic sultanate of Darfur in the mid-eighteenth century. Islam, which came gradually to the region, came even more gradually to the remote villages and societies. The Berti at the time of research claimed to be Muslims, but they had “created their own version of it that deviates from the ‘normative’ Islam but locally constitutes an orthodoxy. All the Berti subscribe to it” (Holy 1991: 20).

For instance, every Berti village had a mosque, which was ordinarily nothing more than an open-air shade. Local religious authorities or *fugara* (sing. *faki*) were the most knowledgeable men in the religion, having graduated from Islamic schools and memorized the Qur’an. However, many *fugara* also kept books on astrology, divination, dreams, etc., and even constructed their own guidebooks or *umbatri* containing all the “secrets” they picked up from their experience. The Qur’an itself they treated as an object of “magical efficacy” (Holy 1991: 25).

The Berti distinguished between “religion” (*din*) and “customs” (*awaid*) but were not averse to blending the two. *Fugara* would make amulets out of the Qur’an and offer prayers for pedestrian reasons like combating locusts, bringing rain, guaranteeing the harvest, and so on. Holy concludes that the Berti, although aware of the religion/custom dichotomy, did not emphasize it. “They see both classes of ritual as bringing about the well-being, safety, health, comfort, and prosperity of specific individuals who undergo them or on whose behalf they are performed” (1991: 131). In fact, they looked upon *awaid* as “something that is uniquely theirs and that clearly distinguishes them from all their neighbors, with whom they otherwise share many elements of a common culture, including the Arabic language. As the main posts in the symbolic boundary of Berti society, the customary rituals contrast with Islam,

which the Berti also share with all their neighbors and which, in consequence, rather erodes or threatens their identity” (Holy 1991: 132). A few purists criticized custom as superstition and even anti-Islam, but, for the majority, the two religious approaches were one.

S. F. Nadel echoes this view in his classic study of Nupe religion. Nadel persists in considering Islam “an intrusion” upon the “indigenous religion,” although he admits that what he observed was not Islam replacing tradition or functioning parallel to tradition; rather “Nupe Islam” was not even “so-and-so much Nupe religion plus so-and-so much Islam but a fundamentally novel phenomenon, unprecedented, integrated, self-contained” (1954: 256). Like Songhay and the Berti, Islam had originated from above, brought with the conquering Fulani in the late eighteenth century. “Islam thus added to the unification of the conquest-state, extending the area of a common culture over a population otherwise unified only by political means” (Nadel 1954: 233). Nupe converted to Islam for various reasons, including exemption from slavery and closer client ties with the Muslim nobility. However, at the same time, the Nupe converted Islam to their own culture. Like the Berti, they accommodated the mosque to local design (an open area under a shady tree), applied obligatory prayers to traditional concerns, identified their local god Soko with Allah, and picked and chose among orthodox Islamic festivals. Nupe Muslim “scholars” (*mallam*) often held and taught “a medley of incongruous” information about the religion, and average members thought that Muhammad was the first human being, etc. (Nadel 1954: 247). In Nadel’s time, finally, young people were converting to Islam “not for any particular benefits they were expecting of Islam,” but out of personal, practical, and political considerations: Their conversion “meant abandoning religious practices which, more or less openly, stood for the status quo, for parental authority and an outmoded family structure” (Nadel 1954: 251).

Ernest Gellner, in his analysis of Islam in the Atlas Mountains, refines Geertz’s discussion of Moroccan religion. Not only does Gellner find that Islam in Morocco diverged from that in other countries, but it was regionally diverse as well. The Islam of urban centers was characterized by, “Stress on scripture and hence on literacy. Puritanism, absence of graven images. Strict monotheism. Egalitarianism as between believers; minimization of hierarchy. Absence of mediation, abstention from ritual excesses. Correspondingly, a tendency towards moderation and sobriety. A stress on the observance of rules rather than on emotional states” (Gellner 1969: 7). By contrast, the Islam of the rural and tribal areas was typified by “Personalization of religion, tendency to anthropolatry. Ritual indulgence, and absence of Puritanism. Proliferation of the sacred, concrete images of it. Religious pluralism in this and the other world and local incarnation of the sacred. Hierarchy and mediation” (Gellner 1969: 8). Thus, the “saint” complex that Geertz attributes to Morocco seems to apply to a certain *sector* of Morocco but not the entire country. We find that we cannot even generalize *within* a country, let alone across them.

To make one more point, Islam, like all other religions, often occupies a complex place in a religious field with other world religions, particularly, but not exclusively,



Christianity. Bringa (1995) describes one of the more interesting and consequential meeting places of the two world religions, Bosnia, where an ethnic and religious war in the 1990s had totally disrupted the society as previously studied. Bosnia had come under Muslim control as early as the 1300s, and many locals had converted to the religion. In twentieth-century Yugoslavia, Muslims and Christians (mostly Catholics) lived in a more-or-less shared social space in Bosnia, in which each group identified themselves by religion rather than by “ethnicity.” Still, until the war, Muslim and Catholic households were often neighbors, and the families would interact. At the same time, households of each faith maintained relations with other households of their faith living in other neighborhoods. Thus, the local unit, the village, “often consists of different groups of people with partly contrasting, partly overlapping sets of traditions and customs” (Bringa 1995: 82).

Women of the two religions paid casual social visits on each other and exchanged respect more formally on occasions of birth, death, illness, and such. Although each group used conventional religious greetings among themselves (e.g., *hvaljen Isus* or “Praise Jesus” among Catholics), they employed secular expressions like *dovidenja* (“goodbye”) between them. Still, communal markers existed, including religion-specific clothing such as the dark blue beret for men or the colorful baggy trousers (*dimije*) and headscarf for women. Finally, Bosnian Muslims also grasped the distinction between religion and custom (*adet*), valuing custom for the same reasons that the Berti and others did—to distinguish them from their neighbors. Village religion was, once more, a unique blend of orthodox Islam and local custom, including the idea of “religious merit” or *sevap* and the ritual practice of *tevhid* or home-gatherings for prayers or funeral observances, interestingly often attended and led by women. Many Islamic teachers (*hodzas*) disapproved of these events, but others participated in them, once again and ultimately blurring the line between Islam and non-Islam and between orthodox Islam and non-orthodox Islam.

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## Conclusion

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The world religions are among the most conspicuous and the most influential forces in the international arena today. They often claim, aim, or attempt to impose consistency and orthodoxy across their zones of influence. However, as we have learned, it would be misleading to take their claims—or aspirations—of homogeneity too literally. Homogeneity is less a fact of world religions than *part of the doctrine or self-identity* of these religions. The reality is that there are no sharp and absolute lines that divide religions from each other or unite all of the local versions of a particular religion with each other. A world religion, in the end, is not a single global “thing” but an assortment of multifarious local things. As such, each world religion meets, confronts, struggles with, and eventually adapts to not only “traditional” religions and other world religions but also to diversity within its own religion, not to mention nonreligious (including modernizing and secularizing) forces. The final outcome is a dynamic, churning, and ever-varying religious and social landscape in which

religious practices and identities are contested, made, unmade, and remade continuously. In fact, some of today's world religions may not be tomorrow's world religions, and some of today's local—or even not-yet-existing—religions may be world religions tomorrow.

# Religious violence

## The anthropology of violence

The constituents of cultural violence

*Integration into groups*

*Identity*

*Institutions*

*Interests*

*Ideology*

## Religion as explanation and justification for violence

### The diversity of religious violence

Sacrifice

Self-mortification and self-destructive behavior

Persecution

Holy war

Ethno-religious conflict

Abuse, crime, and murder

**Conclusion**

In the early twenty-first century, it is impossible to ignore the relationship between religion and violence. For example, according to Magnus Ranstorp (2003), an expert on international terrorism, the number of extremist religious movements of all types around the world tripled from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s. At the same time, the number of religiously inspired terrorist groups grew from zero to about one-quarter of all known terrorist organizations. In the period from 1970 to 1995, religious groups accounted for over half of the total acts of world terrorism—all this before 9/11.

Not surprisingly, a virtual industry of literature on religious violence has appeared. However, all of these treatments, valuable as they are, suffer from three limitations. First, they tend to examine a limited variety of religions; in short, they usually focus on Christianity and Islam, with some mention of Judaism, but seldom more than these three familiar world religions. Second, they tend to consider a limited variety of violence, namely “terrorism” and “holy war.” Third, they tend to operate from one of two positions in regard to the relationship between religion and violence: Either

they blame religion for violence (seeing all religion as violent or even all violence as religious), or they excuse religion from violence (suggesting that “authentic” or “healthy” religion is incapable of violence and that only “corrupted” religion can breed it).

Instead of these narrow perspectives, the issue of religious violence is more diverse and more complicated. A thorough comprehension of the violence that flows from religion requires a more comprehensive examination of religions. Furthermore, as prominent in the modern world as terrorism and holy war are, they are far from exhausting the variety of religion-based violence; rather, they are comparatively rare variations of the behavior. Finally, it is important to see that violence cannot be dismissed as a product of “bad” religion—partly because it seems to attach to so many forms of religion but primarily because it is judgmental and ethnocentric to dub some religion “bad” and other religion “good.”

In this chapter, we will see that there are many more ways for religion to include or promote violence than is usually thought, and many more manifestations of such violence. We will come to understand that there is little or nothing unique about religious violence that cannot be said about other types of violence; in fact, every example of religious violence has its nonreligious counterpart (i.e., there is holy war and there is secular war). Finally, we will perceive violence, like all else in culture, as a social construct and a practice, one which is performed by specific actors in specific circumstances for specific reasons. Not only is violence more social than usually imagined, but it is also less objectionable than usually imagined, that is, almost no one condemns every expression of violence, and not everyone even agrees on what violence is.

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## **The anthropology of violence**

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We cannot hope to understand religious violence unless we can understand violence in general. The problem is that many people think that violence requires no understanding—that it is a simple and obvious phenomenon—or that to understand it is somehow to condone it. The latter is particularly significant, since a dominant view of violence is that it is always unacceptable. However, the near-universality of violence, the plethora of forms it takes crossculturally, and the diversity of reactions to and evaluations of it make the anthropological approach to violence more problematic.

There are two main problems confronting those who would explain violence. The first is the notion that violence is, by definition, disordering, disruptive, indeed antisocial. This view is part of what psychologist Roy Baumeister (2001) criticizes as the “myth of pure evil,” that violence is the very opposite and antithesis of order and stability, which always comes from “outside,” from “the other,” to ruin individual and collective life. On the contrary, anthropologists understand that violence is part of society, constructed in and by society, and sometimes even constitutive of society. Max Gluckman was one of the first anthropologists to turn his attention from

homogeneity and homeostasis in culture to internal division and conflict. Many, if not all, societies, he noted, are “elaborately divided and cross-divided by customary allegiances” that pit members of the society against each other in various ways (Gluckman 1956: 1). He actually considered this internal division and low-grade conflict to be integrative rather than disintegrative, since

these conflicting loyalties and divisions of allegiance tend to inhibit the development of open quarrelling, and [. . .] the greater the division in one area of society, the greater is likely to be the cohesion in a wider range of relationships—provided that there is a general need for peace, and the recognition of a moral order in which this peace can flourish.

(Gluckman 1956: 25)

The sociologist Georg Simmel went two steps further. He insisted that conflict or violence *is* a social relationship: After all, “One *unites* in order to fight, and one fights under the mutually recognized control of norms and rules” (1955: 35). The very social structure may consist of the opposition, tensions, and overt hostilities between groups. This also reminds us that violence is not chaotic and unruly but is usually very rule-governed. There are acceptable forms, occasions, and roles for violence; the police or the military, for instance, have an official role of violence—but violence of specific and limited kinds, used in specific and limited ways. Beyond being immanently social, Simmel also regarded violence as in at least some ways socially *positive*. Conflict and violence are among the forces, together with peaceful and cooperative ones, that “constitute the group as a concrete, living unit” (Simmel 1955: 20). Violence can integrate and motivate people, clarify and strengthen values, and solidify group boundaries.

So, whether or not it is good for society, violence is certainly a part of society. The second problem we face is the sense that violence is an objective, absolute, and unitary thing, perhaps even a quality of the action or the actor. This perspective should lead to a neat definition of violence, but such a definition—especially crossculturally—has been notoriously difficult to devise. Instead, violence “is a slippery concept—nonlinear, productive, destructive, *and* reproductive. [. . .] [It] defies easy categorization. It can be everything and nothing; legitimate or illegitimate; visible or invisible; necessary or useless; senseless and gratuitous or utterly rational and strategic” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 1–2). There is little that all acts of violence share and that distinguishes them from acts of nonviolence; in fact, the exact same act can be assessed as violence in one context and not-violence in another.

This raises the salient point that violence is not so much an objective quality of an act or actor as a concept and a *judgment*. As Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois go on to say, “violence is in the eye of the beholder. What constitutes violence is always mediated by an expressed or implicit dichotomy between legitimate/illegitimate, permissible or sanctioned acts, as when the ‘legitimate’ violence of the militarized state is differentiated from the unruly, illicit violence of the mob or of revolutionaries”

(2004: 2). In fact, they determine that “most violent acts consist of conduct that is socially permitted, encouraged, or enjoined as a right or a duty. Most violence is not deviant behavior, not disapproved of, but to the contrary is defined as virtuous action in the service of generally applauded conventional social, economic, and political norms” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 5).

From this vantage, violence is not only a cultural judgment but also a *political one*, that is, who gets to label—and, therefore, condemn—an act or actor is a matter of social position and power. As David Riches puts it, “violence is very much a word of those who witness, or who are victims of, certain acts, rather than of those who perform them. [. . .] [W]hen a witness or victim invokes the notion of violence, they make a judgment not just that the action concerned causes physical harm but also that it is illegitimate” (1986: 3–4). And, as a judgment, the determination of violence is a cultural and, therefore, a contestable one: A person, group, or society may label an act as violence, while another person, group, or society—or the same person, group, or society at another time—may label it otherwise. For instance, when I was young, whipping a child was not considered violence, but for many Americans today it is.

“Violence” as a label, then, is relative and constructed. In addition, it is one among a variety of social labels available to judge and condemn/condone behavior. The political scientist Hannah Arendt (1969) noted that the English language has an assortment of terms (such as “power,” “strength,” “force,” “authority,” and “violence”—not to mention “aggression,” “conflict,” “competition,” and many others) that relate to the same general field of activity but that are not carefully and analytically distinguished. All such words/concepts carry some negative connotation; however, there is another universe of terms—often enough applied to the same actions—that convey a positive message, such as “justice,” “right,” “duty,” “self-defense,” and so on. Killing in self-defense is better than, more legitimate than, killing in aggression, even though the victim is equally dead.

Finally, various observers have commented that science, along with popular opinion, has tended to focus on the sudden, extreme, and exceptional “outbreaks” of violence—the ones that are least representative and least informative. Exceptional violence draws us away from the “violence of the everyday,” what has been called “structural violence” or “symbolic violence,” or merely from the routine, taken-for-granted practices and values that contribute to those outbreaks. Nordstrom and Martin (1992) insist that it is not only naïve but also dangerous to believe that violence only occurs when people are killing each other and ends when the killing stops; peace is not simply the absence of violence. Violence, like all other cultural phenomena, is “practiced,” and it emerges from concrete circumstances, shaped by norms, beliefs, and values, that are embodied by real-life individuals in particular situations.

### **The constituents of cultural violence**

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The anthropological perspective suggests that violence is not (usually) something that “bad people” do but something that ordinary people do in certain cultural

contexts. To test this, Stanley Milgram (1963) performed a classic experiment, asking average people to administer painful and potentially lethal electric shocks to other normal people as part of an alleged “teaching study.” He reported that two-thirds of the subjects were willing to give the highest level of shock, even though the “victim” screamed in pain and then went silent. Of course, there was no actual victim or even actual shocking, but the subjects thought there was. His finding was that regular people will knowingly hurt others in certain situations, specifically ones where some authority urges them to do so and absolves them from responsibility for it.

Based on this and other research, the social psychologist Philip Zimbardo (2000) suggests that social factors are much more important than psychological ones in promoting violence. In particular, he identifies six factors that are effective in making good people do bad things:

1. indoctrination into a thought-system that rationalizes or legitimizes violence;
2. obedience to authority, with no opportunity for dissent;
3. anonymity and deindividuation (e.g., getting lost in a crowd or having your individual decision-making powers taken or suppressed);
4. diffusion of responsibility (e.g., “just following orders” or dividing the violent behavior among a group of people);
5. gradual escalation of violence;
6. dehumanization of the enemy or the victim.

Of these six, he feels that blind obedience to authority is the most dangerous.

One serious conclusion of these studies is that an essential ingredient for committing injurious actions is a lack of empathy for potential victims. In empathy, we feel the suffering of the others around us; when I am empathetic, it really does “hurt me as much as it hurts you.” If one can give pain without getting pain, it is much easier. And if one thinks that the other *deserves* pain, or does not feel pain, or is beneath the concern of the perpetrator (nothing more than “dirt,” “a worm,” “garbage,” or otherwise subhuman), one can actually feel good while harming the other—or feel nothing at all.

We arrive at a series of social dimensions or conditions that contribute to the frequency, intensity, and “normality” of violence. The more of these dimensions or conditions that are met, the more likely and stronger the violence may be.

### Integration into groups

If humans have violent potential as individuals, that potential is increased dramatically in groups. And it is not a simple additive increase. Groups seem to have their own dynamics—not the least of which is creating an “out-group,” an “other,” a “not-us” against whom we can commit violence more extravagantly. Many commentators have noted the violent tendencies of groups. Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* that “Madness is something rare in individuals—but in groups, parties, peoples, ages, it is the rule” (1998: 70) Freud also suggested that groups have their own distinct psychology, characterized by heightened emotionality and irrationality, increased

excitability and agitation, and a kind of “suggestibility” found in hypnotic states. It is almost like, he opined, a sort of “group mind” emerges. Gustave Le Bon, writing over a century ago, gives an equally negative assessment of the effect of groups. Groups, he maintains, are distinct and dangerous in that they

do not reason, that they accept or reject ideas as a whole, that they tolerate neither discussion nor contradiction, and that the suggestions brought to bear on them invade the entire field of their understanding and tend at once to transform themselves into acts. We have shown that crowds suitably influenced are ready to sacrifice themselves for the ideal with which they have been inspired. We have also seen that they only entertain violent and extreme sentiments, that in their case sympathy quickly becomes adoration, and antipathy almost as soon as it is aroused is transformed into hatred. These general indications furnish us already with a presentiment of the nature of the convictions of crowds.

(Le Bon 1896: 62–3)

Whether groups, then, unleash something dormant in humans or add something absent in them, mere participation in a group has a profound and often negative effect. Baumeister dubs this the “group effect,” according to which groups “tend to be more antagonistic, competitive, and mutually exploitive than individuals. In fact, the crucial factor seems to be the perception that the other side is a group. An individual will adopt a more antagonistic stance when dealing with a group than when dealing with another individual” (2001: 193).

## Identity

Identity, one’s sense of “who he/she is,” is a complex cultural construction, consisting typically of four elements, all of which relate more or less directly to group integration. The first is a name. The basis for the name can be anything—language, territory, history, religion, race, or what have you—but it usually derived from and shared by a group. The second is values or beliefs, which are also learned and shared with a group or a society and internalized as we grow; the outcome is literally “different kinds of people” than those who learn and internalize other values and beliefs. The third, which is the ground for the first two, is a certain amount of direct and personal interaction. The more continuous and intense the personal interaction, the stronger the identity, although other indirect sources—newspapers, television, etc.—can have a major impact on identity formation too. In fact, Benedict Anderson (1983) made it clear that “imagined communities” of people who really do not know or interact with each other can still have profound identity-forming effects. Fourth, identity involves a sense of future or “destiny,” of not only who we are or were but who we will be and what we will accomplish—individually or, significantly, as and with a group. Identity, therefore, necessarily separates individuals and groups from each other. If I am an X and you are not, we are (potentially or actually) divided—and potentially in competition and conflict.



## Institutions

Individuals in social relations and the groups or categories they organize themselves into—families, classes, races, nations, and so on—will settle into, and sustain and propagate themselves through, routinized, standardized, and enduring patterns of interaction, or institutions. These include marriage and various kin groups (residence and lineage groups, for instance), “government” or other manifestations of power and leadership, class and other forms of stratification, etc. Each of these institutions consists of various formal and informal roles with their appropriate values and norms. In some institutions, values and norms may be homogeneous, but more often they will be “distributed” and unequal, even conflicting, but, either way, institutions tend to “freeze” the social arrangements. The society’s institutions then shape the experiences and, therefore, behaviors of individuals of different “kinds,” who model those behaviors for the next generation, perpetuating practices, beliefs, and values over time. Among these practices, beliefs, and values may be ones that promote equality or inequality and violence or nonviolence, and specific roles—such as police—may have institutional rights to “legitimate violence.” Some institutions, like slavery, may be violent by definition, and other institutions that are not created for violence—like the family home—may yet be primary locations for performing and experiencing violence.

## Interests

Individuals and groups inhabit a world where resources are often in short supply and almost always unevenly distributed. They, therefore, have interests, by which we mean the practical demands or goals of the group, such as wealth, power, land, jobs, education, and “symbolic” ends like prestige, self-respect, rights, and recognition. Humans individually and groups collectively pursue their interests and almost necessarily compete for them. Furthermore, often individuals cannot help but notice that their opportunity to achieve their interests is affected or determined by their group membership: One group may dominate or control valued resources and deny them to the other(s). The unequal and unfair distribution of resources, and the association of access or exclusion with group membership, can turn into competition, which can turn into conflict, which can turn into (deadly and prolonged, even genocidal) violence. That is, ordinarily, not the first step in the process; rather, competitions and disagreements escalate over time. Nevertheless, in this sense, violence can be “instrumental” or goal-oriented, and it can be effective.

## Ideology

Finally, at least certain kinds of groups create and foster their own distinct models and theories about how the world works and about how humans should respond. An ideology is such a model or theory, often characterized by its “completeness”: It is a total vision of reality, sometimes one that is immune to evidence or argument. In the

extreme, it can be an absolute and unquestioning view of how things are—or how they ought to be. Really effective, and dangerous, ideologies have some common traits. They tend to be *idealistic*, that is, to imagine an ideal, perfect world—often a future world—in which they have triumphed and instituted themselves. They are often *utopian*, which does not prevent them from attempting to realize themselves. They also often ask or demand complete commitment from members; they are *exclusivist*. Even worse, outsiders or holders of other ideologies may be “enemies”—the ultimate “them” standing in the way of our ideal reality. This attitude may excuse or compel the suppression, defeat, or total eradication of the other. Finally, such ideologies are often accompanied by a sense of *certainty*, that the ideas and the group are infallible and invincible, and, therefore, that everyone else is wrong and doomed to defeat or destruction. The ideology can easily become a “cause” for the individual or group—and, thus, a cause of violence.

Notice that nowhere in the exposition of these five criteria of violence was religion mentioned. The claim we are making is not that religion is alone in fulfilling these conditions. Quite the opposite: Political, racial, linguistic, gender, even “special interest” (e.g., radical ecological) groups, institutions, and ideologies can meet all of the conditions and have been observed to drive people to violence. Our claim is precisely that religion is *not* unique as a source for violence. Humans are violent in many ways for many reasons. However, religion is not exempt from fomenting violence, because, in some forms, it meets these five conditions thoroughly. Religion is always a social and a group phenomenon. It frequently contributes greatly to individual and collective identity. It seeks and depends on institutionalization. It almost invariably establishes interests (“spiritual” as well as practical) and, thereby, creates not only a “moral community” but also an “interest community.” And its ideology can incorporate absolutist, idealistic, exclusivist, and unquestioning beliefs and goals. Not all religions meet these criteria equally well, but when they do, violence—seen from the members’ perspective as *legitimate violence or not as violence at all*—should be no surprise.

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## Religion as explanation and justification for violence

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Religion has many facets, and one of these facets is violence. Religion does and perhaps must make room for violence in two ways. The first is as an explanatory system; the second is as a legitimization system. That is to say, religion must help people make sense of the empirical and undeniable violence in the natural and social world, and it will almost invariably serve as a reason to conduct violence in certain situations against certain targets.

One of the common theories of or approaches to religion is as an “intellectual,” problem-solving, question-answering institution. And some of the recurring questions that humans ask are: Why do bad things happen? Why is there evil or violence or

misfortune, etc., in the world? And, more specifically, why did it happen to me and mine? Since the existence of pain and adversity is irrefutable, no religion would be taken seriously that did not offer some insight into—and some remedy for—these conspicuously undesirable happenings. Also, as a model of and for the world, religion *can* offer explanations and answers in ways that no other human thought-system can.

The religious explanations of violence are as myriad as religion itself. In large part, the explanation that a religion offers will depend on the beings, forces, concepts, and specialist roles that it includes. One familiar “reason” for violence in the human world is humans themselves: Humans hurt each other and often choose to do so. In the Christian tradition, this human proclivity is attributed to “free will” and human imperfection: Humans are free to choose to help or harm and frequently choose to harm. In Christianity, human failings can even be used to explain “natural evil” like predation, aging, and death: According to Christian beliefs, there was no death at all in the world until humans misbehaved and subsequently brought death and evil down upon themselves and upon the natural world as well. In other words, all of reality suffers for the foibles of humanity.

There are often other kinds of especially powerful and pernicious humans, such as witches and sorcerers. Some religions attribute almost all hardship and misfortune to such human operators. The Azande explained everything from crop blights to hunting failures to bad moods to infertility in terms of witchcraft; as we quoted previously, “any failure or misfortune [. . .] upon anyone at any time and in relation to any of the manifold activities of his life [. . .] may be due to witchcraft” (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 19). Sorcerers and witches used an array of natural and supernatural substances and forces to do their dirty work and often aimed it at those who had offended or violated *them* in some way.

A common, probably universal aspect of religion is the assertion that harmful or at least capricious nonhuman beings or “spirits” exist. Some of these beings plague humans because it is their nature and pleasure to do so, like Spiro’s thirty-seven *nats* in Thailand. An infinity of demons, ogres, devils, and the like inhabit the religions of the world. In addition to malevolent spiritual beings, there are the spirits of plants, animals, and other natural phenomena that simply demand the attention and respect that they deserve as “persons”—like the “spirit-owning beings” of Ainu religion—and may inflict harm on humans for failure to treat them properly. Deceased humans too, the ancestors, can cause all sorts of troubles for the living. !Kung ancestors (//*gawwasi* or //*gangwasi*) were the direct bearers of much misfortune, and Tallensi ancestors determined a person’s “evil destiny.”

In religions with such concepts, impersonal supernatural forces could often account for the suffering of humans. From the ancient Greek notion of fate to *mana* and *chi*, such forces were seen as influencing or setting the course of one’s life, for good or ill. The Hindu-Buddhist concept of *karma* meant that the bad that one did came back to him or her, in the next life if not sooner; there was a supernatural cause and effect that explained a person’s fortunes or misfortunes. Buddhism, perhaps, elaborated this view most and made it central to the religion, in the idea of *dukkha* or suffering. In fact, in the Four Noble Truths, the first is simply and inevitably that

existence itself is *dukkha*; the subsequent truths explained the cause (attachment or desire), the cure (detachment or extinguishing desire), and the method to implement the cure. However, the religion did not promise an alleviation, much less a defeat, of suffering, but merely an acceptance and overcoming of it.

Finally, in religions with gods, the gods themselves may be the architect of human ill. For instance, one or more gods may specialize in tribulation, such as a god of war or a god of disease. Suffering may be divine punishment or “justice” for wrongdoing, if the god(s) take(s) a moral interest in humans. On other occasions, misfortune could be a warning. And some gods simply have a malevolent nature. Christianity tends to emphasize the positive qualities of its god, overlooking the fact that he stated, “I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7). In other traditions, the trouble that befalls humans comes from the struggle between a good god and an evil god or being, with humans caught in between. It may have been an evil god/being who unleashed suffering on the world in the first place, as in the Zoroastrian claim that Angra Mainyu—a kind of “anti-creator” god—introduced the serpents, plagues, “plunder and sin,” unbelief, “tears and wailing,” and the 99,999 diseases into the otherwise perfect creation of Ahura Mazda, the good god.

Not only does religion explain why violence and other burdens exist in the world, but it also frequently explains why such things are *necessary, good, even noble*. Many religions see certain kinds of violence on certain occasions against certain entities as tolerable, moral, or even ordained.

As a charter or model for reality, religion is a particularly effective charter for committing violence in some cases. Mark Juergensmeyer (2000: 12) specifies four elements that create a vital link between the religion and violence:

1. the transcendent moralism with which such acts are justified;
2. the ritual intensity with which they are committed;
3. the familiar religious images of struggle and transformation—concepts of cosmic war—within which they are interpreted;
4. the perception that their communities are under attack—are being violated—and that their acts are, therefore, simply responses to the violence they have experienced.

The result can be and frequently has been violence that is unusually vicious in its means and “final” in its goals.

Even the smallest and most “traditional” religions make room for some forms of sanctioned violence, as we will explore in more depth below. For instance, religions that accept the reality of witches often consider it acceptable and desirable to punish or execute them. Individuals who violate religious taboos, break sacred moral injunctions, or deny or blaspheme religious beliefs may be subject to punishment, including death. However, there can be no doubt that the world religions have offered more extensive and elaborate justifications for violence and have practiced it on a singular scale. A concept like “holy war” would make little sense to most local

religions. World religions created a dualism of believers and nonbelievers that rendered violence possible if not inevitable: Groups that feel themselves in possession of the “one true religion” have little sympathy or tolerance for divergent groups. Clearly, the god of the Torah/Old Testament ordered violence against other societies as well as disobedient or disbelieving members of his own society:

And they warred against the Midianites, as the Lord commanded Moses; and they slew all the males. [. . .]

And the children of Israel took all the women of Midian captives, and their little ones, and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their goodly castles, and all their goods [. . .]

[Moses said] Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill woman that hath known man by lying with him.

But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.

(Numbers 31:7–18)

If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers;

Namely, of the gods of the people which are round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee, from one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth;

Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him; neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him;

But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people.

(Deuteronomy 13:6–9)

Islam too, inheriting the monotheistic absolutism of Judaism and Christianity, sanctions violence in the name of religion.

So when the sacred months have passed away, then slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush, then if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate, leave their way free to them; surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.

(sura 9.5)

O you who believe! The idolaters are nothing but unclean. [. . .]

(sura 9.28)

O you who believe! fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you hardness; and know that Allah is with those who guard (against evil).

(sura 9.123)

Like many ideologies that tolerate violence, the perpetrators of violence see *themselves* as victims of abuse or persecution and their acts, therefore, as self-defense; they also demonize the enemy, who deserves no better treatment.

[P]ersecution is graver than slaughter; and they will not cease fighting with you until they turn you back from your religion, if they can; and whoever of you turns back from his religion, then he dies while an unbeliever—these it is whose works shall go for nothing in this world and the hereafter, and they are the inmates of the fire; therein they shall abide.

(sura 2.217)

While monotheisms are particularly prone to such attitudes, they are not alone. Hinduism, for instance, justifies violence and war through its concepts of *dharma*, *karma*, caste, and reincarnation. The classic statement comes in the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which the warrior Arjuna contemplates the upcoming battle where he will face friends and kinsmen in the opposing army. Prepared to throw down his weapons in despair, his chariot-driver, the god Krishna, explains why war and killing are not only necessary but moral: Arjuna is a *kshatriya*, born into the caste of warriors, as are his opponents. To kill is his duty, his *dharma*, as it is theirs. It cannot be immoral to do one's spiritual duty; rather, it would be immoral *not* to fight and kill. Even more, since humans are really spiritual beings and not material bodies, no harm can come to any combatant; a warrior can only kill the body, not the spirit, and such a death actually *benefits* the spirit, which has died well and dutifully. How will you grieve for what cannot be destroyed, Krishna admonishes him, since the spirit is "unharmful, untouched, immortal"? Birth, death, and duty are all ordained, so what is there to be sad or guilty about?

In these and such ways, violence is legitimized and literally authorized in religion. Religions, as Ortner opined (1978), solve the problems they define for themselves, including the problem of what evil is, why it exists, and what one should do about it. Violence is inappropriate and even wicked in some circumstances, but it is appropriate and even righteous in others. As Ecclesiastes expressed it, there is a time for everything, including a time to kill.

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## The diversity of religious violence

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Religion and violence are clearly compatible, but they are not identical. Violence is one phenomenon in human (and natural) existence, religion is another, and it is inevitable that the two would become intertwined. Religion is complex and modular, and violence is one of its modules—not universal, but recurring. As a conceptual and behavioral module, violence is by no means whatsoever exclusive to religion. There are plenty of other groups, institutions, interests, and ideologies to promote violence. Violence is, therefore, neither essential to nor exclusive to religion. Nor is religious violence all alike. There are numerous manifestations and motivations for

violence in the name or the service of religion. Any religion may condone some and condemn others. And virtually every form of religious violence has its nonreligious corollary.

A few scholars have tried to make theoretical sense of religious violence, most of them nonanthropologists. Probably the two most influential thinkers on the subject are René Girard and Walter Burkert, both of whom have argued for an essential connection between violence and religion. Girard's dominant analysis, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), posits that religion is basically *about* violence. Humans, as social creatures, unavoidably experience tensions and conflicts with each other. The cause of this problem, Girard theorizes, is "mimetic desire," that is, that members of society learn to value and desire the same things and, thus, to compete over them. Humans are necessarily rivals and obstacles to each other, breeding hostility and violence. Allowed to proceed unchecked, this internal violence would tear society apart through fights, feuds, vendettas, civil wars, and so on. Religion provides a solution through the projection of violence away from the real rival and onto a substitute victim, a "scapegoat." This is not a "symbolic" act, he insists, since it must seem real to the actors. Girard ends up equating violence with sacrifice, and equating religion to a control system to prevent the spread of violence. Religion is, in the final analysis, "another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence" (Girard 1977: 23). Thus, he expects to find violence (sacrifice) in societies without other more formal, "judicial" means of handling competition and conflict.

For Burkert, religious violence is related to the human practice of hunting. In his book *Homo Necans* (1983), he theorizes that humans became human through the act of the kill (hence the title, meaning "killer man"). Yet, as necessary and crucial as hunting was, the experience was horrifying: Prehistoric hunters, he believes, felt shock and anxiety at the death they caused. These intense experiences—"the shock of the deadly blow and flowing blood, the bodily and spiritual rapture of festive eating, the strict order surrounding the whole process"—are the very fount of the religious sentiment, the "*sacra* par excellence" (Burkert 1983: 40). "Thus," he concludes, "blood and violence lurk fascinatingly at the very heart of religion," with sacrifice again playing the paradigmatic role of religious violence (Burkert 1983: 2).

### **Sacrifice**

Since it has occupied such a central place in discussion of religious violence, it is tempting to start with the phenomenon of sacrifice. The very word means "to make sacred" (from the Latin *sacer* for "holy" or "sacred" and *facere* for "to make or do"). Sacrifice entails the damage or destruction of some object, often a living being, for a supernatural purpose. In one of its first sociological treatments, published originally in 1898, Hubert and Mauss defined it as "a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned" (1964: 13). In Durkheimian style, they saw sacrifice as a mediation between the poles of sacred and profane,

represented by the sacrificer and the supernatural entity to which he/she sacrifices. In the process, the object is removed, literally, from the profane world and “sacralized” so that it can be transferred to the sacred world in a sort of supernatural communication and exchange.

Other analysts have offered various views. E. B. Tylor saw sacrifice as a gift to the divine, while Frazier interpreted it as a ritual control of death, and Robertson Smith as predominantly a communal meal. And in the most recent crosscultural study, Meyer Fortes considers it

a special ritual procedure for establishing or mobilizing a relationship of mutuality between the donor (individual or collective) and the recipient; and there is generally, if not always, an implication of mutual constraint, and indeed of actual or potential mutual coercion in the act. [. . .] Sacrifice is more commonly a response to a demand or command from supernatural agencies or else a rendering of a standard obligation, than a spontaneous offering; and whether or not it is thought of as expiation or propitiation or purgation, there is commonly an element of demand, certainly of persuasion, on the donor’s side.  
(Fortes 1980: xiii–xiv)

From this perspective, sacrifice is not only a destructive act and a mandated and, therefore, appropriate act but also a social act. The nature and meaning of the social exchange and mutual obligation implied has often been viewed through Judeo-Christian eyes, as a matter of “cleansing sin” or currying God’s favor or, as Girard emphasized, scapegoating (i.e., substitutive killing). And if scapegoating is the paradigm of sacrifice, the offering of Abraham’s son Isaac to God is the paradigm of scapegoating. However, Judeo-Christianity is not the only religious tradition of sacrifice, nor is scapegoating the only type of sacrifice in Judeo-Christianity. The written sources mention “peace offerings” (Exodus 20), “trespass offerings” (Leviticus 5:19), “sacrifice of thanksgiving” (Leviticus 22:29), and “jealousy offerings” (Numbers 5:15), among others.

Hinduism began as a fundamentally sacrificial religion. Early Hindu texts like the Vedas consist principally of hymns and instructions of sacrifice. The god Agni, literally the deity of fire, was the “ruler” of sacrifice, and sacrifice was a critical if not *the* critical ritual act. Ancient Greeks practiced animal sacrifice, such as the *buphonia* or ox sacrifice for Zeus. Dennis Hughes (1991) mentions several purposes of Greek sacrifice: For the gods of Olympus, for weddings and childbirths and funerals, in honor of heroes, in preparation for battle, as part of swearing oaths, and as purifications. In fact, the ritual of *pharmakos* may have involved human sacrifice or, at the very least, the scourging of human victims, who were whipped, cursed, and chased out of the city, carrying the ills of the group with them.

Blood sacrifice has been observed around the globe, from small pastoral societies to centralized kingdoms; the only situation in which it has *not* been observed with any regularity is in foraging societies, where Burkert predicts it should be most prevalent. Pastoralists like the Nuer and the Dinka sacrificed cattle for rituals like



male initiation or to communicate with and honor the ancestors. But the most extreme versions of sacrifice, including human sacrifice, have been noted in complex state or protostate societies—the precise ones where Girard expects *not* to find it. In the kingdom of Dahomey, the living king and the spirits of dead kings demanded sacrifice on such occasions as a royal death, the construction of a new palace, the initiation or conclusion of a war, the opening of a new market, and the ceremonies to feed his ancestors (Herskovits 1938).

The almost obsessive human sacrifices of the Aztec and Mayan civilizations are particularly famous and particularly “political.” At least three major themes combined to produce these prodigious religious killings. One was a belief that the sun was a tired and hungry god who needed a constant flow of blood to rejuvenate him and keep him returning every day. The second was the model of the gods themselves. According to one Aztec myth, the god Huitzilipochtli had been born fully grown and fully armed for battle from the womb of the goddess Coatlicue. Born a war god, Huitzilipochtli fought with his sister Coyolxauhqui and other gods and defeated them. His sister’s broken body, beheaded and dismembered, landed at the bottom of the stairs of his temple (Matos Moctezuma 1984: 136). Subsequent human sacrifices at the main temple at Tenochtitlan in present-day Mexico City re-enacted this victory: Human victims were killed at the top of the temple, ideally by having their beating heart ripped out, then they were bled, and, finally, their bodies were tossed down the stairs to land where and as the vanquished goddess had fallen. In some particularly macabre rituals, priests would flay the skin off of the victims and wear it themselves, transforming themselves temporarily into gods. The third theme was an overtly political one: The Mayan and Aztec emperors proclaimed their political and military prowess by leading vast sacrifices, often of defeated enemies, in a theater of absolute power over life and death.

### Case study 9.1

#### Sacrifice in the Hawaiian kingdom

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Pre-conquest Hawaii had a highly developed political system, verging on state status. Sacrifices were common in and critical to this system. They were performed for a wide variety of purposes, including life-cycle occasions like birth, marriage, and death; work- or production-related activities such as building a house, setting fishing nets, cultivating crops; to combat sickness and ritual and moral failures; natural increase and protection, such as to bring rain or fertility or to protect against sharks or volcanoes; and as part of sorcery and divination. Each of the many deities on the islands required their specific sacrifices, of species or objects that were associated with it. Many of the victims were also associated with humans, such as domesticated animals, or had metaphorical connections with humans, like bananas and coconuts.

In some cases, humans themselves were offered. Among other things, the sacrifices were food for the gods, who ate the “essence” of the offering and left the rest to share among the human participants, who were “supposed to absorb divine mana” (Valeri 1985: 56). The king was not only the political leader but also the paramount sacrificer. In this role, he was seen to partake of “the nature of the god on whom his actions are efficacious” and even to be “a human manifestation of this god” (Valeri 1985: 131). The king, by conducting or at least authorizing sacrifice—especially the ultimate sacrifice, human—proclaimed and established, literally *performed*, his role as highest of men. In a word, “The king is king, therefore, because he is the head of the cult, the supreme sacrificer, the man closest to divinity” (Valeri 1985: 140). Therefore, being the supreme sacrificer was not only part of his political power but also *the source of his political power*: “It is precisely this that gives him authority over men, since it makes his actions more perfect and efficacious than theirs” (Valeri 1985: 142). “He is, in sum, the point of connection between the social whole and the concept that justifies it” (Valeri 1985: 142)—namely, the supernatural and its demand for victims.

Thus, it appears that Girard, Burkert, and others who take similar approaches are wrong about the social and religious meanings of sacrifice. Probably the most inclusive and useful interpretation comes from a lesser-known scholar named E. O. James, who suggested that sacrifice is not about death at all but about life:

In the ritual of shedding blood it is not the taking of life but the giving of life that really is fundamental, for blood is not death but life. The outpouring of the vital fluid in actuality, or by substitute, is the sacred act whereby life is given to promote and preserve life, and to establish thereby a bond of union with the supernatural order.

(James 1971: 33)

In other words, the

fundamental principle throughout [instances of sacrifice] is the same; the giving of life to promote or preserve life, death being merely a means of liberating vitality. [. . .] Consequently, the destruction of the victim, to which many writers have given a central position in the rite, assumes a position of secondary importance in comparison with the “transmission” of the soul-substance to whatever being or purpose it is intended.

(James 1971: 256)

This explains why sacrifice is so common and so crucial to maintaining the *power* of supernatural beings, of social roles (like king), and of physical *but cultural*

items like buildings, farms, and *domesticated* animals. Sacrifice illustrates a natural/social/supernatural complex that is caught in an *economy of life* in which vitality must be drained from here to invest there.

### **Self-mortification and self-destructive behavior**

If there is a universal element in all religions, it is probably not sacrifice but self-mortification—any of the thousands of ways in which humans deprive, injure, or even kill themselves for spiritual reasons. Its very universality makes it an incredibly diverse phenomenon, with many variations and many justifications. Shamans in training often underwent painful ordeals, such as insect bites, food and sleep deprivation, drug ingestion, and physical operations. Ritual participants frequently had to observe behavioral strictures on food or sleep or sex. Initiations typically included direct or indirect infliction of pain, in the forms of circumcision, scarification, “female circumcision” or female genital mutilation, nasal-septum piercing, tooth removal, and on and on and on. While religion is ostensibly about the spirit, it often seeks and even needs to leave its mark on the body.

The most complete sort of self-directed violence is martyrdom, killing oneself or allowing oneself to suffer or die for a religious cause. In a way, it can be construed as self-sacrifice. Judaism to a certain extent and Christianity to a much greater extent have elevated martyrdom to a righteous act. Martyrdom is, as Droge and Tabor (1992) titled their book on it, viewed by the actor and often the audience as “a noble death,” in which dying is superior to living in a desecralized state. For instance, in the text known as *Testament of Moses*, a father urged his sons to “let us die rather than transgress the commandments of the lord of lords” (quoted in Droge and Tabor 1992: 72). The Books of Maccabees give more models: Eleazar, for instance, was ordered to eat unclean food but instead, “welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord [. . .] as men ought to go who have the courage to refuse things that it is not right to taste” (2 Maccabees 6:18–20). The end of the siege of Masada, where the entire population killed themselves rather than be taken prisoner by the Romans, shows the extent to which they embraced death over surrender of religion.

Martyrdom became a fixture of early Christianity, partly because it was seen to emulate the paradigmatic act of Jesus. Some, like the early Church father Tertullian, came to positively revel in the notion, seeing it as not just the only way to salvation but also as a great and glorious choice: “condemnation gives us more pleasure than acquittal” (quoted in Droge and Tabor 1992: 136). “I strongly maintain that martyrdom is good,” he preached (Droge and Tabor 1992: 146), and many others concurred. Origen regarded martyrdom as a kind of baptism that removed sins. Cyprian opined that “death makes life more complete, death rather leads to glory” (quoted in Smith 1997: 91). Ordered to worship the Romans gods, Carpus and Palyus eagerly ran to their deaths (Droge and Tabor 1992: 138). Vivia Perpetua actually assisted in her own death by steadying the executioner’s sword against her neck, according to the book *The Passions of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*. Indeed,

a great number of “acts of martyrs” or “lives of martyrs” are collected in Christian literature.

Nonfatal mortification like self-flagellation has appeared recently as a practice in parts of the Philippines (where a hardy few have even been known to crucify themselves), and “penitential” self-flagellation has also been performed in European Christianity and its offshoots, such as the Penitente Brotherhood in New Mexico, which practiced it in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and in some areas may still. Carroll (2002) argues that self-flagellation was introduced to Spanish colonies as a part of Christian conversion, as a sort of “social disciplining”—a “theatricality of blood” that evoked a strong emotional reaction and commitment to Catholicism. The behavior eventually institutionalized into the “Brothers of Blood” with roles and ranks of discipline and self-mortification.

Islam has its own tradition of martyrdom, as evidenced by the verse in the Qur’an, “And whoever obeys Allah and the Apostle, these are with those upon whom Allah has bestowed favors from among the prophets and the truthful and the martyrs and the good, and a goodly company are they!” (sura 4: 69). Martyrdom in Islam is called *shahadat* and a martyr a *shahid*, from the Arabic root that means “witness” (identical to the root of the English word “martyr”). While traditionally Muslims have not sought martyrdom as eagerly as Christians have, it is still a noble destiny. As Ayatullah Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani (n.d.) puts it,

The *shahid* is the one who has experienced the *shuhud* (vision) of truth. The sacrifice of his own life is not based on illusion or agitation of his emotions. He has seen the truth and the goal. That is why he has chosen to wallow in the blood and the dust. Such a person does so with the intention of intimacy with God, not on the basis of fantasies and personal desires. He is above these worldly matters. He has understood the value of truth in a deserved way. This is why he annihilates himself, like a drop in the ocean of truth.

For at least some Muslims, martyrdom follows from the historical model of Husein or Husayn, who was killed in the early days of the religion. Members of the Shi’a Ali (see Chapter 8) sometimes include self-mortifying behaviors in their rituals. In the festival of Asura, the devout flagellate themselves across the back with blades attached to whips to taste martyrdom.

Jeffrey Goldberg (2000) illustrates how contemporary martyrs are made and not born. He visited a Muslim religious school (*madrasa*) in Pakistan and described how young males, mostly from poor families, spent years of their lives memorizing the Qur’an and learning Islamic history and law—and little else. He concluded that this school was a “jihad factory,” and students’ and parents’ attitudes support his claim. He asked one student at the school how his parents would feel if he were to die in religious combat. “‘They would be very happy,’ he said. ‘They would be so proud. Any father would want his son to die as ‘*shahid*,’ or martyr.”

There are numerous other forms of self-mortification in religions. Asceticism is a very common one, in which people intentionally damage or deprive themselves. In

fact, according to Geoffrey Harpham, “Where there is culture there is asceticism: cultures structure asceticism—each in its own way, but do not impose it” (1987: xi). Ascetic behaviors can include extreme isolation, self-starvation, sleep deprivation, lack of sanitation, poverty, silence, and, of course, sexual chastity, or any other action that makes life difficult or uncomfortable (like wearing scratchy clothing, sleeping on hard surfaces, or exposing oneself to heat or cold). It can also include deliberate infliction or acceptance of pain. The monastic tradition (secluding oneself in a monastery) derived from individual feats of ascetic rigor. St. Anthony, the Egyptian Christian lone ascetic, set the model for what Harpham calls “heroic fanaticism” and experimentation in self-torment. Such self-treatment is often referred to as “discipline,” as if the natural and pain-free body is undisciplined and unfocused, and nothing brings the body into focus like pain. In the extreme, Harpham suggests, the motto of the ascetic is “I am already dead” (1987: 26).

Harpham posits that the common thread of asceticism is the belief in a “composite self” containing a transcendent “spiritual” essence conjoined to a substance (matter or body) “that is mutable, degraded, and rebellious” (1987: 36). Isaac echoes this sentiment in stating that asceticism “is based on the a priori assumption that sensuous, bodily, and worldly matters, contrasted with spiritual ones, are either non-real, or the source of evil, or simply evil itself” (1995: 334–5). Hinduism shares some of this virulently anti-body ideology with Christianity, as the following passage from the *Maitreya Upanishad* shows:

Lord, this body is produced just by sexual intercourse and is devoid of consciousness; it is a veritable hell. Born through the urinary canal, it is built with bones, plastered with flesh, and covered with skin. It is filled with feces, urine, wind, bile, phlegm, marrow, fat, serum, and many other kinds of filth. In such a body do I live.

Thus, asceticism, especially in its more extreme forms, is founded on a religiously inspired conception of self and offers a method and discipline “to become a different person, a new self, to become a different person in new relationships; and to become a different person in a new society that forms a new culture” (Valantasis 1995: 547).

Most religions suggest asceticism as a path for the few. Buddhism, on the other hand, essentially represents a program in which every human is an ascetic; although some practitioners commit themselves more completely to the goal than others, the ideal Buddhist life is a self-denying one. Hinduism, in addition to full-time ascetics, offers renunciation via a special life stage—the final stage of life (especially for men) when the duties of family and household have been satisfied. In late life, a man ideally was to become a *sanyasin*, abandoning home to reject the world and its pleasures and wander as a poor spiritual athlete. The path was not as open or proper for women, although Lynn Denton (2004) found a group of female ascetics or *sanyasini* in contemporary India who engaged in ritual fasting and sexual abstinence; they literally organized themselves into formal ascetic communities or subcultures with sects and leaders and ranks and rituals. However, for the vast majority of Hindu women, self-

denial and self-destruction awaited their husbands' death, when rather than live as a widow they were ideally to kill themselves by joining their husbands on the funeral pyre to become a *sati* or "pure one." Numerous mythical and historical models established this paradigm of womanly and wifely devotion.

## Persecution

Persecution ranges from mild discrimination and intolerance to active hostility to genocidal violence; the unifying aspect of these practices is the disapproval of one religious community by another. Every religion, of course, creates a community of believers, which, in turn, creates a community of nonbelievers, essentially everyone else in the world. Religion, then, has a fundamentally us-versus-them dynamic. However, not all religions experience this dichotomy equally—or at all—and not all act on it as strenuously. "Local" religions never expected that all humans would share the same beliefs and practices; geographically and socially limited beings, forces, rituals, and symbols constituted their religious reality. But other kinds of religions—especially those that make universal, totalistic, absolute claims to truth and morality—are more prone to religion-based intolerance and conflict. These include the world religions.

Persecution requires not only belief but also power. However, it is a tragic lesson of history that the persecuted tend to become the persecutors once they attain power. In Christianity's early years, it was persecuted. Most of this hostility resulted from their refusal to conform to Roman imperial religious conventions, like sacrificing to the emperor. Once Christianity came to power in the empire, it engaged in persecution too. For example, when religious orthodoxy was established by the Council of Nicaea in 325, all dissenting views became heresy. Such heresies included the claim that God was not a trinity or that Jesus was not divine or that the sacraments of the Church were wrong or unnecessary. In 380, Theodosius set penalties for deviation from official doctrine, ranging from fines and loss of property to banishment, torture, and death; in 385, Spanish bishop Priscillian and six of his followers received the honor of being the first put to death under the new edicts, by decapitation.

Tertullian was only the most extreme advocate of persecution when he wrote, "How shall I admire, how laugh, how rejoice, how exult, when I behold so many proud monarchs, and fancied gods, groaning in the lowest abyss of darkness; so many magistrates who persecuted the name of the Lord, liquefying in fiercer fires than they ever kindled against the Christians" (quoted in Freke and Gandy 1999: 243). Augustine and Aquinas agreed. In fact, Augustine asserted that persecution and execution were not only just but kind: The Church killed "out of love [. . .] to reclaim from error to save souls." Accordingly, there was unjust persecution and just persecution, namely "an unjust persecution which the wicked inflict on the Church of Christ, and [. . .] a just persecution which the Church of Christ inflicts on the wicked." Aquinas argued that some crimes deserved capital punishment and that blasphemy and "unbelief" were the worst of crimes. Therefore, heretics "by right [. . .] can be put to death and despoiled of their possessions by the secular authorities,

even if they do not corrupt others, for they are blasphemers against God, because they observe a false faith. Thus they can be justly punished more than those accused of high treason” (quoted in Levy 1993: 52).

The Inquisition, established in the 1200s, was the most institutionalized form of European religious persecution, aimed first at “protesting” Christian sects and eventually at Jews and Muslims. Non-Christians who did not convert to Christianity, or who converted but were suspected of “backsliding” or secretly following their old religion, were often tortured and killed. Martin Luther, who barely escaped the Inquisition himself, was unfortunately no champion of tolerance: In 1530 he called for imprisonment, torture, and death for *other* heretics like Anabaptists and accepted the persecution of Jews.

Many religions have conducted or suffered their own versions of persecution. Hindus and Muslims have persecuted each other, and continue to do so, along the India–Pakistan border. The religion of Sikhism in Kashmir was born, and became militarized, from religious clashes on the Muslim–Hindu frontier. Local traditional religions were widely suppressed and persecuted under European colonialism, and religions of all kinds were persecuted by Communist governments in the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, and elsewhere. In the attempt to purge society of religion, functionaries of every faith were defrocked, sometimes forced to marry, publicly ridiculed and “re-educated,” and more than occasionally killed; religious properties were seized for secular uses or simply destroyed.

Jews have been particular targets of persecution in the Western world, for a variety of reasons. They have been the most populous and prominent group of non-Christians in generally Christian societies. They often held roles of wealth and power. And, of course, they were often accused of being the “murderers of Christ.” Throughout European history, they were segregated into ghettos, made to wear identifying clothing, barred from certain occupations or social positions, and periodically uprooted or terrorized. In imperial Russia, recurring “pogroms” forced them from their homes. And, of course, the very model of modern religious persecution, the Nazi Holocaust, was only and overtly the “final solution” to what had been perceived as a problem by many Westerners for many centuries.

### Holy war

The notion of holy war presupposed the notion of war. While virtually all societies have had their more or less violent episodes, not all have practiced war, by which we mean a prolonged, coordinated effort by a more or less formal “military institution” to conquer, often to occupy the land of, and sometimes to vanquish or even exterminate another society. Most anthropological analyses of war suggest that it is a characteristic of state-level political systems—perhaps a *defining* characteristic of such systems—and this form of politics typically occurs, again, with the world-religion form of religion.

Holy war, then, is probably unique to exclusivist, universalistic religions. Not only does each see itself as sole possessor of the truth and, therefore, as being in mortal

competition with all other religions (local and world), but each may find itself at some time in alliance with or possession of the apparatus of state, including the military. Islam is the religion most closely associated in most people's minds with the doctrine of holy war or *jihad*, but the Christian concept of *crusade* means precisely the same thing. Both can trace their roots to the ancient Hebrew doctrine of *milhemet mitzvah* or "commanded" or "obligatory war." As Jewish scriptures and history prove, their god regularly ordered them to war against certain neighbors, making such war not only holy but mandatory. At least according to some commentators and traditions, *milhemet mitzvah* also included or allowed for self-defense, including "pre-emptive wars" to prevent an expected attack; some commentaries even suggest that wars to expand God's territory are obligatory. Like later Islamic practice, ancient Hebrew war first required an offer of peace to the enemy, which of course meant surrender and servitude to the conqueror; if they refused the "peace offer," the godly army could destroy them or enslave them righteously. Compared to some later versions of holy war, the ancient Hebrew variety was not meant for conversion but for eliminating "abomination" and keeping the religion integrated and "pure" against foreign influence.

Two warlike components of Christian ideology are "cosmic dualism" and "just war." Cosmic dualism envisions the forces of good and evil locked in a cosmic struggle for domination. Humans are and should be engaged in this contest—"warriors for God" and "Christian soldiers"—in which there is no neutrality. "Just war" is a form of war which meets certain conditions, such as declaration by a legitimate authority (like the Church), conduct with the right intention, prosecution in proportion to the threat (i.e., no excessive force), and conformity with the "rules" of war (such as not killing noncombatants or prisoners, etc.). In practice, these standards were relative and often disregarded: It was up to the warriors to decide who was a legitimate authority and what was a just cause; protecting the faith certainly qualified, and advancing the faith often did. Frequently, self-defense was asserted, if only defending the "holy land" against infidels. So, the Crusades could fit the requirements, especially if, their promoters claimed, "*Deus lo volt*" (God wanted it). Just war could be conducted not only against other religions but also against sects of its own. The fratricidal wars of religion in the 1500s and 1600s, including the Thirty Years War (1618–48), pitted Christian against Christian, Catholic against Protestant, and it is estimated that as many as 8 million Europeans lost their lives in religious wars during this period.

Islam is most often held up as the model of holy war. As in Christianity, the religion perceives the world as basically dualistic, with a domain of peace where true religion reigns (*dar al-islam*) and a domain of conflict and struggle where religion is absent (*dar al-harb*). The domain of peace is naturally where Islam is observed. The domain of strife is where it is not—but where it should and will be.

*Jihad*, the generally known word for holy war, actually does not mean "war" in Arabic (which is *qital*). *Jihad* means "struggle," including the so-called "greater *jihad*" of struggle against one's own immoral self and the "lesser *jihad*"—the *jihad* of the sword—of struggle against the enemies of religion. Despite this distinction, the lesser



*jihad* can and does employ real weapons and cause real death. As the Qur'an instructs: "Permission (to fight) is given to those upon whom war is made because they are oppressed, and most surely Allah is well able to assist them" (sura 22:39), so "slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush, then if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate, leave their way free to them; surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (sura 9.5). As in ancient Hebraic war, unbelievers are given the option to give up their irreligion and accept the truth, but if they fail to, war is authorized. Islam also sees this violence as defense, namely defense against persecution.

The Sikhs of Kashmir and Punjab value war in the name of the faith. Sikhism (from the Hindi word for "disciple") was born in struggle, specifically the struggle between Hindus and Muslims in the sixteenth century. A guru named Nanak proffered a new religious vision and movement that accepted aspects of both. However, first the Muslim rulers, and, later, the Hindu ones, opposed and suppressed the religion, martyring the guru Arjan in 1606. Thus, in 1699, the last human guru, Gobind Singh, instituted a military wing of religious purists, the Khalsa or "company of the pure." As a contemporary Sikh website expresses it:

Readiness for the supreme sacrifice or of offering one's head on the palm of one's hand to the Guru is an essential condition laid down by the Gurus for becoming a Khalsa Sikh. Seeking death, not for personal glory, winning reward or going to heaven, but for the purpose of protecting the weak and the oppressed is what made the Khalsa brave and invincible. This has become a traditional reputation of the Khalsa. Right from the times of the Gurus till the last India-Pakistan conflict (1971), the Sikhs have demonstrated that death in the service of truth, justice and country, is part of their character and their glorious tradition. They do not seek martyrdom, they attain it. Dying is the privilege of heroes. It should, however, be for an approved or noble cause.

(Gateway to Sikhism: 2005)

Many religions in addition to Sikhism have not only justified war but also actually established their own warrior organizations, like the various orders of knights in Christendom. Many of these orders were formed for or during the Crusades by the Church, such as the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the Knights of Malta, the Teutonic Knights, and the famous Knights Templar. Article Three in the Constitution of the Teutonic Knights is direct in saying:

This order, signifying both the heavenly and the earthly knighthood, is the foremost for it has promised to avenge the dishonoring of God and His Cross and to fight so that the Holy Land, which the infidels subjected to their rule, shall belong to the Christians. St. John also saw a new knighthood coming down out of heaven. This vision signifies to us that the Church now shall have knights sworn to drive out the enemies of the Church by force.

The same philosophy has appeared in other places and times, such as medieval Japan, where groups of fighting Buddhist monks (*sohei* or “priest warriors”) were created. Wars between monks and monasteries broke out in the tenth century, at which time the temple of Enryakuji established the first standing army of monks in the country. Perhaps the greatest of these Buddhist armies was the Ikko-Ikki (*Ikko* meaning “single-minded” or “devoted” and *Ikki* meaning “league” or “mob”), which conquered an area around Kyoto in the 1500s. As T. Dugdale Pointon (2005) describes it, “With their belief in a paradise waiting for them the warrior monks of the Ikko-Ikki were fearless and eager warriors proving very useful to whichever side they were aiding at the time. In battle they would often use mass chanting (*nembutsu*) to strike fear into their enemies and improve their own morale.”

### Ethno-religious conflict

As a modular social phenomenon, religion can easily become intertwined with other identities and interests, even while it sets its own. When a pure or hybrid religious group and/or its interests are threatened, or merely blocked from achieving its interests by another group, conflict and violence may ensue. In such cases, although religion is part of the issue and religious groups form the competitors or combatants, it would be simplistic or wrong to assume that religion is the *cause* of the trouble or that the parties are “fighting about religion.” Religion in these circumstances may be more a marker of the groups than an actual point of contention between them.

Nevertheless, religion is an element in a number of the main “ethnic conflicts” of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Catholic versus Protestant in Northern Ireland; Christian versus Muslim in Bosnia; Hindu and Muslim versus Sikh in Kashmir; Hindu versus Buddhist in Sri Lanka; Sunni versus Shi’ite in Iraq—in all these cases, the belligerents are distinguished by religion. However, it would be more accurate and useful to view these conflicts as clashes of *communities* and identity- and interest-groups rather than religions. A clear example is the sectarian violence since 1969 in Northern Ireland. Protestants and Catholics were locked in violence occasionally verging on civil war for almost three decades, but *not* over matters of religion. In fact, they were not different religions but denominations of the same religion. In the USA and elsewhere, Protestants and Catholics coexist without collapsing into sectarian strife. Since the same doctrinal differences hold in Northern Ireland as in the USA, those differences are not the major or real source of friction. Rather, being a Protestant or being a Catholic *in the Northern Irish cultural context* makes a critical difference, in terms of economic and political interests. For one, the Protestants—a two-thirds majority in the region—tend to be “unionists,” that is, desire to maintain the union of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom; Catholics tend to favor disassociation from the UK and integration with the Republic of Ireland. One obvious reason for the disagreement is that Catholics compose a majority of the Republic but a minority in Northern Ireland; conversely, Protestants, a two-thirds majority in Northern Ireland, would become a minority in a unified Irish state. In addition, Protestants occupy most of the positions of power and control most of the

wealth in the north. Catholics perceive themselves as an underclass, with segregated neighborhoods, schools, etc., based on their religion. What originated as a “civil-rights” struggle, after a failed attempt at secession from the UK, eventually escalated and transformed into an “ethnic” conflict.

Escalation and hardening of “ethnic” claims and identities is the usual process in such scenarios. In Kashmir, a contested region north of India, Sikh nationalists hoped for a Sikh homeland; however, both Indian/Hindu and Pakistani/Muslim authorities eye the area as their own. Hostilities there led eventually to an Indian attack on the Golden Temple of the Sikhs at Amritsar. In the Middle East, tensions between Jews and Muslims have seethed since the nineteenth century, as Jews began immigrating to reoccupy their historical homeland. When the state of Israel was established, local Arabs/Muslims launched a campaign to crush the state, leading to a series of wars and the formation of various violent extremist groups, like the Palestine Liberation Organization, Hamas, and Hezbollah, dedicated to the destruction of Israel. In this case, issues of sovereignty, land, wealth, and political power blend with historical religious differences and hatreds.

Despite Buddhism’s reputation as a religion of peace, Buddhist Sinhalese in Sri Lanka have been engaged in a struggle with Hindu Tamils for the better part of fifty years. Tamils, around 15 percent of the island’s population, with their own language and history, sought inclusion in the postcolonial government, but increasingly nationalist Sinhalese not only excluded them but also enacted discriminatory laws against them, including an official language act (Sinhalese), an official religion act (Buddhism), and voting, citizenship, and education acts. Still worse, the Sinhalese felt like an “oppressed majority” since they existed nowhere in the world except this island, whereas the Tamils had a “homeland” on the Indian continent. Worst of all, they saw themselves as the original and, therefore, rightful occupants of the island—a claim even sanctioned by the Buddha himself—and Tamils as invaders or interlopers. When a struggle for equality transformed into a struggle for separation and a Tamil state, a bitter war broke out that has not been settled yet.

### Case study 9.2

#### Religious conflict and “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia

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The coexistence of religious groups often results from conquest followed by conversion. In the case of Bosnia, Muslim Turks invaded the area in the fourteenth century, maintaining control until late in the nineteenth. Many locals converted to Islam, for reasons discussed in Chapter 8—relief from religious restrictions, access to wealth and power, assimilation, and, no doubt, sometimes genuine belief. Serbs, who migrated northeast to escape Turkish influence, held tightly to their Eastern Orthodox faith, while Croats to the northwest kept their Catholicism. When the state

of Yugoslavia was created after World War I, attempts were made to minimize “national” and “ethnic” differences, but by the 1990s Yugoslavia began to disintegrate along national lines. Five “nations” (*nacija* or *narod*) had been recognized—Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrins, and Macedonians—each with a national home-republic; Muslims had not been regarded as a nation but instead were considered apostate Serbs or Croats. During the 1940s and 1950s, most Bosnian Muslims identified themselves as “Yugoslavs” first and Bosnians or Muslims second. However, Muslims had been allowed to establish some religious institutions, like the office of *Reis-ul-Ulema* (the national head of Muslims) and *vaqf* (charitable) organizations. However, in 1961, a new category was added to the census—“Ethnic Muslim”—and by 1964 Muslims were recognized as a “nation.”

Then, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran and elsewhere (see Chapter 11), other Yugoslavs began to suspect Bosnian Muslim sympathies and motives. Anti-Muslim writings appeared, such as Vuk Draskovic’s 1982 novel *Noz* (*The Knife*), portraying ugly stereotypes of Muslims. The Serb thinker Dragos Kalajic insisted that Muslims did not belong to “the European family of nations” but were culturally and genetically the product of foreign invasion and race mixing: “in satisfying their sexual impulses [ . . . ] the Ottoman armies and administrators—drawn from the Near Eastern and North African bazaars—created a distinct semi-Arab ethnic group” (quoted in Cigar 1995: 26). Fears increased such that in 1983 Alija Izetbegovic (who eventually became the President of Bosnia) and twelve other Muslims were put on trial for “conspiring to transform Bosnia into an Islamistan,” and all were found guilty. While there was undoubtedly some pure religious hatred involved, there were also political and economic motives: Serb nationalists wanted to expand Serb power and territory in the region, and other Serbs could not help but notice the relative economic deprivation of their homeland compared to more “developed” areas like Croatia and Slovenia. When these relatively wealthier republics withdrew from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s with fairly little resistance, Bosnia decided to follow, so in early 1992 it declared independence.

However, the “ethnic composition” of Bosnia—roughly 45 percent Muslim, 34 percent Serb, and 17 percent Croat—made it largely ungovernable. With Izetbegovic as president, some Serbs and Croats alike regarded Bosnia as a Muslim polity with a captive Serb or Croat minority, so Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat militias were formed and autonomous regions declared. Between the ethnic militias and the Yugoslav army (which was basically an instrument of Serbia by this time), a policy of clearing Muslims (and sometimes Croats and other minorities) out of once or future Serb land was adopted—a policy known as “ethnic cleansing.” As Cigar describes it, ethnic cleansing

was neither a spontaneous expression of communal hatreds, extending back over a millennium, nor was it a primeval popular emotion, which the [ . . . ]

leadership could not control. On the contrary, in seeking to develop a vehicle for its own acquisition and consolidation of power, the [. . .] elite (both governmental and non-governmental) found it necessary to engage in a systematic and intensive campaign in order to create a nationalist movement and to exacerbate intercommunal relations to the extent that genocide could be made plausible.

(Cigar 1995: 6)

The outcome was not only a near-genocide but also the near-destruction of a country and a culture.

### **Abuse, crime, and murder**

Not every abuse, crime, and murder perpetrated by a religious person is a “religious” crime; otherwise, almost all crimes would be religious crimes. Also, many religious people commit abuses and crimes not because they are religious but because they are abusers and criminals, as the child sex-abuse scandal facing the Catholic Church (but not *only* the Catholic Church—there are Protestant and other offenders too) amply proves. However, just as religion is not immune to violence, it is not immune to crime. Even so, in this discussion we want to restrict ourselves to abuses and crimes that are committed for explicitly religious reasons. As such, they are often not interpreted as “abuses” or “crimes” at all by the perpetrators but as necessary and even good actions.

Among the most lurid crimes is the murder of children by their mothers. Andrea Yates, the Texas woman who killed her five children (named, significantly, Noah, John, Paul, Luke, and Mary) in 2001, stated that her motivation was religious. She told doctors afterwards that “My children weren’t righteous. They stumbled because I was evil. The way I was raising them they could never be saved [. . .] Better for someone else to tie a millstone around their neck and cast them into a river than to stumble. They were going to perish [in Hell]” (quoted in Baker 2002). Two other women, Deanna Laney and Dena Schlosser (of Tyler and Dallas, Texas respectively), also recently killed their children for religious reasons. Laney, a Pentecostal, beat two of her children to death with stones because, she claimed, God told her to. Schlosser, a member of the Way of Life Church, killed her ten-month-old because she wanted to offer her to God. And studies indicate that they are not alone. Lisa Falkenberg cites two studies that link religiosity with child-directed violence. One found that of thirty-nine women who killed their children, fifteen had religion-related motivations; the other concluded that one-fourth of its fifty-six child-killing mothers had religious “delusions” (Falkenberg 2004)—although at the time at least they did not consider them delusions at all.

In fact, in some instances, the violent deaths of children or adults have been part of a more systematic belief. The case of the Lafferty brothers received infamy in Jon

Krakauer's bestselling book *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003). On July 24, 1984, Ron and Dan Lafferty murdered the wife and daughter of their brother Allen because God had told them to do it. Members of a fundamentalist sect of Mormonism, they are unrepentant to this day, reasoning that if God orders an action, there is no way to disobey. Similarly, when Jacques Robidoux starved his infant son to death in 1999, it was on God's orders. Robidoux was a member of an offshoot of the World Wide Church of God known only as The Body. Members believed that they received "leadings" or direct messages from God, one of which told Jacques to deprive his baby of solid food. Over fifty-two days, baby Samuel wasted and died.

Christianity is certainly not the only religion that has driven people to murder. A Hindu group known as Thuggee practiced ritual murders into the nineteenth century. Members would infiltrate bands of travelers and assault them with ceremonial weapons like a magical pickax (*kussee*), a special scarf or cloth (*rumal*) for strangling victims, or a sacred dagger. Victims were dismembered and buried in collective graves, on top of which the successful killers would hold rituals. All of this was done at the behest of the goddess Kali, who demanded the dead as sacrifices to her. Religious models and values play at least partly into the too-common modern practice of bride-burning or "dowry death," in which husbands or their mothers injure or kill wives in staged "kitchen accidents." An abusive but not generally fatal biannual ceremony known as Kuzhimattu Thiru Vizha involves burying a child alive "briefly" as a thanksgiving gesture; the child is supposedly drugged into unconsciousness and then laid in a shallow grave and covered with dirt for up to a minute while priests pray over them.

In Muslim societies, as we have mentioned, girls are most often the objects of harm and abuse, as in "honor killings" for behaving inappropriately, including having sex before marriage, dating outside of the religion or ethnic group, or just "acting too Western." In more than a few cases, especially when living in Western countries, families have sent younger brothers to do the deed, since Western law deals more leniently with minors. Females in these and many other societies are often married young and physically abused in their marriages, on the grounds that men have spiritual authority over women. And in a number of societies—at least eighteen, as surveyed by Dickeman (1975)—families kill one or both of twins, in the belief that twins are evil or unnatural or a bad omen of some sort.

Not all religion-inspired deaths are intentional murders; some, like the Robidoux case, are more like religion-inspired criminal neglect. Most modern people would consider depriving a sick person of medical care to be a form of neglect, but it is a controversial subject, and a variety of religious groups claim the right to decline medical care for themselves or their children in favor of spiritual cures. Not only do many religious groups reject scientific medicine, but American law often grants a "religious exemption" from safe and effective medical treatments. The result, as Seth Asser and others have noted, is a high rate of preventable death. In the study that he and Rita Swan conducted of religiously motivated rejection of treatment, 172 child deaths occurred (from causes like diabetes, dehydration, trauma, infections, heart conditions, and tumors), of which 104 would have had a 90 percent survival

rate with modern medical care (Asser and Swan 1998). The belief that parents were doing something effective, something ordained by their faith, led directly to the preventable deaths of their children. It is yet another case of people, thanks to religion, thinking they are doing good when they are really doing harm.

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## Conclusion

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Much good has come from religion. Much harm has also come from it. And much harm has also come from sources other than religion. However, we find that the characteristics of religion—its group nature, its authority principles, its identity aspects, its practical interests, and its specific ideologies—can be and have been particularly productive of violence. And not only producing but justifying, valorizing, and virtually demanding violence. As the not-at-all antireligious philosopher Blaise Pascal once said, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction” (1958: 265).

Violence, aggression, and destructiveness are not only part of the human condition but also part of the natural condition. It is no surprise that religion would have to take notice of it—and would more than occasionally take advantage of it. Religion is diverse, ambiguous, and cultural, and violence is equally diverse, ambiguous, and cultural. Alloyed as they can be, they produce a stunning and alarming array of religion-inspired and often enough religion-sanctioned violence. Violence, therefore, is neither native to nor foreign to religion. Rather, it should be said that both violence and religion are native to humans, and they will find their way together.

## Secularism and irreligion

- The anthropology of secularism
  - Secularization theory
- Western secularism, ancient and modern
  - Ancient philosophy as religious doubt
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- Secularism and secularization in non-Western societies
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- Conclusion

Religion is undeniably a pervasive and powerful phenomenon in the traditional as well as the modern world, and it deserves all of the attention that it has received. Still, it is true that not all humans are equally religious, and many are not religious at all. In fact, according to Adherents.com, there are some 1.1 billion “nonreligious” or “secular” or “agnostic” or “atheist” people in the world. If so, they would constitute the third largest category after Christianity (2.1 billion) and Islam (1.3 billion). A category this large—larger than all but two of the “world religions”—certainly deserves attention as well.

Yet, as Talal Asad admonishes us, “anthropologists have paid scarcely any attention to the idea of the secular” (2003: 17). He even cites a recent survey of course syllabi on the anthropology of religion conducted by Andrew Buckser for the American Anthropological Association, which finds that the topic of “the secular” or secularism “makes no appearance in the collection. Nor is it treated in any of the well-known introductory texts” (Asad 2003: 22). But, as he concludes, “Any discipline that seeks to understand ‘religion’ must also try to understand its other” (Asad 2003: 22).

If the nonreligious or secular segment of humanity is nearly as large as the Islamic segment, and no doubt as diverse, then it is certainly something that social science must consider, and in fact it has, to a small degree. Since the work of Max Weber,



“secularization” has been a topic of some theoretical and descriptive interest—even a general, if unspoken, assumption. Admittedly, it is perhaps more difficult to apply anthropological methods to secularism than to religion, since secularists do not tend to form actual communities where fieldwork can be done (see below). Even in states like the Soviet Union or the People’s Republic of China that were “officially” atheistic, the reality often did not match the official position. Nevertheless, an identity or *movement* so distinct and so numerous must offer ways to examine it.

Even more than “studying secularists,” anthropology suggests that there are critical and widely overlooked cultural and conceptual elements to the question. Indeed, Asad reminds us that “secularism,” like “religion” itself—and the various components of religion, such as “belief” and “myth” and “ritual” and “conversion,” etc.—*is* a concept. As such, it will vary from culture to culture, historical moment to historical moment, and situation to situation. It will also be more internally diverse and more subtly and complexly related to its social and cultural environment—including the surrounding religion, in such a way that secularism may not be quite, contrary to Asad’s assertion, the “other” of religion at all.

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## The anthropology of secularism

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The nonreligious section of society tends to be ignored for a variety of reasons. One, as we mentioned, is that it does not usually form a distinct localized community, so there has been “nowhere to go” to investigate it. Additionally, it has regularly been presumed that the section is so small that it does not merit much attention (despite the fact that anthropology focuses on the micro-social level of analysis). Even more, it has regularly been presumed that religion is the “default” position of any society and of humanity as such, so that irreligion is nothing more than a *lack* of religion, if not an actual aberration from normal humanity. This is particularly likely to be the position of religious observers, for fairly obvious reasons. For instance, the eminent historian Arnold Toynbee opined that “To have religion is one of those distinctively human characteristics of mankind that differentiate us from our non-human fellows on the face of this planet. This assumption implies that every human being has religion: in fact, that one cannot be human without having it in some form” (quoted in Campbell 1971: 130). Not surprisingly, theologians and Christian scholars concur, like Martin Marty, who prejudicially dubs secularism as “unbelief,” defined as “any kind of serious or permanent departure from belief in God (as symbolized by the term ‘Trinity’) and from the belief that God not only is but acts (as symbolized by the historic reference ‘Incarnation’)” (1966: 30). But, by this definition, not only are *most humans unbelievers*, since they do not have any such concepts as trinity or incarnation or even god, but many Christians would be unbelievers, since not all Christians are Trinitarians. By his own admission, such a wide net would catch “unbelievers, disbelievers, nonbelievers, the unserious, the inattentive” (Marty 1966: 27), and necessarily the two-thirds or more of humanity who are not Christians. In fact, even the venerable scholar David Martin, in his *A General Theory of Secularization*,

confesses that “by the term ‘religion’ in this context I mean Christianity” (1978: 2). But such an approach cannot possibly produce a “general” theory of anything.

Yet Martin is correct when he proposes that our understanding of secularism, both popular and scholarly, is dominated by the Christian perspective. In fact, the very notion of “the secular” is a culturally specific one. The word “secular” derives from the Latin *saeculum* for breed or generation and is further related to *serere* or “to sow,” as in to plant a field. In common English usage, it means something akin to “worldly” or “of the world,” as opposed to “sacred” or “divine” or perhaps “supernatural.” In other words, it depends on, or establishes, a dichotomy between “the religious” and “everything else” that reminds us of Durkheim’s dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. The secular, the worldly, thus, becomes the profane.

There are two immediate problems with this viewpoint. First, it is not even uniformly the approach within Christianity. Secular was not always the opposite or absence of religion at all: A “secular priest” was still a religious figure, simply one who participated in the social world as opposed to one who took monastic vows and secluded himself from the world. Secular could even refer to the laity, who might be quite religious. Second and more important, it is not a universal aspect of all religions. Many of the religions that anthropology identifies do not make a radical separation between “religion” and “the world” at all. Not all see their beings or forces as “supernatural” in the familiar Christian sense: Spirits of animals or plants, dead ancestors, or forces like *mana* or *chi* are often “natural” in a real sense. Even local gods may not be removed from the world or “transcendent” in the Western/Christian way. And, of course, in all religions, including Christianity, the supernatural can, does, and must express itself in the natural, in the form of symbols, objects, places, and all the forms that we discussed in Chapter 3. In other words, the absolute dualism of religion/world is not a necessary characteristic of all religions but a characteristic of specific religions.

Religions then can occupy various positions on a spectrum in regard to “the secular,” with diverse meaning and importance. Religions like Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism fall near the opposite end of the spectrum from Christianity, where the secular is not much distinguished from the supernatural. In Buddha’s teachings, there is explicitly little concern for supernatural beings: If they exist—and the religion does not depend on their existence—then they are of no immediate concern to the Buddhist, since each person (and each spirit) is involved in his/her own salvation quest. Buddhism originated as a set of precepts and, even more so, *practices* rather than as a system of “beliefs.” It was interested in how one lived one’s life—what one ate and said and did, etc.—rather than esoteric matters of sacredness. Confucianism was even more this way: Its concerns were primarily social rather than spiritual. The point of life was to act interpersonally with the proper respect or civility (*li*) based on one’s position in society. “The secular” was where one’s primary responsibilities and interests rested—in the family, the government, and the general social order.

### Case study 10.1

#### A secular religion: the Hua of New Guinea

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As Meigs describes it, Hua “religion” is as “secular” as a religion can be imagined. She suggests that they possessed concepts of gods and spirits but that “these religious concepts appear to be peripheral to the central body of religious thought” (1984: 125). Instead, she finds that the Hua, like other societies in the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea, focused on four religious themes. The first was the concept of *nu*, a kind of vital essence or energy that was “supernatural” but also quite natural and “distinctly nonspiritual” (Meigs 1984: 129), residing in foods and other physical substances (especially bodily secretions). This *nu* could be conserved, accumulated, or lost depending on what one did and ate. The second theme, therefore, was bodily states achieved or lost in terms of *nu*. The third related theme was a preoccupation with pollution and purification, since foreign *nu* could do harm to the person exposed to it. This included especially the *nu* of women for men: Women were seen as polluting to men. However, other and more nuanced rules for social behavior—particularly but not exclusively dietary rules—were predicated on the positive or negative effects of others’ *nu*. People could only eat certain foods, grown and/or prepared by certain kinsfolk, since food contained the preparer’s *nu*. Rules were further elaborated based on one’s age and initiation status, such that the very old were almost free from food restrictions. Finally, rituals of “imitation, adulation, and control of female reproductive power” rounded out Hua religious interests (Meigs 1984: 131). All told, this religion stressed “health” in a culturally conceived sense. “Spiritual concepts and concerns, states of grace and sin, simply do not exist. The Hua monitor their bodies, not their souls, and it is with their physical state of being, itself determined by *nu*, that their religion is concerned” (Meigs 1984: 129). Thus, a “secular religion” like that of the Hua attended to

physiological fitness and survival. Religious goals of heightened vitality and sexual potency are achieved without recourse to sacrifice, obeisance, meditation, worship, or prayer. Spirits, deities, and the supernatural in general play no role. Instead, the body, sacred temple of all power, is approached directly, its contents assessed and monitored, its intake and output carefully regulated.

(Meigs 1984: 135)

### **Secularization theory**

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Especially in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, the secular did receive considerable analytical attention, even defining a theory known as “secularization theory” which was widely accepted as true and inevitable until the unexpected “return of religion” in the late twentieth century. The origins of secularization theory can be

traced at least back to Marx, if not before. Some of the French *philosophes* of the eighteenth century were intensely critical of religion and expected and desired its decline and disappearance. Marx offered a vision, in his dialectical materialist view of society and history, of a future where religion would become unnecessary: Instead of postponed or imaginary rewards, humans would satisfy their practical material needs in this life. Since religion, he believed, was nothing more than “false consciousness,” mystification, and control, it would simply fade away, like the state itself. The philosopher Nietzsche, particularly in his famous passage “The Madman,” announced that God—the possibility of believing in a god—was already dead. Finally, Freud joined the chorus that sang of religion’s demise, calling it an illusion without a future; again, when humans could solve their psychological problems directly, they would not need the indirect salve of religion.

Probably the leading statement on secularization came from Weber, who saw it as part—and a virtually inevitable part—of the more general process of *modernization*. In the past, in social settings like those described by Redfield and Gellner before the “great transformation,” any society’s religion was ubiquitous and taken for granted—the kind of moral glue that held that the society together. However, as social relations and the ethos or “feel” of society changed, the nature and function of religion changed as well. In other words, secularization, seen as the decline of religion, was an effect of other social forces.

Weber regarded the central features of modernization as including *rationalization*, *industrialization*, *bureaucratization*, *urbanization*, and finally *secularization*. Industrialization and urbanization are obvious enough. Rationalization meant that social goals, and the methods to achieve them, became more and more “practical” and “economic” as opposed to “moral” and “religious.” Efficiency of action and cost, division of labor, market exchange relations, and technological imperatives replaced more personal interests and relations. Bureaucratization meant that social organization became more formal, differentiated, hierarchical, and “integrated,” with “managers” far removed—physically or socially—from the site of production. Also, institutions like “the factory” or “the market” or “the government or “the family” became functionally detached from each other, separate social spaces. Altogether, the experience of society would be more complicated, more diverse, more fragmented (i.e., the people you interact with in the factory are not the same ones you interact with in the market or the family, etc.), and more “private.”

The basic assertion of secularization theory, as Bruce explains it, is “that modernization creates problems for religion” (2002: 2). As society evolves more rational, industrial, bureaucratic, and urban qualities, religion is changed or vanquished. Religion develops into just one more “institution” in the society, unplugged from its multiple social and moral functions; it transforms into something you “do” on Sundays in a specialized building, one part of a complicated modern life. It also transforms into a private matter, a personal choice and activity, not a “social” matter at all. For some, it simply diminishes in importance or is ignored altogether, either as insignificant or impractical or *false* or in favor of other activities that compete with it in a busy schedule.

Thus, Berger and Luckmann, like so many other observers, claim to see the declining power and influence of religion in “the progressive autonomization of societal sectors from the domination of religious meaning and institutions” (1966: 74). What they mean is that, as various actions, roles, and institutions “free” themselves (become “autonomous”) from religion, religion’s impact on society cannot help but wane. A critical aspect of this evacuation of religion from society is social diversity, in two ways. First, as societies, for various historical reasons, began to include multiple racial, ethnic, linguistic, and, of course, religious communities, no religion unified them all, and, therefore, they did not comprise a “moral community.” In other words, the *pluralism* of modernity threatened religion as much as any other force: Bruce argues that the “separation of church and state was one consequence of diversity” (2002: 17). Second, even within a religion like Christianity and increasingly in all religions, including the “traditional” ones, schisms and syncretisms led to a proliferation of alternative and competing “religions” or religious movements; the Catholic monopoly in ancient and medieval Europe had largely prevented this development, but the triumph of the Protestant Reformation generated a new kind of or new attitude toward religion which “was extremely vulnerable to fragmentation because it removed the institution of the church as a source of authority between God and man” (Bruce 2002: 10), leaving the individual to voluntarily choose between or “convert to” any of the religious offerings. The result is a “consumer approach” toward religions in which the individual as a free and private agent “may choose from the assortment of ‘ultimate’ meanings as he sees fit” (Luckmann 1970: 99).

As powerful and unquestionable as this modernization process is, its religious outcomes are diverse. Even within a paradigm of secularization, Bryan Wilson suggests a variety of possible consequences for religion, such as

the sequestration of political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies; the shift from religious to secular control of various of the erstwhile activities and functions of religion; the decline in the proportion of their time, energy and resources which men devote to supra-empirical concerns; the decay of religious institutions; the supplanting, in matters of behavior, of religious precepts by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria; and the gradual replacement of a specifically religious consciousness (which might range from dependence on charms, rites, spells, or prayers, to a broadly spiritually-inspired ethical concern) by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation; the abandonment of mythical, poetic, and artistic interpretations of nature and society in favor of matter-of-fact descriptions, and with it, the rigorous separation of evaluative and emotive dispositions from cognitive and positivistic orientations.

(Wilson 1982: 149)

That is to say, secularization is not the simple “opposite of” or “absence of” religion. The devout Christian who goes to a medical doctor instead of a faith healer, or

who paints a landscape instead of a Madonna, could be regarded as “secular” on this account.

Peter Glasner (1977) pushes the investigation of secularization still further. For him, there are three approaches to secularization, depending on one’s approach to religion, namely, “primarily institutional,” “primarily normative,” and “primarily cognitive.” Under each of these approaches, he finds several different variations of secularization.

1. *Primarily institutional.* Secularization processes: decline, routinization, differentiation, or disengagement. “Decline” refers to quantitative measures of religious identification and participation, such as lower church attendance/membership or decreased profession of belief. “Routinization” means “settling” or institutionalizing through integration into the society and often compromise with the society; it tends to occur when the religion becomes large and is, therefore, one mark of *success* as a religion, although it is less intense and distinct than in its early formative “cultish” or NRM stage. “Differentiation” means a redefined place or relation to society, perhaps accepting its status as one religion in a plural religious field or morphing into a more “generic” and, therefore, mass-appeal religion. “Disengagement” means the detachment of certain facets of social life from religion.
2. *Primarily normative.* Secularization processes: transformation, generalization, desacralization, or secularism. “Transformation” refers to change over time (Glasner cites Weber’s analysis of Protestantism as a transformation of Christianity for a new social milieu). “Generalization” means a particular kind of change in which it becomes less specific, more abstract, and therefore more inclusive, like the supposed “civil religion” in the USA (see Chapter 12); it moderates its more controversial and potentially divisive claims and practices. “Desacralization” means the evacuation of “supernatural” beings and forces from the material world, leaving culture and rationality to guide humans instead. “Secularism,” then, is the outright denial “of a sacred order and approximates more to intellectual agnosticism” if not atheism (Glasner 1977: 42); it is the literal rejection of religion.
3. *Primarily cognitive.* Secularization processes: segmentation or secularization (i.e., modernization in the Weberian sense). “Segmentation” refers to the development of specialized religious institutions, which take their place beside other specialized social institutions. Secularization, finally, designates the processes of urbanization, industrialization, rationalization, bureaucratization, and cultural/religious pluralism through which society moves away from the “sacred” and toward the “profane.”

Clearly, then, “secular,” “secularism,” and “secularization” are not a single, monolithic social phenomenon. They take many different courses with many different outcomes, not all of them hostile to religion. Nor is secularization an inevitable or irreversible response to the “modern world.” As we noted in our discussions of NRMs and world religions, contact with modernity and external social forces can lead to an *increase* or

*revival* of religion and/or an adoption and modification of religious concepts and practices in the attempt to cope with a strange new reality. Whether or not such religious movements really are a first stage in a long-term secularization, as Lawrence and others posit, will remain to be seen. But, so far, religion has shown a remarkable capacity to rise from the dead.

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## Western secularism, ancient and modern

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Nonbelief or irreligion or secularism is not exclusive to the modern world. Certainly, modernization as conceived by Weber provided a particularly fertile ground for secularism, but other times and societies have also offered their own secular alternatives, for their own social or intellectual reasons. In fact, as Glasner stresses, one of the assumptions of modern secularization theory is “that there was a period when man and/or society was ‘really religious’” and that this alleged period represents the *real* religious condition of humanity, from which modern life strays (1977: 66). However, like all other cultural conceptions, religiosity has vacillated cross-culturally and historically, from epochs and locations of thorough—sometimes even fanatical—religiosity to those of mild or intense irreligiosity. In fact, on more than a few occasions, the two competing forces have existed contemporaneously. That is to say, we might think of religion and irreligion as equally “movements” challenging each other for access to minds and power.

### Ancient philosophy as religious doubt

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According to Jennifer Hecht, *doubt* is often at the crux of the rejection, or at least the questioning, of received religious traditions. “The earliest doubt on historical record was twenty-six hundred years ago, which makes doubt older than most faiths. [. . .] Doubt has been just as vibrant in its prescriptions for a good life, and just as passionate for the truth” (2003: xxi). These doubters, or rather philosophers—“lovers of wisdom”—began their career when they asked aloud whether the things they had learned from religion were really true and how they could determine it.

The classical Greeks had inherited a rich religious tradition from their ancestors, full of the exploits of gods and men, virtually side by side. Moreover, these gods were not always particularly pleasant or moral beings, often exhibiting the same flaws and excesses as mortals. Still, the gods were the gods. In addition to the classic pantheon of Greece, people participated in so-called “mystery cults” for gods like Dionysius, oracles like the famous one at Delphi, and cults of “state” or “city” gods like Athena for Athens.

Eventually, questions arose, and “philosophy” was born. One sort of musing came from Theognis, who wondered about the apparent injustice in the world:

Dear Zeus, you baffle me. You are king of all; the highest honor and greatest power are yours, you discern what goes on in each man’s secret heart, and your

lordship is supreme. Yet you make no distinction between the sinner and the good man, between the man who devotes himself to temperate and responsible acts and the man who commits deeds of hubris [pride]. Tell me, son of Cronus, how can you deal such unfairness?

(quoted in Wheelwright 1966: 29–30)

Xenophanes struggled with another obvious problem: How could the gods, authors of all good and right, act so decidedly badly in the traditional stories? “Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods all sorts of actions which when done by men are disreputable and deserving of blame—such lawless deeds as theft, adultery, and mutual deception” (quoted in Wheelwright 1966: 33). One possible, though disturbing, answer was that the myths and the poets were wrong. This conclusion was bolstered by the patently obvious fact that different societies believed in different gods that were noticeably similar to the believers themselves: “Ethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair, Thracians have gods with gray eyes and red hair. [. . .] If oxen or lions had hands which enabled them to draw and paint pictures as men do, they would portray their gods as having bodies like their own; horses would portray them as horses, and oxen as oxen” (Wheelwright 1966: 33). So, all of these local portrayals of gods could be nothing more than anthropomorphisms (or horse-omorphisms) for a god or gods that really have none of these traits at all.

The consequences of this line of reasoning were not long in arriving. The pre-Socratic “natural philosophers” began to ponder how the universe might work—even how it might have come into existence—without reliance on religion. Their aim, states Wheelwright, was “systematically to explain nature in terms of nature, instead of referring to the supposed will or caprice of supernatural beings” (1966: 41). What, for instance, is the primary substance of nature, out of which all other things are made? How does the diversity of nature (the “many”) come from the single source (the “one”), and how does change between forms occur? These are essentially a-theistic questions, seeking a-theistic answers.

The precise answers were various and not our concern. The point is that the explanatory function previously reserved for religion was usurped by nature, as when Heraclitus reasoned that, “This universe, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be—an ever-living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures” (quoted in Wheelwright 1966: 71). The new explanation was natural sufficiency and natural law: Nature did not need anything other than nature to create or sustain it, and nature operated by laws which were in principle knowable by man. Parmenides wrote: “For strong Necessity holds [Being] in its bonds of limit, which constrain it on all sides; Natural Law forbids that Being should be other than perfectly complete. It stands in need of nothing; for if it needed anything at all it would need everything” (quoted in Wheelwright 1966: 98). The key notion was *cause*. Natural things have a cause, and those causes are other natural things. Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War (432–404 BCE) described human action without reference to gods. Hippocrates argued that disease, even the “divine disease” of epilepsy, had solely natural causes.



And Protagoras made the strongest statement yet, earning himself a charge of blasphemy:

As for the gods, I have no way of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist; nor, if they exist, of what form they are. For the obstacles to that sort of knowledge are many, including the obscurity of the matter and the brevity of human life.

(Wheelwright 1966: 240)

Anaxogoras was the first man in recorded history to be indicted for atheism; a law was even drafted around 438 BCE to “denounce those who do not believe in the divine beings or who teach doctrines about things in the sky” such as planets or meteors (quoted in Hecht 2003: 10). But it was the fate of Socrates to be the only Athenian victim of the death penalty for “impiety” and “corrupting the youth” by asking too many impertinent questions.

The classic period of Greek civilization came to an end when, following decades of intercity squabbling, conquest devastated the independent city-state (*polis*) and united them, not only with each other but with civilizations as far away as Persia and India, into a single great “world society” (*cosmopolis*). Not only was an old way of life gone, but so was an old certainty—the certainty of the “traditional” or “authentic” or “closed” community. As Otey writes:

The changing dimensions of the Greek world shifted focus away from the city-state, and it fell upon the individual to create new structures of meaning to address the inner turmoil experienced by its inhabitants. The philosophic schools appealed to thinking individuals who were not satisfied by the shortcuts that myths and magic had to offer. All the Hellenistic schools were dedicated to freeing individuals from suffering and anxiety, as well as the fear of pain and death. Achieving happiness was the fundamental quest made possible by an understanding of an individual’s relationship to the universe.

(Otey 1997: 16–17)

In other words, the ancient Greek world was undergoing its own “great transformation” along the lines described by Redfield and Gellner. As they emphasize, one possible and recurring product of this form of cultural change is a universalist religion, a potential “world religion.” In the Greek case, many new potentially universal or at least “multicultural” movements and cults were founded or adopted. However, a religious response is not the only possible type of response to this difficult new social situation. Rather, nonreligious or “secular” solutions, philosophies, and movements can attempt to offer the same answers or solace as religion. In the case of this “Hellenistic” period (roughly from the time of Alexander around 323 BCE until the rise of Rome around 31 BCE), four new secularist theories or “schools” of thought tried to meet emerging human needs. Each of them, in the words of Hecht, represents “a clear-eyed resignation to chaos and uncertainty, and a

conviction that reality, even painful reality, is preferable to living under false ideas," including false religious ideas (2003: 27).

1. *Cynicism*. Cynics (from the Greek for "dog") under the influence of Diogenes were the first "drop-outs" and rejecters of social norms. The *polis*, that is, conventional social order, had failed and had been erased. Convention could no longer be trusted. The only option for humans was the pursuit of complete individual freedom by following nature. "Happiness was attained by satisfying one's natural needs in the cheapest and simplest ways. [. . .] The natural ways of dogs were the model of behavior" (Otey 1997: 5). This included owning no property, living in the open, going around naked, and occasionally even relieving one's other needs in public. It was an utterly "scandalous" way of life, yet as natural and free as any animal's. Rejecting social conventions obviously also entailed rejecting supernatural beliefs; gods, if they existed, were merely ignored.
2. *Stoicism*. Stoicism gets its name from the *stoa*, or porch, from which such teachers as Zeno delivered their teachings. In modern language, it tends to mean a kind of toughness or resignation, a willingness to bear difficulty without complaint. As a philosophy and social movement drawing inspiration both from Socrates and the Cynic movement, it combined virtue with rationality to produce a "no-nonsense realism, engaged detachment, and [. . .] advice [. . .] to concern oneself only with what is within one's control" (Hecht 2003: 33). Individual happiness was irrelevant, perhaps unattainable, and emotion was anathema to rational self-control. As Bertrand Russell expressed it, the attitude of the Stoics was: "We can't be happy, but we can be good; let us therefore pretend that, so long as we are good, it doesn't matter being unhappy. This doctrine is heroic, and, in a bad world, useful" (1945: 269).
3. *Epicureanism*. "Epicurean" in contemporary English usually means something like "pleasure seeking," but that misconstrues the message of Epicurus. He taught, unlike Zeno, that humans in a cosmopolitan world could not only be good but happy also. The chief obstacles to happiness were error, mistaken beliefs, and fears. The two greatest fears were fear of death and pain and fear of the gods. Death, however, was nothing to fear, since it was the end of all sensation, including fear. And religion, if anything, made the fear of death greater. As to the gods, he did not know if they existed or not, but if they did, they were totally uninterested in humans, so it would do no good to pin our hopes to them either way. In fact, he is famous for this analysis of the gods, in terms of the contradictory aspect of their goodness and their power, which tended to refute such a concept:

God either wishes to take away evil, and is unable, or He is able, and unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally

at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?

4. *Skepticism.* Against the dogmatism of Zeno and Epicurus, and against the self-assured givenness of *polis* life, the school of skepticism founded by Pyrrho and his successor Carneades argued that individuals could, even should, live without firm and sure beliefs and values. Certainty was impossible, since the opposite case was always possible, so really nothing could be known. Since nothing could be known, then one should suspend or avoid all decisions or judgments. Only by withdrawing from the business of opinion, knowledge, and value altogether could one achieve happiness and peace of mind. Carneades went still further, effectively debunking most of the classic arguments for god(s), including personal experience, design, tradition or common belief, and the “goodness” of god(s).

### **Science as a cultural system**

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In the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, the greatest challenge and alternative to religion for the average person has undoubtedly been not philosophy but science. Even among the ancient Greeks, naturalistic explanations of the universe, humanity, and society vied with religious ones. The real breakthrough to a scientific cultural outlook came with the later Renaissance humanists. Probably the first crucial scientific “laboratory” was the night sky, and the first crucial tool was the telescope. Unfortunately, the sky was also where the “heavens” were, making this a sensitive undertaking. The orthodox view, based on a combination of biblical references and the authority of the ancients, was that the Earth stood still at the center of the universe while all of the “heavenly bodies” revolved around it in perfect circles. Nicholas Copernicus, based on observations and calculations of astronomical motion, cautiously offered his radical revision in the year of his death (1543) in his book *De Revolutionibus orbium coelestium* or “On the Revolution of Celestial Objects.”

Received religious truth did not retire gracefully. The new theory was condemned by the Church, which was waging its wider war against heresy. In 1600, Giordano Bruno, a former Dominican brother who had been defrocked for his unorthodoxy in 1576, was burned at the stake for criticizing the traditional view and believing, beyond Copernicus, that the “heavenly bodies” were merely distant suns with their own solar systems around them. Galileo, a telescope-maker, in 1609, discovered that the celestial bodies were not perfect but marred by craters and sunspots; he also indisputably saw other new objects like the moons of Jupiter. He was emboldened to support the heliocentric view but was forbidden by the Church to teach it. In 1632 he wrote a treatise that, while representing “both sides” in the debate (*Dialogue on the Two Great World Systems*), clearly preferred the new over the old; in front of a papal inquisition, he was made to recant his position.

Science at this point was still a haphazard affair, despite its “successes,” but, along with Descartes, Francis Bacon began to define the methods that would lead it to success after success. In his *Novum Organum* and *The Great Instauration* in the 1620s, he laid out not only the philosophy but also the methodological program of science. It included empiricism (the authority of sense data), inductive reasoning (gathering evidence to arrive at general conclusions), skepticism (a questioning attitude on all matters), experimentation (testing through controlled situations), and, above all, *naturalism* (the provision that we can only know what is natural and, therefore, observable). Some modern scientists, like Eugenie Scott of the National Center for Science Education (NCSE), distinguish between “methodological naturalism,” in which science merely attempts to find naturalistic answers, and “epistemological naturalism,” in which science asserts that only natural (and, therefore, no supernatural) answers exist. While the distinction may be real and important, the fact is that science does not seek nor accept supernatural explanations and so far has had no need to resort to them. In 1687, Isaac Newton published his work on gravity and celestial mechanics, describing an absolute universe in which the motions of the heavens did not need god(s) at all. Most succinctly, the French scholar Laplace left the supernatural out of his descriptions and explanations because, as he stated, he had “no need of that hypothesis.”

During the 1800s, deeper understandings of electricity, magnetism, light, and, eventually, the atom accompanied and energized more powerful technologies, making possible the industrial revolution in Europe and America. The more humans understood about nature, the less it seemed to require an outside force or source. The only place remaining for the supernatural was the as-yet-unknown areas, leaving what has been characterized as a “god of the gaps.” However, as the gaps in human knowledge narrowed, the area of operation of the supernatural seemed to decline. The last great gap was the origin of life, including human life. Then, in 1859, Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species*, offering a natural mechanism by which new species could arise. The theory of “evolution” did not demand that the supernatural had no place, but it did not reserve a place for it. Natural processes, like “natural selection,” could do the work all by themselves. Now, as the arch-evolutionist Richard Dawkins put it, it was “possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist” (1986: 6).

Science continued and continues to fill in the gaps and to humble authority and human-centered images of reality. Einstein’s theory of relativity painted a universe without any “privileged places” at all; the universe has no center, with all measurements of space and time relative to the measurer. Even worse, quantum theory appeared to describe an almost incomprehensibly strange world that followed none of the rules of everyday reality. Worst of all, it is a *probabilistic* reality, not a rule-ordered one at all—not the kind of place where a reasonable god seems at home (hence why Einstein resisted the theory, saying that God does not play dice). Walking on the moon proved that it is just a rock, and views of distant stars indicate remote planets, making the Earth seem small and not particularly unique. The one continuous insult to religion from the scientific program is that natural law seems to suffice to explain

everything we see; as Richard Dawkins would say, “the universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference” (1995: 133). No matter where science looks, it does not find supernatural beings or forces. Even the Catholic Church has had to abandon its resistance to evolution. John Paul II (1996) declared such research not only acceptable but also convincing: “The convergence, neither sought nor fabricated, of the results of the work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favor of the theory.”

The consequence of these developments over centuries was the formation of what Geertz called a “scientific perspective” as an addition to—and increasingly a substitute for—the “religious perspective” (not to mention the “commonsense” and “aesthetic” perspectives). In the scientific perspective, the taken-for-grantedness and human-centeredness that characterizes religion disappears. With science, we get “deliberate doubt and systematic inquiry, the suspension of the pragmatic motive in favor of disinterested observation, the attempt to analyze the world in terms of formal concepts whose relationship to the informal conceptions of commonsense [and much of religion] become increasingly problematic” (Geertz 1973: 111). This differs profoundly from the religious perspective, shaped by “wider, non-hypothetical truths,” “commitment” rather than detachment, and “encounter” rather than analysis.

For some observers, including the prominent paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, religion has been cut back even further, to its core “moral” function. As he proposed in his peace treaty with religion (1999), science is only about facts, and religion is only about morality, and, therefore, the two have no real complaints with each other. What he failed to appreciate is that religion makes fact claims too, and that its moral claims depend on them; what he did not fail to appreciate is that religion is one of several possible sources of morals and values and that it is the source of multiple and conflicting morals and values. Philosophy, reason, culture, and, perhaps, nature can be and have been mined for value and meaning. Ultimately, as Colin Campbell concludes, “Traditional religions like Christianity, and what are usually called secular alternatives [. . .] cannot meaningfully be judged to be any more or less adequate than each other” as cultural systems and guides for a satisfying human life (1971: 141). It is not that science cannot answer the questions that religion raises but rather than “there are no universally ‘given’ human problems. What is identified as a problem is dependent on the cultural tradition of the individual of society concerned” (Campbell 1971: 136). As Ortner posited above, not only does religion create questions and problems, but particular religions create particular questions and problems, and science as a cultural system creates its own too. They just need not and more than likely will not be the same ones.

## Case study 10.2

### Secularization in Early Modern England

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A great deal of research has been conducted on secularization in England, especially, but not exclusively, in the nineteenth century. However, C. John Sommerville finds that secularization was already underway in the sixteenth century—and not entirely in conformity with the official secularization model.

It is natural to suppose that the fading of religious significance from common activities must have been a very gradual process and clearly visible only at a late stage. One of the surprises [is] how early this process began and how sudden and dramatic are parts of the story. Secularization often proves to have been a matter of conscious debate, promoted theologically and decided politically. The rapidity of the change was commented on by English and foreign writers at the time.

(Sommerville 1992: 11–12)

In the sense of “institutional differentiation,” secularization had made some advances even before 1530; in fact, he argues that Christianity has an inherently secularizing tendency, “marking off an area of the sacred” from the everyday world (Sommerville 1992: 12). Still, the arrival of Henry VIII and his intention to disempower the Catholic Church and the entire English religious establishment greatly accelerated the process.

Official royal policy after Henry’s break with the Church included not only the detachment of politics from religion but also, to a large extent, the eradication of religion from popular experience. For instance, by most calculations, up to one-sixth of English land had previously been committed to religious functions, and the government seized it all. As Sommerville imagines, “No aspect of secularization could have been more obvious and dramatic than this activity” (1992: 20). Monasteries were destroyed or converted to other uses. Parish churches were also razed or abandoned—as many as 360 by one estimate (Sommerville 1992: 31). Church property was confiscated and sold, the metal used to manufacture cannons and ammunition. In addition to this secularization of space, time was secularized. The number and boisterous quality of holidays were reduced; even more, the timing of holidays was ruled to be arbitrary and malleable, not fixed by scripture but determinable by political authority. In addition to policy, the everyday experience of “an undifferentiated and secular time” was fostered by new technologies like the clock and the personal watch.

The state was naturally wrested from religion and given power over religion. An independent Church of England was established, with Henry as head. Parliament was empowered as the secular alternative to church councils, and new aristocratic

positions were created to ensure a majority of secular over clerical members of government. Secular courts were founded, nonclergy were appointed to high office, and even the monarchy itself was secularized.

Beyond official circles, the secular progressively invaded personal life. Literature increasingly distanced itself from religion, with Sir Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia* being one of the first works "to relativize social institutions" (Sommerville 1992: 147). Writings on economic and political theory began to appear, culminating in Thomas Hobbes's 1651 *Leviathan*. Additionally, naturalistic studies of disease and the human body itself, and, ultimately, the scientific works of Bacon and Newton, presented a mechanistic picture of the world. Even naturalist theories of religion began to emerge. "If the secularization of thought was not a cause of the secularization of other aspects of English life, it is the fullest expression of that process. For it marks the full consciousness of secularization and of the issue of faith" (Sommerville 1992: 167).

In order to secularize thought, a new secular language was necessary, and, in fact, Sommerville submits that language "was among the first things to be secularized," at once changing people's "habits of perception" and creating "a vocabulary which could express real unbelief" (1992: 44). Religion was deprived of its mystical language, Latin, and placed squarely in the workaday vernacular of English. Printing and commercial sales of bibles "put cultural authority in secular hands" (Sommerville 1992: 47). Magical invocations, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), and religious vows and oaths were discouraged. Religion itself was abstracted and objectified: Words like "religion" and "Christianity" and "theism" and "supernatural" first came into usage, and an entirely new lexicon of secular and scientific terms appeared, including "atheism," "sceptic," "deist," "rationalist," "investigate," "criticism," "analyze," and "consciousness."

Altogether, these forces gave people a new experience of society and of themselves. Nationalism was stressed over religious enthusiasm. The clergy was "professionalized," seen as officeholders instead of charismatic authorities. Many social organizations, such as occupational guilds, lost their religious dimensions and became mere practical groups. And the individual came increasingly to be an autonomous, bounded "self" entering into voluntary and modifiable social arrangements. Even religious dissent began to receive "toleration." These changes were not smooth and linear, nor did they proceed without resistance, but they were profound and effective and began long before urbanization and industrialization.

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## Secularism and secularization in non-Western societies

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Outside of the Western/Christian world, secularism and secularization have pursued their own paths. Or, rather, in many, if not most, of these settings, the concepts do not quite apply at all. Some have never made the distinction, at least in the Western/Christian manner. Others have long been “secular” after their own fashion and for their own reasons. A comparative glimpse of religions reveals the diversity and relativity of the very notion of “the secular.”

### **The Basseri: secular Muslims**

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In Fredrik Barth’s classic ethnography of the Basseri, religion does not even merit its own chapter; it is discussed in an appendix at the end of the book. As he admits,

Only few references have been made to ritual in this account of the Basseri—hardly any ceremonies have been described, and the behavior patterns have been discussed in terms of the pragmatic systems of economics, or politics, and hardly ever in terms of their meanings within a ritual system. This has followed from the nature of the material itself, and is not merely a reflection of the present field worker’s interests or the analytic orientation of this particular study. The Basseri show a poverty of ritual activities which is quite striking in the field situation; what they have of ceremonies, avoidance customs, and beliefs seem to influence, or be expressed in, very few of their actions. What is more, the different elements of ritual do not seem closely connected or interrelated in a wider system of meanings; they give the impression of occurring without reference to each other, or to important features of the social structure.

(Barth 1961: 135)

This pastoral people of southern Iran, while possessing a religion, took little interest in it. They were Shi’ite Muslims who “accept the general premises and proscriptions of Islam to the extent that they are familiar with them.” They were, at the same time, self-consciously “lax” in their religion and “indifferent to metaphysical problems” (Barth 1961: 142). They lacked ritual specialists of any sort, although they might invite a village holy man to perform marriages or certain other ceremonies. For the most part, their ceremonial life was quite simple and pragmatic. They observed some rituals surrounding key life events like birth, marriage, and death, but these were more social and political than religious; the supernatural seemed to play little or no role. Even funerals were “relatively little elaborated” (Barth 1961: 142), and no ritual specialists took part. They observed a few other customs, such as calendrical rites (often associated with migration patterns), but they did not pray regularly, and there was “no communal gathering of worshippers within a camp or even within a



tent” (Barth 1961: 136). Their religious concerns amounted to not much more than concepts of luck and the “evil eye.”

Perplexed at how to “explain” the Basseri’s relative “lack of religion,” Barth suggested that the society “invested its values” in their economic activities, especially their herds and their cyclical migrations. The meanings, he concluded, of those activities “are of the same logical order and partly of the same form as many of the ritual idioms of a religious ceremony, as these have been analyzed by anthropologists elsewhere” (Barth 1961: 148). So the Basseri, through this reinterpretation, *do* have a religion of sorts, as long as we conceive of religion as “ultimate concern and value” but not supernatural belief and behavior.

The Basseri differ from many people in that they seem to vest their central values in, and express them through, the very activities most central to their ecologic adaptation. This is perhaps possible for them only because of the peculiar nature of that adaptation—because of the picturesque and dramatic character of the activities, which makes of their migrations an engrossing and satisfying experience.

(Barth 1961: 153)

Presumably then, if Basseri “secular” life was less satisfying, they would have more religion—and, by extension, if other people’s secular lives were more satisfying, they would have less religion.

### **Shinto: a worldly religion**

According to Ian Reader, contemporary Japanese people tend to assert “that they are not religious, even whilst performing acts of an overtly religious nature such as praying at a shrine or walking a pilgrimage” (1991: 1). In fact, he reports that two-thirds of Japanese in a 1981 survey responded that they had no religious beliefs. They can do so because of their particular conception of “religion” and because of the nature of their “traditional” religion, Shinto. The Japanese word for religion, *shukyo*, he argues, is a modern introduction,

a derived word that came into prominence in the nineteenth century as a result of Japanese encounters with the West and particularly with Christian missionaries, to denote a concept and view of religion commonplace in the realms of nineteenth-century Christian theology but at that time not found in Japan, of religion as a specific belief-framed entity.

(Reader 1991: 13)

This foreign (but familiar to Westerners) view of religion as “organized religion” or “doctrine” or “creed” has never really caught on in Japan, especially among the young: Another study of college students showed that 92 percent of them maintained that they would never join any organized religious movement (Reader 1991: 14).

All of this is not to say that Japan is irreligious or secular in the Western sense of the terms. Instead, their particular religious sensibility has tended to run along naturalistic (versus supernaturalistic), social (versus “spiritual”), and behavioral (versus doctrinal) lines. First and most essentially, “the Japanese religious world is not separate from the general flow of life, but an intrinsic part thereof, upholding, strengthening, and giving sustenance to it” (Reader 1991: 54). The dualistic approach of Western religions, dividing the “religious” from the “secular,” is not an indigenous understanding. For instance, the conception of Shinto spirits or gods (*kami*) was not transcendent and otherworldly: “Traditionally, anything that inspired a sense of awe (that is, which expressed through its nature some special quality or sense of vitality) could be seen as a *kami* or as the abode of a *kami*, including rocks and trees” (Reader 1991: 25). The world of the spirits and the world of nature and human society were not infinitely separated from each other but were continuous, such that humans could become *kami*, and *kami* could act like humans; the spirits suffered pain, loss, decay, and death like any other person.

Reader further suggests that religion for traditional and contemporary Japanese has been more about fulfilling social obligations than possessing deep faith. Visiting a shrine, attending a festival, participating in a ritual were matters of “social belonging”: Individuals belonged to corporate groups like families, neighborhoods, villages, companies (especially in the present), and, of course, the nation, and these corporate groups had corporate religious duties. Significantly, this made Japanese religion particularly “flexible” and “syncretistic,” even to the point of leading many people to make little distinction between Shinto and Buddhism. *Kami* and Buddhas existed side by side or were even equated with each other, and people attended whatever religious activities were available and incumbent on them. They could, as we have seen in other cases (see Chapter 8), “move into (and out of) religious modes according to requirements and circumstances” (Reader 1991: 21–2). At the extreme, as Reader puts it, Japanese are born Shinto but die Buddhist, integrating both into their lives on different occasions or at different stages.

Japanese religion allowed for this inclusiveness because “belief,” let alone “exclusive belief,” was not a central component. Religion was something to do, more than something to believe. It had very practical and worldly interests and goals, including creating and maintaining social relationships with the gods and ancestors and ensuring purity, health, prosperity, and tranquility for living humans. “Orthodoxy” was less important than “orthopraxy,” doing the right things to achieve the right results. People might behave religiously without any significant religious belief or understanding.

Most recently, Reader notes that Japanese religion has become increasingly “secular” in the familiar sense. For instance, civic festivals have become common: The Kobe Festival, “sponsored by the civil authorities, is intended to create a sense of civic pride and community feeling in the city and consists of pageantry, parades, and spectacular street events which have little or no religious content” (Reader 1991: 73). At the same time, businesses have absorbed and “co-opted” religion by embracing religious institutions or forms, sponsoring festivals, supporting shrines and temples,

organizing visits to sacred places, and the like—all for the purpose of reinforcing the loyalty of workers and of advancing the image of the company.

### **Turkey: official secularism**

If there is a Henry VIII of the modern Muslim world, it is Mustafa Kemal, also known as Atatürk, the founder of the modern state of Turkey. Long before Kemal rose to power after World War I, the struggle over Turkish society and religion had been joined. A dominant regional power from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire, centered on what is Turkey today, was in noticeable decline by the 1700s. The Empire suffered a series of military reversals while it was falling increasingly under European economic and cultural domination. As early as 1720, French influences in architecture, tastes (including coffee houses and taverns), and thought had diffused to the Empire. In 1731, Ibrahim Muteferrika wrote a book about “rational politics” involving democracy, parliamentary government, and popular representation, not to mention Western military science; accordingly, a school of military engineering was opened in 1734.

The classic Ottoman political society had consisted of three main institutions: the Sultanate or office of the head of state (the Sultan), the Caliphate or office of the head of Islam (the Caliph, a successor to Muhammad)—both of which offices were combined in the emperor—and the *Shariat* or Islamic law (the Turkish version of *shari‘a*). As some segments of Ottoman society began to perceive the deficit with Europe, they pushed for the kinds of reforms just mentioned, meeting resistance from religious traditionalists, what Berkes already calls “fundamentalists” (see next chapter), “who regarded any innovation as contrary to the *Shariat*” (1998: 18). Periods of Westernizing reform were followed by reactionary periods of social and religious revival. In the most lasting early modern reform, Mahmud II inaugurated a system known as *Tanzimat* or “re-ordering” in the 1830s, which envisioned the Ottoman state as “composed of peoples of diverse nationalities and religions, based on secular principles of sovereignty as contrasted with the medieval concept of an Islamic empire” (Berkes 1998: 90). A secular council was appointed to decide judicial questions outside the *Shariat*, and the jurisdiction of *Shariat* courts was diminished; Western science was promoted; education (at the primary level) was made compulsory; and modernizations of language and literature were undertaken. As in early England, a new secular vocabulary including “freedom of expression,” “public opinion,” “liberal ideas,” and “natural rights” was advanced.

As a system to empower the Empire against its European rivals, the *Tanzimat* failed, but it represented, nevertheless, a step in the secularization of society, at least in the “church–state separation” sense of the term. It was also only one element in a changing society marked by a growing urban working class, entailing “the breakdown in several traditions, habits, tastes, and attitudes” (Berkes 1998: 273) and the emergence of an educated professional class, with their newspapers and other Western-style literature, introducing new “modes of psychological states, feelings of conflict, doubt, anxiety, and, above all, the practice of philosophizing and

moralizing, both of which were the signs of secularization in mind and morality” (Berkes 1998: 280).

By the early 1900s, not two but three positions were vying for the future of the Empire—Westernists, Islamists, and Turkists, the last of whom rejected both pure Westernization and pure Islamic tradition in favor of “Turkish” nationalism and identity, which many saw as pre-Islamic and in which Islam played only one temporary part. The one thing that all three constituencies agreed on was that the doddering Ottoman state was devoid of a legitimate base; each had a different notion of what a legitimate base would be—popular sovereignty, religious identity and *Seriat*, and Turkish national identity respectively. Thus, for the Turkists who ascended after World War I, “it was only indirectly, through their nationalism, that they hit upon a secular view which gave a new note to [. . .] secularism” (Berkes 1998: 412).

When the Ottoman Empire fell in 1918, Kemal eventually emerged as the leader and symbol of a modern Turkey. He believed in the sovereignty of the people, in a “civilized” and rational society, and in the eradication of backward and superstitious thinking. He was not antireligion but sought to put religion “in its place” in a secular society. First, the Sultanate was abolished; then, since the Caliphate now had no place in Turkish politics, it was abolished too. *Seriat* courts were closed; *medreses* (religious schools), *tariqas* (Muslim brotherhoods), and *turbe* (tombs and shrines of saints) were all shut down. The Ministry of *Seriat* was abolished, and some religious roles and titles were eliminated. A new code of civil/family law was promulgated, which “signified the unmitigated secularization of civil life. The men of religion lost their function, not only in civil procedure, but also in the administration of the law” (Berkes 1998: 472), including the area of marriage, which was entirely secularized. Even dress was secularized: The traditional headgear for men (the fez) was circumscribed, and women were heavily discouraged from wearing the traditional veil or headscarf. Even religion was brought under the authority of the State, which opened its own schools for the education of *imams* (religious specialists) under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. In 1924, a Department of the Affairs of Piety was created “to manage the administrative affairs of religion” (Berkes 1998: 484).

### **Raelianism: a new religion without gods**

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On 13 December 1973, a French journalist named Claude Vorilhon was driving to work when he felt compelled to keep driving until he arrived at a volcanic crater near Auvergne. As he tells it in his book *The Final Message* (Rael 1998), he saw a flying saucer descend from the sky, out of which proceeded four-foot tall “greens” with long dark hair. During this and five subsequent meetings, the outer-space beings, including one named Yahweh (a biblical name for God), explained to Vorilhon their identity, their role in human history, and their plans for humans: that they would return to Earth when world peace had been achieved and an “embassy” for them had been built in Jerusalem. They also gave Vorilhon a new name—Rael.

According to Rael ([www.rael.org](http://www.rael.org)), the contents of the alien message to humanity consisted of the following:

- “God does not exist, we were the ones who made all life on Earth.” Through the processes of DNA, it was the extraterrestrial beings who created and designed life, including human life.
- “You mistook us for gods [elohim, another biblical term for God—or literally, gods] and distorted our teachings of love.” The Raelian religion is a self-consciously “atheistic” religion, since what we thought were gods are really just space beings. The various world scriptures are attempts to communicate this reality but are garbled and confused.
- “We now reveal how to realize your potential and achieve global peace.” The creator-beings have been waiting until the human race attained sufficient “maturity” to receive knowledge of and from the creators—including technological knowledge—and that time has come. For this contact to commence, the above-mentioned embassy is necessary.
- “Contact those people whose lives have already been radically improved by this revolutionary philosophy.” Raelians should spread the good news about the return of the creators and prepare the world for it, not only through efforts toward world peace but also through promotion of science as well as a world government and a world currency.

This “new philosophy, where religion and science meet,” as they assert, includes familiar kinds of “spiritual” or “psychological” disciplines as well. Like most optimistic NRMs, Raelianism maintains that the “natural state” of humanity is happiness. However, Rael identifies the macrosocial institutions as the main obstacles to natural human happiness. The “organized brutality” that has marked human history, together with the deliberately misleading behavior of leaders, distracts us from our true destiny. According to the Raelian website:

Governments and religious institutions don’t have your interest at heart, they are just fronts to make money and maintain power, the puppets of economic giants acting behind the scenes. They lie behind their smiles and benedictions before the elections but behind your back they are laughing all the way to the bank. They use the media as their obedient little liars to manipulate public opinion with their politically correct propaganda and maintain the illusion of legitimacy while deliberately cultivating an atmosphere of fear.

Science, the “great democratic leveller,” will emancipate humans from this exploitative system, along with the practice of what they call “sensuality,” by which they mean disciplined sensuality through “sensual meditation,” which “teaches us how to awaken our potential and bring these into our lives, so that we each become gardens of fulfilment with all our flowers blossoming.” This meditative technique seems to be the main “product” that Raelianism is selling for now, offered through books, CDs, and, most importantly, conferences and training seminars.

Finally, in 1997, the Raelian Religion founded a technology company called Clonaid to further its scientific, specifically DNA-related, researches. This technology, the original “creation method” of the elohim, is believed to be a gift to us and a

virtual religious duty, as well as a way of participating in the creative process of making more and better humans and, ultimately, humans that realize their infinite and eternal potential.

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## The contemporary “secular movement” in the USA

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If secularism is a continuum or field, then at the far end of the spectrum, or on some part of the field, are those who are not merely indifferent or worldly but more or less self-consciously and positively unreligious or antireligious. It is proper to consider this phenomenon a “movement” rather than a group or culture, since it apparently neither aspires to nor has succeeded at “institutionalizing” itself into a culture or society. There are no secular states or towns or even neighborhoods; rather, secularists and irreligionists are distributed among their believing peers. We might conceive of the secular movement as a network more than a group—a pseudogroup or virtual group or, still better, an assortment of such virtual groups. They occasionally form and participate in local and national associations, but they are much more present through communication technologies like the Internet, like all other virtual groups/networks and many actual groups. While they have no distinct “way of life” and do not appear to pursue one, they have attempted to create for themselves—and for the society around them—some cultural elements, such as research institutes, publications (newsletters and magazines), political-action committees, and even special dates, like Darwin Day (Charles Darwin’s birthday, February 14), a National Day of Reason in early May, and seasonal celebrations for solstices and equinoxes. They have undergone the same kinds of “doctrinal” feuds and even schisms that all human groups, including religions, have confronted. And, arguably, most non-religious people do not belong to any groups or organizations at all, and many do not identify themselves as such.

There is no single, generally accepted term for this position or movement, because it is in fact not a single position/movement but a field of overlapping but discrete positions/movements. Collectively, they are sometimes referred to, or refer to themselves, as “the irreligious” or “unbelievers” or “the unchurched,” or, more recently, “the brights” or “the universists.” Within this realm, however, there is a variety of names and claims.

One of the more neutral terms in the world of irreligion is humanism. Actually, there can be and are religious humanists as well as secular humanists. Humanism is an approach to humanity and to human society rather than any specific position about religion. It is a term that has been in use at least since the Renaissance, although not with its contemporary denotation. According to the American Humanist Association and its magazine *The Humanist*, humanism is

a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion. Affirming the dignity of each human being, it supports the

maximization of individual liberty and opportunity consonant with social and planetary responsibility. It advocates the extension of participatory democracy and the expansion of the open society, standing for human rights and social justice. Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values—be they religious, ethical, social, or political—have their source in human nature, experience, and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

Another often-employed term is *skepticism*. In philosophy, skepticism tends to designate the epistemological stand that knowledge is impossible (see above); a skeptic is never sure about anything and so perhaps avoids commitments and decisions altogether when possible. Some laypeople use the term in this way, but individuals who call themselves “skeptics” today and who organize as skeptics usually mean something less radical. Skepticism is a doubting attitude, a “show-me” spirit. As *Skeptical* magazine, the vehicle of the Skeptic Society, puts it:

Skepticism is a provisional approach to claims. It is the application of reason to any and all ideas—no sacred cows allowed. In other words, skepticism is a method, not a position. Ideally, skeptics do not go into an investigation closed to the possibility that a phenomenon might be real or that a claim might be true. When we say we are “skeptical,” we mean that we must see compelling evidence before we believe [. . .] the pure position [that knowledge is impossible] is sterile and unproductive and held by virtually no one [. . .] The key to skepticism is to continuously and vigorously apply the methods of science to navigate the treacherous straits between “know nothing” skepticism and “anything goes” credulity.

Thus, skeptics do not deny all knowledge but adopt a cautious and demanding approach to knowledge. Furthermore, skeptics may not focus exclusively on religion, often exercising their attitude on “pseudo-science” and dubious social or historical claims as well.

*Freethought* is another polysemous term used by the religious and the irreligious alike. Essentially, it means making up one’s own mind without constraint by authorities, traditions, personal preference, popular opinion, or other extraneous influences. Freethought is not necessarily antireligious: Medieval Christian sects like the Free Spirits and even various Protestant denominations often referred to themselves as freethinkers when they disagreed with official Church dogma. People who identify themselves primarily as freethinkers today, however, are often using the word as a gloss for a stronger nonreligious position.

*Atheism*, from the Greek *a-* for “no” or “without” and *-theos* for “god,” is thought by many to be the most extreme and negative irreligious term and position, although many, if not most, humanists, skeptics, naturalists, and freethinkers are atheists.

When most Americans use or hear the term “atheism,” they think of someone who does not believe in the Christian god or who denies that such a being exists. Historically, this is not the only or main meaning of the term: Christians used and use the word against other religions, and other religions, like imperial Roman religion, used the word against Christians. In practice, then, an atheist has tended to mean anyone who does not believe in your particular god, which is the same thing as believing in the wrong god, which is the same thing as believing in no god. Even worse, as we have seen, atheism, strictly speaking, is not a particularly enlightening analytical term, since most of the religious belief systems we have discussed (see Chapter 2) do not include gods but rather other kinds of spirits or forces and are, therefore, in a serious sense, a-theistic—not anti-god(s) but rather simply lacking any such concept.

*Agnosticism* is a common but profoundly misunderstood notion. Most people think that it is an “in-between” position, neither theism nor atheism, neither belief nor nonbelief, but some kind of “opting out” or “waiting for the information.” However, this is not what the man who coined the term, Thomas Huxley, meant by it. A friend and supporter of Darwin, he invented the word out of the Greek *gnosis* for “knowledge,” literally then “without knowledge.” His precise definition ran thus:

Agnosticism is not a creed but a method, the essence of which lies in the vigorous application of a single principle. Positively the principle may be expressed as, in matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it can carry you without other considerations. And negatively, in matters of the intellect, do not pretend the conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable. It is wrong for a man to say he is certain of the objective truth of a proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.

(Huxley 1902: 245–6)

In other words, he did not see himself offering a new belief but expressing an old and trusty approach to knowledge: Do not claim to know what you cannot prove you know. In this sense, agnosticism is virtually identical to skepticism and free-thought and to reason itself—the process by which we gather our facts and arrive at our conclusions.

A number of groups and organizations actively promote secularism, naturalistic science, or political goals like the separation of church and state. American Atheists is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, irreligious organization, founded by Madalyn Murray (later O’Hair) in Baltimore on July 1, 1963, two weeks after the successful Supreme Court case on Bible reading and prayer in public schools (see Chapter 12). O’Hair quickly became known as “the most hated person in America” for her public atheism, even though the coplaintiff in the case was a Unitarian. Because of the rampant hostility toward atheism, the organization’s original name was “Other Americans” (that is, those who are *not* Christian), which was changed to “Society of Separationists” and finally American Atheists in 1976. It owns a press (American Atheists Press) and publishes occasional books as well as two journals—*American*



*Atheist* magazine and a membership newsletter. It also produces a television program, *The Atheist Viewpoint*, and, in 2004, established a political action committee to lobby for the rights of atheists. It holds an annual conference each year over Easter weekend. In 1995, Murray O'Hair and her family disappeared under suspicious circumstances, and Ellen Johnson became president of the organization. In 2001, their remains were found in Texas, where they had been left by the killer, a former employee of the organization.

Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) was formed by disaffected members of American Atheists. The founder of the organization is Anne Gaylor, and the other central figures in the group are her daughter Annie Laurie and Annie Laurie's husband Dan Barker. Barker is the public face of FFRF, a former believer who speaks as well as sings songs for the cause of irreligion. Based in Madison, Wisconsin, it publishes a monthly newspaper, *Freethought Today*. The main cause of FFRF is church-state separation, including fighting religious displays on public property and use of facilities like schools for proselytizing. It does a small amount of publishing, including Barker's memoir *Losing Faith in Faith* and Annie Laurie Gaylor's *Women Without Superstition*, a collection of writings from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female freethinkers. It holds an annual conference in Madison in the fall, with smaller occasional meetings around the country.

Atheist Alliance International (AAI) is a loosely affiliated group of atheist and freethought grassroots organizations with a "democratic" approach to their activities. It has a website and an annual conference, also over Easter weekend, but is much more informal than the prior groups. It also publishes a journal called *Secular Nation*.

Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) is headed by perhaps the intellectual leader of humanism, Dr. Paul Kurtz, a philosopher in Buffalo, New York. In 1980, he formed the Council, which maintains a variety of activities focusing on research, education, and publishing. The organization runs a major press, Prometheus Books, which publishes on freethought, science, politics, philosophy, and other subjects. It also publishes journals including *Free Inquiry*, *Skeptical Inquirer* (an instrument of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, or CSICOP), and *Philo*. It has an outreach arm to students in schools and colleges, the Campus Freethought Alliance. Finally, it operates a series of "Centers for Inquiry" where research and education are conducted. The current locations are Amherst, New York (the home office), Hollywood, New York City, and Tampa Bay; there are even international sites in Russia, Mexico, Peru, Nigeria, Germany, France, and Nepal. Major scholars like Ibn Warraq (who recently published *Why I Am Not a Muslim*) and Karen Armstrong work for or with the centers. At these locations, and occasionally around the country, CSH offers training seminars on critical thinking, science, history, and other issues of interest to humanists.

American Humanist Association, established in 1941, is probably the most socially oriented of the major freethought organizations. Typical issues that it tackles include environmental, political, educational, ethical/moral, social justice, and, of course, religious ones. It operates local chapters around the country as well as a student outreach group, the Secular Student Alliance. It publishes a magazine entitled *The*

*Humanist* and a newsletter called *Free Mind*. It even keeps a registry of secular officiates for humanists who want a nonreligious wedding or funeral.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) is an organization with a single agenda—First Amendment separation of church and state. It is not directly associated with atheist issues and, in fact, is headed by a religious man, the Revd. Barry Lynn. AU starts or joins legal action in cases of violation of the First Amendment, and Lynn is a regular figure on national news and discussion programs.

The Skeptics Society is primarily the work of Michael Shermer, author of such titles as *Why People Believe Weird Things* and *The Science of Good and Evil*. Based in Pasadena, it publishes *Skeptical* magazine, the main target of which is pseudoscience, with typical topics ranging from UFOs and alternative medical treatments to creationism and Holocaust-denial. While not explicitly antireligious, it does take religion to task for its false or unsupported “scientific” claims. It has published *The Skeptic Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience* and sponsors monthly lectures at the California Institute of Technology. It also promotes various educational activities, including research, speakers and local events, and training and informational guides, not the least of which is the “Baloney Detection Kit” to help people identify errors, fallacies, and pseudoscience whenever they meet it.

The Secular Web/Internet Infidels is one of the many initiatives that exist only on the Internet ([www.infidels.org](http://www.infidels.org)). It maintains an extensive online library of articles and information on topics from religion to politics to science. It also supports local and national organizations by listing activities on its site. There are also many smaller or private internet projects, as well as a number of internet-radio outlets, such as “Freethought Radio,” “The Infidel Guy,” “Hellbound Allee,” and the like that feature guests and discussions on secularist issues.

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## Conclusion

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Even the most religious of people live in the natural world. The supernatural world, in most religious traditions, does not contradict or refute the natural one but rather complements or adds to it. As the Japanese and other examples show, religion does not necessarily imagine *another* world but *more* world. Secularism and secularization are particularly prominent elements in the modern world, but this fact may be less about modernity as a distinct and real phenomenon than about the precise historical and social processes that characterize it. Also, as we have seen, “the secular” is not unique to modernity; there have been secular periods in earlier history and secularistic societies around the world. Secularism, if it is not a product of world religions specifically, appears to be a product of a “dualistic” outlook that is unusually sharp in some such religions. Therefore, secularism in the contemporary context may relate to the penetration of those religions and their outlook into ever-growing sections of the world. Finally, insofar as secularism or secularization is a “thing” at all, and a thing in response to wider “thing” called modernization, it is obviously only one possible response. As we have already seen, another response

to similar processes—of pluralism, economic and political integration, individualization, and so on—has been the emergence of universalistic religions. Another response has been the proliferation of new religious movements, some making universalistic claims and others being quite “local.” Another possible response might be clinging to traditions, even when they do not entirely fit modernizing conditions. When this clinging becomes sufficiently intense and aggressive, we might even witness a kind of “fundamentalism,” as we will explore in the next chapter.

# Religious fundamentalism

## The anthropology of fundamentalism

Fundamentalism, “tradition,” and modernity

Fundamentalism as a cultural system

## Christian fundamentalisms

The rise of modern fundamentalism

The resurgence of fundamentalism in the late twentieth century

## Fundamentalisms in cross-cultural perspective

Jewish fundamentalisms

Islamic fundamentalisms

Hindu fundamentalisms

Buddhist fundamentalisms

## Conclusion

Developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have shown that, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the rumors of the death of gods and religion were greatly exaggerated. Religion survived the onslaught of modernization and secularization, evincing its characteristic and almost infinite capacity to adapt to and absorb extra-religious influences. Not only did religion not quietly fade away, but it thrived and multiplied, producing more religions and new religious movements, especially in the decades after World War II, than scholars could keep track of. And at least some of these religions and NRMs expressed resistance—even virulent resistance—to modernization, or to other cultures and religions, or to “the world” as we commonly know it.

Religion, some might say, has reemerged with a vengeance as a global social force—with fundamentalism as the most vengeful. No other strain of religion has been as vociferous and, on occasion, as violent. It has become a lightning rod for diagnoses, positive and negative, about the health of modern religion. However, like so many of the dimensions of religion discussed so far, it is often greatly misunderstood, or, at least, great assumptions are made about it.

Fundamentalism is not a religion, nor is it a sect or denomination of religion. Following Thomas Meyer (2000), we might more accurately refer to it as a “style” of

religion. It is not the only style of religion, of course: There are other styles, from liberal and syncretistic to conservative and traditionalistic. It is also not exclusive to any particular religion: There is a fundamentalist Christian style, a fundamentalist Muslim style, and a fundamentalist Hindu style, and on and on. In fact, fundamentalism is not exclusive to religion at all: Meyer calls it a “style of civilization” (2000: 29), which can occur in any area of culture. One can be fundamentalist about politics or economics or race or gender or baseball. Finally, while fundamentalism seems to be a distinctly modern phenomenon, or, at least, a type of response to certain challenges posed by modernity, it is possible, without stretching the term, to identify it in premodern contexts as well.

Thus, fundamentalism is a cultural concept with multiple cultural contexts. It is not a single, simple fact but a diverse and ambiguous construct and practice. While each fundamentalism claims for itself a kind of intellectual and moral absolutism, the very plethora of fundamentalisms—not to mention the coexisting and competing nonfundamentalisms—proves its relativity. Even more, we must be careful with the use of the term as an analytical device, since the attribution of “fundamentalism” to a group or position is often not neutral but pejorative: For many people, “fundamentalist” means “bad,” “irrational,” even “dangerous.” In this chapter, we will treat religious fundamentalism in particular, and contemporary religious fundamentalism even more particularly, in a wide crosscultural setting. We will see that it is a style of religion—probably not a majority style in any actual religion, but one that attracts a disproportionate amount of attention and that enjoys a disproportionate amount of influence. We will see that its rivals (for it sees itself “fundamentally” in a rivalry) are not only irreligion and the secular but also the more liberal wing of its own religion, as well as other religions and some (but never all) aspects of modern social life in general—and that all are locked in a struggle to control or create a society.

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## The anthropology of fundamentalism

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Religious fundamentalism derives its name (and much of its energy) from the notion of “fundamentals,” those things—beliefs, behaviors, organizational structures, and/or moral injunctions—that are felt by members to be most essential and central, the oldest, deepest, and truest aspects of it. The popular and often scholarly view is dominated by impressions of Christian and Muslim fundamentalisms: George Marsden, for instance, defines a fundamentalist as “an evangelical Protestant who is militantly opposed to liberal theologies and to some aspects of secularism in modern culture” (1990: 22). This definition, however, not only excludes all non-Christians but also most Christians; for instance, “Catholic fundamentalism” would be impossible, since Catholics are not Protestants.

Instead of associating fundamentalism with any specific religion, or with religion at all, Richard Antoun, while still focusing overtly on Christian, Muslim, and Jewish versions, sees it as “an orientation to the world, both cognitive and affective. The

affective, or emotional, orientation indicates outrage and protest against (and also fear of) change and against a certain ideological orientation, the orientation of modernism" (2001: 3). Still more inclusively, Jeffrey Hadden (n.d.) defines it as "the proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition which is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society that has strayed from its cultural moorings," recognizing its simultaneously "theological and political dimensions." Most inclusively of all, Meyer describes it as "a political ideology of the 20th century *that recruits members on their shared ethno-religious characteristics*" (2000: 17). He continues:

Combining elements of the late modern age in an ambiguously pragmatic manner with aspects drawn from the dogmatized stock of premodern traditions, fundamentalism seeks to attack the *basic structures* and consequences of the culture of the modern era. [. . .] Fundamentalism projects itself as a political ideology which poses a—for the most part—religious—and less frequently—secular-ideological ethic as a politically *absolute answer to the crises of modernization* [emphasis in the original].

In fact, rather than fundamentalism, he refers to a "fundamentalist impulse" that can and does show itself in many cultural arenas.

These and like approaches to religious fundamentalism illustrate a number of common points. First, religious fundamentalism is *for* something, namely, what it perceives to be the fundamental and crucial elements of its faith, which constitutes the worldview *and the truth* for practitioners. In the case of Christianity, these fundamentals typically include a focus on the Bible even as a literal and inerrant document and source of knowledge; a certainty that their path is the true path and, therefore, the exclusion and sometimes condemnation of others (even other Christians) as corrupt and lost; a sharp distinction between religion and "the secular," the latter of which is inferior or actually evil; an eschatology in which the end-time is near and only they will survive into the new kingdom, that is, an apocalyptic view and a sense of being "chosen"; an uncompromising moral standard; and, increasingly, a willingness to participate in politics to institutionalize all of the above, including a more or less conscious desire to dismantle the separation of church and state. Other religions obviously have their own programs based on their own "fundamentals": A scriptural religion like Islam finds its fundamentals in the Qur'an, while other types of religions find it elsewhere.

Second, religious fundamentalism is *against* something. Virtually all of the commentators stress the exclusivist, agitated, and even militant attitude of fundamentalism. As Marsden proceeds to argue, fundamentalists "must not only believe their evangelical teachings, but they must be willing to fight for them against modernist theologies, secular humanism, and the like" (1990: 23). Marty and Appleby, in the introduction to their massive comparative study, state that fundamentalists see themselves as fighting, specifically *fighting back*: "It is no insult to fundamentalisms to see them as militant, whether in the use of words and ideas or ballots or, in extreme cases, bullets. Fundamentalists see themselves as militants.

This means the first word to employ in respect to them is that they are reactive” (1991a: ix). They are, in their words and often enough in their works, at war with the world.

While fundamentalisms may be reactive, there is a variety of particular reactions that they may mount. *Moral and ideological purists* are probably the most common and least extreme proponents of fundamentalism; like the Southside Gospel Church (see below), they merely take their religion especially seriously and let it pervade and define more or less every aspect of their lives. Some groups and sects take this notion of community further, becoming *peaceful separatists* like the Mennonites or the Amish, whom Larsen (1971) has called “quiet fanatics.” These groups reject the modern and outside world to greater or lesser degrees and hold to their convictions by not only ideologically but also physically detaching themselves from the wider society. Typically, there are certain practices that can only be accomplished in a separatist setting, such as polygamy among the Fundamentalist Mormons of the Southwest USA.

Groups or sects that seek to engage the wider society, for purposes of bringing that society into line with their own beliefs and values, can be regarded as *activists*. The Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, among other religiously and culturally conservative agencies, represent such an effort: They want not only to live their own moral and ideological principles but also want to urge them on the rest of society and are willing to use political (including electoral and governmental) methods to achieve their goals. Legislating and institutionalizing religious principles are among their techniques. More uncompromising are the *reconstructionists* who seek a total transformation or reinvention of society in line with their religious convictions (see below). However, they do not use, or at least so far have not used, coercion to reach their ends. At the extreme, then, are the *militants*, who are willing to employ force against their perceived enemies—which may include the government and the general population—in pursuit of religious agenda. These are the groups that fly airliners into towers or drive truckloads of explosives to federal buildings.

So, fundamentalism is not a single monolithic phenomenon or movement either. Not all religious fundamentalisms have the same goals nor do they adopt the same methods. And, of course, not all fundamentalisms are religious at all. Nevertheless, summing up their research on religious fundamentalisms, Marty and Appleby (1991b: 818–27) find the following characteristics recurring through history and across culture:

- religious idealism;
- religious claims as an irreducible basis for communal and personal identity;
- extremism, rhetorical or actual, which “serves a number of purposes, among them the posing of a litmus test separating true believers from outsiders” (Marty and Appleby 1991b: 818);
- dramatic eschatologies;
- a dramatization, demonization, and even “mythologization” of their enemies;

- a counteracculturation orientation, that is, a refusal to compromise with or integrate “outside” influences;
- missionary zeal;
- a crisis mentality: “Fundamentalisms arise or come to prominence in times of crisis, actual or perceived” (Marty and Appleby 1991b: 822);
- charismatic and authoritarian (usually male) leadership;
- mass appeal;
- a stated rejection of modernity mixed with “a shrewd exploitation of its processes and instrumentalities” (Marty and Appleby 1991b: 827).

### **Fundamentalism, “tradition,” and modernity**

This last item raises a third common thread of fundamentalism, one that is a familiar to anthropologists—that is, its alleged resistance to the “present” or the “modern.” As a type of movement, it overtly appeals to “the past” or to “tradition.” The fundamentals necessarily hark back to an earlier time, a time closer to the origin of the religion, when religious belief and practice was supposedly more perfect. But anthropologists know that tradition is a complex and constructed concept: All traditions had their origins (i.e., at one point they were not “traditional” but innovative), and few, if any, contemporary beliefs and practices are, or could conceivably be, “traditional.” In the case of Christianity, there could be no Protestant traditions more than 500 years old and no Christian traditions of any kind more than 2,000 years old. Other religions would have potentially older (but not infinitely old) traditions and, for most religions and especially NRMs, much younger traditions.

Accordingly, one of the characteristics that Antoun emphasizes in addition to the scripturalism of (many) fundamentalisms is what he calls “traditioning.” By traditioning, he means an active process in which “traditions” are chosen and modified (though often not admittedly so), interpreted, and sometimes outright invented to give form to the religion. These “traditioned” traditions are then “given” as the fundamentals of their faith, *through which members are supposed to view and understand their past, their present, and, most critically, their future.* In other words, fundamentalism is a special case of the more general process of “the invention of tradition” (e.g., Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

As we explored in Chapter 7, the invention and reinvention of tradition is not unique to the modern world or to the “world religions.” All religions, and all cultural domains, continuously create, supplement, delete, and reinterpret themselves while maintaining the ideology that they do not, that their beliefs and practices and institutions are eternal and real. Fundamentalisms go one step further: They know that they are *not* living entirely in conformity with “tradition” and certainly that the world at large is not but that they and it *should be*. The past, when the fundamentals were formed and truly practiced, looms as a kind of golden age, an ideal and idealized way of life. Fundamentalisms thus emerge as one variation of the cultural nostalgias produced by the modern world—memories of a better, purer time.



Today, however, the fundamentals and the people who keep them alive are seen to be under threat, and much has already been lost or corrupted. Fundamentalisms, therefore, often take the form of revivals, restorations, and reconstructions—and necessarily as *religious movements*. To be precise, contemporary religious fundamentalism is a type of NRM that denies that it is an NRM; rather, it perceives itself as the *old* religion, the recovered and restored religion—and not only brought back to life but also brought back to prominence in the culture of the society.

As movements, then, fundamentalisms stand in an ambiguous relation to modernity. They overtly and vociferously reject many aspects of modern or foreign (or both) attitudes and practices and values—“the modern world” or “the outside world” is usually the express enemy—even while they accept or even embrace other aspects. Extreme fundamentalists, like the Christian Reconstructionists (see below), still happily take advantage of printing, computers, the Internet, cell phones, and many other items of modernity; few, if any, recommend speaking Aramaic or wearing robes. This explains Antoun’s fourth characteristic of fundamentalism, “selective modernization,” through which such movements contend with but also adapt to modern/foreign influences. As Bruce Lawrence has phrased it, fundamentalisms “accept the instrumental benefits of modernity but not its value orientation” (1989: 6), but either way, they are very much “products of modernity” (1989: 3).

This is why Anthony Giddens, the brilliant social theorist, is wrong when he declares that fundamentalism is “tradition defended in the traditional way” (1994: 6). As he himself subsequently admits, “The point about traditions is that you don’t really have to justify them: they contain their own truth, a ritual truth, asserted as correct by the believer” (Giddens 1994: 6). There is a vast difference between tradition and “traditionalism,” between the fundamentals of a religion and “fundamentalism.” But since fundamentalisms are not only movements but also *arguments and ideologies*—and arguments and ideologies that share the social space with others, fundamentalist and nonfundamentalist—they act highly nontraditionally. In other words, fundamentalisms may be *about* tradition, but they are not “traditional,” and they may complain against innovation, but they are essentially innovative.

### **Fundamentalism as a cultural system**

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Fundamentalisms are not, any more than NRMs or secularization or modernity itself, purely negative programs; they are not only against something but also are for something. Each sees itself, as the cases below will amply illustrate, as an effort to create a good and true religion as part of a larger project to create a good and true society. As Marty and Appleby clearly state:

fundamentalism intends neither an artificial imposition of archaic practices and lifestyles nor a simple return to a golden era, a sacred past, a bygone time of origins—although nostalgia for such an era is a hallmark of fundamentalist rhetoric. Instead, religious identity thus renewed becomes the exclusive and absolute basis for a re-created political and social order that is oriented to

the future rather than the past. Selecting elements of tradition and modernity, fundamentalists seek to re-make the world in the service of a dual commitment to the unfolding eschatological drama (by returning all things in submission to the divine) and to self-preservation (by neutralizing the threatening 'Other').

(Marty and Appleby 1993: 3)

Fundamentalisms, then, are engaged in the noble practice—indeed, the essentially and only human practice—of world-making.

From an anthropological perspective, fundamentalisms are not only cultural but also *cultures or potential cultures*. And, based on everything we understand about culture, fundamentalisms are doing what must be done: They are offering not only a model *of* the world but a model *for* the world, one in which “ethos” and “worldview” match. They are generating the “consonance” between religion and other domains of society and, in a certain and sometimes intentional sense, eliminating the modern “separation” of religion and the rest of society. Peter Berger (1999) has dubbed fundamentalisms programs for the “desecularization of the world.” They are also, finally, employing their view of religion as the legitimation for the culture and world they plan and work to make.

Part—in fact an essential part—of the fundamentalist program is the construction of institutions, religious and otherwise, but necessarily authorized and legitimized by religion. The details of the institution-construction will vary from religion to religion, from society to society, and from historical period to historical period. Nevertheless, a few elements of this process are fairly standard. Fundamentalists, as Marty and Appleby put it, “are boundary-setters: they excel in marking themselves off from others by distinctive dress, customs, and conduct” (1993: 4). These distinctions are, of course, one dimension of their culture, whether it is earlocks for orthodox Jews, beards for orthodox Muslims, or “WWJD” bracelets for orthodox Christians. As for the boundaries, the group that is enclosed by them can be a single congregation, a movement or entire religion, an ethnic group, a society, or a state. One of the more interesting things we observe is the easy concatenation of religion and nationality or nationalism, as with *Hindutva* in India or Buddhism in Sri Lanka (see below).

The relation between fundamentalisms and the State is a problematic one, as our examples will show. Depending on their theology and politics, a fundamentalist movement may be opposed to any state at all (God or religion being the sole source of authority and law) or adamantly pro-state (seeing the government as the mechanism for achieving religious rectitude on Earth). In more than a few cases, fundamentalist groups have attempted, occasionally successfully (e.g., Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran or the Taliban in Afghanistan), to literally seize the government and use political power to implement their religious plans. Some scholars have asked whether one can reasonably speak of a fundamentalism-in-power, since fundamentalism is, by definition, oppositional, but the question is wrongly asked: A fundamentalist movement is not in opposition to power (in a direct way, each seeks power) but to aspects of society or of foreign societies. Therefore, a fundamentalism-in-power

still has much to oppose, including resistance from modernized members of society, not to mention all nonmembers of the movement. A more serious question is whether a fundamentalism-in-power must necessarily make some concessions to “secularism,” that is to say, when a religious movement attains political power and becomes “the State,” it must first participate in areas of society that it never did before—thus redefining religious institutions and practices (like Muslim *shari’a* law) in original ways—and, second, at least partly submit religious principle and authority to pragmatic and worldly concerns. In other words, when a religion becomes the government, it must deliver the mail, pick up the trash, and command the army.

The culture of fundamentalism brings with it other troublesome ingredients. Experience has shown that fundamentalism tends to be “essentially antidemocratic, anti-accommodationist, and antipluralist and that it violates, *as a matter of principle*, the standards of human rights defended, if not always perfectly upheld, by Western democracies” (Marty and Appleby 1993: 5, emphasis in the original). This attitude, not unique to fundamentalism (we find it in Communism and Nazism and other absolutist and idealist movements), flows from the superhuman authority of the system: Power and sovereignty do not lie with the *demos* but with the divine. Also, naturally, all other positions, even loyal oppositions, are necessarily and completely wrong. Thus, the legitimation of the movement and its resulting institutions and (if successful) regime almost inevitably entail the delegitimation of all possible alternatives and rivals, which are castigated as evil, corrupt, and so on. This attitude can, obviously, lead to violence.

Besides pluralism and popular sovereignty, other aspects of modern social life are questioned or rejected by fundamentalisms. One is the self-critical and uncertain nature of modernity, or even postmodernity, the collapse or failure of all “grand narratives” of human life and social meaning. As Berger reminds us, “Modernity, for fully understandable reasons, undermines all the old certainties; uncertainty is a condition that many people find very hard to bear; therefore, any movement (not only a religious one) that promises to provide or to renew certainty has a ready market” (1999: 7). This is predictably one of the recurring comments about the fundamentalist personality or mentality; as Lawrence writes, fundamentalism “is the affirmation of religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction” along with the logical demand that those absolute truths “be publicly recognized and legally enforced” (1989: 27). Ammerman, in her ethnography of a fundamentalist congregation (1987), repeatedly refers to their impulse to certainty; inerrancy of their authorities (scriptural, human, and institutional) is typically the first principle of the movement (see below).

A second aspect of modernity that is disparaged is the separation of the religious and the secular or, as it is often formulated in modern religion, the assignment of religion to “the private” apart from public social and political life. As Garvey has stated it, fundamentalists “resist the maintenance of the public/private distinction” (1993: 17). Religion is not merely private, not merely a matter of choice or feeling; therefore, it can and must be institutionalized. Religion, from this point of view, is the very ground and source of society and its institutions. This leads, as one might

expect, to a perspective on religion itself which is diametrically opposed to the one that anthropology and the other social sciences take. While we call religion essentially “symbolic” and “social” and “functional,” they insist that it is literal and true. In other words, as Gellner explains, the fundamentalist understanding of religion “rejects the widespread modern idea that religion [. . .] really doesn’t mean what it actually says” (1992: 2). A clear example is the televangelist James Kennedy, who rejects the symbolist approach when he argues that aside from obviously metaphorical parts of the Bible (like “faith of a mustard seed”), the rest is to be taken literally. For him, Jonah was literally swallowed by a whale, Adam was a real person, and Jesus really walked on water; there is no interpretation, no symbolic analysis: “In living, explaining, or defending our faith, we are most likely to say, ‘The Word of God says . . .’ As believers, that settles the matter, no matter what the matter may be” (1997: 20).

Finally, as we have mentioned, fundamentalists, like all culture-makers, must put their plans into action; this may mean pervading and “colonizing” the existing institutions of a society. Very often, the primary institutions in contention between fundamentalists and the rest of society are the government, the education system, and the media. Fundamentalists, in the USA and elsewhere, have been active and direct in attempting to penetrate and dominate these segments of society (see also Chapter 12). They have often, due to their minority status or their perceived extremism, been defeated in these initiatives. However, given their certainty and their energy, defeat is seldom the end of their culture-making efforts: As Ammerman points out, “Whenever fundamentalists have lost a battle, they have responded by withdrawing to establish their own alternative institutions” (1987: 211). At the extreme, like the Amish, they literally withdraw and live in a world-within-a-world of their own design. More commonly, if they cannot control the public schools, for instance, they establish private schools or home schools where they can teach their own curriculum. The Catholic Church has long operated an extensive system of schools parallel to the public ones; Muslim societies often depended on religious schools or *madrasas*, and Protestant sects have increasingly exploited the notion. Recently, fundamentalist movements have opened their own colleges (e.g., Liberty University or Bob Jones University) and law schools, as well as creating their own radio and television stations, printing their own curricula and textbooks, publishing their own journals and newspapers, organizing their own political-action groups, and so on.

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## Christian fundamentalisms

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While fundamentalism in Christianity is especially noteworthy in the present moment, it is not entirely unprecedented in this moment. In an important way, the Protestant Reformation can well be seen as a fundamentalist movement. Martin Luther’s purpose, quite explicitly, was to dispense with the accretions of time and tradition and to return to a simpler, purer, and, therefore, truer Christianity, one without

priests and sacraments but with only the believer and the Bible. Even before that, we could regard such dissent movements as the Free Spirits of the twelfth century and beyond as a kind of fundamentalism, which took their inspiration from a literalist reading of (some parts of) scripture for their beliefs and lifestyles. And, even further back, unitarian and other such challenges to Catholic orthodoxy can be seen as attempts to dip directly from the source and to restore a lost original orthodoxy, a “primitive church” like in Jesus’s own time. Finally, many, if not all, ascetic and monastic traditions are attempts to create an oasis of right belief and conduct in a desert of chaos and corruption.

### **The rise of modern fundamentalism**

Although reform and “revivalism” are old Christian traditions, the terms “fundamentalism” and “fundamentalist” did not enter the English vocabulary until shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. Between 1910 and 1915, a series of twelve publications entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* appeared. Out of this effort emerged an organization, the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association, founded by William B. Riley in 1919, and the new terminology. In 1920, the editor of the Northern Baptist newspaper *Watchman Examiner*, Curtis Lee Laws, actually described a fundamentalist as a person who is willing to “do battle royal” for Christian fundamentals.

There were five basic points to the developing fundamentalist position:

1. the absolute truth and inerrancy of the Christian scriptures;
2. the virgin birth of Jesus;
3. the atonement of sin through the substitutive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross;
4. the bodily resurrection and future second coming of Jesus;
5. the divinity of Jesus and/or the reality of the miracles he performed.

Of these, the anchor is clearly the inerrancy of the Bible, which is the source (and purportedly proof) of the other four claims. A more interesting question is why fundamentalism appeared at this particular moment in social history. There have been various revivals or “awakenings” in American history (see Chapter 12), and some of the most successful and respected denominations in the country, like the Methodists and the Baptists, started as energetic revivalist efforts with “circuit riders” traveling the countryside giving ordinary people a version of the religion they could understand and digest.

So “old time religion” is nothing new. And the nineteenth century saw its share. William Miller, for instance, in 1831, having studied the Bible carefully, determined that Jesus would return in 1843, touching off a movement that would engender the Seventh-Day Adventists. John Nelson Darby also delved into the scriptures, “discovering” the concept of the Rapture, a mainstay in current fundamentalist thinking. At the very opening of the century, Elias Smith’s group, who merely called themselves “Christians,” represented a kind of “primitivist” and individualistic church,

rejecting priestcraft, inviting the common man to return to the only real authority in religion (the scriptures), and condemning all other forms of Christianity—even Protestantism—as anti-Christian. Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone also established primitivist sects which, by 1830, had amalgamated to become the Disciples of Christ; they repudiated all church structure and superfluous traditions and trappings and, as Hatch puts it, “vowed to follow nothing but the Christian name and the New Testament” (1989: 70). Most extraordinarily, in 1830, Joseph Smith introduced to the world a “new revelation,” the *Book of Mormon*, that gave the “compelling message that God was restoring the one true fold, the ancient order of things [by] revealing an up-to-date Bible” (Hatch 1989: 120–1).

While the specifics of these and other similar movements differ, on some general points they are in substantial agreement. All invoked the purity and perfection of scripture, whether old or new. Each looked out upon not just a physical world but also a spiritual world, even a Protestant world, that had “gone wrong” somehow; as Campbell wrote, “The stream of Christianity has become polluted” (quoted in Hatch 1989: 168). And each saw itself as representing authentic Christianity (even if, as in Miller’s case, that meant the end of the world). Each imagined itself—and only itself—as the *restoration* of religion. Dramatically, Campbell wrote a column called “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things,” in which he set the agenda to “bring the christianity [sic] and the church of the present day’ up to the standards of ‘the state of christianity [sic] and of the church of the New Testament’” (quoted in Hatch 1989: 168). Other nonprimitivist churches were corrupted at best, false or even Satanic at worst.

However, there were other menaces afoot. A crucial one was science and its attendant secularization; Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, after all, appeared in 1859. Humanistic philosophies and social sciences were also advancing. The Bible itself was increasingly being treated as literature rather than literal truth, to the point of questioning the authenticity of some of its passages or even the very historicity of Jesus. Finally, on the social front, the USA was changing, under the forces of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration; as early as the 1840s, Roman Catholics comprised the largest single Christian denomination in the USA, which they continue to do today, unseating any single Protestant sect as the most numerous in the country (although Protestants collectively still outnumber Catholics by nearly three to one). Even within Christianity, there were “modernizing” processes at work, attempting to accommodate scientific and social realities with religion.

By the late nineteenth century, while liberal Christians were making their peace with cultural change and modernity, conservatives were organizing their opposition. Charles Hodge, in his 1873 book *Systematic Theology*, argued that every word of the scriptures was literally true, not allegorical or symbolic; he followed with *What is Darwinism?*, where he wrote that religion “has to fight for its life against a large class of scientific men.” By 1875, conservative Christians in the USA were organizing “bible conferences” and other such gatherings for preachers and teachers. For instance, 1875 saw the founding of the Believers’ Meeting for Bible Study (which became in 1883 the Niagara Bible Conference). In 1886, what would become the Moody Bible

Institute opened, followed in 1909 by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, and any number of books, newspapers, newsletters, and magazines.

### Case study 11.1

#### Fieldwork among fundamentalists: the “Southside Gospel Church”

Nancy Ammerman employed participant-observation techniques in studying a fundamentalist congregation pseudonymously called the Southside Gospel Church. In 1916, it split from a Protestant church in a northeast industrial city, alarmed at the “worldly things” that members were doing, like going to the movies (Ammerman 1987: 24). At the time of her research, there were over 500 members, with a majority of women. Contrary to the prejudice that fundamentalists are poor and uneducated, the members were largely middle class, with many working women. More than half of the followers were “converts” from other Christian sects, with the largest component being former Catholics.

Members referred to themselves simply as “believers,” and one thing they believed was that the world was

in a sorry state, that divorce and delinquency are rampant, that movies and television are full of pornography, that the teaching of evolution and secular humanism has taken over in the schools, and that despite its proud heritage as God’s chosen nation, the United States is in grave danger of destruction. The only answer to any of these problems is to trust Jesus.

(Ammerman 1987: 38)

In a word, their perception of the nonfundamentalist world was *chaos*, whereas their own world inside their community of belief was orderly:

The ideological world in which Southside members live comes with a detailed and well-marked road map for living the Christian life. The task of the believer is to find God’s will and to follow it to the letter [. . .] What is important here is the fact that they are sure God does have a plan and that God’s plan leaves little room for individual variation and quibbling.

(Ammerman 1987: 41)

This was present in the day-to-day practices and discourses of the church, where there is “an explanation for everything” (Ammerman 1987: 42) and the assumption “of orderliness and knowable truth pervade the everyday conversations of believers” (Ammerman 1987: 46).

But the church did not leave this outcome to chance. The congregation carefully and deliberately maintained external boundaries, internal authority, and a "total" Christian experience. Because they knew they were a holy minority in a secular world, "the task of boundary maintenance is a constant one. To keep their identity as a separate and distinct group, all members of Southside must become 'policing agents,' being continuously on guard against doubts that might destroy their own faith and compromises that might destroy the identity of the church" (Ammerman 1987: 75). Internally, the pastor's authority was second only to scriptural authority. He (and the leadership was thoroughly male) ruled through his role as preacher and teacher, interpreter of God's word and embodiment of the church's standards. He combined "traditional" and "charismatic" powers and used those powers "for shaping the life of the congregation" (Ammerman 1987: 126).

And shaped their lives were. The specific religious activities of the group required, of course, church attendance, but also financial sacrifices of pledging and tithing, exhortations to proselytize to nonbelievers, and all of the small "rituals of the heart" like singing and a "controlled informality" between members. The church entered into every aspect of the member's life, from marriage to childrearing to recreation. Babies were designated as "church kids," and the congregation attempted to provide a childhood in which children "rarely step outside the sheltering canopy of the faith. Competing ideas and ways of life are as foreign to them as the native customs they see in missionary slides" (Ammerman 1987: 170). For adults, things were not much different: "For many, almost every spare minute is spent on activities related to the church" (Ammerman 1987: 106), including church-sponsored book clubs, craft groups, and sports teams. Of course, "The other side of involvement in church is the loss of time for involvement in anything else. Many members give up nonchurch leisure and sporting activities" (Ammerman 1987: 106), giving the Southside Church the same position in people's lives as the missionaries described by Comaroff and Comaroff.

### **The resurgence of fundamentalism in the late twentieth century**

American fundamentalism hit its high point in the 1925 Scopes "monkey" trial in Tennessee, in which a man named Scopes was charged with the crime of teaching evolution. For several decades, fundamentalism fell into disrepute and was replaced by the more benign and less political "evangelicalism" best represented by Billy Graham: The goal was to save souls, not change society. Even Jerry Falwell subsequently maintained that fundamentalists "are not interested in controlling America; they are interested in seeing souls saved and lives changed for the glory of God. They believe that the degree to which this is accomplished will naturally influence the trend of society in America" (quoted in Pinnock 1990: 50). However, cultural developments in the second half of the twentieth century caused fundamentalists to become impatient with this natural trend and, therefore, to become more politically



active. First, the civil rights movement of the 1950s aggravated some cultural conservatives, as can be seen from the anti-integration activities of the Ku Klux Klan and certain Southern politicians. The 1960s saw minorities of all sorts—feminists, “hippies” and antiwar activists, and even gays and atheists—supposedly trampling on “traditional values” and conventional definitions of family and society. The school prayer cases of the early 1960s (see Chapter 12) and the struggle over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) were two rallying causes. But the last straw was the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion rights (*Roe v. Wade*). To some, this was tantamount to legalized murder and official Satanism. From that date, it only took a few years for organized fundamentalism to crystallize. That these are precisely the issues that preoccupy fundamentalists is evidenced by the litany of complaints featured in Tim LaHaye’s influential 1980 book *The Battle for the Mind*, including the ERA, prayer in school, abortion, gay rights, and the general philosophy of “secular humanism,” as well as such other matters as the limitation of corporal punishment for children, certification requirements for Christian schools, and investigations into church finances.

A newly motivated and politically active American Christian fundamentalism coalesced in the late 1970s, embodied in organizations like the Moral Majority (1979). Figures like Falwell, Ralph Reed, and Pat Robertson rose to prominence on a clear and firm platform: As Robertson expressly stated, “We have together with the Protestants and Catholics enough votes to run this country. And when the people say, ‘We’ve had enough,’ we are going to take over” (quoted in Armstrong 2000: 310–11). The election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980, and even more so of George W. Bush in 2000, proved that he was not speaking idly. The result so far has been, precisely, a “culture war,” with fundamentalists seeing themselves as a combatant against forces and philosophies that threaten the character and very existence of America, which they see as an essentially Christian country. As Robertson said during his *700 Club* television program in 1981, “The Constitution of the United States, for instance, is a marvelous document for self-government by Christian people. But the minute you turn that document into the hands of non-Christian people they can use it to destroy the very foundations of our society. And that’s what’s happening” (quoted in Pelletier 2004).

Outside the “mainstream” of American fundamentalism are other, more adamant groups and movements. We referred earlier to the separatist types like the Amish and the Mennonites who have successfully created their own society-within-a-society where they can practice their religion and traditions untroubled by the outside, modern world. Jerry Falwell actually recently announced a plan to establish a Christian community in Virginia where, theoretically, a person could be born, go to school, work, retire, and die without ever stepping foot outside. And a movement known as Christian Exodus has gone further; as they state clearly on their website (<<http://www.christianexodus.org>>):

ChristianExodus.org is an association of Christians who no longer wish to live under the unjust usurpation of powers by the federal government, and therefore

resolves to formally disassociate itself from this tyrannical authority, and return to the model of governance of a constitutional republic. We seek a republican government constrained by constitutionally delegated powers. If this cannot be achieved within the United States, then we believe a peaceful withdrawal from the union to be the last available remedy.

Their express mission, then, is to migrate en masse to a relatively small state (South Carolina is their current selection), vote themselves into office, and inaugurate a society based on their religious principles. These principles include prohibition of abortion and gay marriage, institutionalization of prayer and the Christian Bible in schools, the elimination of evolution from the curriculum, the public display of the Ten Commandments, and the right to own weapons, among others. As they intimate in their statement above, if the federal government interferes with their effort to build a Christian society (no mention is made of the non-Christians or non-Christian-Exodus Christians in South Carolina), they are prepared to secede from the Union.

Further along the fundamentalist scale is the Christian Reconstruction movement. It aims to do for the entire country what Christian Exodus aims to do for one state: institute a religious society and a religious government. Also known as Dominionism and Theonomy, Christian Reconstructionism advances the following agenda:

- the reformulation of civil law in accordance with biblical, specifically Torah/Old Testament standards, including the death penalty for adultery, blasphemy, heresy, homosexuality, idolatry, and witchcraft;
- the banning of any congregation or religion that does not accept Mosaic law, including of course all non-Christian religions;
- the return of women's status to ancient conditions;
- the elimination of income taxes and the prison system (the death penalty presumably rendering jail mostly unnecessary);
- the criminalization of abortion, also punishable by death.

The rationale behind this agenda is expressed clearly by R. J. Rushdoony, one of the founders of Christian Reconstructionism: "The law is therefore the law for Christian man and Christian society. Nothing is more deadly or more derelict than the notion that the Christian is at liberty with respect to the kind of law he can have" (1973: 8–9). And by law, as we see, they mean ancient Hebrew law; as another prominent person in the movement, Gary North, writes:

The *New* Testament teaches us that—unless exceptions are revealed elsewhere—*every* Old Testament commandment is binding, even as the standard of justice for all magistrates (Rom. 13:1–4), including every recompense stipulated for civil offenses in the law of Moses (Heb 2:2). From the New Testament alone we learn that we must take as our operating *presumption* that any Old Testament penal requirement is binding today on all civil magistrates. The presumption can surely

be modified by definite, revealed teaching in the Scripture, but in the absence of such qualifications or changes, any Old Testament penal sanction we have in mind would be morally obligatory for civil rulers.

(1986: 242)

In other words, and unusually overtly, Christian Reconstructionism seeks to reshape the future in the image of the (ancient) past. Equally overtly, North elsewhere reformulates the fundamentalist struggle, which we tend to conceive as being between religion and modernization. The battle for the mind, which other fundamentalists like LaHaye also acknowledge, “some fundamentalists believe, is between fundamentalism and the institutions of the Left. This conception of the battle is fundamentally incorrect. The battle for the mind is between the Christian reconstruction movement, which alone among Protestant groups takes seriously the law of God, and everyone else” (North 1984: 65–6). Not only is modernity wrong, but all other religions are wrong as well.

Near the far end of the scale, the “Christian Identity” movement is a loose affiliation of various groups and agendas, from Anglo-Israelists to white supremacists to some “militia movements.” Anglo-Israelism is a doctrine inspired by the Englishman John Wilson’s 1840 “Lectures on our Israelitish Origin,” which argues that white people, specifically Anglo-Saxons, are the direct and true descendants of Israel. It was first promoted in the USA by Howard Rand, who founded the Anglo-Saxon Federation of America in 1930. However, the movement received a major boost when Wesley Swift joined in the 1940s; coming from a Christian and politically right-wing position, he introduced “demonic anti-Semitism and political extremism” to the religious mix (Barkun 1997: 61). Swift started the Anglo-Saxon Christian Congregation in California, which eventually became the Church of Jesus Christ Christian. He was succeeded in 1970 by Richard Butler who also established the Aryan Nations in Idaho.

According to the watchdog organization ReligiousTolerance.org, the beliefs of Christian Identity groups, while various, share some common factors, including “a very conservative interpretation of the Bible,” leading to condemnation of homosexuality and members of other religions; the superiority of the whites as the “Adamic race,” that is, the real descendants of Adam, who was a white man; derogation of nonwhites as “Satanic spawn,” subhumans and “mud people” who corrupt and threaten God’s true people; racial separation or, in the extreme, racial extermination; an absolute ban on interracial marriage or “racial adultery”; and more or less complex conspiracy theories, often with Jews at the center. At least some Christian Identity groups have syncretized fundamentalist religious views and racial ideologies with American patriotism, producing a volatile blend of religious conviction and political extremism. As Richard Abanes reports:

Long before today’s militias, these white supremacists/Christian Identity Movement followers were calling themselves “patriots.” One Aryan Nations newsletter (c. 1982), for instance, lists Aryan Nations founder Richard Butler and racist leader Dan Gaymen as “Christian patriots” [. . .] Several racist fundraising

letters from the 1980s, such as those produced by KKK Grand Wizard Don Black, were addressed to fellow “White Patriots” [. . .] By the 1980s, white “patriots” were also forming paramilitary groups similar to militias. For example, in the mid 1980s a militia-like group of racists called the Arizona Patriots were arrested and convicted of plotting to bomb several targets, including federal buildings in Phoenix and Los Angeles.

(1997: 31–3)

The potential for violence shows not only in the company that the Christian Identity movement keeps, including the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nations, the National Alliance, and the Posse Comitatus, but also the acts that have been carried out by its adherents, including the Olympic and abortion-clinic bombings of Eric Rudolph and the Oklahoma City bombing by Timothy McVeigh.

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## **Fundamentalisms in cross-cultural perspective**

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Other religions have their own fundamentalisms; in addition, the fundamentalisms within a religion differ depending on the society or country and even further on the specific group or movement within the society or country. And, while “modern” fundamentalisms resist modernity, past fundamentalisms have strived against their contemporary social, moral, or ideological threats. Each clings to and elevates its own “fundamentals” and seeks to restore its own version of the past. Within this diversity, fundamentalism is a recurrent theme in human life. In fact, it is more than interesting to ponder how the decade of the 1970s was an especially fertile time for fundamentalist movements—and for the success of those movements.

### **Jewish fundamentalisms**

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Even in ancient times, Hebrew prophets and other devotees were constantly trying to bring the people back to the right worship of their god; one of the most persistent and pernicious issues among the ancient Jews was the influence of “baals” or gods of foreign neighbors, and they were repeatedly admonished to abandon these false gods and return to their own god. When Israel came under the influence, first of the Greeks and then of the Romans, this created a new fundamentalist dynamic; now they were faced with cultural as well as religious assimilation and syncretism. As in every case of culture contact, some Israelites adopted the culture of the outsider, as prestige or as defiance of traditional Jewish authority; some mixed old and new cultures and molded something locally unique from the mixture. But some held firmly to the “old religion” and even became militant champions of orthodoxy against outside and inside challenges alike. As we saw in Chapter 9, many followers were willing to die for their religious truths.

The Essenes and the Maccabees are two examples of “restorationist” groups in ancient Judaism. After centuries of foreign rule, Judas Maccabeus led a Jewish revolt and temporarily established a Jewish state in the late 60s CE which was the restoration

of not just the State but also of the religion. And the Essenes, a monastically separatist faction, seem surprisingly modern in their attitudes, which included their denunciation of the priests of Jerusalem “as being hopelessly corrupted by their accommodation to Gentile ways, and by collaboration with the Roman occupiers,” as well as their doctrines “of repentance and God’s coming judgment [which meant that] Jews must separate themselves from such polluting influences and return to strict observance of God’s law” (Pagels 1995: 18).

The so-called *sicarii* or knife-bearers, active during the Roman occupation, leavened their convictions with violence. They were a sect of nationalist religionists who attacked enemies in broad daylight, preferably on holidays when the temple was crowded, and killed with a short sword that gives them their name. Their victims, predictably, were not exclusively or even normally the occupying foreigners but the moderates and collaborationists among their own people, again highlighting the fact that fundamentalists often target their “liberal” coreligionists as their main enemy. And their religious motivation is undeniable; the historian Josephus describes them as having “a passion for liberty that is almost unconquerable since they are convinced that God alone is their leader and master” (quoted in Rapoport 1989: 29).

Modern Jewish fundamentalism can be traced to the early 1700s as a response to the modernist or “enlightenment” shifts in Jewish culture. This is one major distinction between Christian fundamentalisms and the non-Christian ones to be discussed below: In the non-Christian cases, modernity seems not only secular but also *foreign*, a force or culture of the alien West, often implicated with colonialism. Among early modern Jews, the modernist/Westernist members—the *maskilim* or enlightened men—were opposed by traditional religious teachers or rabbis as well as a new breed of more orthodox leaders who called themselves *zaddikim* (“righteous men”) or *rebbses*. These men founded the movement known as Hasidism, an ultraorthodox form of Judaism which identified itself with the Maccabees and medieval Judaism and “provided the spiritual model for what has emerged as Jewish fundamentalism” (Lawrence 1989: 124). For these *rebbses*, the greatest threat of modernism was “the separation of Jews from their collective observance of the *mitzvot*, or commandments of the Torah” (Lawrence 1989: 126).

In the late nineteenth century, Jewish culture and politics took a new direction with the Zionist movement, represented by Theodor Herzl and his efforts to establish a Jewish state. The movement grew until it succeeded, after World War II, in creating the state of Israel. While it might seem that all Jews would welcome this development, some of the more traditionalist elements, in fact, did not. One reaction came in the form of the *haredim* (literally, “those who tremble”), which is not a single unified group but a collection of like-minded organizations and communities. All such groups, including Neturei Karta and Toldot Aharon, share some ideas and values, like a strict observance of all scriptural laws and a theological opposition to Zionism and the secular state of Israel. They have attempted to purge foreign, secular learning from their religious schools (*yeshiva*) and to purify their culture, as much as possible withdrawing from the wider society; Sprinzhak describes them as “a totalitarian

system which does not recognize privacy" (1993: 465), and, accordingly, they contain an institution known as *Miahtarot Hatzniut* or "The Chastity Guards" who police the sexual behavior of the community. Politically, they interpret the formation of Israel as a betrayal of eschatology, an indication that divine history is not progressing but is veering in the wrong direction. They are a small component (less than 3 percent) of a generally much more secular society (under 20 percent of Israeli Jews identify themselves as "religious," although 35–40 percent call themselves "traditional" rather than secular [Liebman 1993]), but they have been very vocal and influential.

Other groups and movements share the social space of contemporary Israel, with varying agendas and methods. A small (perhaps 20,000 active members) but effective group is *Gush Emunim* (The Bloc of the Faithful), which emerged in the early 1970s following the Israeli success of the Six-Day War in 1967. Adherents of *Gush Emunim* saw this event as apocalyptic, a sign of God's involvement and approval. Originating as a student movement out of the *yeshiva* of Rabbi Abraham Itzhak Hacohen Kook and his son Zvi Yehuda Kook, they have tended to be younger, better educated, and higher in social class than *haredim* members—products of the modern age. Another difference is their attitude toward the state of Israel: They are not hostile to it but rather seek to expand it, ideally "from the Euphrates River in Iraq to the Brook of Egypt" (Aran 1991: 268). They have, therefore, been particularly active in the settlement movement in the occupied territories of Gaza and the West Bank. They have opposed any plans to withdraw from conquered territories like Sinai and have committed vandalism and harassment against local Palestinians. Sprinzak characterizes their aggression as "settler vigilantism" but also notes that they have been implicated in "messianic violence," including a plot to destroy the Muslim mosque, the Dome of the Rock, which sits atop the ancient Jerusalem Temple Mount.

Our third and final Jewish fundamentalist example is the movement associated with extremist rabbi Meir Kahane, whom Lawrence considers "a Jewish activist but not a fundamentalist" (1989: 130). Kahane rose to prominence in 1968 with his New York-based Jewish Defense League and his angry rhetoric against Israel and non-Jews alike. The state of Israel, he taught, was sinful and its leadership secular and corrupt. Judaism, he further instructed, was not an individualistic religion but a collective one, such that all Jews must collectively obey Torah commandments. He also expressed deep animosity for all gentiles and even regarded the state of Israel not as a gift to the Jews but as revenge against non-Jews. Eventually, his thinking crystallized into a violent ideology embodied in the group *Kach* (Thus!), which saw all oppressions and humiliations of the Jewish people as sacrilege against God. His group advocated and conducted violence and terrorism against Arabs and even against other Jews.

### **Islamic fundamentalisms**

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For most people, the very epitome of fundamentalism in the modern world is the Islamic version; certainly, the most dramatic instances of recent violence have been

carried out in its name by its followers. This had led some observers to conclude that Islam is uniquely prone to fundamentalist tendencies and to criticize the religion accordingly; others have separated the fundamentalism current in Islam from the wider religion, branding it with the derogatory term “Islamist” (although one never hears the words “Jewishist” or “Christianist”) or “Islamic fascist.” Beyond the judgmental tendencies, to talk about Islamic fundamentalism is especially complex because Islam exists in so many different states and societies, with so many different internal variables (historical, political, and ethnic), and with such a problematic relation to “the West.” In addition to the “foreign” nature of secularism and modernization, we must understand the connection for many Muslim people and groups of these forces not only with Europe and the USA but also with Christianity and with colonialism and, finally, with their own nationalist struggles. Islam is also one of the few cases where fundamentalists have actually achieved political power and begun their implementation of a religious social system.

One might consider the very founding of Islam as a kind of fundamentalist movement, the recovery and reestablishment of an original and basic monotheism which continued but clarified and perfected earlier revelations in Judaism and Christianity. One of the essential things to realize is that, from the beginning, Islam was ideally both a religion and a social system; in fact, the religious/secular schism did not really exist. Islam is a set of beliefs and rituals, to be sure, but it is and always has been also a set of laws and a system of jurisprudence, established first and foremost in the *shari’a* legal standards, then in the “traditions” of Muhammad’s rulings and the history of interpretations and applications of both. Islam never experienced a “reformation” or an “enlightenment” like Christian Europe and never recognized a “separation of church and state.”

Islam has its unique history of movements and struggles for belief and power, dating back to the earliest years and the controversy over the successor (*caliph*) to Muhammad. This led immediately to the split between the Sunnis and the Shi’ites (the *Shi’a Ali* or the “partisans of Ali,” kinsmen of Muhammad). Thus, Shi’ites, in particular, have tended to see themselves as the purifiers and reformers of a literally “misguided” Islam. However, the movements that have arisen since sustained contact with and colonization by the West interest us the most. Wahhabism is one of the more familiar and important developments. Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), living in what would become Saudi Arabia, started a purist movement characterized by “opposition to popular superstitions and innovations, his insistence on informed independent judgments over against the role reliance on medieval authorities, and his call for the Islamization of society and the creation of a political order which gives appropriate recognition to Islam” (Voll 1991: 351). Specifically, this entailed a return to the textual fundamentals of the Qur’an and the other main Islamic scripture, the *Hadith* or “traditions.” Wahhabism is still an influential school of thought in Saudi Arabia.

Islam was a medium of discourse, response, and resistance in all Muslim societies penetrated by Western colonialism and culture, from Africa to Asia. As in the Ottoman Empire, some local rulers attempted to embrace modernization, if only for

their own interests; among them were Muhammad ‘Ali and Isma‘il in nineteenth-century Egypt. Traditionalist and “counter-reformation” movements arose in reaction, although Ramadan (1993) notes that no Arabic equivalent for “fundamentalists” existed until recently; prior to the invention of the term *usuliyyun*, such groups were called “radicals.” One of the most influential examples was the Muslim Brotherhood founded by Hasan al-Banna (1906–49) in the late 1920s to defend Islam against foreign contaminants, such as

their half-naked women [. . .], their liquors, their theaters, their dance halls, their amusements, their stories, their newspapers, their novels, their whims, their silly games, and their vices [as well as] schools and scientific and cultural institutes in the very heart of the Islamic domain, which cast doubt and heresy into the souls of its sons and taught them how to demean themselves, disparage their religion and their fatherland, divest themselves of their traditions and beliefs, and to regard as sacred anything Western.

(quoted in Voll 1991: 360–1)

The Brotherhood rejected the separation of the religious and temporal worlds and called for an Islamic society and government, arguing that political neutrality was a crime against Islam. Eventually, a secret military wing was established to defend the group and, they hoped, to someday seize power; they even attempted an assassination of the Egyptian leader, Nasser. The Muslim Brotherhood spawned other movements in Egypt, like Sayyid Qutb’s *takfir* approach, which accused all existing Muslim societies of atheism (*takfir* literally means “branding with atheism”) and, therefore, rejected their legitimacy. Some *takfir* groups advocated the overthrow of regimes, while others proposed withdrawal from them (e.g., Shukri Mustafa’s *al-Takfir w’al-Hijra* or “charging with atheism and emigrating” view). By 1975, the Jihad Organization had formed to extend the vision, calling for obligatory holy war against any society or administration not ruled by God’s laws.

Undoubtedly, the most inspiring model for Islamic fundamentalism in the twentieth century was the Iranian revolution, which must be understood in the context of internal and international politics. A revolution in 1906 had led to a constitution that was not anti-Islamic but not based on *shari’a* law either. In 1941, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi became ruler, or shah, and, after being reinstalled by the West following an insurrection in the early 1950s, became a major ally and champion of modernization, if not of political freedoms. His modernizing policies and close ties to the West, together with the repression practiced through his secret police force, made the regime increasingly unpopular. From exile in France, Ayatollah Khomeini applied continuous pressure, calling for an Islamic administration which would rule but not “legislate,” since all of the laws were already provided by Islam. In 1979, the revolution was successful, and Khomeini declared Iran an Islamic republic—the first time in modern history that a Muslim fundamentalist movement had actually achieved power.



According to Arjomand, Khomeini's theory of Islamic government was the "Mandate of the Jurist," a thoroughly nontraditional interpretation of the role of the jurist or interpreter of the law. Shi'ite jurists had previously asserted their rights of religious authority but never of political power; not only that, but Khomeini claimed that if any single jurist ever succeeded in founding a government, all others were bound to submit to him (violating the traditional principle of the equality of *ayatollahs*). He set about building an Islamic (specifically Shi'ite Islamic) system, expressed in a new constitution that described the effort "as an attempt by the nation to cleanse itself of the dust of godless government and foreign ideas, as a way to return to God and to the 'authentic intellectual positions and worldview of Islam'" (Arjomand 1993: 92). Article 2 of the constitution explicitly inaugurated a theocracy, with all sovereignty and legislative power placed on God, and a Council of Guardians (composed of *ayatollahs*) to lead the way. Ironically, as Mayer (1993) points out, the necessities of politics required a kind of de-facto secularization of the religious revolution: In 1988, Khomeini ruled that the State had the authority to rule even in opposition to Islamic law or ritual duty.

Mayer goes on to argue that Islamic fundamentalism, while claiming doctrinal unity and absolutism, has actually produced diverse interpretations and has been used for diverse purposes: "A variety of ideological formulations of the *shari'a* that range from the radical left to the reactionary right have been proposed in recent decades" (1993: 111), employed to support democratic and even socialist worldviews as well as antimodernist and authoritarian ones. The outcome is a complex and inconsistent movement shaped by local forces. For instance, whereas the Shi'ite majority largely supported Iranian fundamentalism, Zia ul-Haq's religious program in Pakistan in the 1980s came largely from the Sunni side and was opposed by the Shi'ite minority, which in this circumstance was liberal and antifundamentalist. In fact, Zia's fundamentalism may have been more self-interested than devout. In the Sudan in 1983, military dictator Jafar al-Numayri initiated an Islamization program in the midst of numerous national crises, including economic woes, famine, ethnic tensions, and threat of civil war in the south. His supposed Islamic revival oddly did not include any actual religious leaders, so that it was opposed not only by the secular part of the government but also by much of the religious part of the society. Many of the rebels in southern Sudan still blame the policy for contributing to the local war.

## Case study 11.2

### Fundamentalists in control: the Taliban of Afghanistan

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On April 27, 1978, a Communist coup seized power in Afghanistan, a multiethnic society created by British colonialism in the 1800s. As early as the 1870s, various

resistance movements had arisen, generally spearheaded by religious clerics who enlisted support among the region's myriad local tribal leaders and groups; such movements had never attempted political revolution, only cultural and legal (*shari'a*) reforms, usually by appealing to the rural population. Following the same pattern, rural resisters inspired by Islam had liberated two-thirds of Afghanistan before the Soviet Union intervened in December 1979 to save the regime. Now the resistance had to contend with the Soviet army, but with US aid and leadership and financing provided by outsiders like Osama bin Laden, the Mujahadin fighters drove the Soviets out by 1989. In the power vacuum and factional fighting that ensued, a group of religious students (*talib* is singular for student, *taliban* plural) emerged in 1994 and captured the capital city of Kabul in 1996. The reign of the Taliban had begun.

The Taliban grew out of the system of religious schools (*madrasas*) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, often in refugee camps, where they also provided other social and religious services to the communities and defended them when necessary; they were also predominantly drawn from the Pashtun ethnic group, comprising roughly 48 percent of Afghanistan's population. As sources of education, they espoused a particularly orthodox and puritanical version of Islam, associated with Wahhabism (see p. 294). Under their leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban administration set about instituting its strict brand of Islam as social and political policy. Very many modern or unorthodox practices were banned, including movies and television, music of all kinds, the Internet, pornography, non-Islamic books, kite-flying (seen as a Hindu behavior), smoking, drinking alcohol, and proselytizing other religions. Other "traditional" practices were mandated, such as public executions for murder and adultery, hand amputation for theft, obligatory beards for men, and a panoply of restrictions for women—no employment outside the home, no education, complete covering of the body in public, and no printed or electronic images of women, among many others. Even wearing fingernail polish could get a woman's fingers cut off. As mentioned, all non-Muslim and pre-Islamic religions were wicked; hence, in 2001, two immense Buddha statues were destroyed to rid the country of idolatry. Also in 2001, eight Western aid workers were put on trial for preaching Christianity, which was punishable by death.

The Taliban were removed from power by the USA after September 11, 2001 for providing haven for al-Qaeda. As of late 2006, Taliban fighters continued to skirmish with American forces and had actually reestablished control of some parts of the country.

## **Hindu fundamentalisms**

While monotheisms are particularly prone to religious fundamentalisms, they are by no means unique in that regard. Any religion—in fact, any position or ideology—can develop fundamentalist tendencies, especially when syncretized with other

volatile social ideas and forces. In the context of India, tradition and modernization met in European colonialism, with the added variable of precolonial Indian sociopolitical organization, or lack thereof. As Frykenberg explains it, there had never been a unified Indian society or state prior to the British Raj that created colonial and modern India. Instead, society had always been diverse, decentralized, and weakly integrated, “a carefully arranged hierarchy of ranked social, political, and religious contracts” (1993: 235). Not only was there no precolonial “national” integration of the modern, Western “state” sort, but there was no “national” *identity*. In particular, there was no such thing as “Hinduism”; what we think of as Hinduism was (and largely is) a “mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects, and ideas” (Frykenberg 1993: 237). Not surprisingly, the formalization and advancement of “Hinduism” paralleled the formalization of the bounded, inclusive “society” and “state” of India, essentially an achievement of modernization and colonialism. “The ‘Hinduism’ promulgated by mass mobilizations—the rising ideal of an all-embracing monolithic ‘Hindu community’—is, accordingly, a recent development” (Frykenberg 1993: 237).

Part of this accomplishment, as in Sri Lankan Buddhism (see below), came from activities of the Raj, both political and scholarly. The need to name the local culture and society, in distinction from Muslim or Christian, etc., led to the adoption of the term “Hindu.” At the same time, Western scholars like Max Müller were actively studying and codifying Asian cultures and traditions, providing order, attention, and legitimacy to those traditions; with efforts like the fifty-volume *Sacred Books of the East* edited by Müller, there was now an “official Hindu literature.” The Parliament of World Religions in 1893 (see Chapter 12) made Hinduism a household word and a world religion.

The other part of the coalescence of Hindu culture and identity came from indigenous sociocultural initiatives. In 1871 the All-India Congress introduced a classification of religious and communal categories, including “Hindu.” Shortly thereafter (1875), the Arya Samaj or Society of Aryas appeared as a Vedic fundamentalist organization, observing a strict adherence to the very oldest of Hindu texts (the Vedas) and dismissing “much of later Hindu tradition as degenerate practice that is best forgotten” (Gold 1991: 534). In 1915, the All-India Hindu Mahasabha was created in association with the Indian National Congress and as a cultural reaction to the Muslim League.

Out of such activity rose an ideology known as *Hindutva*, discussed by Vinayak Damadar Savarkarin in the 1923/4 publication of the same name. Meaning essentially “Hinduness” or “Hindu nationalism,” its principles included the idea that Hindus were not only a single nation (*rashtra*) but the indigenous nation of the subcontinent. All true natives of the land, regardless of their caste or sect or language, were Hindu; the “fundamentals” of Hindu identity and belief were literally in the blood. Therefore, all of India was not only a home but a *sacred* home to Hindus. This ideology was institutionalized in the 1925 movement Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Union of Volunteers/Servants) led by Keshar Baliram Hedgewar. This new understanding called for a radical personal transformation, basically a “conversion,” to one’s true Hinduness. The RSS recruited “volunteers” or “self-

servants” (*swayamsevaks*) to defend and advance the cause—the elite cadre, trained in *kshatriya* values and organized into military regiments.

By 1939, there were 60,000 active RSS members, and by 1989 1.8 million trained *swayamsevaks* in 25,000 national branches (Frykenberg 1993). The movement had become quite influential on Indian politics in the late twentieth century and was best summarized by Madhav Sadashir Golwalkar, who wrote in his 1938 *We, or Our Nationhood Defined*:

The non-Hindu peoples in Hindustan must adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but glorification of the Hindu race and culture: i.e., they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ungratefulness towards this land and its age-old traditions, but most also cultivate a positive attitude of love and devotion instead [. . .] in a word, they must cease to be foreigners, or must stay in this country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment, not even citizens’ rights.

(quoted in Frykenberg 1993: 243)

As Menon portrays it, *Hindutva* essentially constitutes a massive “reconversion” (or, in some instances, a first conversion) to Hindu identity. This often entails overcoming Christian conversion and retrieving people who “have been tricked by missionaries or [. . .] seduced by offers of material remuneration” (Menon 2003: 43). From the Hindu nationalist perspective, the proselytization of other religions “is part of a conspiracy to destroy ‘Indian’ culture and to destabilize the ‘Indian’ polity” (Menon 2003: 43). As such, the conversion of Hindus to foreign religions, and their successful reconversion to their true and native religion and identity, “is not seen as simply an individual expression of faith but rather as a political choice that necessarily implicates questions of national allegiance, patriotism, and cultural determination” (Menon 2003: 51).

### **Buddhist fundamentalisms**

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The popular impression of Buddhism is of a religion of moderation and peace and, therefore, not one susceptible to extremism, fundamentalism, and violence. However, in practice, although perhaps not as regularly, it too has demonstrated fundamentalist tendencies. In the mildest cases, like the one reported by Ortner in Nepal, such phenomena can take the form of movements to improve or enforce or purify religious belief and practice. As we mentioned previously, Sherpa Buddhism has been characterized by monasteries staffed by married monks, a habit set in the late 1600s. However, the early twentieth century saw efforts to establish a more orthodox institution, “the first celibate Buddhist monasteries among the Sherpas of Nepal” (Ortner 1989: 3). And the founding of the monasteries was only the first stage in a process of reorthodoxification: “Once the Sherpa monasteries were built, a whole

new process was set in motion: the monks launched a campaign to upgrade popular religion and to bring it into line with monastic views and values” (Ortner 1989: 3).

In other instances, Buddhist restorationism has been more muscular but also more “modern” and syncretistic, particularly in contemporary Burma (sometimes called Myanmar). As in so many parts of the world, the impetus originally came from the colonial experience: By the 1800s, some religious authorities were demanding a return to and purification of Buddhism against the Christian threat, which involved a “new exegesis of the Tripitaka, the Buddhist scriptures, and a stricter adherence by monks to the ‘discipline’” (Keyes 1993b: 368). Modernization and integration into the global economy brought further shocks: When the Great Depression of the 1930s impoverished many Burmese, millenarian movements like *Saya San* emerged, aimed at the expulsion of the British and the return of the Buddhist monarchy. More modernized Burmese developed a heightened self-identity as Buddhists, along with a more activist and “political” agenda. One of the key figures was U Ottama, who advocated a militant and “fundamentalist” style, with a political role for monks. Even more significant was U Ba Swe, who consciously blended Buddhism with Marxism, seeing Marxism as the temporal, practical counterpart to Buddhism. The political coup of Ne Win in 1962 brought to power a regime committed to just such a “Buddhist socialism,” at the same time aggrandizing religion and achieving state control over religion, e.g., leadership of the *sangha* or religious community was shifted to the Burma Socialist Program Party.

Sri Lanka provides the best case of a Buddhism that rose to political power and to religious violence. Sri Lanka is an island containing two main “ethnic” or religious/identity groups, the majority Sinhalese (Buddhists) and the minority Tamils (Hindus). The Sinhalese also claimed to be the original and rightful inhabitants, and, at various times in the past, strong Buddhist kingdoms had existed, especially under the Sinhalese Buddhist culture hero Dutthagamani, who purportedly drove out a non-Buddhist king in the name of Buddhism. From that time at least, if not before, Buddhist monks (*bhikkhus*) were politically important, seeing it as their right and duty to preserve and promote the religion and the kingdom.

Immediately after becoming a British colony in 1802, Christian missionaries began to flood the island. Within decades, Buddhist *samagamas* (associations) were formed, such as Sarvagna Sasanabhivruddhi Dayaka Dharma Samagama in 1862, to “protect and develop Buddhism,” and Buddhist spokesmen like Gunananda contested with Christianity, even conducting public debates. Interestingly, the American-based Theosophical Society (see Chapter 12) played a part in encouraging Buddhist self-identity, and Sinhalese journals and newspapers like *Lankapakaraya* and *Lak Mini Kirula* were established (both in 1881) to advance Buddhist identity and interests. Probably the single most important figure in nineteenth-century Buddhist fundamentalism, though, was Anagarika Dharmapala, who advocated an exclusive Sinhalese/Buddhist identity and hegemony for the island:

The island of Lanka belongs to the Buddhist Sinhalese. For 2455 years this was the land of birth for the Sinhalese. Other races have come here to pursue their

commercial activities. For the Europeans, apart from this land, there is Canada, Australia, South Africa, England and America to go to; for the Tamils there is South India; for the Moors [. . .] Egypt; the Dutch can go to Holland. But for the Sinhalese there is only this island.

(quoted in Dharmadasa 1992: 138)

As independence approached in the 1940s, Buddhist elements became more active, like the political *bhikkhus* who formed the Lanka Eksath Bhikkhu Mandalaya (Ceylon Union of *Bhikkhus*) to advance Buddhism, by means of the overthrow of the colonial government if necessary. In 1956, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress issued a report titled “The Betrayal of Buddhism” complaining about the condition of Buddhism, government, and society; it demanded discontinuation of aid to Christian schools and the reestablishment of unity between state and *sangha*. Not surprisingly, the same year, the dominant political party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, turned more pro-Buddhist and pro-Sinhalese, promulgating laws to advantage the Buddhist religion and the Sinhalese language, which eventually so outraged Tamils that an ethno-religious civil war broke out between them.

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## Conclusion

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No religion is immune to fundamentalist tendencies, especially in a modern world of religious and cultural pluralism, rapid social change, and strong religious beliefs and sentiments. All fundamentalisms share a certain reactionary or defensive nature—even a certain militancy—although they also vary significantly not only between religions and between societies/states but also within religions. They are also, it is quite clear, not utterly unique to modern times but can be found in all times of change and threat—which are almost all times. They are ultimately one of the recurring forms of “revitalization movements” that arise in all societies (and not only in religious institutions) during moments of turmoil and (real or perceived) social decline. Fundamentalism is, thus, not “bad religion” nor is it “true religion” but rather one of the variations that religion can and likely will take in particular historical and social circumstances. The fact that these very circumstances are certain to continue and even intensify in the future suggests that fundamentalisms are likely to persist, and it also proves conclusively that “modernity” is not the death of religion but may rather give it new and energetic life.

# 12

## Religion in the USA

### Religion, American style

#### The evolution of religion in America

The first great awakening

The second great awakening

The first “New Age,” late 1800s

Esotericism meets fundamentalism, early 1900s

### Religion and the courts

#### Religion in the public square

Sexual issues: abortion, stem-cell research, contraception, and sex education

Gay marriage

Pledge of Allegiance

Religious displays

Science education and evolution

“Faith-based initiative”

Political party membership and voting patterns

Popular media and workplace

### Conclusion

The first “fieldworker” to describe American society, Alexis de Tocqueville, in the early 1800s, found a people who were optimistic, practical, materialistic, egalitarian in spirit, energetic, a little unsophisticated, and unusually religious. In fact, he wrote, “The religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States” (1969: 295). He was surprised not only by the general religiosity of the society but also at the diversity of religion, the “innumerable multitude of sects” (Tocqueville 1969: 290). All of these sects, he thought, shared the same basic world-view and morality, including a commitment to freedom and equality; the original settlers, he opined, “brought to the New World a Christianity which I can only describe as democratic and republican” (Tocqueville 1969: 288). Among their values was a voluntary separation of religion and politics; even the priests and ministers declined to “lend their support to any particular political system. They are at pains to keep out of affairs and not mix in the combinations of parties” (Tocqueville 1969:

291). He also noted the propensity for religious extremism, especially in the sparsely settled western frontier: "Here and there throughout American society you meet men filled with an enthusiastic, almost fierce, spirituality such as cannot be found in Europe. From time to time strange sects arise which strive to open extraordinary roads to eternal happiness. Forms of religious madness are very common there" (Tocqueville 1969: 574).

In this final chapter, we examine religion in the contemporary USA. We will find that many of de Tocqueville's observations still hold, while others are not so appropriate today, if they ever were; for instance, as we noted in Chapter 11, many religious groups in the USA are not at all loathe to involve themselves in politics. But, as de Tocqueville saw, America evinces two significant general religion tendencies: an overall high level of religiosity (the highest level in the modern Western world, according to many commentators) and a great deal of religious diversity. On the first count, while the USA can be said to have a "secular" political system, it has a distinctly religious culture; we cannot, therefore, call the USA unproblematically "religious" or "secular," but rather, both. On the second, we cannot really speak of "American religion" but only of "American religions": One can find in the society everything from atheism to Christian Reconstructionism, every flavor of Christianity, every world religion, and many smaller religions. America has, indeed, been the site of the genesis of many new religions, from Mormonism to Scientology, and has become a major exporter of religion around the world—especially, but not exclusively, its Pentecostal Christianity.

In the end, it might be even more appropriate to speak of an "American style" of religion. As in all societies, there is a certain consonance between its religion(s) and the general ethos and worldview. Americans value freedom, practicality, individualism, and innovation in other aspects of their lives; it is only natural that they would value those same qualities in their religion. And, at the same time as the USA develops a certain secular and scientific approach to its political and social life, religion—as a major force in many people's lives—cannot help but have an impact in those domains as well.

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## **Religion, American style**

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If ever there was a "religious field" populated by all sorts of distinct yet partially integrated religions, it is US society. The vast majority of Americans subscribe to some variation of Christianity, but the variations are staggeringly abundant. According to the recent "American Religious Identification Survey," Catholicism ranks as the single largest "church," with nearly one-quarter of the citizenry in its fold. Protestantism is not, and never has been, a single unified church but rather a type of Christianity; loosely defined so as to include its diverse sects and denominations, it accounts for about 50 percent of the total population. Thus, the remaining quarter of Americans identify themselves as following "other religions," "no religions," and "unspecified/no answer."



Table 12.1 Religious identification in the USA: Christian groups

	<i>Number</i> 1990	<i>%</i> 1990	<i>Number</i> 2001	<i>%</i> 2001	<i>%</i> Change
<b>Total US adult population</b>	175,440,000	100	207,980,000	100	18.5
<b>Total Christian groups</b>	151,225,000	86.2	159,030,000	76.5	5.3
Catholic	46,004,000	26.3	50,873,000	24.5	10.6
Baptist	33,964,000	19.4	33,830,000	16.3	-0.4
Protestant—no denomination	17,214,000	9.7	4,647,000	2.2	-73
Methodist/Wesleyan	14,174,000	8.0	14,140,000	6.8	-0.2
Lutheran	9,110,000	5.1	9,580,000	4.6	5.2
Christian—no denomination	8,073,000	4.6	14,190,000	6.8	75.8
Presbyterian	4,985,000	2.9	5,596,000	2.7	12.6
Pentecostal/Charismatic	3,191,000	1.8	4,407,000	2.1	38.1
Episcopal/Anglican	3,042,000	1.7	3,451,000	1.7	13.4
Mormon	2,487,000	1.4	2,697,000	1.3	8.4
Churches of Christ	1,769,000	1.0	2,593,000	1.2	46.6
Jehovah's Witness	1,381,000	0.7	1,331,000	0.6	-3.6
Seventh-Day Adventist	668,000	0.4	724,000	0.3	8.4
Assemblies of God	660,000	0.4	1,106,000	0.5	67.6
Holiness	610,000	0.3	569,000	0.3	-6.7
Congregational/ United Church of Christ	599,000	0.3	1,378,000	0.7	130
Church of the Nazarene	549,000	0.3	544,000	0.3	-0.1
Church of God	531,000	0.3	944,000	0.5	77.8
Orthodox (Eastern)	502,000	0.3	145,000	<0.1	-71.1
Evangelical	242,000	0.1	1,032,000	0.5	326.4
Mennonite	235,000	0.1	346,000	0.1	47.2
Christian Science	214,000	0.1	194,000	<0.1	-9.3
Church of the Brethren	206,000	0.1	358,000	0.1	73.8
Born Again	204,000	0.1	56,000	<0.1	-72.5
Nondenominational	195,000	0.1	2,489,000	1.2	1176.4
Disciples of Christ	144,000	<0.1	492,000	0.2	241.7
Reformed/Dutch	161,000	<0.1	289,000	0.1	79.5
Apostolic/New Apostolic	117,000	<0.1	254,000	0.1	117.1
Quaker	67,000	<0.1	217,000	<0.1	223.9
Full Gospel	51,000	<0.1	168,000	<0.1	226.4
Christian Reform	40,000	<0.1	79,000	<0.1	97.5
Fundamentalist	27,000	<0.1	61,000	<0.1	125.9
Salvation Army	27,000	<0.1	25,000	<0.1	-7.4
Independent Christian Church	25,000	<0.1	71,000	<0.1	184

Source: American Religious Identification Survey, 2001.

A few interesting trends are apparent from this research. First, many of the mainstream denominations have grown little, if at all, in the decade under review. The fastest-growing groups relative to their starting size are the nonmainstream Christian and the non-Christian sects, including Muslims and Buddhists as well as the “nones”; Hindus have tripled, and Wiccans have grown by nearly seventeenfold.

Table 12.2 Religious identification in the USA: non-Christian groups

	<i>Number</i> 1990	<i>%</i> 1990	<i>Number</i> 2001	<i>%</i> 2001	<i>%</i> Change
<b>Total other religions</b>	5,853,000	3.3	7,740,000	3.7	32.2
Jewish	3,137,000	1.8	2,831,000	1.3	-9.7
Muslim	527,000	0.3	1,104,000	0.5	109.5
Buddhist	401,000	0.2	1,082,000	0.5	169.8
Unitarian/Universalist	502,000	0.3	629,000	0.3	25.3
Hindu	227,000	0.1	766,000	0.4	237.4
Native American	47,000	<0.1	103,000	<0.1	119.1
Scientologist	45,000	<0.1	55,000	<0.1	22.2
Baha'i	28,000	<0.1	84,000	<0.1	200
Taoist	23,000	<0.1	40,000	<0.1	73.9
New Age	20,000	<0.1	68,000	<0.1	240
Eckankar	18,000	<0.1	26,000	<0.1	44.4
Rastafarian	14,000	<0.1	11,000	<0.1	-21.4
Sikh	13,000	<0.1	57,000	<0.1	334.5
Wiccan	8,000	<0.1	134,000	<0.1	1575
Deity	6,000	<0.1	49,000	<0.1	716.7
Druid	N/A		33,000	<0.1	N/A
Santeria	N/A		22,000	<0.1	N/A
Pagan	N/A		140,000	<0.1	N/A
Spiritualist	N/A		116,000	<0.1	N/A
Ethical Culture	N/A		4,000	<0.1	N/A
Other unclassified	837,000	0.5	386,000	0.2	-53.9
<b>Total no religion</b>	14,331,000	8.2	29,481,000	14.1	105.7
Atheist	N/A		902,000	0.4	N/A
Agnostic	1,186,000	0.7	991,000	0.5	-16.4
Humanist	N/A		49,000	<0.1	N/A
Secular	N/A		53,000	<0.1	N/A
No religion	13,116,000	7.5	27,486,000	13.2	109.6
<b>Refused</b>	4,031,000	2.2	11,246,000	5.4	179

Source: American Religious Identification Survey, 2001.

In terms of Christian sects, the greatest growth has been experienced outside the main "churches" with which we are most familiar. For instance, the increase in the number of people identifying as "Christian-Nondenominational" was around 75 percent, while the increase in simply "Nondenominational" was a multiple of twelve. Congregationalists/United Church of Christ doubled, Fundamentalists expanded by 2.5 times, Quaker and Full Gospel tripled, and Evangelical quadrupled.

Watchers of American religion have noted the recurrent presence of certain themes and patterns, some of which are plain to see in the new data. These themes and patterns include:

1. **Religious searching and revivalism.** Martin Marty, one of the leading scholars of American religious history, has said that Americans are on a “constant pilgrimage,” reenacting generation after generation that formative event or paradigmatic act in which believers made their pilgrimage to a new home. Americans, as even de Tocqueville commented, are a restless people, always on the move, always on the lookout, including in their religious identity. This has taken the particular form of cyclical “revivals,” in which periods of relative disinterest or low energy in religion are followed by periods of “reawakening” of religious fervor. Along with this has come the uniquely American expression of the literal “tent revival,” in which preachers—often ones outside the mainstream or “official” churches—bring religion to the people and attempt to stir up vehemence of belief as well as a more “moral” or Christian way of life.
2. **Anti-authoritarianism or “populist” or “democratic” style.** Americans, partly as a function of the origin of the country and partly as a function of their democratic ethos, do not like anyone telling them what to do, even in their religion. So American religion has repeatedly resisted the “learned men” and formal academic theologians. Instead, religion has tended to “go to the people,” even to be “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Nonordained, often untrained preachers have claimed as much right to—and often had more effect on—the religiosity of the populace than any university or high-church official. The latter have often bemoaned the coarse and untutored teachings of these enthusiasts, but they have also envied their successes. This “popular religion” has tended to resonate with the interests and even the personalities of the masses, the rural folk, and the dispossessed.
3. **Emotionalism and individualism.** Americans are individualists. They also veer toward being emotionalists. Far back in the country’s history, and recurrently throughout that history, they have been given to bursts of “enthusiasm” and personal/emotional experiences and expressions of religion. Religion is not just something for Americans to think or even to do but to *feel*. In fact, the elevation of feeling over thinking or doing is a persistent message. This is partly about the associated individualism, that Americans should not just go along with religion because everyone else does but should really take it into their individual and private heart. However, it also has to do with a pervasive anti-intellectualism and a “down home” simplicity, a “leveling,” of religion, like everything else in the American way of life. This is why we see repeated appeals to and outbursts of activities like “possessions of the spirit,” speaking in tongues, “holy rolling,” and such overt forms of religiosity.
4. **Separation of church and state.** While not all Americans have held this principle, and not all interpret it identically, there has at least been a tendency to favor religious freedom and the noninterference of government in religion, what is known as “disestablishment.” Many early American politicians and religious leaders alike realized the benefit of this separation, so that churches could go about their business without government burdens, and government could go about its business without religious burdens. People have been willing to

accept a certain amount of secularization of society in order to preserve the purity and the freedom of action of their religions. This compromise is often credited with the success and diversity of religion, ironically perhaps, since, because there was no official religion and religions were free—and required—to compete for followers in the “religious marketplace,” religion could be as lively and entrepreneurial as any business. In fact, some have suggested that American religion *is* a business of sorts.

5. **Moralism.** Americans tend to have a high opinion of themselves and their place in the world. While extreme elements like the Christian Identity movement regard (white) Americans as the chosen people and descendants of the true Israel, many mainstream Americans consider their country and society to be particularly virtuous and moral. They can see themselves as the guarantors of all that is good in the world, a “shining city on the hill,” facing an “axis of evil” outside their borders. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, “morality”—often conceived in rather frankly religious terms (and focusing heavily on sexual issues like homosexuality, abortion, premarital sex, contraception, pornography, etc.)—occupies a prominent place in the national discourse and the struggle over laws and institutions. According to many observers, the 2004 presidential election was decided on “values issues.”
6. **Religious innovation and even unorthodoxy.** Americans are innovators, pragmatists, tinkers. They are only loyal to a thing as long as it “works.” They also trust individual inspiration and authority. And the country was largely settled in the first place by people who had to and were willing to break away from traditional homes and authorities. Americans tend to be willing to try out the new, although this “new” often repackages familiar themes. Some of the most powerful themes have been sin, the apocalypse and “doomsday,” the “chosen people,” and individual salvation. This has enabled Americans to reinterpret or invent many divergent teachings about these basic components which, when mixed with technology and “modern” experiences like UFOs, has manifested in some surprising syncretistic results. But as Philip Jenkins (2000) has concluded, extreme and bizarre religious ideas are not a “fringe” phenomenon in America at all; they may be *the essence* of American religion.

Various organizations maintain periodic or ongoing research on American religion through surveys and means. The Barna Group ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)), for instance, has discovered a variety of interesting things about contemporary American religion, including how very complex and even inconsistent it is. Some of the findings include:

- Seventy-nine percent of Americans believe in an immortal soul (82 percent of women, 72 percent of men).
- Fifty-nine percent reject the reality in Satan, taking him or it to be merely symbolic of evil.
- Only half of Christians believe that Jesus was perfectly sinless.
- Forty-four percent believe that the Bible, the Qur’an, the Book of Mormon, etc.

are all expressions of the same spiritual truths. However, 84 percent of “evangelical” Christians disagree.

- Adults under thirty-five years of age are the least likely to have a “biblical perspective” on life.
- Religious teachings actually minimally affect people’s moral choices. More important influences on people’s behavior are the practical outcomes they expect, their desire to avoid conflict, and their parents.
- The overwhelming majority of adults and youths do not believe in absolute moral truth. Two-thirds of adults and 80 percent of youths think that morality is “relative,” even though they are Christians and believe in the accuracy of the Bible. Interestingly, whites endorse relativism by 60 percent, while non-whites hold it by 74 percent. “Born-again” Christians were the most likely to believe in absolute morality.

Other fascinating and maybe surprising results were:

- Born-again Christians and non-Christians have the same divorce rate.
- Half of all home-schooling parents are born-again Christians.
- Forty percent of senior pastors do not have a seminary degree (supporting our contention about the “populism” of religion, even religious leadership).
- After a short surge following the 9/11 attacks, all indicators of American religiosity returned to preattack levels within two months, i.e., there was no long-term religious impact.
- Less than 1 percent of Hispanics belong to a mainstream Protestant sect.
- The religious beliefs of church members who started attending as children are no different from those who did not start attending as children, i.e., childhood “religious education” seems to have no distinguishing effect.

### Case study 12.1

#### America’s “civil religion”

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In his celebrated essay on American religion, Robert Bellah proposes that “there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the [Christian] churches” another religion which is equally “elaborate and well-institutionalized” (1967: 1). Admittedly borrowing a term from Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, he calls this second faith America’s “civil religion.” It is particularly invoked on important political or ceremonial occasions and, while it is not any specific form of Christianity, it functions like and is as significant as a complete religion.

Central to this civil religion is the concept of “God,” “a word that almost all Americans can accept but that means so many different things to so many different

people that it is almost an empty sign" (Bellah 1967: 3). In fact, it may be the only—or one of the very few—religious concepts that Americans widely (though not universally) share. The civil religion, he notes, does not ordinarily make reference to Jesus or to other beliefs and doctrines which might be more contentious. As he admits, the God of civil religion "is not only rather 'unitarian,' he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love" (Bellah 1967: 7). Neither he nor the civil religion as a whole is "in any specific sense Christian," but he is not a general god, and the civil religion is not a "religion in general" (Bellah 1967: 8). And obviously, as a religion, this civil religion cannot be "ant clerical or militantly secular" (Bellah 1967: 13).

Why does the USA have and need a religion in addition to Christianity? Bellah's answer is first that the American orientation to religion—as a private and basically apolitical matter—means that no sectarian religion, even Christianity, can or should be injected into civil affairs. Still, there are occasions and circumstances in which a religious invocation seems appropriate, even essential. Bellah, thus, suggests that the civil religion provides a religious sanction that most Americans can accept. But this does not solve the problem of why a religious sanction is called for at all. His answer is that a society and its institutions require *legitimation* and *transcendental goals*. As we have seen, religion not only explains but legitimates social arrangements; in the USA, where the people are sovereign and their will law, the civil religion assures citizens that "the ultimate sovereignty" lies with God. This both ensures the goodness and value of the laws and institutions and also provides a ground for judging and criticizing them: "The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible that the people may be wrong. The president's obligation extends to the higher criterion" (Bellah 1967: 4). Further, the sense of transcendental goals means that American decisions and actions are "going somewhere," part of a greater plan and a greater good—literally, that Americans are doing God's work on earth. This makes their history and their policies virtuous and important by definition.

Even this does not entirely explain the efficacy of the civil religion. It is "ceremonial" but not *merely* ceremonial; like any other religion, its rituals are not empty forms but the embodiment and performance of meanings and goals. The civil religion achieves "national solidarity" (Bellah 1967: 13) in a way that no other more sectarian religion precisely can because it calls upon "God" as a national symbol—one that is a "vehicle for a conception" which can be filled with meaning by all who hear it. In other words, the very fact that "the meaning of 'God' is by no means so clear or obvious" allows listeners and participants to hear and feel and believe whatever they are so inclined. It does not ask them to believe anything in particular but merely to believe something. As President Eisenhower seems to have understood, the message here is that "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is" (quoted in Bellah 1967: 3).

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## The evolution of religion in America

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Just as American religion is not monolithic, it has not been historically immutable. Instead, it has passed through a number of phases, each unique in certain ways but also recognizable for common recurring themes. The first phase of American religion was the “establishment” phase, in which local communities or entire colonies accepted one (or occasionally more than one) religion as the “official” religion, with the economic and political benefits that flowed from it. For instance, governmental bodies would often mandate taxes for the payment of clergy and the maintenance of church facilities and programs. The end of this phase—“disestablishment”—began with the ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights but is still in progress today. This entailed the disentanglement of religion and politics and the breakup of special relationships between the government and any (or all) religions or churches. The philosophy, as Thomas Jefferson expressed it, was that people should not be made to support a religion that they do not believe in and that both church and state would be healthier if they were kept apart. However, even before this development transpired—indeed, before the USA was an independent nation—important movements and changes were already occurring, including the first in a cycle of religious revivals in what became known as the “Great Awakening.”

### The first great awakening

The years between 1720 and 1750 are noted for not only an escalation of religious piety and activity but also a change in these factors that was at once novel and typical. The first century of English occupation of America had been characterized by institutional domination and rigidity of doctrine and expression. The Great Awakening represents, in part, a loosening of these bonds but also a “popularization” of religion, the likes of which we have addressed before and will address again.

This first awakening, like the second and, perhaps, the one that is occurring in the twenty-first century, highlights the processes of innovation, individualism and emotionalism, and antiauthoritarianism and populism described above. Marty (1984) posits that the essence of the moment was *choice*, in both senses of the word: You must individually choose to commit to religion, and you have choices as to *how* to commit, that is, you have multiple “churches” to choose between. This was not what the original settlers had envisioned when they established official churches for specific communities or colonies. However, try as they may, they could not prevent the emergence of new sects and denominations, sometimes simpler but more effective than their own. Some of these new sects would join the mainstream churches of our day, including the Baptists and the Methodists.

These were “grassroots” religious movements, literally bringing religion to the people, especially the people who had left colonial cities and moved inland. New and competing churches emerged, even in towns like Boston, but the towns and their

universities, like Harvard, were seen by many as places where “men of renown” and learned theologians resided—people who studied religion, to be sure, but did not *live* religion and could not communicate religion to the common folk. Their erudite sermons did not have the “fire” that a person enflamed by the Holy Spirit should have, and so they could not transmit that fire. This task fell to men of passion, if not learning, like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, James Davenport, Charles Woodmason, Devereux Jarratt, and Samuel Morris.

These men had two primary traits in common: great passion and great energy. They were the first “circuit-riders” of religion, itinerant preachers who traveled from village to farm to hamlet, stopping to spread the Gospel in open-air or tent “revivals,” wherever they could assemble an audience. They spoke with the well-known enthusiasm of the evangelist—in fact, they were the first American evangelists, bearers of the “message” (*evangel* comes from the Greek root for messenger or good messenger). Not only did they circulate among the masses, but they also delivered the message in a style and language that the masses could digest. To their opponents—and the staid and established clergy and churches were their opponents—they were crazy and dangerous. Jarratt, for instance, knew that the churchmen saw him as “an enthusiast, fanatic, visionary, dissenter, [. . .] madman” (Marty 1984: 123). But they stirred the listeners, and that was the point.

In his study of American religiosity, Eugene Taylor describes the emotionalism and unconventionality of the proceedings and their after-effects: “Trance states, ecstatic whirling, automatic utterances, falling down in the spirit, joyful exuberance, and spiritual happiness were all common occurrences” (1999: 18). Those were the signs of the Holy Spirit and of the success of their missions. Perhaps most compelling and sinister was their contemporary view that they were in a great battle—not only a battle against sin and the Devil but against each other. Samuel Davies stated it clearly: “The art of war becomes a part of our religion” (quoted in Marty 1984: 126).

### **The second great awakening**

The period from 1750 to the early 1800s was marked by relative calm in American religion, perhaps enforced by the literal battle for independence of the new country. Also, as mentioned, it was the period of the first efforts to “disestablish” official religions wherever they existed. This was not done, it must be emphasized, out of any animosity toward religion but generally out of real concern for religion. It was also a time of nation-building and tolerant inclusion: Washington himself said that his workers at Mount Vernon could be Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, African or Asian, and even atheist, as long as they worked well. And it was a time in which the first efflorescence of new religions and sects settled into their mature and institutionalized forms. For instance, by the early 1800s, Methodism had grown from less than 5,000 members to over 200,000. The leaders of the dominant churches were more than happy to see the enthusiasm of past decades subside.

Perhaps the new awakening of religion was a reaction to the decades of quiescence, or perhaps to the social upheavals of starting a new country, together with its



expansion ever westward, where old authorities had little power or did not exist at all. No doubt a major contributor to the next outbreak of religious enthusiasm and innovation was the energy released by the very disestablishment of the traditional founding churches; now all churches, old and new, orthodox and unorthodox, were free to compete in the marketplace of religion, depending on who could offer the most appealing product. So, about a century after the first great awakening, a second followed in its footsteps. It was a movement of a frontier society on the brink of industrialization; it was, in some measure, a grasping for the certainty, the lost stability, that marks so many ages of NRMs. Not surprisingly, it was a period (from around 1820 to around 1850) of new variations on old themes and the foundation of still more, and more heterodox, sects, many of which survive today as more or less orthodox and mainstream churches or religions.

One of the first signs of a new phase in American religion was the emergence of a "primitive Christianity" movement originating in various quarters. In the early 1800s, Elias Smith had called for a simpler, more egalitarian kind of Christianity, one in which the masses could interpret the Bible for themselves; his camp eschewed even a name and merely referred to themselves as "Christian" or "Disciples of Christ." James O'Kelly's Christianity was even more political, saying: "I contend for Bible government, Christian equality, and the Christian name" (quoted in Hatch 1989: 70). Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell led yet other segments of the primitivist movement, and their followers, unnamed "Christians" and "Disciples of Christ" respectively, combined in 1830 to form the fifth-largest Protestant denomination by the end of the era.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) appeared in this period, as did the Millerites and Seventh-Day Adventists. Late in the era, the Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science) was organized by Mary Baker Eddy (formally inaugurated in 1879) as one of the "health conscious" movements syncretizing religion and science with the kind of "mind cure" that we still see today in Scientology and Raelianism.

Pervading the age and many of these specific religious movements was a set of more general themes, including communitarianism, perfectionism, and "transcendentalism," along with the familiar beliefs in scripture and the second coming. The communitarian and perfectionist impulse could be seen in a variety of forms, religious and "social." Utopian communities were created by idealists, as in the Oneida community, where private property and often traditional propriety were eliminated. The "Shakers" or United Society of Believers, founded as early as the end of the 1700s, was another example. Started by "Mother Ann" Lee, it became a separatist colony demanding common property, strict discipline, unitarianism, material simplicity, spiritual perfection, and absolute celibacy. In all of these movements we see a new and more urgent kind of rejection of, and withdrawal from, the world than seen before in American history.

The other element of the first half of the 1800s was a fascination with "mentalism" or the power of thought and a kind of naturalism that approached supernaturalism, called transcendentalism. This movement was characterized by the recurrent

American theme that, as Marty attributes to one of its greatest prophets, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “religion must have feeling, must *be* feeling” (1984: 210). Two older influences helped shape the notion—Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism. Mesmerism arose from the work of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), a founding father of modern hypnotism, who explained the odd phenomenon of hypnosis and, especially, hypnotic suggestion as an effect of “animal magnetism.” The mind, or perhaps the entire human being, was seen as an electrical system, with mental or spiritual energy that could not only affect the health and happiness of the individual but demonstrably of other individuals as well (e.g., the hypnotic subject). The other source of transcendentalist thought came from Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1771), including his writings *The Worship and the Love of God* and his eight-volume *Arcana Coelestia*. His main claim was that the Christian Bible was not to be taken as a literal, historical document but as a spiritual code or allegory. He viewed existence as having three “levels” or “planes”—the physical (animal, vegetable, and mineral), the spiritual, and the celestial. Each of these planes reiterated the others, such that every entity on the physical plane (he called them “ultimates”) had a corollary on the spiritual and celestial planes. Therefore, there was no need for slavish obedience to or pained interpretations of the scriptures; the point was to know one’s relation to the higher realms of reality and to put one’s affections and actions in order.

The early nineteenth-century American transcendentalists who put these thoughts into practice included Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. American transcendentalism revered nature, but not so much out of love for nature as because it was the visible manifestation of the spiritual. As Taylor puts it, “Nature had to be preserved in order to remain an effective transmitting medium, and character had to be perfected so the light could shine through” (1999: 63). In this philosophy, “knowing” nature was not as important as “feeling” nature; in fact, in general, knowing was not as important as feeling. Second, and more scandalously, as Emerson stated explicitly, it not only displaced but actually rejected old, literalist “religion” in favor of spiritual intuition. Religion as usually performed was little more than “the dead forms of our forefathers” (quoted in Marty 1984: 210). People could have a direct, intuitive experience of the spiritual, via nature, without reference to the fossilized old law. Mainstream Christians, the transcendentalists charged, experienced religion “through the eyes” of the ancients, while transcendentalists claimed they could see the spiritual source for themselves. They literally asked Americans to “forget historical Christianity.”

### **The first “New Age,” late 1800s**

Once again the spiritual strivings of Americans were sidetracked, this time by the Civil War and the period of Reconstruction. However, by the 1870s, many of the old yearnings had returned in recognizable but often distinctly new forms, particularly ones influenced by Eastern, especially Hindu and Buddhist, sources. This new assortment of religious interests and movements would sufficiently resemble the late-twentieth-century “New Age” as to make the latter seem much less novel.

The religious innovations of the second half of the nineteenth century represented a blend of spiritualism, “mind cure,” and Eastern religion. Spiritualism was, and is, an independent phenomenon in its own right, not directly tied to any particular religion. Related to the transcendentalist spirituality of previous decades, as well as to general notions about souls and life after death, it involved “interdimensional” communication between the living and the dead. Spiritualist “mediums” would conduct special rituals or séances, inviting the deceased to “speak” to the assembled party, either through the voice of the medium or through other “signs” such as knocks and raps, automatic writing (as with a blank chalkboard or Ouija board), tipping over furniture, and other overt activity. Uriah Clark even published a guide for séance procedures in 1863 called *Plain Guide to Spiritualism*.

Mentalist/mind cure/“thought power” movements, of the sorts developed before 1850, were another major force in American life. In fact, the overarching movement was known as “New Thought” and took many different forms. A pioneer in the field of “mental healing” was Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–66), who began conducting healing sessions after 1840, first using a hypnotized subject as his medium of diagnosis and cure. By the late 1860s, Quimby dropped the partner and did his own curing, using a combination of touch, hypnotic gestures, visual imagery, and talk. He would enter into a clairvoyant state, where he could observe the patient’s “mental atmosphere” (like an “aura” in some modern-day practices) containing the person’s memories and beliefs; the cure amounted to an “adjustment” of those memories and beliefs.

By the time of the “first New Age,” mind cure was big business. Warren Felt Evans (1817–89), who was himself treated by Quimby, became a leading practitioner; in 1869 he wrote *The Mental Cure*, followed by *Mental Medicine* (1872) and *Soul and Body* (1875). For him, as for Quimby and many to come, the cause of illness was unhealthy thoughts and beliefs. Henry Wood represented another but familiar side of the mentalist movement, that is, the use of “visualization” or mental imagery. In his 1893 *Ideal Suggestion through Mental Photography*, he essentially appropriated Swedenborg’s tripartite distinction (here, material, psychological, and spiritual), suggesting that humans exist on all three levels simultaneously but that disease results from fixating solely on the material. In reality, he suggested, neither illness nor healing is a purely physical process but a psychological/spiritual one too. In fact, recovery truly occurs when the patient opens his or her heart and mind to the “great light” of God, achieved through specific “meditations” and ideal thoughts, such as “God is here,” “I am not this body,” and “I will be healed.”

Of all of the “spiritual medicine” movements, the most important and enduring has been Christian Science. Founded by Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), it survives today as a strong, if controversial, church based on the relation between the mind, spirit, and body. Like Evans, Eddy was cured by Quimby of a nervous condition. However, in the year that Quimby died (1866), she suffered a spinal injury from a fall, for which she refused medical treatment and “willed herself well” through religious and biblical realizations and affirmations. She emerged, healed, with the conviction that mind is everything and body nothing. In 1875, after a decade of

traveling, teaching, and healing, she wrote *Science and Health*, announcing her system of physical health through the powers of God alone, apart from any mesmerism or spiritualism or non-Christian, non-scriptural techniques. In 1879, she was able to create the Church of Christ Scientist in Boston and, shortly thereafter, the Massachusetts Metaphysical College. Finally, in 1883, the journal *Christian Science Monitor* appeared.

Finally, in the mid- and late 1800s, Western scholars were discovering Asian scriptures, including the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu *Vedas*, and the various Buddhist sutras. Archaeological discoveries in Egypt and Mesopotamia, India, and the Americas also provided fodder for religious creativity. Probably the most pervasive and influential was Theosophy (from the Greek for “god-wisdom”). The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875–6 by “Madame” Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott, born out of Blavatsky’s alleged spiritualist/occult powers. In her 1877 *Isis Unveiled*, she elaborated her occult system, received from “ascended masters” who revealed the knowledge to her. In 1879, she and Olcott moved the Theosophical Society to India, where it absorbed more Hindu content and practice (and where Hinduism absorbed its). Yoga and meditation were discovered and transmitted to the American public; Hindu terms and concepts like *samadhi* and guru were popularized. In 1888, Blavatsky compiled her teachings into the “Bible” of Theosophy, *The Secret Doctrine*.

Perhaps the defining moment of the age came at its end, during the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. At this event, representatives of many religions stood next to each other—mainline Protestants, Catholics, Jews, NRMs like Christian Science, and other religions from around the globe. The most dramatic figure was apparently Swami Vivekananda, the first impresario of Hinduism to the West, but by no means the last. Non-Western religion found a home in America.

### **Esotericism meets fundamentalism, early 1900s**

By the turn of the twentieth century, many of these foreign religious concepts and groups had “gone mainstream.” However, the period from about 1910 also represents a particular moment of resistance from the mainstream Christians, who saw themselves in a “battle royal” not only with forces of secularization and science but equally or more so “internal” forces, “religious” people—even Christians—who were making too many concessions to the non-Christian world.

Meanwhile, the “esoteric” movements of the previous century showed no exhaustion either but rather an almost infinite vitality and variability. Not far behind the Hindu wave came Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism. Daisetz Taitaro Suzuki (1870–1966) brought Zen to San Francisco in 1897, where he introduced Americans to Zen and Taoist writings. Not only that, but in 1911 he married a Theosophist and himself undertook a study of Swedenborgianism, as well as the religious psychology of William James, thereby Easternizing certain American traditions and Americanizing certain Eastern ones. Eventually, it would become impossible to separate the two. In 1927, he published his *Essays on Zen Buddhism*, and he was

sufficiently mainstream by 1955 to become a visiting professor at Columbia University—a year after the Tibetan Dalai Lama became an international figure.

The “esoteric boom” of the early 1900s had many other forms and faces. Some of its leading figures were Aleister Crowley, Edgar Cayce, and H. P. Lovecraft. The following is a very short list of organizations and publications appearing over the span of two or three decades:

- 1902 R. Swinburne Clymer publishes history of the Rosicrucian movement.
- 1907 Levi H. Dowling publishes *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*.
- 1911 Rudolf Steiner’s *The Submerged Continents of Atlantis and Lemuria* translated from German.
- 1915 H. Spencer Lewis founds Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis.
- 1920 Paul Foster Case founds mystical order called Builders of the Adytum.
- 1923 Alice Bailey opens Arcane School in New York.
- 1924–35 Baird T. Spalding publishes five-volume *Life and Teachings of the Masters of the Far East*.
- 1924 Ian Ferguson publishes *The Philosophy of Witchcraft*.
- 1928 Manly Hall publishes *Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabalistic, and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy*.
- 1933 James Hilton publishes *Lost Horizon*. William Dudley Pelley founds Christian-Fascist “Silver Legion of America” (the Silver Shirts).
- 1936 Lemurian Society founded in Wisconsin.

This was clearly a fertile time for movements that played on certain powerful themes, including “revealed teachings,” ancient predecessors, arcane knowledge, Eastern wisdom, and esoteric or “gnostic” Christianity. The appeal of ancient symbolism was so strong that even the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s began to use titles like Hydra and Giant and Great Titan and Exalted Cyclops. Much of the claim to antiquity was hopeful at best and fictitious at worst; the “wiccan” religion, which purports to be a revival of pagan pre-Christian beliefs and practices, is largely the invention of Gerald Gardner, from such writings as *A Goddess Arrives* (1948), *Witchcraft Today* (1954), and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959).

Religious innovation, often in the name of traditionalism, also took place in the African-American churches. Not the least of these was the “Black Muslim” movement, descending from Timothy Drew or “Noble Drew Ali.” In 1913, he introduced the Moorish Science Temple in Newark, attracting many followers of Marcus Garvey and his “Back to Africa” movement. The Nation of Islam itself was born around 1930 from the efforts of a prophet named Wallace Fard or Wali Farad or Wallace Ford Muhammad. These organizations had multiple inspirations, but among them was the 1927 account by William Seabrook entitled *Adventures in Arabia*, which chronicled various secret Muslim sects such as the Druze. There were also “black Jew” denominations, probably after the model of the Church of God and Saints in Christ originated by William S. Crowdy. Other examples include the “Father Divine” movement, identified with George Baker, who by 1915 was referring to himself as a

personification of God. Finally, the Caribbean syncretism known as voodoo (or Vodun or Vodoun) offered itself as an “authentic” religion of the African diaspora, a mixture of transplanted Africa traditions, Christianity, and indigenous elements. Seabrook’s 1929 contribution, *The Magical Island*, had its impact as well.

All of this proliferation of cults and religions was visible to the public at the time, many of whom felt themselves under continuous assault from crazy, dangerous cults and false prophets. There was a significant backlash against the cultism of the early century, akin to the backlash in the 1980s against the “hippy” and California cults of the 1960s and 1970s. Much of the taming of the cults simply occurred with the reversal of American fortunes in the Depression of the 1930s and then World War II. However, as soon as that war was finished, the energy and attention returned to religious innovation and resistance against it.

Within the mainstream Christian world, the established denominations and churches attempted to carry on as usual; many of the “new religions” of the 1800s had now earned their place. However, the new, more militant, brand of American Christian fundamentalism had gotten its start in the first decades of the 1900s. In fact, new energetic styles, if not exactly churches, emerged and then mobilized to become true political forces by the end of the century. Two of these styles are evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. Evangelicalism, perhaps represented best by Billy Graham in the late twentieth century, is the “good news” wing of contemporary American Christianity. An evangelical is, among other things, a “born again” Christian, one who has made the personal commitment to Jesus and become a messenger of the Gospel. Pentecostalism goes a step further and is one of the, if not the, fastest growing segment of Christianity, nationally and internationally. Marty connects the contemporary Pentecostal movement to a group of devotees at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh in 1966, who claim to have been “baptized in the spirit” (1984: 465) and to have exhibited the “gifts” thereof—prophesying, healing, and, most commonly, “speaking in tongues” (glossolia). However, we can trace the essence of the movement back much further and recognize it as one of those recurring themes of American religion: the personal contact with the “spiritual” and the wonders that flow from it—wonders of revelation and of power. Pentecostalism, possession of or by the Holy Spirit, is a form of the “enthusiasm” that American religion has repeatedly demonstrated.

## Case study 12.2

### The women’s spirituality movement

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One of the more interesting and illustrative religious movements to emerge in late-twentieth-century America was the women’s spirituality movement. Cynthia Eller conducted research within this loosely integrated community of women, examining

continued

their identities, their goals, and their inspirations. While it was incredibly and intentionally diverse—she found that “dissension is so easily tolerated, and the urge to create dogma so readily suppressed. Even the grossest of internal contradictions seem to create very little anxiety among spiritual feminists” (Eller 1993: 4)—she discerned four core principles. The first was that it was female-focused, even separatist. In fact, in her research she found not only an exclusion of masculinity but also often of conventional heterosexual femininity. As she writes,

lesbianism or at least bisexuality is something of a norm in feminist spirituality, and heterosexuality is regarded as a deviation—at times, a wholly unacceptable one. [. . . ] If her partners are female, she can talk about their shared sexuality. But if her partners are male, she would risk social censure to talk too long or loudly about her lovers or about male sexuality.

(Eller 1993: 21)

A second principle was the rejection or transcendence of “traditional” religions, locating the movement within the “alternative religious milieu” (Eller 1993: 7). It drew from very many eclectic sources, including New Age, the therapy/recovery movement, Jungian psychology, ancient religions (especially the ostensibly matrifocal “pagan” religions), Eastern religions, Native American religions, as well as Judaism and Christianity. It often incorporated aspects of magic, altar building, meditation and dreamwork, divination, pilgrimage, and, inevitably, the notion of the “goddess,” the supernatural representation of the feminine. Eller stresses the role of the more general therapeutic/psychological movement, with women’s spirituality being a form of healing and recovery: “In spiritual feminist thought, it is a given that all women need healing: if not from specific illnesses or infirmities, then from the pains suffered as a result of growing up female in a patriarchal world” (Eller 1993: 109). Therefore, “whatever makes a woman stronger is valid feminist spirituality” (Eller 1993: 3).

The third principle was “feminism” understood broadly. It blended political and economic concerns with spiritual ones, including women’s rights, income differences, reproductive rights, and so on. In fact, Eller notes that there was some tension between the secular/political feminists, who preferred to focus on “practical” matters, and the spiritual feminists, who believed that even a political movement necessitated a spiritual foundation. Fourth, and finally, she found that membership was particularly English-speaking and affluent. The profile she paints of the movement member is “white, of middle-class origins, fairly well-educated (beyond high school), of Jewish or Christian background (usually, though not always, having had a significant amount of religious training), in their 30s or 40s, and disproportionately lesbian” (Eller 1993: 18). Together these women organized themselves into “small groups, makeshift organizations, workshops, retreats, training schools, and mail-order courses” and at the extreme “utopian communes,” which served as the institutions for participating in and promoting the movement (Eller 1993: 11).

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## Religion and the courts

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One of the unique aspects of American religion is the role that the judicial system has played in its expression and regulation. Having laid down the principle of separation of church and state in the First Amendment, the issue of its implementation became a matter of interpretation and application—that is, a matter for the courts, particularly the federal courts. Interestingly, First Amendment cases were slow to reach their way to the Supreme Court, and most cases in the early 1800s had more to do with settlements of church property than the entanglement of religion and state. One reason for this delayed development is that the First Amendment, as written, expressly limits the power of Congress in regard to religion but makes no mention of state governments, so states seemed free to mix politics and religion as they deemed fit. However, a new era dawned with the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1868. Written with slavery rather than religion in mind, jurists gradually realized that its language effectively extended First Amendment and other federal protections to the state level. More cases involving religion began to find their way to the federal courts, but it was only in 1940 in the landmark *Cantwell v. Connecticut* decision that the Supreme Court formalized the relationship between the Fourteenth and First Amendments.

Significantly although not surprisingly, many of the early disputes involved nonmainstream religious groups like the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses, who were concerned with "free exercise" rather than "establishment," and pitted specific religious practices against civil law and authority. For example, *Reynolds v. United States* (1879) concerned the Mormon practice of polygamy. This was an important case, since it pitted a religious tenet against a criminal statute (polygamy being illegal). The Court affirmed Congress's right to legislate on matters of marriage law and then asked whether a religious exception could be made from such laws. The answer was no, on the basis of fairness, the traditional distinction between beliefs and actions, and the principle of higher law and morality than religion. As the decision put it, if religions are given exemptions from civil law,

Then those who do not make polygamy a part of their religious belief may be found guilty and punished, while those who do, must be acquitted and go free. This would be introducing a new element into criminal law. Laws are made for the government of actions, and while they cannot interfere with mere religious belief and opinions, they may with practices. Suppose one believed that human sacrifices were a necessary part of religious worship, would it be seriously contended that the civil government under which he lived could not interfere to prevent a sacrifice? Or if a wife religiously believed it was her duty to burn herself upon the funeral pile of her dead husband, would it be beyond the power of civil government to prevent her carrying her belief into practice?

(quoted in Alley 1999: 418)



In other words, the Court ruled against religion and in favor of law. *Davis v. Beason* (1890) took up the same general question and came to the same conclusion: “Crime is not the less odious because sanctioned by what any particular sect may designate as religion” (US Supreme Court 1890)

Into the early twentieth century, most of the cases continued to be “free exercise” ones, with varying outcomes. *Cantwell v. Connecticut* brought the proselytizing activities of the Jehovah’s Witnesses before the Court. Newton Cantwell and his sons were distributing literature, soliciting donations, and playing recordings openly critical of Catholicism in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood in New Haven. The Court ruled that the Cantwells had a constitutional right to engage in this behavior on the grounds that, in religion and politics alike, strong differences of opinion exist, and in both areas

the tenets of one man may seem the rankest error to his neighbor. [. . .] But the people of this nation have ordained in the light of history, that, in spite of the probability of excesses and abuses, these liberties are, in the long view, essential to enlightened opinion and right conduct on the part of the citizens of a democracy.

(Quoted in Alley 1999: 425)

Also in 1940, the Court decided *Minersville School District v. Gobitis*, in which Jehovah’s Witnesses were denied their freedom to dissent from reciting the Pledge of Allegiance; however, it reversed itself shortly thereafter in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), with Justice Robert Jackson making this classic expression of religious freedom: “If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein” (quoted in Alley 1999: 435).

Other cases relating to other religious groups followed logically. Some highlights include:

***Braunfeld v. Brown*** (1961): Jewish businessmen who were compelled by their religion to close their shop on Saturday challenged Pennsylvania’s “blue law” requiring no business to be done on Sunday. The state law was upheld.

***Sherbert v. Verner*** (1963): A Seventh-Day Adventist had been fired and denied unemployment benefits because she would not work on Saturday, her sabbath. Although only three years after *Braunfeld*, the Court ruled in her favor and made some comments about the dissimilarities between the two cases.

***Wisconsin v. Yoder*** (1972): Amish parents objected to sending their children to public school past the eighth grade, for religious reasons. The Court ruled in favor of the parents.

***Oregon Employment Division v. Smith*** (1990): Two Klamath Indian men were fired and refused unemployment benefits for using peyote as part of their Native

American Church ritual. The Oregon Supreme Court agreed that the men's religious freedom had been violated, but the US Supreme Court reversed them, on the same basis as the *Cantwell* decision—that the state had a right to regulate or criminalize such behavior. This ruling sent a shockwave through the American religious community, resulting in the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which was also subsequently struck down by the Court (in *Boerne v. P. F. Flores* [1997]).

***Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah*** (1993): The Santeria practice of animal sacrifice was upheld unanimously (possibly because the Hialeah city ordinances came after Santeria rituals were already known in town).

Meanwhile, the other and potentially more contentious clause of the First Amendment, the “establishment” clause, began to receive its share of attention and challenge—more contentious because, while “free exercise” almost by definition relates to minority religions, “establishment” strikes to the heart of the majority's religious sentiments, practices, and identity. Here the cases are far too many and far too idiosyncratic to discuss in much detail. For better or for worse, the issues tend to congregate around schools, both public and private.

***Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Township*** (1947): By a five-to-four majority, the Court concluded that it was constitutional for this New Jersey town to provide a public bus service for students attending parochial schools, on the premises of “child benefit” and of “non-exclusion” of people from services on the basis of their faith.

***McCollum v. Board of Education*** (1948): This was the first major school-facilities decision, over what is called released time. An Illinois law permitting religious groups to use public school facilities during school hours to teach religion classes was ruled unconstitutional by an eight-to-one vote. “This is beyond all question a utilization of the tax-established and tax-supported public school system to aid religious groups to spread their faith,” the justices wrote.

***Zorach v. Clausen*** (1952): As opposed to released time, New York public schools granted dismissed time, during which students could leave school premises to attend “church school.” The practice was upheld, with the six-to-three majority stating that to do otherwise would be to express a “philosophy of hostility to religion.” The minority mocked this logic, arguing that dismissed time did not differ from released time.

***Torcaso v. Watkins*** (1961): In a case unrelated to education, the Court found that a Maryland law that required an oath of belief in God was unconstitutional.

***Engel v. Vitale*** (1962): In the first major school-prayer decision, the Court annulled a New York school prayer, despite its attempts to be “non-denominational.” The prayer was: “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers, and our Country.”

Although nondenominational, it was ruled an unconstitutional establishment of a religious belief.

*School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* and *Murray v. Curlett* (1963): In two separate cases adjudicated together, Unitarian Edward Schempp and atheist Madalyn Murray (later O’Hair) objected to religious exercises in the school, including prayers and Bible readings. Although the exercises were voluntary, the Court outlawed them, evoking the “neutrality” of the State in religion as the reason for the finding: The “Free Exercise” clause blocks the State from denying religious freedoms, but “it has never meant that a majority could use the machinery of the State to practice its beliefs.”

*Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971). In one of the seminal decisions in First Amendment history, the Court threw out programs in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island that provided direct aid to nonpublic schools in the form of books, materials, and teachers’ salaries. More enduringly, it articulated a three-part test to be applied to such legislation to adduce its conformity to First Amendment principles. Known as the “Lemon test,” the three questions that make up the test are (1) whether the law or practice serves any secular purpose or is purely religious in nature; (2) whether it neither advances nor inhibits religion; and (3) whether it creates any “excessive entanglement” of government in religious matters.

*Stone v. Graham* (1980): Using the Lemon test’s first “prong” (secular purpose), a Kentucky law requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in school classrooms was tossed out.

*Lynch v. Donnelly* (1984): In one of its “religious display” cases, the Court approved by a five-to-four majority a Christmas crèche in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. The majority opined that the manger scene in the display “depicts the historical origins of this traditional event long recognized as a National Holiday.”

*County of Allegheny v. ACLU* (1989): The Court struck down a nativity scene and cross on public property in Pittsburgh but let stand a menorah.

*Lee v. Weisman* (1992): The majority of the Court found the participation of a clergyman in public school graduation ceremonies unconstitutional. The majority decision referred to constitutional principle, while the dissent emphasized tradition.

While the controversy persists and will continue to persist, these examples give some sense of the magnitude and ambiguity of the issue.

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## Religion in the public square

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One of the defining debates in America in the early twenty-first century is the proper role for religion in public life. Indeed, historians may look back on the first years or

decades of the century as the third great awakening. Still, each previous awakening has awakened something other than, or at least in addition to, “traditional” Christianity. If they are in the midst of another awakening, no doubt it will bring many unforeseen surprises. At any rate, religion probably pervades American national discourse and national consciousness at the moment more than at any moment in the living memory of its citizens. This is no doubt in part a response to the new challenges and opportunities facing their society, as much from technology as anything else. It is also in part a reaction to the fears of a dangerous and uncertain world, post-Communism and post-9/11. Finally, it is in part the “upswing” in the long-term cycle of the fortunes of religion; many religious people feel that religion has been on the defensive for too long and that it is merely reasserting its original and rightful place. Whatever the actual causes and sources, religion is an undeniable force in contemporary political and social life, and many religious activists want it that way. There is much controversy over the proper role of religion “in the public square,” if for no other reason than that there is only one public square but many different religions vying in and for it. We will close, then, with a brief discussion of some of the most significant social arenas in which the power of religion is felt.

### **Sexual issues: abortion, stem-cell research, contraception, and sex education**

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Sex in all its permutations is an enormous issue in the USA. In fact, “morality” and phrases like “traditional values” or “family values” often mean “sexual propriety” in a religious/Christian sense. Abortion and many other sexual practices and policies are of major concern to many religious Americans. Any interference with the “natural” process of conception and childbirth is considered to be a contradiction of “God’s plan.” The *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision protecting abortion rights was a galvanizing moment in the Religious Right movement, and numerous efforts have been made and continue to be made to overturn or at least restrict it, such as the “fetal injury” law that criminalizes harm to a fetus in the course of a crime against a pregnant woman.

Stem-cell research and related technological procedures, including human cloning, are also hotly debated. Some simply argue that such actions are “playing God,” some that science is taking the “beauty” or “randomness” out of birth. Most Americans probably accept the use of contraceptives, but many do not and often for religious reasons. The Catholic Church and some Protestant churches adamantly oppose it. Another concern is that contraception, along with sex education in schools and access to “emergency contraception” (the “morning-after pill”), will encourage and has encouraged sexual promiscuity, out-of-wedlock birth, and teen pregnancy. One of the latest worries is that a vaccine for the virus that causes cervical cancer might lead to increased teen sexual activity. Accordingly, some religious and conservative Americans have promoted the opposite trend through “abstinence only” school programs and campaigns to get children to sign promises to “wait until marriage.”

## **Gay marriage**

One of the most intense controversies is the issue of the rights of homosexuals, especially the right to marry. Gay activists insist that there is no reason why gays and lesbians should not be conferred the same marital rights—and, more crucially, the same spousal rights, including inheritance, hospital visitation, insurance, etc.—as any other couple. Antigay or antigay-marriage activists, on the other hand, defend what they explicitly consider to be a “traditional definition” of marriage, which is heterosexual, most of the arguments for which are religious. The Catholic Church has been a leading international force resisting legalization of gay marriages. A 2003 position paper from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith titled “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition for Unions Between Homosexual Persons” ordered Catholic politicians to fight any such legislation. “There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family. To vote in favor of a law so harmful to the common good is gravely immoral,” it holds.

A sense of outrage ensued when the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court found no legal grounds for denying gays the right to marry. More than a few legislators, including President George W. Bush, subsequently announced their support for a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a heterosexual union. Called in 2004 the “Federal Marriage” or “Defense of Marriage” amendment, it would stipulate that marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman and that no state can grant otherwise. The amendment was raised again in 2006 but failed in the Senate.

There are those whose contempt for homosexuals goes much further. Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas maintain a mission to protest at and disrupt gay events, including memorials for such victims of hate crimes as Matthew Shepard. They arrive carrying signs saying—and their website is named—“God Hates Fags.” More recently, they began protesting at military funerals, alleging that soldiers die because of America’s toleration of homosexuality and that, consequently, God hates America.

## **Pledge of Allegiance**

Most Americans grew up reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, but most do not realize that the Pledge is a relatively new document, authored by Francis Bellamy in 1892 and originally omitting the phrase “one nation under God.” Many commentators have reasoned that the motivation for a pledge in the first place was to assimilate the large influx of immigrants and, even more, to curb the “separatist” tendencies of the growing network of Catholic private parochial schools (also the motivation for the so-called Blaine Amendments in many states disallowing public financial support for private schools). It was only in 1954, in the midst of an even more sinister conflict (the Cold War), that the “under God” phrase was added. The legislative record from 1954 states clearly that “The inclusion of God in our pledge therefore would further

acknowledge the dependence of our people and our Government upon the moral directions of the Creator. At the same time it would serve to deny the atheistic and materialistic concepts of communism with its attendant subservience of the individual” (HR 1693, 83rd Congress, 2nd Session).

Although some people complained about the Pledge, and various religious minorities objected to it on grounds of *their* religion, no one openly contested the document until Dr. Michael Newdow, an atheist in California, brought a suit in federal court to have the religious language struck from it. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in 2002 that the words “under God” do in fact constitute a First Amendment violation. In his opinion, Justice Goodwin wrote:

To recite the Pledge is not to describe the United States; instead, it is to swear allegiance to the values for which the flag stands: unity, indivisibility, liberty, justice, and—since 1954—monotheism. The text of the official Pledge, codified in federal law, impermissibly takes a position with respect to the purely religious question of the existence and identity of God. A profession that we are a nation “under God” is identical, for Establishment Clause purposes, to a profession that we are a nation “under Jesus,” a nation “under Vishnu,” a nation “under Zeus,” or a nation “under no god,” because none of these professions can be neutral with respect to religion.

(US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit: 9123)

### Religious displays

One of the recurrent controversies concerns the display and celebration of religious themes and events on public property or by public officials. A number of court decisions have gone against practices like manger scenes at schools and government offices, Christmas and Easter pageants at public schools, or crosses on public land. A significant recent dispute took place over a Ten Commandments monument at a courthouse in Alabama. Justice Roy Moore was a particularly outspoken Christian who vowed to “acknowledge God” not only as his sovereign but as the founder of the country and its laws. In collaboration with the Coral Ridge Ministries, headed by James Kennedy, a two-and-a-half-ton granite block carved with excerpts of the Ten Commandments was placed in the courthouse in August 2001. Moore insisted that it was not only his duty as a Christian but his right as an American to express his religious belief. However, the federal courts ruled against him, and when he refused to comply with the order to remove the monument, he was dismissed from his office on the bench.

In numerous settings, confrontations have arisen over proposals to display the commandments in schools. One common argument in favor of such religious displays is that they are only “ceremonial” or that they constitute an example of Bellah’s “civil religion” but not any particular church or denomination of religion. In fact, Michael Newdow’s 2006 challenge to the American motto “In God We Trust” was dismissed on precisely the basis that the saying was not religious but rather a “national secular slogan.”

## **Science education and evolution**

One of the most contentious battlegrounds for public religion in the past century or so has been the classroom, not just in regard to prayer and religious displays but, more specifically, to curriculum and content. This conflict takes a variety of forms but none more persistently or intensely than the teaching of evolution. By the second half of the twentieth century, antievolutionists had reformulated their position as a “scientific” one—a “creation science”—and restated their goal as “equal time” along with “evolution science.” In 1981, Arkansas passed a law that required teaching creation science in public schools for equal amounts of time as evolution. The law was challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union and overturned in 1982. Finally, in 1987, the Supreme Court (in *Edwards v. Aguillard*) ruled that creation science cannot be forced into science curricula along with naturalistic science, because creation science is religion.

The response was the “intelligent design” (ID) movement. Represented by such works as Michael Behe *Darwin’s Black Box*, Phillip Johnson *Darwin on Trial*, and William Dembski *The Design Inference*, it invokes the so-called “teleological argument” or argument from design: The universe and its various parts are so complex and well integrated that they could not possibly have resulted by natural processes. Such phenomena, they insist, indicate an intentional design and, therefore, a designer. Behe is modest about the possible identity of this designer, but for many ID supporters, it is the Christian god.

One of the embodiments of the movement is the Discovery Institute (<<http://www.discovery.org>>), from which they lobby for the inclusion of ID in school science classes and attempt to get media and legislative attention and support for their initiatives. As a result, several states, at least temporarily, have either invited ID into the curriculum or have restricted or eliminated the teaching of evolution, including Kansas, Georgia, and Ohio. Even more interestingly and revealingly, though, the Discovery Institute has mounted a “cultural” campaign well beyond the purview of science. In its “Wedge Strategy” statement, it calls for a complete revolution not only in science but in society as a whole. Among its explicit goals are the defeat of “scientific materialism” and, ultimately, the permeation of design theory throughout “religious, cultural, moral and political life.”

### **“Faith-based initiative”**

The George W. Bush Administration has been far and away the most overtly pious one in recent American history, if not ever. Evangelical Christians were instrumental in his election, and his own personal religiosity is very much on display, from his “salvation” from drinking to his invocations of God and good and evil in his speeches. Accordingly, one of the first acts of his presidency was to launch a “faith-based initiative” to aid religious organizations that provide services of various kinds to the public. This move was not entirely new; the federal government has long distributed tax dollars to faith-based charities, and the tax-exempt status of churches constitutes an enormous financial advantage to religions.

Nine days after assuming office, Bush announced the creation of the Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI), on the premise that government had built an “uneven playing field” in which religious groups could not compete for federal money simply because they are religious. A White House document celebrating the inauguration of the OFBCI clearly argued that “the Federal government has often not been a willing partner to these faith-based and community groups. Instead, it has put in place complicated rules and regulations that hinder these groups from competing for Federal funds on an equal footing with other, larger charities” (The White House 2004). The plan for using public tax revenues for church-based services was sufficiently controversial that it sparked a string of congressional bills, watering down some of the original language and intent, until in December 2002, by executive order, the “Equal Protection of the Laws for Faith-Based and Community Organizations” was issued, putting the policy into place.

Explicitly, faith-based charities and social services can compete, along with other agencies, for federal money. In addition, some special moneys are set aside specifically for such charities and services. Religious institutions were not allowed to proselytize with the money, but they were allowed to preserve their “religious identity,” including displaying religious symbols and slogans. They could use church facilities for their services, as long as religious services and social services were offered in different parts of the facility. And, while they were not allowed to talk religion during the provision of social services, they were allowed to answer any questions that were asked and to direct questioners to other parts of the church where religion is discussed.

Some religious and secularist/separationist leaders have expressed concerns over this church–state alliance. Some church groups have declined to participate on the basis that it would compromise their freedom, open their accounting to government scrutiny, and subject them to federal hiring and antidiscrimination regulations. Some, like the Salvation Army, have sought exceptions to such regulations, and subsequent legislation provided that faith-based groups could in fact hire and fire on the basis of religion in order to maintain their religious identity. Secularists/separationists have complained that public money might be redirected to religious rather than social purposes and that religious groups should not be exempt from the regulations placed on everyone else.

### **Political party membership and voting patterns**

After a period of relative inactivity, religion began to become a formal political force in the late 1970s, with the rise of the “religious right” through the efforts of such figures as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Ralph Reed and such overtly political efforts as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. Those years also saw the emergence of other significant movements, often ostensibly one-issue but still very powerful movements, like Focus on the Family (James Dobson, 1977), the American Family Association (Donald Wildmon, 1977), the Free Congress Foundation (Paul Weyrich, 1977) partly funded by Coors, Citizens for Excellence in Education (Robert Simonds, 1983), Concerned Women for America (Beverly LaHaye, the wife of



Christian writer Tim LaHaye, 1979), *Operation Rescue* (Randall Terry, 1987), and many others.

While such organizations have had a noticeable impact on American politics and culture, religion is a more pervasive political issue in its effects on voting patterns. Most generally and predictably, evangelical/born-again Christians and Mormons are more likely to vote Republican, whereas Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and the non-religious are more likely to identify as Democrat or independent. Not only does overall religious affiliation appear to enter into political decisions, but the intensity of that religiosity does as well. According to exit polls from the 2000 presidential election, voters who reported attending church more than once a week supported Bush 63 percent to 36 percent, while those who reportedly never attend church backed Al Gore 61 percent to 32 percent. Thomas Byrne Edsall notes that this tendency correlates more closely with views on “moral” issues than with any other demographic factor: For instance, those who held the view that abortion should always be legal voted for Gore by a three-to-one margin, while those who believed that abortion should always be illegal supported Bush three-to-one. He mentions political strategists Dick Morris and Mark Penn, who devised five key questions to predict a person’s voting habits: “Do you believe homosexuality is morally wrong? Do you ever personally look at pornography? Would you look down on someone who had an affair while married? Do you believe sex before marriage is morally wrong? The fifth question was whether religion was very important in the voter’s life” (Edsall 2003: 36). People who took the “liberal” position on any three of these questions were twice as likely to vote Democrat as Republican, and the more “liberal” positions one took, the more likely. Likewise, the more “conservative” your answers were, the more likely to vote Republican. Edsall refers to this as the great “morality gap” in America.

Churches have also served as organizing centers, and, although they are legally restricted from openly supporting candidates, some have distributed “voter guides” and arranged “get to the polls” drives. More formal efforts have also been undertaken, like the recently founded Clergy Leadership Network, a political advocacy group composed of mostly Protestant Christians that describes itself as operating “from an expressly religious, expressly partisan point of view.” A group known only as The Fellowship sponsors the National Prayer Breakfast; this organization, which houses its archives at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College, “has had extraordinary access and significant influence on foreign affairs for the last fifty years” (Getter 2002).

### **Popular media and workplace**

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Finally, religion is, and always has been, a fixture in American “popular” culture, such as movies, television, books, music, and the like. The recent feature film *The Passion of the Christ* is only one in a long line of such entertainments. Every year around Easter, Americans are treated to the classic *The Ten Commandments*. Other more or less reverential film accounts of Christian tales appear in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, *King of Kings*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Godspell*. Television has featured a number

of openly religiously themed programs, including *Touched by an Angel* and *Joan of Arcadia*. Many years ago, a famous “claymation” series called *Davey and Goliath* featured a boy and his talking dog who learned religious or moral lessons in each episode. Preachers and healers have been a staple on radio and television for decades, and, in the twenty-first century, religious organizations own and operate radio and television stations and networks with twenty-four-hour, international programming, such as Trinity Broadcast Network or Daystar.

Popular literature has always been a huge medium for religious or quasireligious messages, from Dale Carnegie’s and Norman Vincent Peale’s “positive thinking” teachings to the sectarian novels in the *Left Behind* series, at least two of which have been made into movies. Over the years, there have been other offerings, from Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* to pseudoreligious thrillers like *The Da Vinci Code*, not to mention the landslide of “spirituality” books from the likes of Deepak Choprah and others, often not specifically Christian but vaguely spiritual.

The market for religious (mostly Christian) products is vast and expanding. While popular music overall has suffered disappointing sales in recent years, the Christian music subcategory, even including a “Christian rock” genre, has been strong. Stalwarts like Amy Grant have been joined by newer, “edgier” acts like Creed and Jars of Clay—and even Christian rap groups—doing music that is mainstream enough to not be immediately identified as Christian in some cases. Major printing initiatives exist, not only to feed consumer demand but especially to support the home-schooling movement. These home schools require learning materials, and various presses, not the least of which is Bob Jones University Press, offer textbooks on every school subject at every grade level from an openly Christian perspective. The Christian Book Distributors catalog offers everything from software bibles to inspirational literature and music to children’s entertainment (including *Veggie Tales*) to apocalyptic books and videos to diet guides.

Very recently, a “religion in the workplace” movement has emerged. Proponents assert that the workplace, where they spend most of their waking hours, has been stripped of religion or has even become hostile to religion. Many workers demand the right to make religious displays in their workspace and to openly talk about and practice their religion there. And many managers and owners have introduced their religions in the company, including the owners of Chik-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby; both of these establishments close on Sunday to observe the Christian sabbath. Large and powerful retailers like Wal-mart have institutionalized conservative moral views by banning anything from explicit rock and rap albums to men’s magazines.

One problematic area for business is the relation with its customers. Some pharmacists have refused to fill contraceptive prescriptions because of their moral objection to birth control. Another area is the relation between coworkers or between workers and their bosses. The religiosity of a boss or coworker can potentially favor colleagues who share that religion but offend or disadvantage those who do not. The problem is especially serious in a faith-based workplace. In California in 1995, a Catholic medical center fired a clerk who openly preached born-again Protestantism. Terence Silo was terminated by CHW Medical Foundation for what it called “soul

saving on clinic premises.” The case reached the California Supreme Court in 2002, which ruled unanimously that faith-based employers do have a right to control their work environments and that the government cannot intervene, even to protect the First Amendment rights of individuals. In the minds of the court, First Amendment rights were superseded by the rights of faith groups to hire and fire workers according to their organization’s mission. Whether this can or will lead a religious balkanization of the USA—in which Catholic businesses hire only Catholics, Baptist ones hire only Baptists, Jewish ones hire only Jews, etc.—only time will tell.

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## Conclusion

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The USA is a religious society—both de Tocqueville and Bellah agree that religion is essential as a glue to integrate it—but we might better say that it is a society of religions, a vast field of religious identities and conceptions, a sea of swirling religious currents. No one religion is the “true” American religion nor is or could be representative of America’s religions. The USA includes militant atheists, militant Christian fundamentalists, and more sects, denominations, and NRMs in between than an army of anthropologists could study in a lifetime. Any ethnography of “American religion” could hope to achieve no more than adding one more tile to the mosaic. Yet there are some threads that bind the fabric of American religions, just as there are some threads that bind all religions in all places and times. Religions legitimate the existing social system—its institutions and values. They also provide means to contend with and change the system; they are at once conservative and liberating. Religions give meaning, even *ultimate meaning*, to the lives of members; they also more than occasionally pit themselves against others in the struggle for meaning. They are *effective*: they motivate people to do things, to change the world in many ways. They make a group a group, a society a society, a nation a nation. They are, thus, immanently and ultimately social, linking humans with fellow humans and with “nature” and with the “supernatural.” We might say that the ultimate purpose and effect of religion is to take humans and their cultures to the Ultimate.

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