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Religion

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Religion

An Anthropological Perspective



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Printed in Germany

To Anthony R. Walker, my mentor and friend

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Anthropology and Religion

Scholars have speculated about the nature, origins, and functions of religion for thousands of years up to the present. A variety of modern disciplinary perspectives have been brought to bear on the subject, such as neuroscience, psychology, sociology, history, theology, comparative religion, cultural studies, and so forth. Anthropological approaches differ from these in several important respects. Anthropological studies of religion are based upon in-depth fieldwork and the attempt to understand religious practices and beliefs from an emic or insider's perspective. This requires that one must become familiar with the "native's" values, logic, and beliefs to the degree that one can understand the world from the point of view of the participants of the culture being studied.

Anthropologists attempt to achieve this level of comprehension through an approach known as participant observation, which entails living with the people being studied and taking part in their daily affairs over an extended period of time. The systematic description of particular cultures through fieldwork is known as ethnography. As the noted British anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973) put it, this investigative process involves two distinct steps:

[First the anthropologist] goes and lives for some months or years among a people. He lives among them as intimately as he can, and he learns to speak their language,

to think in their concepts and to feel in their values. [Second] He then lives the experience over again critically and interpretively in the conceptual categories and values of his own culture and in terms of the general body of knowledge in his discipline. In other words, he translates from one culture to the next (Evans-Pritchard 1962: 148).

Religious practices and beliefs are not studied in isolation, as distinct categories of experience and action, but in terms of how they articulate with other aspects of culture, such as economics, politics, social organization, family life, and artistic traditions. This is referred to as anthropology's holistic approach.

Documenting particular religious traditions through field research, i.e., ethnography, is one component of the anthropological agenda of building and enhancing our knowledge. However, this is not an end in itself. In-depth particularistic studies provide the basis for broad comparative and cross-cultural analysis in which generalizations are based upon the entire spectrum of religions, taking into account the full range of cultural diversity, rather than the religious beliefs of one society or a group of societies. This enterprise is called ethnology, the systematic comparison of related and unrelated cultures around the globe looking at similarities and differences in order to answer particular questions and produce useful theoretical generalizations.

To address the problem of bias, anthropologists adopt the axiom of cultural relativism, which means evaluating each culture in its own terms rather than according to the values and standards of the anthropologist's own society. This orientation is associated with what has been referred to as methodological agnosticism in the study of religion in which questions of truth and falsity are bracketed out (see below).

Another distinction between anthropology and other disciplines that study religion is that historically anthropologists have tended to investigate religious beliefs and practices among small-scale, non-Western societies in faraway places, rather than focusing upon the "world religions" (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and their variants) and those close to home. Overall, anthropology has made a tremendous and lasting contribution to our understanding of these religions.

Today, however, the situation has changed as anthropologists have broadened their scope of analysis to include the religions of complex societies along with the traditional emphasis on small-scale cultures. Moreover, anthropologists now include in their purview prehistoric religion, attempting to address questions of origins, ancient religions, such as the beliefs of the Aztecs, Inca, Maya, and ancient Egyptians, as well as new religious movements that have appeared during the last few centuries.

Defining Religion

Anthropologists maintain that religion is a cultural universal, found in all societies for tens of thousands of years in tremendous variety. As anthropologist Stephen Glazier (1997: 3) has put it:

Religion is a universal. It has been found in all societies studied by anthropologists and is one of the hallmarks of human creativity as well as a tribute to humankind's nearly infinite resourcefulness and adaptability in coping with the problems of daily existence.

Religion is universal but at the same time it is incredibly diverse. As anthropologists Roger and Felix Keesing (1971: 302) point out:

The religions of men vary enormously in the powers and agencies they posit in the universe and the ways men relate to them. There may be a range of deities, a single deity, or none—simply spirits or even impersonal and diffuse powers. These agencies may intervene constantly in the affairs of men, or be uninvolved and distant; they may be punitive or benevolent. In dealing with them, men may feel awe and reverence, or fear; but they may also bargain with supernaturals or seek to outwit them. Religions may govern the moral conduct of men or be unconcerned with morality.

Religion also has a vast range of effects. As anthropologist Scott Atran (2002: 7) observes:

[Religion] benefits elites. It benefits the downtrodden. It intensifies surplus production. It wastes surplus production. It fosters cooperation. It drives competition. It binds society. It cements the self. It is the opiate of the masses. It is the motor of the masses. It is the warhorse of war. It's a player for peace. It's the mouthpiece of monarchy. It's the oracle of oligarchy. It's a friend of fascism. It's a foe of communism. It's the spirit of capitalism. It's whatever money can't buy.

The problem confronting the anthropologist is how to define religion within a single analytical framework that encompasses the vast diversity of religious expression in cultures around the globe. In other words, we must determine a manner of conceptualizing religion that applies equally to all religions, not just Western religions, or the religions of small-scale societies. The issue is complicated. For example, there are cultures that do not have a word that can be translated as religion, as understood in the Western context. In such societies, culture is a seamless whole and religion is not compartmentalized, as it is in the West, as a separate endeavor from other activities, such as politics, economics, family life, and the arts.

In these cases, deciding which beliefs/behaviors to label as religious becomes a problem. It does not help that the meaning of the term religion itself is varied even in European usage, as anthropologist David Hicks (2010: xxviii) has pointed out.

But does the lack of an equivalent word for religion in another culture derail the anthropological enterprise? Is the anthropological study of religion doomed from the start? The answer to these questions is no. There are no words for many analytical categories that anthropologists routinely use in the study of other cultures, including belief, politics, economy, culture, ecology, art, etc. This has not impeded our analysis of other cultures.

The problem is that there are no widely accepted definitions of religion (Horton 1960; Spiro 1966). Various perspectives have been forwarded (Nye 2008: 17–19). One of the earliest definitions of religion was provided by Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917), who has been called the founder of social anthropology. In his book *Primitive Religion* (1871), Tylor presented what he called the minimal definition of religion as the belief in “Spiritual Beings.” By this he meant, as anthropologist Marvin Harris (1927–2001) explains:

that humans share the world with a population of extraordinary, extracorporeal, and mostly invisible beings, ranging from souls and ghosts to saints and fairies, angels and cherubim, demons, jinn, devils, and gods. Wherever people believe in the existence of these beings, that is where religion exists. Tylor claimed that animistic beliefs were to be found in every society, and a century of ethnological research has yet to turn up a single exception (Harris 1989: 399–400).

According to this definition, all cultures have a religion. Hence, unlike many of his contemporaries who argued that “savages” have no religion, Tylor was proposing that religion is a cultural universal. Tylor (1929, I: 424) referred to the belief in spiritual beings as “animism” or “theory of souls.” According to Tylor, the belief in spirits developed out of the attempt by early humans to explain the difference between living and dead people and images seen in dreams and visions. Early humans observing the difference between someone who is living and someone who is dead, tried to understand the difference, and came to the conclusion that people must have a spiritual as well as a material body. This is the same spiritual body that roams around at night when one is dreaming, only to return upon waking up. After death, the spirit leaves permanently, becoming a soul. The body dies: the soul continues to exist. This is how early humans explained death and this is the principle underlying all religions (Tylor 1929, II: 24).

Tylor was concerned with the evolutionary development of religion. He saw religion as having evolved from animism to polytheism to monotheism, from simple to complex, with the monotheism of his own culture representing the

pinnacle of evolutionary development. According to Tylor, people attributed different powers to the soul, believing it to influence the world of humans. Over time, the doctrine of souls gave rise to the doctrine of spirits. Offerings and sacrifices were made to the spirits which were thought to inhabit different parts of the environment, thus religious rituals were born. The souls of the dead ancestors were worshipped as guardians of lineages and clans. Thus ancestor worship evolved. The notion of soul also led to beliefs in places where such entities dwell, leading to the idea of Elysian Fields, Paradise, Hades, and heaven and hell. Some souls were associated with evil, resulting in beliefs in demons. The belief in spirits residing inside objects, which thereby acquired supernatural qualities, led to the development of fetishes. At some point, fetishes were fashioned to resemble idols, giving rise to idolatry, and spirits became deities, each with its own sphere of influence over the world of humans. In due course, the idea of deities of different sorts resulted in the development of polytheism. Finally, multiple deities were hierarchically arranged, eventually leading to the elevation of one god over all others, and thus the idea of monotheism developed.

Tylor was interested only in the cognitive dimensions of religion and did not incorporate the institutional aspects or sociological context of religious beliefs and actions into his analysis. He has been criticized for his individualistic orientation and his unilineal evolutionary scheme has been rejected as speculative.

Another criticism of Tylor was forwarded by the anthropologist Robert Marett (1866–1943), who pointed out that aside from supernatural beings many religions also posit the existence of an impersonal spiritual force, vitalism, or supernatural potency, which he termed animatism. An example of such a force is called *mana* and comes from the aboriginal religions of Polynesia and Melanesia. People, objects, or places can be infused with such supernatural potency inspiring feelings of awe, wonderment, or dread. *Mana* accounts for the unusual attributes of things, places, and people. A thing possessing *mana* could be a canoe or fishing gear that always does the job. A place with *mana* could be a sacred peak or a cave where mysterious and supernatural happenings have been observed or experienced. A person with a lot of *mana* could be a charismatic figure who is extremely successful and victorious in life, while one who has lost *mana* is bound to slip into failure and defeat.

Thus, supernatural powers comprise beings and forces. Supernatural beings possess humanlike qualities, they are agents that think, feel, have motives, and interact with people. Supernatural forces are impersonal, but can be manipulated by humans using the correct techniques, rites, or spells.

Tylor's cognitive perspective fell out of favor during most of the twentieth century. However, in recent years cognitive theories of religion have reemerged (see chapter 2). As anthropologist Stewart Guthrie (2007: 51–52) points out:

In the last decade, scholars in several fields have returned to something like Tylor's view of religion as an attempt to explain or at least interpret the phenomenal world ... The new cognitive scholars of religion largely hold, as did Tylor, that religion may best be defined as thought and action concerned with spirits and deities. These are beings who are humanlike in their mental (and sometimes physical) characteristics, yet still usually are distinguishable from, and usually superior to, ordinary humans.

In contrast to Tylor's cognitive approach is the view of anthropologists who look upon religion as a sociological phenomenon. This perspective was first expounded by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915). Durkheim observes that religion is not reducible to individual psychological states and he points out that “Religion is more than the idea of gods or spirits, and consequently cannot be defined exclusively in relation to the latter” (Durkheim 1961: 50). Moreover, he points out that there are non-deistic religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, to make the point that belief in spiritual beings is not the defining condition of religion. However, in practice gods and spirits play a prominent role both in Buddhism and Jainism. So in this respect Tylor was not off the mark.

Durkheim (1961: 52) forwards a conception of religion based upon the distinction between the ordinary realm of human existence and the realm of the extraordinary:

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by the words *profane* and *sacred* ... This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought.

For Durkheim religion is a group phenomenon, comprising a set of shared behaviors and attitudes toward the sacred. These shared beliefs bring individuals together into an enduring single “moral community.” Practices such as magic, which may have adherents, but do not bind together those who adhere to them, or unite them into a group, fall outside the domain of religion (Durkheim 1961: 60).

In religion, according to Durkheim, when group members come together, the power of the collective consciousness, the collective thought of the aggregate as a whole, impinges upon individuals as an awesome external force. From the collectivity emanates collective power, which appears impersonal and transcends the individual and which, because it is a manifestation of the collective, endures beyond the earthly existence of individuals and bears down upon them as an outside force. It is this force that becomes the focus of worship and ritual and arouses emotions of awe, contributing to social solidarity and perpetuation of the group,

or the social organism. In Durkheim's scheme, the object of reverence and worship is the collective force or society itself. Durkheim (1961: 62) defines religion as:

a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside as forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

Among the problems with Durkheim's conception of religion is that social solidarity is not based upon religious adherence alone. People in society may also be organized into groupings with conflicting loyalties based on kinship, economic, political, and linguistic affiliations that do not correspond with religious communities. Moreover, religion can be as divisive as it can be unifying, take for example sectarian conflicts, or the inhumane actions people perpetrate against one another in the name of religion. Finally, not all religions classify things as sacred and profane. Buddhism, for example, does not recognize such a dichotomy. Similarly, the Australian Aborigines do not make a distinction between the sacred and the profane.

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) propounds a perspective on religion focusing on individual human psychology. For Malinowski (1955: 87):

Both magic and religion arise and function in situations of emotional stress: crises of life, lacunae in important pursuits, death and initiation into tribal mysteries, unhappy love and unsatisfied hate ... religion [opens] up escapes from such situations and such impassés as offer no empirical way out except by ritual and belief in the domain of the supernatural.

Humans deal with the psychological stress of uncertainty by resorting to the supernatural through ritual. For example, the use of magic is rooted in tangible human emotions that arise in times of frustration and uncertainty when one is confronted with forces beyond comprehension and control (see chapter 7). As Malinowski sees it, magic and religion are institutional expressions of human emotional states; they allay fears and anxieties.

Critics of this perspective point out that religion can be an equally powerful source of fear and anxiety: fear regarding wrathful deities, demons, devils, multiple hells, witchcraft, sorcery, and of being punished for ritual infractions.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006), drawing on the ideas of sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), offers a symbolic or cultural definition of religion that does not refer to supernatural beings or the supernatural world. According to Geertz (1973: 4), religion comprises:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general

order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

By this convoluted formulation Geertz means that religious symbols encourage and motivate people by making them believe in a meaningful and coherent universe. Put differently, religious symbols produce powerful moods and provide validation and ultimate meaning for human existence. Thus, the worldview and ethos of a culture are integrated through religious symbols.

Geertz's position on religion is no different from his conception of culture, which he defines as:

A system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (Geertz 1973: 89).

His position on religion is therefore indistinguishable from non-religious ideologies, such as existentialism, communism, or Nazism, philosophies that most anthropologists would refrain from calling religion.

An altogether different perspective is offered by Karl Marx (1818–1883). For Marx religion is a manifestation of tangible earthly economic and sociopolitical relations. His perspective on religion derives from his general theory of society which he describes as follows:

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life [i.e., religion]. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness (Marx 1959: 43).

For Marx, religion is the ideological reflection of the exploitive economic and sociopolitical relations characteristic of society. Religion mystifies the situation by distracting people from realizing the true earthly sources of their misery. Religion is a coping mechanism for the wretched masses that provides solace by promising rewards in the afterlife for the miseries tolerated in this life, and a false consciousness that legitimates and bolsters the status quo whose ideology predominates. As he puts it in one of his most misquoted passages:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo (Marx 1844).

As Marx puts it, this is a critique of society rather than an anti-religion diatribe as it is so often misleadingly portrayed. Religion provides solace but does not address the real sources of misery. Doing away with the tangible material conditions that cause human misery, i.e., class oppression and exploitation, “a condition that requires illusions,” will result in the dissolution of religion and its replacement by an ideology that more accurately reflects existential circumstances.

In his analysis, Marx prioritizes the relations of production and modes of production. He has therefore been criticized for rendering religion, along with values, ideas, and beliefs, to the status of epiphenomena.

As this brief survey suggests, conceptualizations of religion are diverse. There is no agreement as to which features of religion represent the common denominator in all of the world’s religions. Different scholars have emphasized different attributes, such as beliefs, ritual, affect, community, and morality (see Smith 1998). Hence, no single definition has been able to capture the entire picture. For this reason, some argue that religion is best thought of as a multifaceted phenomenon with many interpenetrating dimensions as opposed to being viewed as a unitary occurrence.

Religious studies scholar Ninian Smart (1989: 12–21; 1996: 10–11) lists the following dimensions of religion:

1. Ritual/practical dimensions: practices such as worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites, and healing rituals.
2. Doctrinal/philosophical dimensions: intellectual statements regarding the basis of the faith.
3. Mythic/narrative dimensions: vital stories, historical or primordial, such as stories about vatic or prophets or creation myths.
4. Experiential/emotional dimensions: emotional reactions to rituals, feelings such as sacred awe, calm peace, rousing inner dynamism, outpouring of love, sensations of hope, gratitude for favors.
5. Ethical/legal dimensions: ethical and legal imperatives incorporated into the fabric of religion, such as *Sharia* in Islam or the Torah in Judaism.

6. Organizational/social dimensions: how religion manifests itself in society, as separate from or coterminous with secular life.
7. Material/artistic dimensions: expressions in material creation, ranging from churches to cathedrals and icons to divine statuary and books.
8. Political dimension: the relevance of religion to politics, such as divine kingship or religion as state ideology.
9. Economic dimension: the exchange of material goods and services for merit, or the role of religion in economics, such as Protestantism in the rise of capitalism, or Confucianism in the East Asian economic surge.

How these dimensions are accentuated varies from one religion to the next. Some religions may emphasize the legal dimensions, others the role of myth, and still others the experiential and emotional dimensions, and so forth.

Natural and Supernatural

The concept of supernatural has figured prominently in anthropological constructions of religion. Discussing religion in terms of the categories of natural and supernatural is problematic in the context of non-Western societies that do not make such a distinction. In other words, not all cultures recognize an explicit dichotomy between what we call natural and supernatural. This distinction is a Western concept (Saler 1977). Therefore, definitions of religion based on such a distinction, it could be argued, are inappropriate when applied cross-culturally.

The term supernatural refers to beliefs in gods and spirits and the existence of an invisible non-empirical reality that transcends the world of humans. People in all cultures recognize the existence of this transcendental world, even if they do not have a word that translates into the term supernatural, or make an explicit distinction between the natural and supernatural realms. It is ridiculous to think that there are people who cannot distinguish between a living human and a ghost, between the world of spirits and the world of people, or between mystical and ordinary realities (cf., Winzeler 2008: 7).

However, because “supernatural” is an emic term, how it is defined varies from culture to culture. There are no agreed upon scientific definitions. These have not been forthcoming because it is epistemologically impossible to provide an empirical definition for what is considered to be non-empirical reality (Lett 1997: 109).

Another problem is that the term supernatural is too restrictive. As anthropologist James Lett (1997: 110) has pointed out:

It is not sufficiently comprehensive to embrace beliefs and behaviors that are virtually identical in form and function to so-called religious beliefs and behaviors but that would not commonly be called supernatural.

This is why anthropologists Arthur Lehmann and James Myers (2001: 3) advocate that our conception of religion has to be augmented:

Expanding the definition of religion beyond spiritual and superhuman beings to include the extraordinary, the mysterious, and unexplainable allows a more comprehensive view of religious behaviors among the peoples of the world and permits the anthropological investigation of phenomena such as magic, sorcery, curses, and other practices that hold meaning for both preliterate and literate societies.

To address this issue, Lett (1997: 111) suggests the term “paranormal” as an alternative to the word supernatural. As he puts it:

The term embraces the entire range of transcendental beliefs, covering at once everything that would otherwise be called magical, religious, supernatural, metaphysical, occult, or parapsychological.

I will discuss the relationship between religion and the paranormal in chapter 8.

Science, Religion, and Rationality

Most cultural anthropologists assert that the truth or falsity of the content of religious beliefs is beyond the legitimate boundaries of anthropological inquiry. As Evans-Pritchard (1965: 17) explains in his book *Theories of Primitive Religion*:

[The anthropologist] is not concerned, *qua* anthropologist, with the truth or falsity of religious thought. As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of his knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration. The beliefs are for him sociological facts, not theological facts, and his sole concern is with their relation to each other and to other social facts.

The anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1966: 5) expresses this view in his influential book *Religion: An Anthropological View*:

we shall ignore the extremes of fundamental piety or anticlerical iconoclasm. Thus, for us, religion will be neither a path to truth nor a thicket of superstition, but simply a kind of human behavior: specifically that kind of behavior which can be classified as belief and ritual concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and forces.

Anthropologist Brian Morris (2006: 9–10) similarly states that:

Anthropologists ... are not concerned with the truth status or morality of specific religious concepts or beliefs, nor with the authenticity of the personal experiences that are often attributed to religious devotees or prophets. ... Anthropologists as social scientists have thus, following their vocation, been neither for nor against religion, neither engaged in theology, apologetics, or advocacy, nor in explicitly attacking or dismissing religion as meaningless or irrational.

And more recently, anthropologist Jack Eller (2009: 2) notes that:

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.

Questions of truth and falsity are thus bracketed out. This methodological stance is thought to enable the study of the religious beliefs and practices of others with minimal bias and remains the standard approach used by most anthropologists.

Then there are those anthropologists who go beyond merely bracketing out the question of truth and falsity to fully subscribe to the worldview of the people they are studying. For example, as Paul Stoller (1989: 229) maintains:

As anthropologists we must respect the people among whom we work ... For me, respect means accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous. I took my teachers seriously. They *knew* that I used divination in my personal life. They *knew* that I had eaten powders to protect myself. They *knew* that I wore objects to demonstrate my respect for the spirits. They *knew* I had an altar in my house over which I recited incantations.

Thus participant observation becomes what in the 1960s was called “going native.”

Scientific anthropologist James Lett (1997: 103) has observed that a common theme in the vast and diverse body of anthropological literature on religion is the premise that one cannot apply the epistemological principles of the scientific method to the central content of religions because phenomena that are non-empirical are outside the scope of science, which encompasses the empirical realm. Stephen Jay Gould (1999: 6) espoused just such a point of view when he wrote that:

The net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion

extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for example, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven.

Lett (1997: 108) argues, however, that the defining feature of science is not empiricism.

Science ... relies upon both logic and experience, both reason and observation, in the pursuit of knowledge. It would be prejudicial to call science empirical: Science demands only that the evidence collected through observation be objective (i.e., publicly verifiable and testable) ... the essence of science lies in the exclusive commitment to rational beliefs, by which I mean beliefs that are both falsifiable and unfalsified. If a belief satisfies both criteria (if it is, in the first place, propositional, and it has, in the second place, survived the unrelenting attempts at falsification in light of publicly verifiable evidence), then it deserves to be called scientific knowledge. ... It would obviously be irrational to give factual credence to a purported propositional claim that was either nonfalsifiable (i.e., propositionally meaningless) or falsified (i.e., evidentially wrong).

In contrast:

The term supernatural is purportedly used to designate a reality that somehow transcends the natural universe or empirical reality, but what does it mean to “transcend empirical reality”? If such a thing as nonempirical reality exists, how could we, as empirical beings, know about it? (Revelation and intuition, after all, are demonstrably unreliable—witness the mutually exclusive claims made by people on revelatory grounds.) If such a thing as nonempirical reality really exists, by what mechanism is it connected to empirical reality? (How, in other words, do supernatural beings and forces have an impact on the natural world?) Further, if such a thing as nonempirical reality exists, why is there not a shred of objective evidence to indicate it exists? (Lett 1997: 109).

For Lett (1997: 111) therefore the common denominator of all religions is not that they are non-empirical but rather that they are all irrational. He adds:

by which I mean that every single paranormal belief in the world, whether labeled religious, magical, spiritual, metaphysical, occult, or parapsychological, is either nonfalsifiable [and hence propositionally meaningless] or has been falsified ... The simple fact is that every religious belief in every culture in the world is demonstrably untrue. Irrationality is thus the defining element of religion. Religion and science are not at odds because religion wants to be “supernatural,” while science wants to

be “empirical”; instead, religion and science are at odds because religion wants to be irrational (relying ultimately upon beliefs that are either nonfalsifiable or falsified), while science wants to be rational (relying upon beliefs that are both falsifiable or unfalsified).

This does not preclude the anthropological study of the social, psychological, ecological, symbolic, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of religion. These are all important topics for investigation. What Lett means is that we cannot have a legitimate scientific study of religion until anthropologists address the epistemological question he raises (Lett 1997: 116).

For Lett a legitimate scientific study of religion is contingent upon the application of the epistemological principles of the scientific method to the content of religious belief systems. This is something most anthropologists would be reluctant to do. As anthropologist Richley Crapo (2003: 8–9) maintains:

If we resort to simply deciding that belief in things that are not accepted by the contemporary scientific community as “real” should be called “supernatural beliefs,” then we adopt a truly ethnocentric method, one that amounts in essence to equating “supernatural” with “(scientifically) false.”

Lett would argue that the “supernatural” is in fact scientifically false. To suggest that this assertion is ethnocentric implies that science and scientific knowledge are culture bound phenomena.

Crapo is in the company of those anthropologists who are content to bracket out questions of truth and falsity, allow room for epistemological compromise, and attempt to elucidate religious beliefs and actions in terms of local construals of cause and effect, rather than scrutinizing them in terms of scientifically meaningful categories in accordance with the tradition of systematic skepticism.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this perspective places native epistemologies on equal grounds with the epistemology of science. Scientific knowledge thus becomes valid solely in the culture of its origins. Humanistic perspectives are elevated as the only valid approach in elucidating religious phenomena. Scientific approaches to the study of religion are disqualified as being ethnocentric and inappropriate. Proponents of this kind of epistemological relativism, however, verge upon becoming “propagandists and apologists” for religion (e.g., Stoller and Olkes 1989: 227; van Dijk and Pels 1996). This compromises the intellectual integrity of anthropology as a discipline.

Religion does give factual credence to propositions that are falsified or are unfalsifiable. Therefore, from the scientific perspective religion is irrational. This

is not the question. The real question is: why do humans, the world over, ardently espouse beliefs in irrational counterfactual entities and concepts, such as ghosts, goblins, devils, angels, deities, life after death, heaven and hell, virgin births, resurrection, and so forth? This is one of a number of related questions I shall attempt to address in the chapters that follow.

Religion, Cognition, and Prehistory

In recent years important scientific strides have been made in the cognitive study of religion. Cognitive researchers have gone back to a view similar to Tylor's idea of religion as a way of explaining events in the world. They define religion, like Tylor, as beliefs in spirits and gods. What is different between the two perspectives is that while Tylor based his position on ethnographic accounts and logical reasoning, contemporary researchers draw upon the findings of the cognitive sciences (Guthrie 2007: 51–52).

The starting point of cognitive research is that explanations for religious beliefs are to be found in how the human mind operates (Boyer 2001: 2). The human cognitive architecture is postulated to contain a repertoire of innate specialized modules that were fashioned by natural selection to address various recurrent information-processing quandaries faced by our hunting-gathering ancestors during the Paleolithic period (Samuels 2000: 13). As a result of the common evolutionary heritage of our species, these modules, or cognitive mechanisms, are cross-culturally the same (Whitehouse 2007: 217). Such evolved mechanisms with which humans think, perceive, and remember, predispose people to think in certain ways and are said to affect the content of thought and behavior (Boyer 2001: 3; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2007: 24). It is posited that these universal features of human psychology underlay, shape, or constrain the cross-cultural recurrence of the “form and content of religious phenomena,” such as the ubiquitous beliefs in life after death, souls,

spirits, ghosts, gods, devils, divination, magical healing, witchcraft, sorcery, attribution of good and ill fortune to supernatural causes, and the belief in the power of ritual (Whitehouse 2007: 217).

Theory of Mind and the Generation of Religious Ideas

One cognitive mechanism involved in the generation of religious ideas is called the “theory of mind module” or ToM (Pinker 2006: 7). This involves the capacity to attribute a mind, i.e., thoughts, intentions, and beliefs, to others in order to understand and predict their behavior. Theory of mind is “foundational to social cognition and human life” (Guthrie 2007: 49). The evolutionary rationale given for this capacity is that individuals who could determine the “strategic interests of allies and enemies and to manipulate social relations accordingly” would have had a reproductive advantage (Whitehouse 2007: 220).

We apply theory of mind “spontaneously and intuitively” to animate and inanimate objects. ToM makes us unconsciously “perceive minds or causal agents behind events” (Guthrie 2007: 49). As experimental psychologist Steven Pinker (2006: 7) points out with respect to religious thinking:

If you are prone to attribute an invisible entity called “the mind” to other people’s bodies, it’s a short step to imagining minds that exist independently of bodies. After all, it’s not as if you could reach out and touch someone else’s mind; you are always making an inferential leap. It’s just one extra inferential step to say that a mind is not invariably housed in a body.

Here arises the notion of unanchored agency, which is the basis of beliefs in souls, ghosts, and gods.

In addition to living people, we also apply ToM to those who are deceased. According to anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse (2007: 220):

People are strongly biased to attribute mental states (desires, sensory responses, intentions, etc.) to dead persons based on basic ToM operations, even though they are readily able to represent biological and physical functions as having terminated. Part of the reason for this bias may be the impossibility of representing one’s own consciousness as ‘no longer existing’ even though one can readily imagine (or directly experience) the loss of particular biological and physical capacities. Our bias to represent dead people as having mental/emotional capacities that outlive their physical bodies provides a compelling foundation for notions of free-floating agency, separable from any corporeal anchorage. Such a notion in turn affords the possibility of other kinds of bodiless agents, such as deities and primordial ancestors.

Psychologist Jesse Bering (2006: 130) elaborates:

Here then is one key ingredient for belief in God or spirits: an innate disposition to see others not as ambulant objects or brain-dead sacks of meat but as thinking, feeling beings that, just like oneself, are causal agents who do things intentionally.

Due to innate ToM operations humans everywhere populate the world and universe with counterfactual entities, like ghosts, demons, and deities.

Agency Detection and Religious Thought

A related aspect of human cognition involved in the production of religious ideas is a mechanism for the detection of agents. We are constantly scanning the environment for possible signs of agency. This has evolutionary significance. As anthropologist Scott Atran (2002: 60–61) has put it:

Identifying animate beings as agents, with internal motivations, would allow our ancestors to anticipate goal-directed actions of predators, prey, friend, and foe and to profit from this in ways that enhance hominid survival and reproductive success.

The agency detection system is hyper vigilant, rendering it prone to over-detection of potential agents in ambiguous circumstances. As Atran (2005: 78) adds:

Natural selection designed the agency-detector system to deal rapidly and economically with stimulus situations involving people and animals as predators, protectors, and prey. This resulted in the system's being trip-wired to respond to fragmentary information under conditions of uncertainty, inciting perception of figures in the clouds, voices in the wind, lurking movements in the leaves, and emotions among interacting dots on a computer screen. This hair-triggering of the agency-detection mechanism readily lends itself to supernatural interpretation of uncertain or anxiety-provoking events.

Such interpretations, it is claimed, result in the ubiquitous cognition in all cultures of supernatural agents like gods, ghosts, ghouls, vampires, and other benign or rapacious beings. This hair-triggering of the agency detection system has survival value because if we mistake a non-agent for an agent we lose little, but if we fail to detect an agent, particularly in the case of other humans or dangerous animals, this could be lethal. Thus, “it is better to be safe than sorry” (Atran 2005: 267). Put another way, religious ideas arise from our cognitive tendency to over-evaluate ambiguous phenomena by comprehending them as alive and human-like, i.e., through animism and anthropomorphism. As Guthrie (2001: 99, 107) points out:

our tendency to view and treat the world as alive and humanlike—that is to animate and anthropomorphize it—constitutes a necessary and deeply held cognitive bias. This bias stems from an innate strategy; to interpret ambiguous things and events first as what matters most. What matters most usually is what is alive and especially what is human. We readily see and hear our environments as alive and humanlike because when they actually are, we benefit from such interpretation, and when they are not, we lose little. Consequently gods, demons, and the like are part of the spectrum of humanlike beings we think we discern in the world.

If the cognitive approach is on the right track, there is no module for religion in the brain, but rather religion is the outcome of different selected mechanisms or cognitive traits operating together (Pinker 2006: 8).

The cognitive approach is not without its critics. As anthropologist James Laidlaw (2007: 220) observes, “defining religion as beliefs and practices relating to spiritual or supernatural beings” does “not come near to constituting all that we might reasonably call religion.” Laidlaw (2007: 230) adds that the cognitivist idea of religion:

is only a very constricted, indeed one may say an impoverished, idea of “religion.” It excludes the history of religion as mankind’s various more concentrated and sustained attempts to think and act out its conceptions of human values and worth, and particular and varied achievements and follies that have resulted. Nothing cognitive science has any prospect of achieving will obviate the need to understand these, in humanist terms.

Laidlaw thus calls for a humanistic approach to the subject as the more appropriate way of understanding religion.

Prehistoric Religion

Having briefly discussed how basic religious ideas arise, we now turn to the question: When did the cognitive disposition for religious thought first appear? Given the length of time humans have been on earth, there are a number of possibilities. As the archaeologist Steven Mithen (2008: 82) observes:

[Religion] could be an attribute of all members of the *Homo* genus, hence appearing prior to 2 million years ago. Alternatively, it might depend upon the possession of brains of a size beyond some threshold, perhaps not appearing until, say 500,000 years ago and hence [to] be an attribute of large brained hominins such as *Homo heidelbergensis*, *neanderthalensis* and *sapiens*, leaving smaller brained hominins such as *Homo habilis* without religion. Other possibilities are that religious thought is a unique attribute of either all members of *Homo sapiens*, or only those after particular social

and economic conditions had arisen, such as communities of a particular size and structure.

It was once widely believed that evidence of religious behavior dated back to the time of “Peking Man” (*Homo erectus*), some 500,000 year ago, based on discoveries at Zhoukoudian (Chou Koutien), near Beijing, China. Evidence of human skulls broken open at the base (*Foramen magnum*), presumably to extract the brain, and long bones split apart, to extract the marrow for consumption, were considered evidence that *Homo erectus* practiced ritual cannibalism, with ritual behavior being equated with religiosity (Maringer 1960: 16–21; Malfejt 1968: 107). Ritual cannibalism, head hunting, and the veneration of skulls among contemporary cultures were often cited in support of such conclusions. However, subsequent analysis of these materials suggests that non-human scavenging accounts for the particular archaeological features in question.

A stronger case was made for the existence of religion among the Neanderthals. Again, skulls opened up at the base to acquire the brain were taken as evidence of ritual cannibalism. However, ambiguities in the evidence, poor excavation techniques, and the work of animals, such as the fox or wolf, cast doubts on such conclusions (Jordan 1999: 106–107).

Another line of evidence for Neanderthal religiosity was the discovery of cave bear bones arranged in altar-like structures, found in Drachenloch, Switzerland (Figure 2.1). The bones were thought to have been treated as objects of veneration and were taken as evidence for the presence of a Neanderthal “bear cult” (Tattersall 1995: 94–95). Today, this interpretation is also attributed to poor archaeological excavation techniques and the configuration of the bones is ascribed to natural processes (Jordan 1999: 108–110; Tattersall 1995: 95).

The strongest evidence of religious behavior among Neanderthals is the presence of numerous burials. Evidence of Neanderthal burials, purportedly with grave goods indicating beliefs in an afterlife, has been found in various caves in Europe and the Middle East. Among these is the famous flower burial at Shanidar Cave, in Iraq, where the discovery of pollen in the dirt suggests that the body was covered with flowers before interment (Solecki 1971). Speaking of the Shanidar flower burial, the archaeologist Ralph Solecki (1971: 250), who excavated the site, writes:

With the finding of flowers in association with Neanderthals, we are brought suddenly to the realization that the universality of mankind and love of beauty go beyond the boundary of our own species. No longer can we deny early men the full range of human feelings and experience.

Presently, such assertions regarding Neanderthal religiosity have been dismissed on the grounds of poor archaeological excavation techniques and the

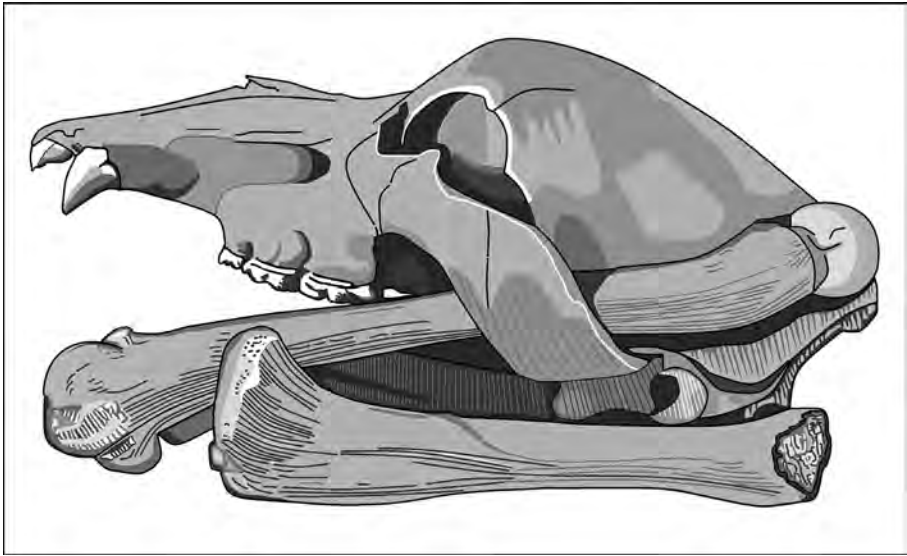


Figure 2.1. Drawing of the cave bear bones found in Drachenloch, Switzerland, once thought to be evidence of a bear cult among the Neanderthals. Today this interpretation is attributed to poor archaeological excavation techniques and the configuration of the bones is ascribed to natural processes.

misinterpretation of the data (Gargett 1989; Mellars 1996: 375; but see Pettitt 2011: 78–138). Thus, as Tattersall (1995: 169) says about Neanderthal burials:

It would be rash to assume ... that Neanderthal burial had exactly the type of symbolic significance that it holds for us, with all the implications for ritual and belief in an afterlife that burial and its complex associated behaviors have among modern humans. It may just as well have been simply a way of conveniently disposing of bodies that would otherwise have unpleasantly cluttered living spaces—and attracted hyenas. Or, given the near certainty that the Neanderthals did not see and comprehend the world in the same way that modern humans do, burial might have had a significance to them that we would find hard to imagine from our modern perspective.

Moreover, the type of objects found in Neanderthal burials and interpreted as grave goods, which imply beliefs in an afterlife, are ordinary everyday items, such as stone tools or bones. These are things that would have naturally been found in the living and working areas of caves where people were interred and could have accidentally found their way into the burials (Tattersall 1995: 170).

Even the famous Shanidar flower burial does not stand up to critical scrutiny. The pollen found in the burial could have been introduced by other factors,

such as burrowing rodents, or it could have been blown into the cave by wind, or brought in on workmen's boots (Jordan 1999: 101; Mithen 1996: 136; Pettitt 2011: 124–125). Thus, the case for religion among the Neanderthals is somewhat tenuous.

Religion and the Evolution of the Modern Mind

There is no evidence of religious behavior before the advent of *Homo sapiens*. Mithen provides a cognitive explanation for the rise of religious thought and why religion was absent among non-*Homo sapiens* hominins. His work also provides an archaeological timeline for when religious thought first arose. According to Mithen's interpretation of the archaeological record, all large brain hominins living during the mid-Paleolithic shared a mentality consisting of multiple specialized intelligences, or modules, each dedicated to a particular domain of behavior, and operating in isolation from one another (Mithen 1996: 147, 174). These included a social intelligence, employed for social interactions, a natural history intelligence, dealing with the understanding of the natural world and the requisites of life as hunter-gatherers, and a technical intelligence, related to making and using tools. While the archaeological evidence of non-*Homo sapiens* hominins shows that each of these cognitive modules was fully evolved, the evidence also suggests that knowledge within these domains remained restricted. As Mithen (1996: 150) observes:

So much of Early Human behavior looks modern, epitomized by the technical skill apparent from stone tools. But so much else looks positively weird: the monotony of industrial traditions, absence of tools made of bone and ivory, absence of art.

These early hominins had a domain specific mentality that was different from the modern mind. Mithen (2008: 91) adds:

The archaeological records of *Homo heidelbergensis*, *neanderthalensis* and other hominins may indicate social, technical and natural history intelligences, but they also reflect remarkably monotonous behaviour, almost entirely lacking in any form of innovation. For them, the worlds of people, artefacts and animals were relatively isolated from each other and this imposed a major restriction on the nature of thought.

The capacity for creative, symbolic, and metaphorical thought is absent. Also lacking is representational art and religious behavior. Religion appeared after there was a transformation in the cognitive architecture of the human mind from a domain specific mentality to “cognitive fluidity.” This occurred after the evolution of the modern mind. This transformation happened with the emergence of *Homo sapiens*

and entailed the direct connection of modules integrating knowledge previously restricted to specific cognitive domains (Mithen 1996: 70–71). This gave modern humans the capacity to integrate ways of thinking and bodies of knowledge that evolved independently to come up with novel ideas and the capacity for unrestricted imagination (Boyer 2001: 322–325).

This development was associated with a remarkable cultural explosion during the Upper Paleolithic characterized by the appearance of diverse material culture, use of new materials like bone and ivory, new tools such as blades and harpoons, the use of artifacts for storing and transmitting information, carvings of animal and human figurines, bone needles for sewing clothes, beads and pendants for personal adornment, cave paintings, and burials with lavishly adorned corpses and elaborate grave goods (Mithen 1996: 22–23; Tattersall 1995: 170).

The key features of religion arise from cognitive fluidity. This is when social intelligence or theory of mind was imposed upon non-human species and inanimate objects (cf., Mithen 2008: 91). This process is reflected in the mixing up of categories in cave paintings and carvings from France and Spain that date back 30,000 years ago. Images of humans with animal attributes or images of animals with human attributes pervade the art of the Upper Paleolithic, suggesting the presence of anthropomorphic and totemic thought (Figure 2.2). This was a result of cognitive fluidity between social and natural history intelligences (Mithen 1996: 164). There was also the appearance of personal adornments, such as beads and pendants to convey social relationships, reflecting cognitive fluidity between technical and social intelligences.

With respect to cave art, Mithen (1996: 176) points out:

Few can doubt that the painted caves, some of which were located deep underground, were the locus of ritual activities. Indeed the anthropomorphic images within this art, such as the sorcerer from the cave of Les Trois Frères, are most easily interpreted as being either supernatural beings or shamans who communicate with them ... these cave paintings are likely to reflect a mythological world with concepts as complex as those of the Dreamtime held by Australian Aborigines.

In addition to the cave art there are the Upper Paleolithic burials. Now we find burials involving lavish decorations of the body with beads, pendants, and other articles of adornment, along with a variety of implements or goods made of stone, bone, and ivory (see Pettitt 2011: 139–214). This suggests considerable investment of time and energy in the burial rites and is clearly indicative of beliefs in an afterlife.

Mithen (1996: 174) mentions the 28,000-years-old burials at Sungir, Russia, as an example. These burials include the grave of a sixty-year-old man and associated

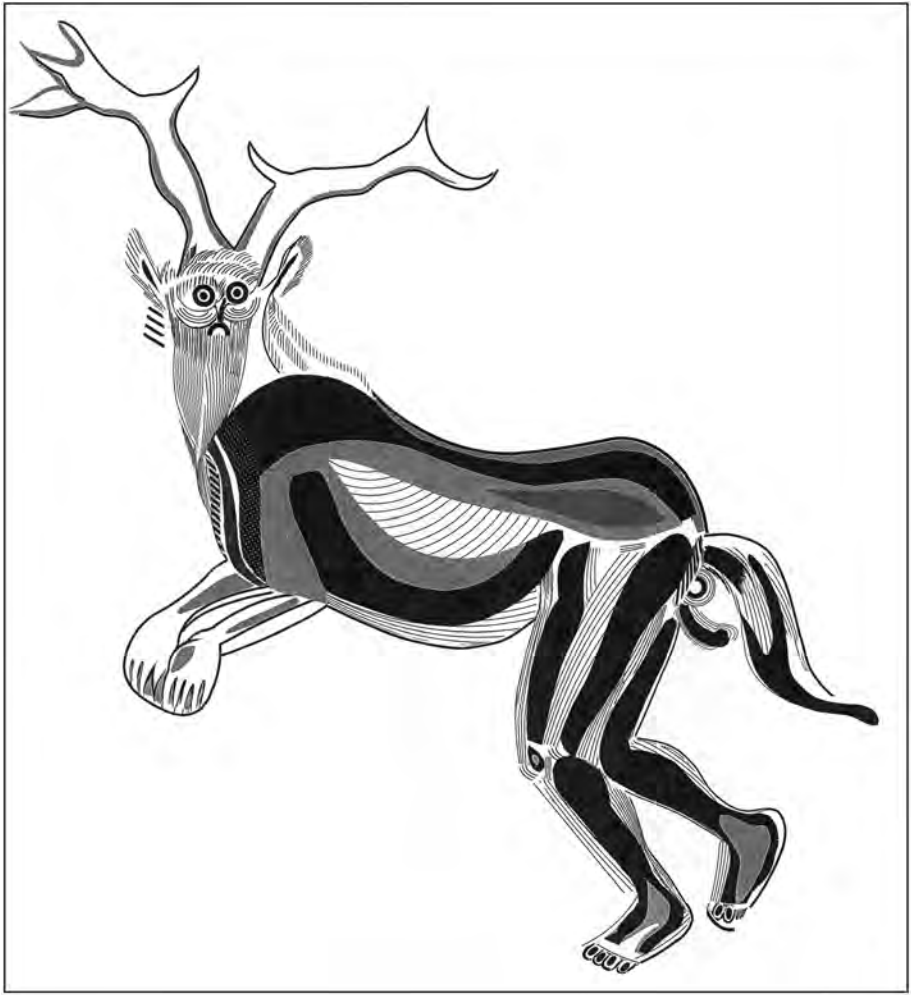


Figure 2.2. Drawing of the “Sorcerer” from Les Trois Frères, France, a figure in upright position with human hands and feet, owl’s face, reindeer antlers, wolf’s ears, and a horse’s tail. Therianthrope images such as this are thought to indicate the emergence of anthropomorphic and totemic thought during the Upper Paleolithic.

burial of a male and female adolescent. The archaeologist Randall White (1993: 289–292) describes the burials as follows:

The man was adorned with 2936 beads and fragments arranged in strands found on all parts of his body including his head, which was apparently covered with a beaded cap that also bore several fox teeth. His forearms and biceps were each decorated with

a series of polished mammoth-ivory bracelets (25 in all), some showing traces of black paint ... Around the man's neck he wore a small flat schist pendant, painted red, but with a small black dot on one side ...

The ... small boy was covered with strands of beads—4903 of them—that were roughly 2/3 the size of the man's beads, although exactly the same form. Unlike the man, however, he had around his waist—apparently the remains of a decorated belt—more than 250 canine teeth of the polar fox. On his chest was a carved pendant in the form of an animal. At his throat was an ivory pin, apparently the closure of a cloak of some sort. Under his left shoulder was a large ivory sculpture of a mammoth. At his left side lay a medial segment of a highly polished, very robust human femur, the medullary cavity of which was packed with red ochre. At his right side ... was a massive ivory lance, made from a straightened woolly mammoth tusk. ... Near it is a carved ivory disk which sits upright in the soil.

The ... girl had 5274 beads and fragments (also roughly 2/3 the size of the man's beads) covering her body. She also wore a beaded cap and had an ivory pin at her throat, but her burial contains no fox teeth whatsoever. Nor does she have a pendant on her chest. However, placed at each of her sides there was a number of small ivory 'lances', more appropriate to her body size than that accompanying the boy. Also at her side are two pierced antler batons, one of them decorated with rows of drilled dots. Finally, she was accompanied by a series of three ivory disks with a central hole and lattice work, like that adjacent to the ... boy's burial.

Hints of the key features of religion, such as belief in supernatural beings, soul concepts, life after death, the idea that certain individuals can contact supernatural agents, and the transformative power of ritual, are all in evidence in the archaeological record from the start of the Upper Paleolithic (Mithen 1996: 176). Thus, as Mithen (1996: 174) concludes:

New behaviors ... such as anthropomorphic images in cave paintings and burial of people with grave goods suggest that Upper Paleolithic people were the first to have beliefs in supernatural beings and a possible afterlife. We are indeed seeing here the first appearance of religious ideologies.

Religion is therefore the unique attribute of *Homo sapiens*. It appeared during the Upper Paleolithic period, around 40 thousand years ago, and has remained a cultural constant ever since.

Mithen tells us how and when religious behavior may have first appeared. He does not focus upon the patterns of religious expression. What were the first religious specialists like? What sorts of beliefs and practices did they hold and engage in? These are questions I shall examine in the next chapter.

Shamanism

Many anthropologists believe that the earliest religious specialists were shamans and that shamanism was the first religion of humankind. The shaman is a socially recognized part-time practitioner who is endowed with supernatural powers and functions as a healer and spirit master (see Narby and Huxley 2001). The shaman's calling is often involuntary and involves an initiatory crisis, such as bouts of madness, sickness, and vivid dreams and visions involving themes of dismemberment, death, and rebirth (Sidky 2008: 1–39). Following an initial traumatic encounter with the spirit world, the neophyte must be trained and initiated by an established practitioner. During training the candidate undertakes soul journeys when he learns how to combat malevolent spirits, and acquires the ability to heal the sick, and the capacity to escort the souls of the dead to their final destination. Once initiated, the new shaman acts as a healer, exorcist, and diviner by conducting night-long public ceremonies involving the use of altered states of consciousness (ASC, trance, technique of ecstasy) achieved through repetitive drumming, dancing, vocalization, and the use of hallucinogenic drugs. The shaman possesses a special costume and ritual paraphernalia, the most important of which is a single or double-sided drum (Figure 3.1).

The word shaman comes from the term *šaman* used by the Evenki (Tungus) of eastern Siberia to denote a person who enters trance states and beckons spirit allies during spectacular public performances for the benefit of the community.



Figure 3.1. A Sherpa shaman in ritual outfit with drum. A shaman is a person who enters trance states and beckons spirit allies during spectacular public performances for the benefit of the community. Photo by H. Sidky.

There is some dispute over the etymology of the word, although it has been suggested that it may derive from *samaṇa*, the term for Buddhist monk in Pali, the ritual language of Buddhism (Gibson 1997: 50–52). Nonetheless, some scholars maintain that even though the term shaman may have a foreign derivation, shamanism itself is an ancient indigenous practice in Siberia with its roots in Paleolithic hunting and gathering societies (Morris 2006: 26). The word shaman became part of the Russian vocabulary through the accounts of the people and customs of Siberia written by Western travelers and Christian missionaries and was incorporated into English and other languages by the late 18th century (Flaherty 1992: 6).

There are many reports of Siberian shamanism written during the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. Among these is an interesting account of a shamanic performance written by the Russian ethnologist Waldemar Jochelson, based upon data gathered during the winter of 1900–1901, from among the Koryak:

The people put out the oil-lamp in the underground house in which [the shaman] stopped with his master. Only a few coals were glowing on the hearth, and it was almost dark in the house. On the large platform which is put up in the front part of the house as the seat and sleeping place for visitors, and not far from where my wife and I were sitting, we could just discern the shaman in an ordinary shaggy shirt of reindeer-skin, squatting on the reindeer-skins that covered the platform. His face was covered with a large oval drum.

Suddenly he commenced to beat the drum softly and to sing in a plaintive voice: then the beating of the drum grew stronger and stronger; and his song—in which could be heard sounds imitating the howling of the wolf, the groaning of the cargoose, and the voices of other animals, his guardian spirits—appeared to come, sometimes from the corner nearest to my seat, then from the opposite end, then again from the middle of the house, and then it seemed to proceed from the ceiling. He was a ventriloquist. Shamans versed in this art are believed to possess particular power. His drum also seemed to sound, now over my head, now at my feet, now behind, now in front of me. I could see nothing; but it seemed to me that the shaman was moving around, noiselessly stepping upon the platform with his fur shoes, then retiring to some distance, then coming nearer, lightly jumping, and then squatting down on his heels.

All of a sudden the sound of the drum and the singing ceased. When the women relighted their lamps, he was lying, completely exhausted, on a white reindeer-skin on which he had been sitting before the shamanistic performance. The concluding words of the shaman, which he pronounced in a recitative, were uttered as though spoken by the spirit whom he had summoned up, and who declared that the “disease” had left the village, and would not return (Jochelson 1908: 49).

Modern scholarship on shamanism got underway with the publication of Mircea Eliade’s (1907–1986) treatise, *Shamanism: Archaic Technique of Ecstasy*, which first appeared in French in 1951 and in English in 1964. In this book Eliade presented an impressive compilation of information gathered from a vast array of sources. The book was accepted as the definitive study of the subject matter and had a profound impact upon European and North American academic and popular audiences (Sidky 2008: 4). Eliade (1964: 5) considered Siberia as the *locus classicus* of shamanism, where the tradition had continued more or less unchanged from the Paleolithic until the present, and concluded that the defining element of shamanism was the ecstatic experience and magic flight during which the shaman’s soul leaves his body and rises to the heavens or descends to the netherworld.

The Shaman’s Cosmos

The shaman’s cosmos, or sphere of operation, is conceived of as having multiple levels, including an upper world of the gods, a middle world of people, and an underworld of spirits, connected with one another by a central axis (*axis mundi*) or cosmic tree. This cosmos is populated by a variety of supernatural agents that can help or harm people. The shaman is able to travel through the multi-level cosmos during soul journeys while in altered states of consciousness (ASC) to traffic with supernatural beings of various kinds, including ghosts, demons, animal spirits, and deities, and use their power for the benefit of clients (Figure 3.2). Such journeys

are undertaken to correct the spiritual equilibrium of the community, alleviate disease, procure game animals, retrieve lost souls, and guide the souls of the dead to their final destination (Sidky 2008: 115–134).



Figure 3.2. A Tamang shaman on a soul journey to traffic with spirits and travel through the cosmos. Photo by H. Sidky.

Jochelson (1926: 210–211) provided an account of a Siberian shaman's hunting magic ritual involving soul travel:

The performance starts in the same way as does the ritual for the curing of the sick. Towards the middle of the performance the shaman falls down unconscious. His soul does not go to the Kingdom of Shadows but to one or another of the deities who control game. For instance [the shaman] described to me a visit of his soul to the Owner of the Earth as follows:

The soul of the shaman, having approached the house of the Owner of the Earth, half-opens the door, but does not enter, fearing to insult the Owner of the Earth by [his] persistence. The shaman is herein supported by his guardian spirits. The shaman, that is his soul, says through the open door:

Earth-Owner! Your children send me for some food for the future.

If the Owner of the Earth loves the shaman, he gives the soul of a reindeer doe, if he does not love him, he gives the shadow of a bull.

Shaman will take that reindeer, having taken will bring home.

That is, the shaman then comes to [regains consciousness], rises to his feet, beats his drum and dances with joy. Then he sings to his spirit protectors, who helped him in his journey to the Owner of the Earth.

Lead me well, protect from evil, else I will kill.

Then the shaman approaches the head hunter and hands him the soul of the reindeer. The hunter does not, of course, see the soul for only shamans can see it. The shaman places it on the head of the hunter, and, tying it with an invisible bandage says:

A river will stand, when there will stand on the right bank of it, go, there you will find [the game]

The next day, in the morning, the head hunter will go to the river and there, on the right shore, a reindeer will come to meet him. He will shoot and kill it. If the Owner of the Earth gave a shadow of a doe the hunter will kill a doe, for this will be the same reindeer whose soul was brought by the shaman. Then throughout the entire hunting season the hunter will have luck in following reindeer. If, on the other hand, the Owner of the Earth gave a bull, the hunter will only kill that bull, and there will be no more game.

If the shaman, without asking the Owner of the Earth, himself takes the soul of animals, with the assistance of his spirits, then, if that shaman should come to the house of the Owner of the Earth, the latter will give him nothing:

A bad shaman, to the Earth Owner if he comes, he does not like, does not give because stealing souls he does not like.

The Owner of the Earth punishes also in other ways the shaman who steals the souls of animals. He kills his child or some other of his relatives. At times he kills the thief himself.

Shamanism and Spirit Possession

According to Eliade (1964: 500), magic flight or soul travel was the original pristine form of shamanism, as distinct from the pattern involving the incarnation of spirits, or spirit possession, which he says emerged later (Figure 3.3). Others suggest, however, that spirit possession is the more significant element of the shamanic complex (see Lewis 1971).



Figure 3.3. A Jirel shaman possessed by spirits. The shaman can embody and expel spirits at will. Photo by H. Sidky.

The noted Russian ethnographer of Siberian shamanism Sergei Shirokogoroff (1935: 269) characterizes shamans as persons who have:

mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people, who suffer from spirits.

Shirokogoroff (1935: 274) elaborates on this characterization by pointing out that the shaman:

(1) [is] ... a master of spirits; (2) he has a group of mastered spirits; (3) there is a complex of methods and paraphernalia recognized and transmitted; (4) there is a theoretical justification of the practice; (5) the shaman assumes a special position.

Shirokogoroff (1935: 271) describes the mastery of spirits as follows:

the master must take care of the spirits, feed them and handle them, when he wants to introduce them into himself ... the difference between a person who is possessed by spirits (e.g., manifested in some nervous and psychic troubles) and a shaman is also essential, for the shaman introduces spirits into himself at his own will when he wants it, i.e., the shaman uses his own body as a placing for spirits. A voluntary introduction of a spirit is ... a characteristic of shamanism ... the same is true about the next step, namely, the expulsion of the spirits, which is beyond the power of ordinary people. Thus among the shamans a voluntary introduction and expulsion of the spirits are particular cases of "mastering."

By mastery of a group of spirits, Shirokogoroff (1935: 271–272) means that:

the shaman must have several spirits possessing various qualities, the latter being used by the shaman when spirits are introduced. Indeed, the number of spirits possessed is subject to variation. The shaman is supposed to have at the beginning of his career, at least one spirit ... with the help of which he may master many other spirits or at least know them ... the more spirits [he has] the more powerful the shaman ... the shaman must have a list of spirits.

Shirokogoroff (1935: 272–273) adds that the acquisition of a dynamic body of knowledge regarding spirits "serves as a condition for the recognition of the shaman's ability," or the theoretical justification of his activities:

the practicing of shamanism presumes that the shamans accept some theoretical basis of shamanism, i.e., a general theory of spirits and their particular characters, and practical possibilities of dealing with spirits. [This theory includes] recognition of the existence of spirits; the possibility of their removal from one placing to another,

including man; the possibility of mastering them in the above given sense. Naturally, every shaman must know what to do. The shamans must know the character of the mastered spirit and of those with which they have to deal.

The Antiquity of Shamanism and the Origins of Religion

Eliade (1964: xix, 503–504) thought that the origins of shamanism dated back some 25,000 to 30,000 years ago and argued that shamanism was the foundation of all religions, or what anthropologists later called the “ur-religion of humankind” (Furst 1977: 4–7). Others maintain, however, that shamanism dates back 50,000 to 100,000 years ago (Hayden 2003: 118).

For Eliade and his followers, the shaman’s ASC is the essence of religiosity and the biological foundations of religious experience (Eliade 1964: xv, 504; Winkelman 1997: 39; Winkelman and Baker 2010: 121–148). The shaman is thus considered to be the most ancient type of ritual intercessor and the originator of religion. As anthropologist Westen La Barre (1972a: 161) has stated:

The ancestor of the god is the shaman himself, both historically and psychologically. There were shamans before there were gods. The very earliest religious data we know from archaeology show dancing masked sorcerers or shamans at Lascaux, Trois Frères, and other Old Stone Age caves.

In other words, the origin of religion is traced back to the spiritual and visionary experiences of the Paleolithic shamans.

The antiquity of shamanism is a contentious issue (Sidky 2010a). The historian Ronald Hutton (2001: 114) has shown that the history of shamanism in Siberia is unknown. There are no records prior to the 16th century and whatever of its prehistory as might be deduced from rock art is similarly obscure and is probably not older than a few thousand years.

The idea that shamanism has great antiquity is based on two premises. The first premise is that extant small-scale non-Western populations on the fringes of the “civilized world” have preserved aspects of culture displaced long ago by “civilization” in the West (Kehoe 2000: 39). Therefore, the magico religious practices recorded in remote places, such as Siberia during the 18th and 19th centuries (Figure 3.4), are similar to the beliefs and practices of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers millennia ago (Sidky 2008: 1–24). The second premise is the postulate that the more widely a phenomenon is distributed geographically the older it must be.



Figure 3.4. A Siberian (Yukaghir) shaman in ritual outfit with drum. Some writers surmise that magico-religious practices in Siberia during the historic period are similar to the religious practices of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers long ago. Photo by Waldemar Jochelson, Jesup North Pacific Expedition. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

The notion that a religious tradition was preserved in its pristine form in Siberia since the Paleolithic period overlooks the massive impact of Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity on region as well as other forces of change. This assumption is therefore problematic. The geographic scope of shamanism is also a contentious issue. Eliade himself excluded Africa, while others have argued for its inclusion (Lewis 1971), and depends upon whether one considers the defining feature of shamanism to be soul travel or spirit possession (Sidky 2008: 1–24).

Shamanism and Cave Art

Those who claim that shamanism is the archaic religion of the Paleolithic hunter-gatherers interpret Ice Age cave paintings that show costumed therianthropic images as shamans. A well-known example is the “Sorcerer” from Les Trois Frères, France (see Figure 2.2). La Barre (1972b: 267) interprets this image, which depicts a figure in upright position with human hands and feet, reindeer antlers, wolf’s ears, an owl’s face, and a horse’s tail, as “the animal-masked dancing shaman of prehistoric hunting peoples.” However, such images are open to various interpretations. We could very well be looking at a deity, spirit, or simply a hunter in camouflage (see Bahn and Vertut 1997: 182–183; Francfort et al., 2001).

More recently, others have interpreted Paleolithic cave paintings which depict geometric figures, animals, and hunting scenes as the product of visionary experiences or ASC. These images are therefore taken as evidence of shamans in prehistory (Sidky 2010a). The neurophysiological model underlying this approach holds that shamanic trance states involve a universal sequence of visual images that begin with lines and dots that form geometric patterns, called entoptics, which then result in the formation of naturalistic images of humans and animals, and culminates in human-animal-human representations (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 2001: 218; 1998). Thus, wherever one finds such images we are looking at the handiwork of entranced shamans drawing the various stages of their hallucinatory experiences.

The objection to this approach is that there is no ethnographic or historical context on the basis of which to discern the motives for, or functions of, these ancient images. There is no access to the mythological worlds of their creators. Moreover, there is no solid ethnographic data on entranced shamans making rock art or cave painting based on their visions, or while in ASC (Bahn and Vertut 1997: 183; Kehoe 2000: 71–80). The association of rock art and cave paintings and shamanism is innovative and fascinating but highly conjectural.

Neoshamanism: A Prehistoric Religion for Modern Times

During the last several decades there has been an increasing interest in shamanism in the United States and Europe. Neoshamanism has emerged as a kind of new religious movement. As anthropologist Piers Vitebsky (1995: 150–151) has observed:

From the 1970s, new shamanic movements have sprung up in the USA and Europe. These combine the legacy of the drug-culture of the 1960s with a longstanding interest in non-Western religions, current environmentalist movements, strands of the

New Age movement and all the various forms of self-help and self-realization. Popular anthropology has also contributed, especially via the work of Castenada [see below]. These movements take the strongest form of the view that shamanism is opposed to institutionalized religion and political systems and speak of a democratization of shamanism in which every person can be empowered to become their own shaman.

Eliade's construal of shamanism as contact with spirits through ASC and his vision of shamanism as an ancient, universal, and pristine form of spirituality, undistorted by institutional hierarchies and dogmas, romanticized the subject for those in pursuit of a timeless human religiosity, self-discovery, and personal growth (Sidky 2008: 114). Shamanism thus became a part of everyone's heritage rather than belonging to indigenous societies—or a distant past—a factor that made it easy to market shamanic journeys to Western audiences. Eliade's work figures prominently in the literature of the neoshamanism spiritual movement (Bahn 2001: 56; Noel 1999: 29). However, the major influences on the neoshamanism movement have been the works of anthropologists Carlos Castenada and Michael Harner.

In his book, *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968), and a number of sequels, Castenada weaves a fascinating tale about his psychotropic adventures in alternate realities and magical worlds while apprenticing for an enigmatic Yaqui shaman named don Juan. Presented as an autobiography, the book vividly recounts Castenada's visionary experiences and insights gained by entering alternate realities while under the influence of powerful hallucinogenic drugs, such as peyote and datura (see chapter 5). This is how he describes his magic flight while under the influence of datura:

My legs were rubbery and long, extremely long. I took another step. My knee joints felt springy, like a vault pole; they shook and vibrated and contracted elastically. I moved forward. The motion of my body was slow and shaky; it was more like a tremor forward and up. I looked down and saw don Juan sitting below me, way below me. The momentum carried me forward one more step, which was even more elastic and longer than the preceding one. And from there I soared. I remember coming down once; then I pushed up with both feet, sprang backward, and glided on my back. I saw the dark sky above me, and the clouds going by me. I jerked my body so I could look down. I saw the dark mass of the mountains. My speed was extraordinary. My arms were fixed, folded against my sides. My head was the directional unit. If I kept it bent backward I made vertical circles. I changed directions by turning my head to the side. I enjoyed such freedom and swiftness as I had never known before. The marvelous darkness gave me a feeling of sadness, of longing, perhaps. It was as if I had found the place where I belonged—the darkness of the night. I tried to look around, but all I sensed was that the night was serene, and yet it held so much power (Castenada 1968: 91).

Castaneda's work is replete with such narratives. Altogether he describes 22 astonishing drug trips. However, the veracity of these accounts is in question. Critics maintain that Castaneda fabricated his evidence (see De Mille 1990; Noel 1976). Although its authenticity has been seriously called into question, Castaneda's work remains highly influential among proponents of neoshamanism.

Michael Harner's book, *The Way of the Shaman* (1980), basically a how-to manual on shamanism, is based on insights gained while he was conducting field research among the Jivaro of Ecuador and the Conibo of the Peruvian Amazon in the 1960s. Harner's personal experience with powerful hallucinogenic drugs, such as *ayahuasca* and *datura*, convinced him that shamanism is a means of entry into the spirit world, which he claims is as real as empirical reality because it is experienced by "direct perception with all the senses." As he points out:

There are two realities and ... the perception of each depends upon one's state of consciousness. Therefore those in the "ordinary state of consciousness" (OSC) perceive only "ordinary reality" (OR). Those in the "shamanic state of consciousness" (SSC) are able to enter into and perceive "nonordinary reality" (NOR). These are both called realities because each is empirically encountered ... A corollary assumption is that the individual forms encountered in nonordinary reality are themselves real. These are called "spirits," and are considered real by shamanic practitioners because they interact with them firsthand. This interaction involves direct perception with all the senses. In other words, for the shamanistic practitioner, the existence of spirits is not a belief, but an empirical fact ... As they work, individual practitioners discover which of the encountered entities are personal helping, or tutelary, spirits which often provide miraculous help in healing and divination ... For shamanic practitioners, souls are identifiable entities because they encounter them directly in nonordinary reality, as they do other spirits (Harner 1999: 1–2).

Harner raises an interesting point; however, one could make the same claim about entities encountered in dreams, because we "interact with them firsthand." Yet, I don't think anyone would argue that dreams have the same ontological status as empirical experience.

Harner's way of attaining SSC is through drumming and concentration rather than through psychological crises or the use of mind altering drugs. Neoshamans are therefore different from indigenous practitioners. Harner markets shamanism as an ancient form of wisdom that can be harnessed in the modern world for self-exploration and personal growth. He teaches his students how to go on spiritual journeys and acquire animal spirit helpers. According to Harner, anyone can leave the ordinary state of consciousness (OSC) by listening to drumming and undertaking shamanic journeys into non-ordinary reality (NOR), a universe inhabited by benevolent guardian spirits or powerful animals that become teachers

and guides. The idea of malevolent spirits, so crucial in indigenous practice, is underplayed in neoshamanism.

This is shamanism stripped down to its most basic component, referred to as “core shamanism,” providing essentially a technique for contacting the spirit world through altered states of consciousness. It is well-suited for Westerners because it is easy to learn in a short time, such as a weekend workshop for a fee, and is generally geared toward self-help and personal empowerment. This stands in contrast to the social and public nature of shamanism in the indigenous context.

Altered States of Consciousness and Religion

The personal encounter with the sacred is the most powerful religious experience. This kind of contact with the numinous is achieved through altered states of consciousness (ASC), variously referred to as trance, ecstasy, and transcendent or transpersonal modes of consciousness. It is conjectured that the rise of religion some 30,000 to 40,000 years ago was associated with individuals such as shamans who deliberately entered into ASC to commune with spirits for the benefit of their communities and undertake such tasks as healing, divination, and funerary practices. Individuals who used ASC techniques were therefore on the frontiers of expanding human consciousness. This phenomenon is linked to the rapid rise of culture among *Homo sapiens* and how humans overcame the highly modular mind of pre-modern humans (Winkelman 2000: 12; Winkelman and Baker 2010: 117–149).

According to psychiatrist Arnold Ludwig's (1990: 18) classic definition, ASC refers to:

any mental state(s) induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognized subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness. This sufficient deviation may be represented by a greater preoccupation than usual with internal sensations or mental

processes, changes in the formal characteristics of thought, and impairment of reality testing to various degrees.

Stated differently, ASC denotes any mental condition that departs radically from ordinary waking consciousness involving perceptual alterations in the awareness of the self and the world (Sidky 2008: 90).

Humans across cultures utilize ASC in the context of religious practice to induce spiritual experiences (Figure 4.1). As anthropological neuroscientist Charles Whitehead (2011: 189–190) points out:

Spiritual experiences—often referred to as “religious experiences” or “REs”—are altered states during which people feel and believe that they are in contact with some kind of sentient “otherness,” whether perceived as “God,” “nature,” “the universe,” “all humankind,” or some other natural or supernatural force or agency ... Although spiritual experiences are culturally variable, there also appear to be cross-cultural parallels, notably the encounter with sentient “otherness,” the sense of something bigger than the self and common if not universal features such as transcending time or space.

Similarities in religious experiences cross-culturally suggest that they are in-built aspects of human consciousness, rather than being solely the product of culture or tradition (Newberg et al., 2001). Anthropologist Michael Winkelman (1997; 2000) argues that the universality of ASC is indicative of a biological foundation for spiritual experience.

The capacity for ASC is a psychobiological feature of the human species, and is therefore universal. How it is used, patterned, and institutionalized is culturally determined (Bourguignon 1973: 12). Laughlin et al., (1992) differentiate between monophasic and polyphasic societies in terms of the alterations of consciousness. Western post-industrial cultures are monophasic. Such societies value the ordinary waking state of consciousness for the apprehension of reality and consider departures from it as aberrations. Polyphasic societies value ASC positively as spiritual in nature and sacred and actively seek it. In a study of 488 indigenous cultures, for which there are sufficient ethnographic data, the anthropologist Erika Bourguignon (1973) found that, unlike monophasic Western cultures, 90 percent of these societies have some form of institutionalized ASC.

This does not mean that people in post-industrial societies do not experience ASC. Research has shown that between a third and half the population in the West has had at least one spiritual experience (Wulff 2000; Whitehead 2011: 189). Rather, it is how such experiences are construed that is different. As Whitehead (2011: 181) observes:



Figure 4.1. A Hunzakutz *bitan* (medium) in an altered state of consciousness (ASC) converses with spirits during a public ceremony. Humans cross-culturally use altered states of consciousness to induce spiritual experiences. Photo by H. Sidky.

Culturally instituted ASC may be just as common in monphasic societies, but they are either not perceived as orthodox (for example, “speaking in tongues” is commonplace in charismatic but not Anglican churches) or are secularized (such as states induced

by social consumption of alcohol or the clinical use of hypnosis) or criminalized (as in the recreational use of drugs that are less traditional than—in the West—alcohol, caffeine, or tobacco).

Induction Techniques

There are numerous techniques to induce ASC. These, according to Ludwig (1990: 19–22), include the following:

Reduction of sensory input: a condition associated with solitary confinement, immobilization, and hypnagogic (falling asleep) and hypnopompic (waking up) states. According to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad’s shaman-like night journey (*Mi’raj*) to the seven heavens, where he was brought into the presence of God, began when he was midway between wakefulness and sleep (Figure 4.2). Many reported contemporary ghostly encounters and encounters with extraterrestrials are the consequences of hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations, when imaginary phenomena seem to be real.

Sensory overload: mental states resulting from the bombardment of the senses with stimuli. One example is the ecstatic trance experienced by the Mevlevi dervishes (also known as “whirling dervishes”), who engage in extended periods of gyratory dancing and repetition of praises of God to achieve states of ecstasy during a prayer ceremony called *Sema* (Friedlander 1992). The ceremony is led by a *sheikh*, or officially appointed *Sema* leader, and is accompanied by the pulsating music of string, percussion, and wind instruments.

ASC are similarly experienced during the liminal phase of rites of passage, when the initiate, bombarded by stimuli, is stripped of his cultural identity, and when he apprehends reality free from culturally prescribed social categories, hierarchies, assumptions, and biases.

Another example is the ASC of members of Appalachian Holiness Churches in the United States, which involves intense prayers, dancing, and loud music (La Barre 1969). Entranced individuals are considered to be possessed by the Holy Ghost. While in this state their eyes roll backwards and they shake and twitch and “speak in tongues.” Some entranced individuals handle poisonous snakes and drink strychnine, based on the passage in the Bible in which Jesus says:

Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover (Mark 16: 15–18).



Figure 4.2. The Prophet Muhammad's shaman-like journey (*Mi'raj*) to the seven heavens. Muhammad is shown riding the magical steed Buraq with the Archangel Gabriel while traveling through the cosmos. From the *Mir Haydar Mi'raj-nameh*, a medieval Timurid manuscript from Herat, Afghanistan. By permission of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Increased mental alertness: a condition brought about by intense absorption in a task such as fervent praying and invocations. Tibetan mediums rely upon invocation mantras to enter into altered states of consciousness and summon possessing deities (see Figure 4.8). Even in public, state-sponsored events, when such mediums dance to music, the possession event begins prior to the monks playing horns and pounding drums, as in the case, for example, of the Tibetan State Oracle (Sidky 2011).

Decreased alertness: involving passive meditation or states occurring during deep relaxation, mediumistic trance, or while listening to soothing music. Profound

ASC occur during meditation. Islam began in the ASC of the Prophet Muhammad while he was meditating alone in a cave in Mecca. In a deep meditative state, Muhammad had a profound religious experience. According to tradition, he heard voices and saw terrifying visions. Then the Archangel Gabriel appeared before him with a text from heaven and commanded him to recite (Figure 4.3). The frightened man refused, but the angel insisted. Muhammad then spontaneously recited the following verses:

Recite in the name of your Lord who created,
created man from clots of blood!
Recite! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One,
who by the pen taught man what he did not know.



Figure 4.3. The Prophet Muhammad in an altered state of consciousness receiving revelations from the Archangel Gabriel. After the fourteenth-century Persian manuscript *Jami' al-Tawarikh* by Rashid al-Din.

This was the miraculous start of the Qu'ran (from *igra*, recitation), Islam's most holy text, which consists of Muhammad's ASC revelations over the next 22 years of his apostleship.

Similarly, Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment after meditating for 49 days under a tree, when he did battle with the demon Mara and gained insight into the causes of human suffering and how to overcome them. Buddhism developed on the basis of Gautama's insights attained while in ASC.

Alterations in body chemistry or neurophysiology: conditions caused by hypoglycemia as a result of fasting, dehydration, hyperventilation, ingestion of toxins, and the use of hallucinogenic drugs, narcotics, and sedatives. An example of this is the vision quest among the Crow Indians. This involved abstinence from food and drink for four days, along with prayers, and the severing of a finger joint or some other means of mortifying the flesh, all of which affect body chemistry and neurophysiology. If successful, the seeker would enter into an ASC, see visions, and acquire a spirit helper in the form of an animal who would teach him a sacred song and advise him on how to live (Lowie 1954: 157–160).

In some cases a combination of ASC inducing factors come into play. For example the Tungus shaman's ASC inducing methods include:

rhythmic effects, music of the performance, particularly rhythmic movements, dancing, drumming and production of various noises with the costume, also singing or reciting, and the contents of the texts of the performance, i.e., descriptions in words of the relations between the shaman and the spirits, the people and the spirits (Shirokogoroff 1935: 325).

Experiential Aspects of ASC

The person undergoing ASC may experience a variety of perceptual and cognitive alterations. According to Ludwig (1990: 22–28), these include:

Shifts in thinking: this involves disturbances in concentration, attention, memory, and judgment, the blurring of cause and effect, and entertainment of contradictory thoughts.

Alterations in the sense of time: this includes feelings of timelessness and changes in the perception of the passage of time, as extremely fast or slow.

Changes in emotional expression: this encompasses a range of emotional states from ecstasy to fear, depression, and emotional detachment.

Transformation of body image: such as the dissolution of the boundary between the self and others, the world, or universe, interpreted as transcendental or mystical oneness.

Perceptual distortions: such as hallucinations, hyperacuteness of perceptions, illusions, and synesthesia, in which one type of sensory experience is converted into another, such as seeing sounds.

Increased significance of subjective experiences: attaching disproportionate meaning to ideas, along with perceptions and feelings of profound insight and illumination.

Sense of the ineffable: the inability to communicate one's sensations because of the uniqueness of the subjective experience.

Rejuvenation: emerging from an ASC with a new sense of hope or a feeling of rebirth.

Hypersuggestibility: susceptibility to uncritically accept commands and instructions of shamans and demagogues, decreased ability to distinguish between subjective and objective reality.

The Significance of ASC

In altered states psychological functions and potentials not available in the baseline state of consciousness are thought to become accessible (Sidky 2008: 90). As the pioneering psychologist William James (1842–1910) put it in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902):

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are all there in their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded (James 1958: 298).

Ludwig (1990: 29) has pointed out that “the very presence and prevalence of these states in man attests to their importance in everyday functioning,” adding that “the widespread occurrence and use of mystical and possession states ... indicates that these ASCs satisfy many needs both for man and society.” And, as psychologist Etzel Cardeña (2011: 12) has stated more recently, “the history of humankind ... cannot be fully understood without seriously grappling with the biological and cultural importance of ASC and attempts to induce them.”

ASC and Healing

ASC have played a major role in healing across cultures (Figure 4.4). This is the case whether one is entering into trance states to diagnose illness or inducing ASC in patients, utilizing “suggestibility, increased meaning, propensity for catharsis, and feelings of rejuvenation” found in ASC (Ludwig 1990: 30). According to Ludwig (1990: 30):

The early Egyptian and Greek practice of “incubation” in their sleep temples, the faith cures at Lourdes and other religious shrines, the healing through prayer and meditation, cures by the “healing touch,” the laying on of hands, encounters with religious relics, spiritual healing, spirit possession cures, exorcism, mesmeric or magnetic treatment, and modern day hypnotherapy are all obvious instances of the role of ASC in treatment.



Figure 4.4. A Nepalese shaman in an altered state of consciousness healing a woman afflicted by spirits. ASC are an important aspect of healing cross-culturally. Photo by H. Sidky.

The healing rituals of the !Kung, a group of San hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari Desert (Figure 4.5), described by anthropologist Richard Katz in his



Figure 4.5. A !Kung San curing ritual which illustrates the role of ASC in healing and social integration. Photo © ANTHROPHOTO.

book *Boiling Energy* (1982), illustrates the role of ASC in healing and social integration:

For the Kung, healing is more than curing, more than the application of medicine. Healing seeks to establish health and growth on the physical, psychological, social,

and spiritual levels; it involves work on the individual, the group, the surrounding environment and cosmos. Healing pervades Kung culture, as a fundamental integrating and enhancing force. The culture's emphasis on sharing and egalitarianism, its vital life of the spirit and strong community, are expressed in and supported by the healing tradition. The central event in this tradition is the all-night healing dance. Four times a month on the average, night signals the start of a healing dance. The women sit around the fire, singing and rhythmically clapping. The men, sometimes joined by women, dance around the singers. As the dance intensifies, *num* or spiritual energy is activated in the healers, both men and women, but mostly among the dancing men. As the *num* is activated in them, they begin to *kia* or experience an enhancement of their consciousness. While experiencing *kia*, they heal all those at the dance [by laying hands]. Before the sun rises fully the next morning, the dance usually ends. Those at the dance find it exciting, joyful, powerful. "Being at the dance makes our hearts happy," the Kung say (Katz 1982: 34).

While in ASC !Kung healers are also able to see inside people's bodies to make a diagnosis and undertake soul travel to the land of the gods from whence illness emanates (Katz 1982: 43).

ASC and Revelatory Knowledge

Another significant role of ASC has been access to new knowledge. As La Barre (1972b: 261) puts it, "all our knowledge of the supernatural derives *de facto* from the statements made by religious visionaries or ecstasies," the impresarios of god. In religious contexts, intense prayer, meditation, revelatory and transcendental states, and divination make available information and new avenues with which people try to cope with dire earthly predicaments. Among shamanic societies, dramatic social changes are linked to ASC, where "all new ideas—new songs, dances, cures, technologies, and customs—are 'given' to an individual in visions, dream visitations, or ritual trance states" (Whitehead 2011: 192).

One reaction to colonial intrusion, stress, and racial and class oppression in Melanesia was the emergence of Cargo cults, movements based on the revelatory visions or ASC of prophetic or messianic figures who offered various solutions to the problems at hand and blueprints for action. Cargo cults, such as the Vailala Madness, involved striking instances of ASC, characterized by shaking, dancing, chanting, and possession states (see chapter 14). Related phenomena include other nativistic and messianic movements, such as the 19th-century Ghost Dance religion in the United States, which was based on the ASC of the prophet Wovoka, who saw God in person, and the earlier Handsome Lake movement among the Iroquois (Wallace 1956). The messages attained through ASC by the messiahs included the

predicted end of suffering, transformation of the world, the end of oppression, and restoration of traditional lifeways. According to Wallace, “higher religions” such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity began as revitalization movements focused on the ASC of prophetic individuals.

Social Uses of ASC

The potential sociological importance and ramifications of ASC are illustrated by the phenomenon of spirit possession (Figure 4.6). Spirit possession is an ASC that involves the takeover of a person’s speech and behavior by an embodying supernatural entity. Possessing agents may be deities, spirits of the dead, nature spirits, and demons. Experientially, in cases of spirit possession there are marked alterations in personality, behavior, and speech. Another aspect of this phenomenon is that after the episode, the possessed individual does not recall the event. There is, in other words, a “discontinuity in consciousness, awareness, or personality or other aspects of psychological functioning” (Bourguignon 1976: 8). This is in marked contrast to ASC involving soul travel, when a person’s soul voluntarily detaches from his body and travels or is projected to the supernatural realm and interacts with spirits, gods, and other paranormal beings. During this period the individual is immobile, but has full recall after the event. In contrast to spirit possession, there are no discontinuities in memory.

Spirit possession can be voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary possession involves deliberate efforts to entice the spirits to take over the human body, usually in a ritual context. This form of spirit possession is considered to be positive and is frequently associated with Tibetan mediums, Nepalese and Tungus shamans, members of Holiness churches, and Voodoo, Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian religions, among others.

Involuntary possession involves uncontrollable spirit intrusion and takeover of a person’s body causing illness, with mental and physical symptoms, and is considered pathogenic by members of society. These events tend to occur outside ritual contexts. Such instances of possession are attributed to the action of witchcraft or sorcery and require ritual intervention in the form of exorcism and other magical countermeasures. An infamous example of this was the outbreak of demonic possession among a group of nuns in Loudun, France, in 1630, narrated by Aldous Huxley in his book *The Devils of Loudun* (1952). The case ended with the arrest, torture, and execution of the local parish priest, Urbain Grandier, (Figure 4.7) who was accused of causing the possession through witchcraft (Sidky 1997: 159–160).



Figure 4.6. Relatives surround a possessed woman (center, right) who is relating a message from a recently deceased relative in Jiri, Nepal. The message aired publicly expresses family tensions and dynamics, the survivors' feelings regarding the death, and their relationship with the deceased during his lifetime. Photo by H. Sidky.

In some cases, for the individual being possessed, the event can mean a temporary disengagement from social obligations and an outlet to express repressed conflicts in a socially sanctioned manner. The anthropologist Ioan Lewis (2003: 29) has posited a theory that differentiates between what he calls “central” and “peripheral” possession. In this model, central possession always involves high gods and goddesses, while peripheral possession is associated with minor supernatural beings and demons. Lewis associates central possession with the prevailing religious



Figure 4.7. The execution of Urbain Grandier, a parish priest accused of causing the demonic possession of nuns through witchcraft. The nuns are shown in the background (left) being exorcized. By permission of Bibliothèque nationale de France.

establishment, whereas he relegates peripheral possession to the domain of individuals of low status, often women. Lewis suggests that peripheral spirit possession events among women are a means of counterbalancing their powerlessness and absence of high social status (cf., Gellner 1994: 28; Lewis 1971). For example, a woman from Sri Lanka can improve her circumstances by becoming possessed by a boisterous demon (Kapferer 1983). Because her actions are considered to be beyond her control she can voice grievances without fear of retribution. The husband is forced to employ exorcists and hold a communal exorcism session during which the grievances are openly expressed. To prevent a reversion, the husband is compelled to change his behavior towards his wife, who emerges from the situation with considerable social gains (Whitehead 2011: 191).

There are broader sociological aspects to spirit possession events as well. In the case of possession by gods and goddesses, the group can vicariously identify with the possessed person who acts out group conflicts or aspirations. Such a

possession event entails the physical manifestation of God, or the gods. As such, its dramatic occurrence is tangible evidence and reassurance that the gods are still active and interested in human affairs (Figure 4.8). Thus, as Ludwig (1990: 32) has noted, possession events:

reaffirm [people's] local beliefs, allow them to exert some control over the unknown, enhance group cohesion and identification, and endow the utterances of the entranced person, shaman, or priest with an importance they might otherwise not have if spoken in an ordinary setting. In general, the existence of such practices represents an excellent example of how society creates modes of reducing frustration, stress, and loneliness through group action.

Cognitive Functions of ASC

Monophasic cultures tend to valorize the ordinary waking state of consciousness and pathologize or downgrade alterations from this state. Some researchers argue, however, that waking consciousness, which is the basis of our culturally constructed sense of reality, may be fairly restrictive. As Cardeña (2011: 12) has put it, “the fabric of reality may be quite different from how we ordinarily experience it.” The alteration of consciousness may be a means of disengaging from our culturally defined habits of perceiving the world in order to gain access to what lies beyond. As Ludwig (1990: 29) puts it, “ASC enable man to transcend the bounds of logic and formality.” According to Winkelman (1997: 404):

Evidence from contemplative traditions indicates that ASC can provide the basis for a more objective perception of the external world. Rather than being bound up in subjectivity, the transpersonal mode of consciousness is viewed as a means of recognizing the illusions and constructed nature of ordinary perception. Many reports from these traditions indicate that these transpersonal states of consciousness provide the basis for a more objective perception of reality.

As such, a person experiencing ASC is able to access psychological functions and potentials unavailable in the ordinary baseline state of consciousness. The capacity to alter consciousness may therefore have adaptive advantages. However, it should be noted that ASC do not automatically lead to “adaptive” superior insights or “greater awareness” all the time. As psychologist Charles Tart (1999) has pointed out:

ASCs, like ordinary consciousness, are mixtures of pluses and minuses, insights and delusions, genuine creativity and misleading imagination, so the observations and insights from ASCs need to be subjected to empirical test, just as those of ordinary consciousness do. Kekule's dream ASC of a snake biting its tail, to use one



Figure 4.8. The Tibetan State Oracle in ritual garb possessed by the deity Dorje Drakden. Events such as this are dramatic occurrences that provide tangible evidence and reassurance that the gods are active and still interested in human affairs. Photo by H. Sidky.

well-known example, led him to discover the structure of benzene and so advanced chemistry considerably, but other ASC revelations have led people to begin holy wars and kill those who disagreed with their visions.

Brain Mechanisms for ASC

ASC is explained according to different mechanisms. Two such mechanisms include integrative brain processes and dissociation. Research has shown that human consciousness despite cognitive fluidity is modulated, meaning that it operates within separate brain modules. This modularity is due to the multiple hierarchically organized functional systems in the brain, such as the triune (reptilian, paleomammalian, and neomammalian structures) and bilateral hemispheric organization (MacLean 1990; 1973). Due to the modularity of brain function, cognitive capacities are geared toward non-interchangeable operations. Techniques for producing ASC, such as drumming, chanting, and dancing, are thought to override the modularity of the brain by synchronizing it through “integrative brain processes” (Winkelman 2000: 17). Thus, ordinarily discreet brain functions can cross-modulate. As a consequence, the brain can process information in a way that is different from ordinary waking consciousness by connecting experiences from innate brain modules (Guthrie 2004: 97).

A different perspective on the nature of ASC holds that ASC takes place when ordinary meta-awareness, which renders our sense of personal identity and agency, is temporarily overtaken because of dissociation. All kinds of anomalous perceptions and subjective experiences, including spirit possession, are attributed to dissociative experiences. Dissociation is compartmentalization of normal integrated mental processes, when parallel brain modules become disconnected and function independently and project thoughts onto awareness. Thus, as psychologist Barry Beyerstein (1999: 552) explains:

what seems, introspectively, to be a unitary self is in reality a multiplicity of semi-autonomous subunits. Under various psychological and neurological conditions, these modules lose their normal cohesiveness and begin to act in an independent, even contradictory, fashion. At such times, behaviors regulated by unattended modules of the brain may begin to play out, minus the normal sense of volition and self-direction, and may feel as though they are being dictated by powerful unseen external forces.

Dissociative conditions can be caused by various mechanisms that produce temporary compartmentalization of integrated mental processes, such as drumming, chanting, dancing, fasting, sensory deprivation or stimulation, and mortification of the flesh. The result is “divided consciousness,” or separate “streams of

consciousness,” giving the impression that the ensuing behaviors are produced by someone else, such as a possessing supernatural being. Thoughts and ideas seem to come from some other entity. Dissociation causes a range of effects. As medical and psychiatric anthropologist Richard Castillo (1994: 15) has observed:

Various types of psychiatric phenomena such as hallucinations, delusions, psychogenic amnesia, blindness, seizures, anesthesia, paralysis, heightened affects, are possible in dissociative experience. However, these phenomena may or may not be considered mental illness depending on what is considered appropriate subjective experience and behavior in the prevailing culture.

Some cultures provide an institutionalized framework for constructively dealing with dissociative experiences such as, for example, in Nepal where individuals suffering from dissociative states become shamans (see Sidky 2008: 57–98). In other cultures, such states are pathologized. This is the reason why some Western scholars during the early part of the 20th century doubted the mental health of individuals experiencing dissociative states, such as shamans and mediums. Schizophrenia, psychosis, hysteria, or other mental illnesses were posited. More recently, the pathologized view has been replaced by a perspective that ASC are within the range of human norms. This shift in view is based upon studies that show a phenomenological difference between ASC and schizophrenia or psychosis (Sidky 2008: 104–105).

Entheogens and Religious Experience

As we have seen in the previous two chapters, the central feature of human spirituality is the mystical experience of a transcendent reality. This is the foundation upon which religion is built. Paula Hruby (2001: 59) describes mystical experiences as “intense phenomenological experiences of awe/wonder, unity, and expanded sense of self.” While such mystical states are typically spontaneous and unpredictable, nearly identical experiences have been achieved through the ingestion of substances referred to as entheogens (Nichols and Chemel 2006: 26). This raises the question: What is the role of entheogens in religiosity?

The term entheogen, from the Greek *entheos* (“god within”) and the root *gen* (“becoming”), meaning “generating the experience of god,” has been coined as a substitute for the words hallucinogenic, psychotomimetic, and psychedelic, conventionally used to refer to a class of substances capable of producing alterations of the sensory perceptions (Ruck et al., 1979). Hallucinogenic, from the verb “hallucinate,” has a negative connotation because it means “to deceive or entertain false notions.” The term psychotomimetic, coined for drugs thought to induce psychotic states, denotes sickness. The word psychedelic, indicating “something that reveals the soul,” became invested with a negative connotation because of its association with the 1960s drug culture. According to Carl Ruck et al., (1979), these terms are inappropriate for describing “the transcendent and beatific states of communion with deity” attained through the use of entheogens.

An entheogen is a psychoactive plant or chemical used in a spiritual context (Roberts 2006: 237). Entheogens include peyote, psilocybin, *ayahuasca*, *Amanita muscaria* (fly agaric), LSD, and ecstasy, among others. These substances are different from other classes of drugs because of their capacity to “reliably induce or compel states of altered perception, thought, and feeling that are not (or cannot be) experienced otherwise except in dreams or at times of religious exaltation” (Jaffe 1985: 563–564). Entheogens can produce visionary states or alternate realities that seem to be absolutely real (Nichols and Chemel 2006: 4). Indeed, it is phenomenologically difficult to separate spontaneously occurring religious experiences from those that have been induced pharmacologically (Furst 1972a: ix; Smith 2003: 81). Some argue that the rise of religiosity and religion itself could have been a direct result of the prehistoric use of entheogenic plants (see below).

Anthropological evidence suggests that the use of entheogens extends back thousands of years “for the purposes of religious rituals, divination, and magic” (Schultes and Hofmann 1972; Schultes 1972: 3). The extraordinary effect of these substances has resulted in their treatment as sacred objects of worship and sacraments in traditional societies. In indigenous cultures, where death and sickness are attributed to the action of spirits, entheogenic plants are closely associated with magic, sorcery, healing, and related ritual observances (Schultes 1972: 5).

The sacramental use of hallucinogenic plants is an aspect of numerous shamanistic practices. As La Barre (1972b: 272) has put it: “the use of powerful botanical hallucinogens has been a real and important vehicle of shamanistic ecstasy, not only in modern ethnographic time but also in prehistory.” People in the New World and the Old World have made extensive use of such plants. However, more species of entheogenic plants have been used in the cultures of the New World than the Old World (Schultes 1972: 5). There is no botanical reason for this discrepancy, as the Old World is not poorer or richer in entheogenic plants. One reason proposed is that the aboriginal groups that came to occupy the New World retained their shamanistic hunter-gatherer religions and their emphasis on direct contact with the supernatural world utilizing hallucinogenic plants. In the Old World, shamanistic hunter-gatherer religions emphasizing ASC were displaced during the Neolithic Revolution by the religions of sedentary agricultural people (La Barre 1972b: 272).

Entheogens and Their Use

Among the notable entheogenic plants is peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) (Figure 5.1). It has been used as a sacrament for many millennia. Peyote is a spineless cactus which contains several alkaloids, including mescaline. It grows in northern Mexico and southern Texas. According to noted botanist Richard Schultes (1972: 15):

Peyote intoxication, among the most complex and variable effects of all hallucinogenic plants, is characterized by brilliantly colored visions in kaleidoscopic movement, often accompanied by auditory, gustatory, olfactory, and tactile hallucinations. Sensations of weightlessness, [micropsia], depersonalization, and alteration or loss of time perception are normally experienced.



Figure 5.1. Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*), an entheogen used as a sacrament for thousands of years. Photo by Frank Vincentz.



Figure 5.2. A Tarahumara shaman seated with peyote buds on cloth, Mexico (1892). Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

Sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers reported the ritual use of peyote among the Aztecs, who referred to the cactus as *peyotl*. Despite the efforts by European missionaries to suppress it, the sacramental use of peyote survived long after the conquest of Mexico. Today, it figures prominently in the religious ceremonies of the Huichol, Cora, Tarahumara (Figure 5.2), and other groups in Mexico (Schultes 1972: 13; Furst 1972b: 136–184).

The use of peyote spread among the Native American tribes of the United States during the late 19th century following the demise of the Ghost Dance movement associated with the prophet Wovoka (see chapter 14). Many leaders of the failed movement became peyote leaders (Stewart 1987: 67). The peyote religion succeeded where Wovoka's religion failed. According to the anthropologist James Slotkin (1956: 14):

The peyote Religion was nativistic but not militant. Culturally, it permitted the Indians to achieve a cultural organization in which they took pride. Socially, it provided a supernatural means of accommodation to the existing domination-subordination relation. ... The Peyote Religion's program of accommodation, as opposed to the Ghost Dance's program of opposition, was the basic reason for the former's success and the latter's failure.

During a time of great cultural upheaval the ritual use of peyote provided a moral compass and a source of community (Maroukis 2010: 25). Due to pressure from Christian missionaries, the peyote religion was incorporated into the Native American Church by the late 1920s. Today, the legal right to use peyote by Native Americans is protected by the Religious Freedom Act of 1993 and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994. Membership in the Native American Church is estimated to be around three hundred thousand, with a geographical distribution from Alberta, Canada, to west central Mexico, and from Wisconsin to the Pacific coastal states (Stewart 1987: 3; Maroukis 2010: 5).

Another important entheogenic plant is the sacred mushroom. Mushrooms belonging to the genus *Psilocybe* are used in Mexico by shamans during nocturnal ceremonies to contact the supernatural world. These entheogens evoke powerful religious experiences.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the use of sacred mushrooms dates back more than a thousand years. Spanish chroniclers recorded their use in Mexico during the 16th century. Among the Aztecs, the mushroom was called *teonanacatl*, meaning “the flesh of the gods.” They used it not only to communicate with spirits, but also as part of their human sacrificial rites to make captives oblivious to their fate (De Rios 1990: 138). According to Schultes (1972: 7):

To the Indian mind, nothing that Christianity offered was comparable to this revered form of plant life, with its hallucinatory powers, so the mushroom represented a great obstacle to the spread of the newly arrived European religion.

As with peyote, Spanish missionaries tried but failed to suppress the indigenous mushroom cults in Mexico. Today, the ritual use of entheogenic mushrooms is to be found among the Mazatecs in northeastern Oaxaca and surrounding areas.

Another important hallucinogen among Mexican Indians was *ololiqui*, or *coaxihuitle*, “snake plant,” identified as a species of Morning Glory. According to anthropologist Marlene De Rios (1990: 139), the vision inducing seeds of this plant were valued as a divine messenger that conveyed people to the spirit world and gave them the ability to communicate with their gods. As a Spanish chronicler wrote:

When the priest wanted to commune with their gods and to receive messages from them, they ate this plant to induce delirium. A thousand visions of satanic hallucinations appeared to them (in Schultes 1972: 19).

Priests and sorcerers used *ololiqui*. It was believed that a god lived in the seeds of this plant and therefore ingesting them would bestow oracular power upon the user. The cult of *ololiqui* was driven underground because of persecution by Christian missionaries.

South American Indians living in the western Amazon, the Orinoco, and the Pacific coast of Columbia and Ecuador make a narcotic infusion from the bark of *Banisteriopsis caapi*, or *ayahuasca*, “the vine of souls,” also known as *caapi*, *yajé*, *natema*, and *pinde*. According to Schultes (1972: 35):

the drinking of this preparation represents a return to the maternal womb, the source of all creation; the partakers see all the gods, the first human beings and animals, and understand the establishment of their social order. Those who take [*ayahuasca*] “die” only to be reborn in a state of greater wisdom. In the northwest Amazon, *caapi* serves the Indian for prophetic, divinatory, and other magic purposes and to fortify the bravery of male adolescents who must undergo the painful *yurupari* [initiation] ceremony ... The narcotic effects may be violent and with unpleasant aftereffects, especially when the drink is made by boiling the bark and most certainly when some other toxic plants enter the preparation as admixtures. Nausea and vomiting are almost always early characteristics of the effects of the drink. This is followed by a pleasant euphoria, then by visual hallucinations, initially tinged with blue or purple. Excessive doses bring on frighteningly nightmarish visions—often of jaguars and snakes—and a feeling of extremely reckless abandon, although consciousness is usually not lost nor is the use of the limbs unduly affected.

A powerful hallucinogenic mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*, called fly agaric (Figure 5.3), was used by the indigenous peoples of Siberia, including the Chuchee, the Koryak, Kamchadal, and the Yukaghir (De Rios 1990: 31). This entheogen was used to converse with supernatural beings in divination and healing ceremonies. It played an important role in Siberian shamanism as a means of communing with spirits. It was also used during festive celebrations.



Figure 5.3. Fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), a powerful entheogen used to communicate with the spirit world since ancient times. *Amanita muscaria* is posited to be *Soma*, a sacred plant and drink mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. Photo © Richard Croft.

Amanita muscaria causes intense hallucinations, micropsia (seeing objects very small) and macropsia (seeing objects very large). The following account of the aboriginal use of this mushroom was provided by a Western traveler who visited the Koryak people of Siberia during the early part of the 20th century:

Fly Agaric produces intoxication, hallucinations, and delirium. Light forms of intoxication are accompanied by a certain degree of animation and spontaneity of movements. Many shamans, previous to their séances, eat Fly Agaric to get into ecstatic states ... Under strong intoxication, the senses become deranged, surrounding objects appear either very large or very small, [and] hallucinations set in, [along with] spontaneous movements and convulsions. So far as I could observe, attacks of great animation alternate with moments of deep depression. The person intoxicated by Fly Agaric sits quietly rocking from side to side, even taking part in conversations with

his family. Suddenly, his eyes dilate, he begins to gesticulate convulsively, converses with persons whom he imagines he sees, sings and dances. Then an interval of rest sets in again (in Schultes and Hofmann 1972: 84).

According to Gordon Wasson (1968), *soma*, a sacred drink and plant mentioned in the Hindu *Rig Veda*, one of the oldest known religious texts, was *Amanita muscaria*. Its use has also been estimated to extend back thousands of years (Wasson and Wasson 1957). Wasson (1986: 78) associates *Amanita muscaria* with the origins of religion itself:

My prime candidate for the earliest religion in the world is the cult that became known to us, much later, as the cult of Soma. In our woodlands, Soma is one of the commonest mushrooms, growing wherever conifers and birches grow, as well as with certain other trees. Soma is also found in the Tropics, at an elevation in the forested mountains. In the tundra of the north, it has been reported as living with dwarf birches. Soma is breathtaking in its beauty, both at a distance and close up, and it is fortunately not to be confused with any other mushroom. Soma is the most mysterious of all. Before mankind existed, our bestial ancestors must have known it: gathering herbs for food, they would have tried it and found it good, and they must have seen other herbivorous fellow creatures do likewise ... At the point in his evolutionary progress where we first call him 'Man' beyond a doubt—*Homo sapiens sapiens*—and when he came to know, also beyond a doubt, what awe and reverence were, he clearly felt that Soma was conferring on him mysterious sensations and powers, which seemed to him more than normal: at that point Religion was born, Religion pure and simple, free of Theology, free of Dogmatics, expressing itself in awe and reverence and in lowered voices, mostly at night, when people would gather together to consume the Sacred Element. The first entheogenic experience could have been the first, and an authentic, perhaps the only authentic miracle. This was the beginning of the age of Entheogens, long, long, ago.

Mystical Experience and Entheogens

If we grant that mystical experiences are at the historical basis of religion, and there is plenty of evidence that they are, then entheogens make it possible to study such mystical states experimentally and to investigate their effects on the human nervous and hormonal systems. Thomas Roberts (2006: 226) proposes a field of study, pharmitheology, which deals with knowledge of the “divine” acquired through the sacramental use of psychoactive substances. There are a number of books that introduce the subject of pharmitheology and discuss the impact entheogens have had on thinking about religion, such as Robert Forte’s *Entheogens and the Future of Religion* (1997), Thomas Roberts’ *Psychoactive Sacramentals* (2001), and Huston Smith’s *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* (2000).

A classic pharmatheological experiment dealing with the effects of an entheogen to induce mystical states was conducted in 1962 and is known as “the Good Friday experiment” (Smith 2000: 99–106). It involved 20 subjects in a double-blind placebo-controlled experiment under the supervision of researcher Walter Pahnke. The hypothesis was that psilocybin (the active ingredient of psychedelic mushrooms) ingested in a religious setting would evoke effects identical to spontaneous spiritual experiences (Nichols and Chemel 2006: 9). The drug and placebo were administered to subjects in the basement of the Marsh Chapel of Boston University, while they listened to the Good Friday services on the floor above. At the conclusion of the service, subjects were interviewed about their experiences. Follow up questionnaires were used several days after the experiment and six months later. In all cases, subjects who had ingested the psilocybin reported having experiences identical to spontaneous mystical states reported by saints and ascetics.

In a follow up investigation of Pahnke’s test subjects 24 years later, Robert Doblin (2001: 73) found:

further support to the findings of the original experiment. All seven psilocybin subjects participating in the long-term follow-up, but none of the controls, still considered their original experience to have had genuinely mystical elements and to have made a uniquely invaluable contribution to their spiritual lives.

Doblin (2001: 73) adds:

The positive changes described by the psilocybin group at six months, which in some cases involved basic vocational and value choices and spiritual understandings, had persisted over time and had deepened in some cases.

The study was replicated at the Johns Hopkins University with similar results (Griffiths et al., 2011). The Good Friday experiment remains a “paradigmatic” experiment for replication by others (Roberts 2006: 246).

The important place of entheogens in religious beliefs and rituals across cultures and through time raises the question of their role in the remote origins of religion itself (Furst 1972a: xiv), an issue already mentioned in relation to Wasson’s ideas regarding *Amanita muscaria*. As Nichols and Chemel (2006: 5) observe:

Throughout history, humans have ingested psychoactive materials, principally plants and plant extracts, to provide altered states of consciousness (ASC). The contemporary shamanic uses of approximately 150 psychoactive plants have been verified by field research conducted early in the last century ... It seems quite probable that many eons ago, at the dawn of human existence, our early ancestors discovered the mind-altering potential of certain plants during their exploration of their environment for food. The psychological effects produced by the ingestion of these substances could have

impacted the worldview of sentient ancient humans in profound ways. Although it must remain a matter for speculation, some believe that spiritual thought arose as a direct result of the prehistoric use of mind-altering plants.

Entheogenic Drugs and European Witchcraft

Entheogens played an important role in the European witchcraft trials of the 16th and 17th centuries (see chapter 6). European witch-hunters asserted that witches could fly by applying magical ointments to their bodies (Figure 5.4). This was how witches attended their nighttime meetings or Sabbats. Witches could also transform into animals using magical ointments (Figure 5.5). Such ointments were frequently mentioned in witch trials. The witch-hunters believed that the efficacy of the witches' unguents was due to the power of Satan. However, the ingredients they listed consist of very powerful hallucinogenic substances (Sidky 1997: 189–214).

The main ingredients of the witches' ointments belong to the Nightshade or Solanaceae family. These species, as the noted German toxicologist Gustav Schenk (1955: 33) put it:

from ancient times ... have been the true magic plants, capable of putting the human mind into states of consciousness impossible to enter without them.

There are 3,000 species in the Solanaceae family around the world, including tomato, potato, eggplant, tobacco, and various pharmaceutical species. The principal entheogens in the witches' ointments are belladonna (*Atropa belladonna*), henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), datura (*Datura stramonium*), and mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*). These plants have very powerful hallucinogenic effects, including intense visual, gustatory and olfactory hallucinations, and the sensation of flight. People experiencing such hallucinations frequently believe that their experiences have actually occurred.

The 16th-century physician Giovanni Della Porta, an opponent of the witch-hunts, wrote the following about the witches' flying ointments in his book *Magiae Naturalis* (1561):

They take the fat of an infant and boil it in a brazen vessel, then strain it; they then knead the residue. With it they mix ... sleep-inducing nightshade, and oil. After the unguent is prepared, they rub all parts of their bodies exceedingly, till they look red, and are very hot, so that the pores may be opened, and their flesh soluble and loose. They add either fat or oil so that the force of the ointment may pierce inwardly, and so be more effectual. Thus on a moonlit night they seem to be carried in the air, to

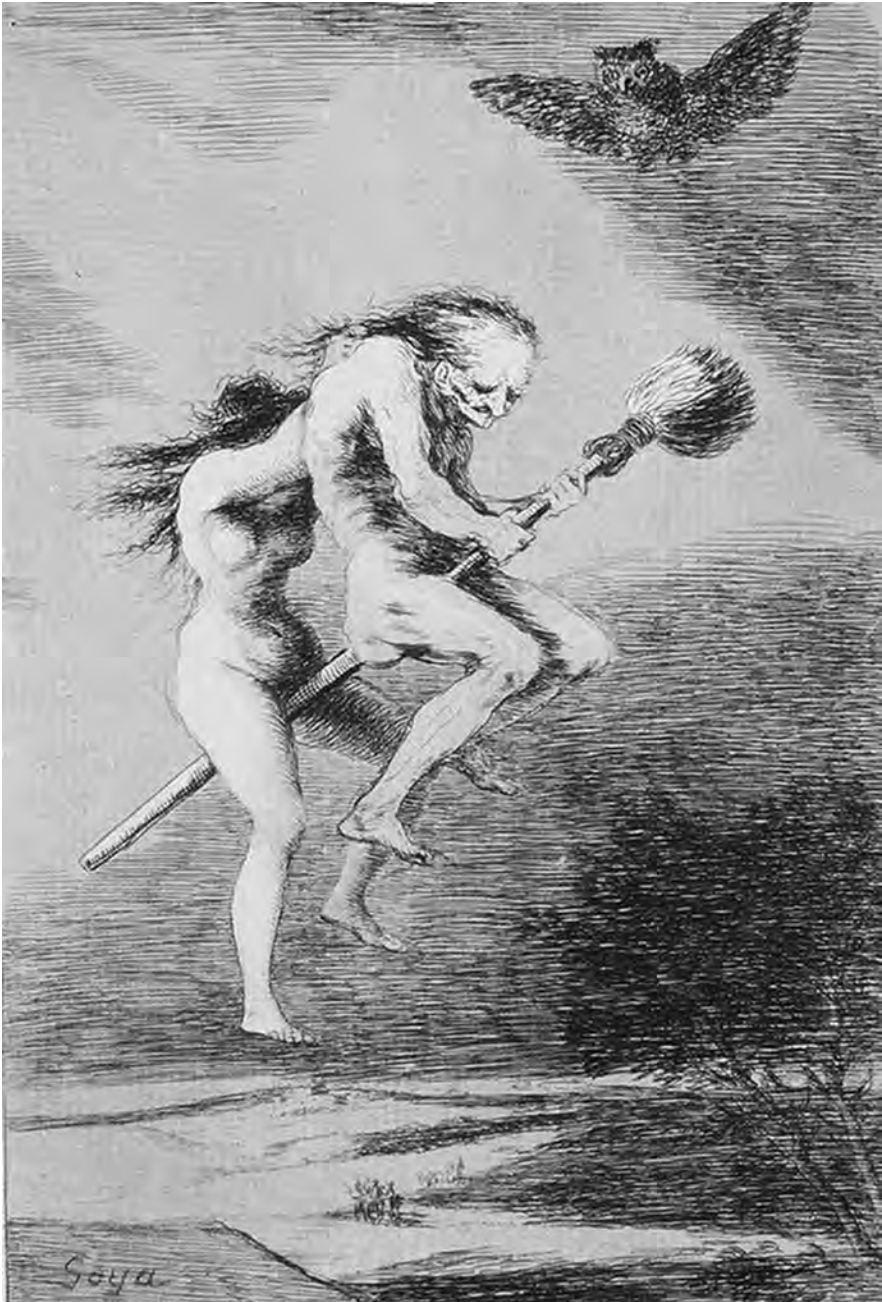


Figure 5.4. Witches flying to the Sabbath. European witch-hunters claimed that witches could fly by rubbing their bodies with magical ointments. Etching by Francisco Goya (Capricho no. 68, 1799).



Figure 5.5. Witches using a magical ointment to transform into animals before floating away. Etching by Francisco Goya (Capricho no. 67, 1799).

feasting, singing, dancing, kissing, culling, and other acts of venerary, with such youths as they love and desire most: for the force of their imagination is so vehement, that almost all that part of the brain, wherein the memory consists, is full of such concepts. And whereas they are naturally prone to believe anything: so they do receive such impressions and steadfast imagination into their minds, as even their spirits are altered thereby; not thinking about anything else, either by day or night (Porta 1658: 85).

Della Porta also provided an eyewitness account of a witch under the influence of the ointment:

I considered thoroughly hereof, remaining doubtful of the matter, when there fell into my hands a witch, who of her own accord did promise to fetch me an errand out of hand from far countries, and willed all them, whom I had brought to witness the matter, to depart the chamber. And when she undressed herself, and smeared her body with certain ointments (which action we beheld through a chink or little hole in the door) she fell down through the force of those soporiferous or sleepy ointments into a most sound and heavy sleep: so as we did break open the door, and did beat her exceedingly; but the force of her sleep was such, as it took away from her the sense of feeling: and we departed for a time. Now when her strength and powers were weary and decayed, she woke of her own accord, and began to speak many vain and doting words, affirming that she had passed over both seas and mountains; delivering to us many untrue and false reports: we earnestly denied them, she impudently affirmed them (Porta 1658: 85).

The pioneering pharmacologist Lewis Lewin (1931: 130) was convinced that the flying ointments were effective:

Magic ointments or witches' philtres procured for some reason and applied with or without intention produced effects which the subjects themselves believed in, even stating that they had intercourse with evil spirits, had been to the Brocken [a peak in the Harz Mountains in Germany] and danced at the Sabbat with their lovers, or caused damage to others by witchcraft.

Several researchers have maintained that the accounts of witches flying in the night, encountering demons, having sexual intercourse with the Devil, and changing into animals were due to the ritual use of hallucinogenic ointments. Some assert that the ointments were used by the leaders of witch covens to produce states of awe among cultists. Others maintain that magical ointments were employed in the initiation rites of witch cults to produce impressionable states of mind among new recruits (Schultes and Hofmann 1972: 87).

One possibility is that the magical ointments were made and dispensed by folk pharmaceutical specialists. Such specialists existed and they had a good

understanding of botanical poisons and various alkaloids. For instance, take the example of toads, which were frequently mentioned as an ingredient in the witches' brew. Although some scholars dismiss this as folklore, we now know that the skin of toads contains the alkaloid *bufotenine*, which has powerful hallucinogenic effects. One could surmise that as folk practices were assimilated into the official stereotype of witchcraft as a satanic enterprise, individuals who dabbled in entheogens were brought under persecution as witches and the hallucinatory states produced by their magic ointments acquired sinister characteristics (Sidky 1997: 189–214).

A point of interest is that the notion of sexual intercourse with the Devil or demons—one of the principal charges against witches—and the actual timing of the witch persecutions match up with the introduction of *datura* (Figure 5.6) into Europe during the late medieval period. This plant produces hallucinations and lucid erotic dreams (Schultes and Hofmann 1972: 106–111). Introduced into Europe by gypsies, *datura* quickly became popular as a recreational drug among the lower classes. Some users, however, were horrified by their hallucinatory experiences (i.e., had “bad trips”) and revealed in confessionals what they believed had actually occurred. As Lewin (1931: 130) observes:

The mental disorder caused by ... *datura* has ... instigated some persons to accuse themselves before a tribunal. The peculiar hallucinations evoked by the drug has been so powerfully transmitted from the subconscious mind to the consciousness that mentally uncultivated persons, nourished in their absurd superstitions by the Church, believed them to be reality.

Baffled clerics rapidly sounded the alarm and took steps to suppress the new crime of sexual intercourse with the Devil, which was integrated into the official theory of witchcraft. It is very possible that the bizarre elements of the witches' Sabbats, such as night flying, interaction with demons, and shape shifting had their basis in the hallucinatory experiences of drug-using addicts mistakenly indicted and tried as witches (Sidky 1997: 189–214).



Figure 5.6. *Datura* (*Datura stramonium*), an entheogen used in the witches' ointments and employed recreationally in Europe during the period of the witch-hunts. Photo by Isidre Blanc.

Witchcraft: Evil in Human Form

A witch is an individual who is believed to possess innate powers to cause harm to persons and property by supernatural means. Witchcraft is part of religion because it involves unseen forces. The terms witchcraft and sorcery are sometimes taken to mean the same thing. Both refer to acts of harmful magic. However, some anthropologists make a distinction between the two. Sorcery is basically the use of harmful or black magic. Anyone who knows the correct spells and formulae can perform acts of sorcery or function as a sorcerer. The sorcerer employs spells, rituals, medicines and manipulates objects to achieve his goals. He can work on his own behalf, deliberately harming enemies, or on the behalf of clients who are afflicted by the sorcery or witchcraft of others. To what extent people practice sorcery is difficult to determine. However, the belief in sorcery, i.e., that others are causing us harm through evil magic, is real enough and affects human behavior. In this respect, sorcery and witchcraft are similar in nature. Both function to explain misfortunes through scapegoating and the patterns of accusation arising from suspicions that one has been attacked by sorcery or witchcraft are in some cases similar.

In contrast to sorcery, witchcraft is generally defined by anthropologists as a purely psychic act. Its power is activated through anger, envy, and jealousy. A person learns to become a sorcerer, but witches are born with malevolent potential. In other words, sorcery involves the deliberate utilization of paranormal forces; witchcraft is involuntary and unconscious. While people may be ambivalent about

sorcery, because it can be put to good uses, witchcraft is universally viewed as evil. In other contexts, however, such as 16th and 17th century Europe, the distinction between witchcraft and sorcery is not so clear cut.

Witchcraft in the Ethnographic Context

There are remarkable cross-cultural similarities in witchcraft beliefs. As anthropologist William Howells (1962: 110) observes:

[there are an] astonishing number of parallels in witch beliefs on different continents. Witches are almost always thought able to fly, or at least travel very rapidly. They are thought to gather in a witch's Sabbath, to plot evil, and to eat or otherwise make use of the corpses of victims which have been killed by members. And they are generally associated with animal familiars. Cats have got a particularly bad name in this regard. In a similar way witches may be werewolves, being able to assume the shape of wolves, cats, or other beasts to carry out their missions. Above all, however, witchcraft is always looked on as utterly bad, an unredeemed evil which cannot be sanctioned while even the blackest of sorcerers is theoretically capable of good magic.

Although witchcraft beliefs are to be found in the Americas, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Melanesia, they are particularly prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, where a range of misfortunes are attributed to witchcraft.

In the ethnographic context, anthropologists have found few instances of someone actually practicing witchcraft (Sidky 1997: 62). Acts of witchcraft are imaginary ones. Witches, as anthropologist John Middleton (1921–2009) has put it, are “a figure of belief” (Middleton 1967: 59). So, when anthropologists talk about witches and witchcraft they are really referring to people's beliefs about these things. Witches, in other words, are creatures that exist in a nightmare world; they do not exist in the real one. This, however, does not mean that witchcraft is not a reality in people's lives.

The Function of Witchcraft Beliefs

If witchcraft is a figure of belief, as many anthropologists suggest, how and why are such beliefs maintained? Ethnographic investigation indicates that the belief in witchcraft can fulfill certain sociological functions. One perspective holds that witchcraft functions to explain misfortunes. Attributing to witches unavoidable calamities, such as death in the family, crop failure, or loss of livestock—events against which a person is normally powerless—can in some cases allay built up apprehensions by shifting blame to flesh-and-blood culprits against whom

countermeasures can be taken. In small scale societies, where there is intimate interaction among members of the community, misfortunes that fall outside individual human control are thought of in personal terms and a man seeks personal reasons why a misfortune has befallen him. Bewitchment supplies the answer. The idea of witchcraft, to put it another way, personalizes misfortune.

Another perspective holds that witchcraft beliefs function as a mechanism of social control. Witches commit numerous atrocities and engage in all kinds of socially unacceptable behaviors. As such, they symbolize all that is abhorrent and hateful in society. This motivates people to avoid anti-social behavior and to be decent citizens so as not to incur suspicions of witchcraft. As Evans-Pritchard (1937: 109) noted among the Azande, in Africa, persons who offend “against rules of conduct are the most frequently exposed as witches.” Witchcraft beliefs can thus function to ensure conformity to social norms.

Also, the fear of witches compels people to treat others with civility for fear of supernatural retaliation lest the offended person be a witch. Evans-Pritchard (1937: 117) adds that “since the Azande don’t know who are and are not witches, they assume all their neighbors are witches, and are therefore careful not to offend any of them without good cause.”

Witchcraft among the Azande

One of the best known ethnographic accounts of witchcraft in a small-scale society is Evans-Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1937). The Azande distinguish witchcraft from sorcery. Witchcraft is entirely a psychic act, while sorcery (black magic) is a concrete act involving the casting of spells, manipulation of ritual objects, and the use of medicines for the purpose of harming and killing. Although sorcery is considered to be more lethal than witchcraft, and is therefore more terrifying, people are reluctant to charge others of this practice. Azande allow the use of punitive magic, or retaliatory sorcery, against a person suspected of killing someone by witchcraft and sorcery.

Azande believe that witchcraft is inherited. Witches are born with a “witchcraft substance” in their stomachs. Because of this, the witch’s spirit ventures forth at night to consume the life force of victims. However, if a person is a decent, law-abiding citizen the witchcraft substance remains inactive. In this case the witch is tolerated socially, although rumors may fly. Negative thoughts, like anger, envy, and jealousy directed at others activates the power of witchcraft, causing death or injury to others. These effects can be nullified if the witch eliminates his negative thoughts toward the victim. In the past, a person found guilty of witchcraft could in some cases be put to death. However, during

Evans-Pritchard's fieldwork the death penalty had been forbidden by the British colonial administration.

For the Azande, witchcraft is a pervasive everyday occurrence, making it necessary for people to be cautious and take magical protective measures. As Evans-Pritchard (1937: 21) writes:

I had no difficulty in discovering what Azande think about witchcraft, nor in observing what they do to combat it. These ideas and actions are on the surface of their life and are accessible to anyone who lives for a few weeks in their homesteads. Every Zande is an authority on witchcraft. There is no need to consult specialists. There is not even need to question Azande about it, for information flows freely from recurrent situations in their social life, and one has only to watch and listen. *Mangu*, witchcraft, was one of the first words I heard in Zandeland, and I heard it uttered day by day throughout the months.

Among the Azande a vast range of circumstances are attributed to witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard (1937: 18) adds:

If blight seizes the ground-nut crop it is witchcraft; if the bush is vainly 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 unless there is strong evidence, and subsequent oracular confirmation, that sorcery or some other evil agent has been at work, or unless they are clearly to be attributed to incompetence, breach of taboo, or failure to observe a moral rule.

Witchcraft accusations among the Azande are generated in the context of social animosities where there are ill feelings between the accuser and accused. The people accused stand in particular social relationships to their accuser. Usually, witches are selected from among competitors, rivals, and enemies. Witchcraft accusations, in other words, are not random, but follow certain patterns.

The accused witch is often an antisocial person, one who violates social norms of decency and neighborliness. Whenever suspicions are aroused, Azande resort to the use of prescribed divinatory techniques, or oracles, to ascertain the identity of the culprit and to determine guilt or innocence. Oracles are administered by "witch-doctors." One technique is the poison oracle, in which a certain quantity of the poison *benge* (a magically potent botanical toxin) is fed to a live chicken, while questions are posed regarding the guilt of a suspect. Answers are determined

on the basis of whether the fowl lives or dies from the action of the poison (see chapter 7).

Evans-Pritchard's study demonstrates that as long as one is working from within the belief system of the Azande, witchcraft beliefs are not illogical for those who hold them. In other words, these beliefs have internal coherence. If an Azande man is injured by fire, for example, they say it is witchcraft. But, Evans-Pritchard (1937: 69) points out, we must make a distinction between fire and its heat, on the one hand, and the fact that a certain person was injured by a particular fire, on the other. Injuries do not result whenever someone uses fire. Why, then, the Azande would ask, was this man burned by this fire on this occasion? The answer: witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard (1937: 69) adds, "Fire is hot, but it is not hot owing to witchcraft, for that is its nature. It is the universal quality of fire to burn, but it is not a universal quality of fire to burn *you*." Thus, "It is the particular and variable conditions that witchcraft explains." In other words, the belief in witchcraft represents a theory of causation that applies to specific situations and under particular circumstances.

The Witch-Hunts in Europe

During the 16th and 17th centuries, Western Europe experienced what scholars have called "the witchcraze," referring to organized, large-scale persecution of people suspected of witchcraft (see Sidky 1997: 23–50). This was a time of prodigious calamities, as Europe was hit by severe economic crises, the shock of the Reformation, unremitting warfare, and intermittent outbreaks of the plague. It was in these circumstances that witches emerged as the principle sources of evil.

Church and civil authorities joined forces to combat this terrible threat. The occult menace, officials claimed, was overwhelming. It was nothing less than a satanic conspiracy against Christendom. Laws were passed and throughout Europe systematic efforts were made to expunge the satanic conspiracy. Witches were sought, found, arrested, tortured, convicted and burned to death. The torture rooms soon provided new and additional information about the witches' conspiracy. Prisoners under torture revealed the names of accomplices. Those who were named were in turn arrested and tortured and forced to name additional co-conspirators. Thus every witch-hunt could expand exponentially, as more and more victims were captured, racked and scourged.

The European witch-hunts lasted over two centuries, a time during which thousands of innocent people were violently tortured and roasted alive; millions were shocked, horrified, and intimidated (Figure 6.1). Those on trial were accused

of implausible crimes, such as flying through the air, metamorphosing into animals, frolicking with demons, and worshipping Satan. Exactly how many people were put to death is hard to say because many of the executions were not recorded and many records have not survived. Figures given extend from as few as 100,000 to an implausible nine million (Gardner 1954: 102; Sidky 1997: 31).



Figure 6.1. A sixteenth-century broadsheet showing the fiery death of accused witches. The Devil is shown snatching one of the witches from the flames, while another witch is being beheaded in the background. The European witchcraze lasted for more than two centuries when over 100 thousand people were executed. Countless others were shocked, horrified, and intimidated. By Permission of Zentralbibliothek Zürich, Graphische Sammlung und Fotoarchiv.

Witchcraft beliefs have a long history in Europe. There is information about such beliefs from the 6th and 7th centuries. Misfortunes that befell people in everyday village life were periodically translated into accusations of witchcraft, or *maleficium*. Once in a while, such accusations would lead to the killing of an accused by individuals or mobs. Such actions, however, were illegal and were conducted without official approval. *Maleficium* continued to exist unaltered until the 16th and 17th centuries. However, this kind of witchcraft did not result in large-scale witch-persecutions. These diffuse beliefs and a witchcraze were completely different phenomena.

There are functional similarities between *maleficium* and the witchcraft beliefs among contemporary small-scale cultures. Maleficent magic is accomplished through the use of philters, love-potions, the manipulation of effigies, and the casting of spells according to the principles of contagion and imitation (see chapter 7).

Contagious magic is based on the idea that two things in contact remain connected in a supernatural way when apart. Thus, subjecting one to magical procedures will produce comparable effects on the other. For example, taking an article of clothing belonging to an enemy and applying prescribed procedures will have the same effects upon the owner of those clothes. Imitative magic is based on the principle that “like produces like.” Making a wax effigy of an enemy and then mutilating it with a knife or a needle will result in harm upon the person the effigy represents.

Maleficent magic works automatically. The invocation of supernatural beings, such as demons, or the Devil, is unnecessary. In medieval and post-medieval Europe, there were people who performed this kind of magic out of malice, jealousy, or desire for someone else’s property. However, this kind of commonplace sorcery was not a collective activity involving secret night meetings, Satan-worship, or pacts with demons.

Like its ethnographic counterpart, *maleficium* served as an explanation for misfortune. Moreover, it allowed an individual to personalize his plight by blaming it upon a human perpetrator. These kinds of charges developed in the context of village hatreds, similar to the case of Azande witchcraft. However, during the late 15th century the idea of evil spirits and pacts with the Christian Devil were attached to simple *maleficium*. When this happened, witchcraft was reinterpreted as a demonic religion, a sinister organization created by Satan to destroy Christendom. It was this ideology that fueled the large-scale persecution of witches in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries.

As the tools of Satan, witches were attributed with unimaginable powers to cause evil. Witches could float in the air, transform themselves into wolves, move through locked doors and solid walls, control other people’s thoughts and emotions, and kill with a mere gaze. Witches often raised tempests, hailstorms, floods, and lightning; they damaged crops and destroyed harvests, and caused sterility in animals and impotence in men. They could conjure up flies, locusts, serpents, frogs, lice, worms, fleas, toads, mice, and other creatures and thereby destroy the harvests. In addition, witches raised demons, caused demonic possession, renounced God, made pacts with the Devil, and offered their own children to Satan during horrible nighttime rituals called Sabbats (Sidky 1997: 38) (Figure 6.2).

People were horrified by these terrible stories of dark deeds and cosmic conspiracies described by the witch-hunters and spread through official propaganda. The question to ask is: Were these allegations true? Were European Church and civil authorities confronted with an actual covert religious organization of witches? The idea of witchcraft as a secret religious organization in Europe was espoused by the archaeologist/folklorist Margaret Murray (1863–1963) in her books *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and *The God of the Witches* (1933).



Figure 6.2. A nightmarish image of witches in the company of demons worshipping the Devil during the Sabbat as propagated by the European witch-hunters. From Paul Christian's *Histoire de la Magie* (1870). Paris: Jouvett.

Murray studied the witch-hunters' manuals and demonological tracts and surmised that witches did really exist. However, rather than being Satan worshippers, as witch-hunters claimed, witches belonged to an ancient pagan cult (cf., Leland 1899, Michelet 1862, Ginzburg 1983). The Inquisitors were really combating an organized sect, but they were incorrect about the nature of the group they were trying to eradicate. According to Murray, witchcraft was the ancient pre-Christian religion of Western Europe and Britain, whose members worshipped a horned deity with two faces. Murray was able to make her case by overlooking the bizarre and implausible fabrications of the witch-hunters. In this way, she constructed an image of the Sabbats as actual organized events attended by flesh-and-blood adherents (Sidky 1997: 51–71).

Murray believed that witches were organized in secret covens headed by a high priest. They met at different times in joyous gatherings to conduct rituals to promote fertility, abundance of crops, and the well-being of cult members. The god of the witches was not the Christian Devil, contrary to official proclamations, but rather the pre-Christian horned god, the oldest known deity, whose images appear in Paleolithic rock art, for example the Sorcerer from Les Trois Frères and similar figures (Figure 6.3).

Murray maintained further that the witches' religion was not a minority cult, but rather was practiced by the majority of people under a thin layer of Christianity. This religion was the dominant faith in Western Europe until the 16th century. It was only then that Christianity finally gained a wide support base—a thousand years after its inauguration—and was able to attack its deeply entrenched rival, resulting in the large-scale witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries. A variant of this idea has been forwarded more recently by Winkelman and Baker (2010: 271), who maintain that the witch-hunts were campaigns to eradicate ancient shamanistic practices labeled as witchcraft by the authorities.

In Murray's work, the vile witches discussed in the ghastly witch-hunting tomes were replaced by an assembly of frolicking nature worshippers, erroneously tied to evil, and unfairly attacked by the officers of the rival Christian faith. Unfortunately, there is no solid evidence to support such contentions (Hutton 1999: 379; Sidky 1997: 23–50; Simpson 1994). Serious scholarship has not uncovered any evidence for the existence of a witch-cult and Murray's thesis has been rejected by the majority of scholars writing about the European witch-hunts (Hutton 1999: 379; Sidky 1997: 51–61). Torture and leading questions created the evidence in the form of detailed and elaborate confessions used to convict and burn people as witches. The dynamics of witch-hunting lie in these forced confessions and violence, not in the scattered folklore of peasant superstition. Unless one is ready to accept the fantastic allegations of European witch-hunters, there exists little



Figure 6.3. Drawing of an Upper Paleolithic image that appears at Les Trois Frères, France, interpreted as the pre-Christian horned god of the witches.

external evidence to support the idea of witchcraft as a clandestine religion (Sidky 1997: 23–50, 51–71).

Witchcraft Today: Neo-Paganism

Margaret Murray popularized the idea that the people persecuted for witchcraft during the 16th and 17th centuries were in fact practitioners of an ancient pagan fertility religion. The notion of a pagan witches' religion was picked up by Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), an admirer of Murray and amateur anthropologist and student of spiritualism (Hutton 1999: 205–240). Gardner made the sensational claim that he had discovered an actual witches' coven in the New Forest region of England. This was a coven that had persisted intact, according to Gardner, since the medieval period, passed down from generation to generation to the present. There is little evidence for the existence of such an organization in the New Forest other than what Gardner himself tells us and there is controversy over whether he discovered or invented this witch-cult (Hutton 1999: 206–212).

Gardner claimed that he studied the beliefs and practices of the group he discovered and was himself inducted into the organization. Based on his experiences he published *Witchcraft Today* (1954), a book that became the seminal text of modern or Neo-Pagan witchcraft (Morris 2006: 281). Like Murray, Gardner espoused the idea that witchcraft was a religion rooted in a pre-Christian or Pagan belief system, whose adherents met in covens, danced naked in circles, and worshipped a goddess and a horned god. It was the followers of this duotheistic religion who were targeted for destruction during the European witch-hunts, which Gardner referred to as “the burning times.” To emphasize the gravity of the situation, Gardner (1954: 102) made the implausible claim that nine million witches were burned at the stake.

Adherents articulate Gardner's ideas as follows:

Witchcraft is a religion that dates back to Paleolithic times, to the worship of the god of the hunt and the goddess of fertility. One can see remnants of it in cave paintings and in the figurines of goddesses that are many thousands of years old. This early religion was universal. The names changed from place to place but the basic deities were the same.

When Christianity came to Europe, its inroads were slow. Kings and nobles were converted first, but many folk continued to worship in both religions. Dwellers in rural areas, the ‘Pagans’ and ‘Heathens’, kept the old ways. Churches were built on the sacred sites of the old religion. The names of the festivals were changed but the dates

were kept. The old rites continued in folk festivals, and for many centuries Christian policy was one of slow cooptation.

During the times of persecution the Church took the god of the Old Religion and—as is the habit with conquerors—turned him into the Christian devil. The Old Religion was forced underground, its only records set forth, in distorted form, by its enemies. Small families kept the religion alive and in 1951, after the Witchcraft Laws in England were repealed, it began to surface again (Adler 1986: 45–46).

Gardner used the term *Wicca* (adjective *Wiccan*), meaning “wise person,” to refer to the adherents of the witches’ religion, individuals who practiced ritual magic, used herbal medicines, and possessed supernatural powers. Gardner is considered to be the principal architect of Neo-Pagan witchcraft. He created its basic framework and propagated it. However, subsequent works, such as Doreen Valiente’s *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (1989), Margot Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon* (1986), and Starhawk’s (Miriam Simos) *The Spiral Dance* (1979) have made significant contributions to Neo-Pagan witchcraft theology. The latter two works also gave further impetus for the expansion of the movement during the 1980s (Morris 2006: 285–286).

Following the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in Britain in 1951, Gardner began initiating people into covens, headed by a “high priestess.” Initiates brought others into the fold. “Coven bred coven” (Luhmann 1989: 42). Some people were invited to join, others purchased Gardner’s book and established their own covens. The number of modern witches grew. Today, Wiccans make a distinction between “traditional Craft,” based on the direct teachings of an initiated and trained individual, and “popular Craft,” based on knowledge gleaned from books by famous Pagan authors, the Internet, films, and television (Magliocco 2004: 75).

Neo-Pagan witchcraft was born in England and soon after the publication of *Witchcraft Today* spread throughout the United States and Canada (Magliocco 2004: 70–71). However, as Hutton (1999: 340) points out:

From the 1970s onward the United States, and not Britain, has been the world centre of modern Paganism, exerting the greatest influence over its development, as over most forms of Western culture, and probably containing the largest number of its adherents.

As Neo-Pagan witchcraft beliefs spread, it inspired the development of new variants. Thus, according to anthropologist Tanya Luhmann (1989: 46):

By now there are many types of witchcraft: Gardnerian, Alexandrian, feminist, ‘traditional’ and so forth, named for their founders or their political ideals. Feminist covens usually only initiate women and they usually think of themselves as involved with a

particularly female type of spirituality. Groups stemming from Gardner are called 'Gardnerian'. Alexandrian witchcraft derives from Alex Sander's more ceremonial version of Gardnerian witchcraft.

One form of feminist witchcraft is called Dianic witchcraft, named after Diana, the moon goddess of ancient Rome, who is worshipped as a single deity. This non-duotheistic version of Wicca is associated with the ideas of Zsuzanna Budapest, author of *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* (1980). Members tend to be lesbians or celibate.

The single most important contribution to Wicca from America was its assimilation into the feminist movement. According to Hutton (1999: 341):

This was based upon the simple fundamental fact that the witch is one of the very few images of independent female power which historic European culture has bequeathed. As the United States became the main source of modern feminist thought in general and radical feminist thought in particular, the appropriation of this image became virtually inevitable.

The feminist vision holds that in the ancient egalitarian matriarchy that once existed throughout Western Europe and the Mediterranean region women had a sacred status. They were at the center of religious and sociopolitical affairs expressed in the worship of the Goddess. People lived in peace and harmony. Warlike patriarchs destroyed this peaceful matriarchy and its Goddess-loving religion. However, aspects of the ancient religion and the sacred position of women were retained over a thousand years after the establishment of Christianity among the masses in the form of witchcraft beliefs. These beliefs survived until the 16th and 17th centuries when patriarchal society attacked it once again, precipitating the witch-hunts. Nine million women were burned at the stake for their courageous stance. Thus, to regain their true freedom and sacred status, women must become witches once more.

Neo-Pagan witchcraft, according to folklorist Sabina Magliocco (2004: 60), is one of the fastest growing religions in North America, and she places the number of practitioners at around 700,000, concentrated in urban areas and university towns. Neo-Pagan witches are organized into small, independent groups, called covens or circles, and the movement itself is non-hierarchical and decentralized. There is no central gospel, but covens may have their own scripture, called a Book of Shadows, and practitioners innovate according to their own inspiration. They authenticate their practices by turning to findings from anthropology, archaeology, mythology, folklore and the classics. Members tend to be well-educated white Euro-Americans, employed in the healthcare and computer industries, as well as teachers, psychologists, civil servants, artists, artisans, and small business owners (Magliocco 2004: 187).

Although there is considerable diversity in beliefs and practices, the theology of Neo-Pagan witchcraft is based upon a shared set of doctrines. These include an emphasis on “the plurality of spiritual beings,” the idea of the world as a manifestation of divinity, an ecological worldview based on a “reverence for nature,” feminism, Goddess worship, emphasis on ritual magic, decentralized politics, and “an experiential and esoteric approach to the divine” (Morris 2006: 275–278). Their ethical principle is consistent with the Wiccan axiom, “Do as you will, but harm no one” (Magliocco 2004: 69).

Detractors, mostly evangelical Christian fundamentalists, associate Neo-Pagan witchcraft with Devil worship, but adherents strongly deny such allegations, pointing out that Satan is a Judeo-Christian concept outside of Pagan beliefs. They also distance themselves from Satanism associated with Anton Szandor Lavey, who founded the Church of Satan in 1966 (see Bromley and Ainsley 1995).

According to Hutton (1999: 409), Neo-Pagan witchcraft is not a sect, i.e., it is not a religion that formed by separating from an existing religious tradition. Its adherents claim that it is a revival of an ancient faith. The term “cult” refers to groups that are not churches, denominations, or sects, and has a derogatory connotation of deviancy. Adherents of Neo-Pagan witchcraft never use the term cult as a designation of their faith. Hutton (1999: 411) argues that Neo-Pagan witchcraft is “neither a sect nor a cult, but a fully developed independent religion.” Neo-Pagan witchcraft is also considered to be a phenomenon separate from the New Age Movement on the grounds that it originated in Britain and was fully formulated in the 1950s, while the New Age was formulated in the 1970s in the United States.

Satanic Ritual Abuse: An American Witch-Hunt

In the 1980s and 1990s, the United States was swept with waves of panic over allegations of witchcraft and satanic ritual abuse (Victor 1993: 7–25; Bottoms and Davis 1997). The efforts taken to contend with this dangerous and alarming situation are strikingly similar to the European witch-hunts. It was said that secret satanic cults had proliferated across the country, whose members were engaged in the most vile and horrendous acts of child abuse, murder, and black magic. These organizations were rumored to be networked, intergenerational, and international in scope. Tales quickly spread about cannibalistic orgies, incest, and child molestation by Devil-worshippers. Moreover, it was said that adolescent girls were being forced by Satanists to serve as “serial baby breeders” for infant sacrificial

ceremonies. There were also allegations about infants being dismembered, boiled and eaten. Children were said to be caged, drugged, tortured with electric cattle prods, raped with crucifixes, photographed for child pornography, and forced into prostitution. There were further stories about how these satanic groups kept their activities secret and exercised total control over members and victims through sheer terror, brainwashing, and post-hypnotic suggestions. As Elaine Showalter (1997: 176) observes:

With their thematic emphasis on incest, infanticide, forced breeding, cannibalism, and conspiracy, these narratives touch on the deepest and most frightening taboos and fantasies of our culture.

The membership of these vile cults, which was rumored to number over a million, was ostensibly drawn from among prominent citizens, including doctors, lawyers, politicians, law enforcement personnel, and clergy (Showalter 1997: 176). Like the witches of European history, the satanic conspirators were organized in covens of thirteen, headed by a high priest and priestess. They gathered in groups to worship Satan, parody Christian rituals, abuse children, and conduct human sacrifice. Members of the covens derived income from extortion, child pornography, and child prostitution. These allegations regarding orgiastic rituals during which children are slain and consumed are nearly identical to charges brought by detractors against reviled groups, such as in the case of the Passover “blood libel” against the Jews, the Knights Templar, who were persecuted in 14th century France, and the witches in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries (cf., Sagan 1995: 160) (Figure 6.4).

Evangelical Christian “experts,” flaunting the dangers of Satanism in America, along with sensational media coverage, instigated and heightened the panics, which spread from town to town, leaving behind horrified children and parents (Showalter 1997: 173). Initial reports originated with a few adult survivors who purportedly recovered memories of satanic abuse during therapy. The first was Michelle Smith, whose narrative appeared in the influential book, *Michelle Remembers* (1980), by Michelle Smith and Lawrence Pazder. After this, various charges were brought in the course of child abuse cases at hundreds of daycare centers, including the infamous McMartin preschool trial (Victor 1993: 117). The investigators obtained testimony from children using highly suggestive questioning techniques and positive and negative reinforcement (see Bradford 1997). The children’s tales seemed to corroborate those of the adults, convincing many of the truth of satanic ritual abuse.

For most victims, child abuse is remembered continuously into adulthood. However for victims of satanic ritual abuse such extreme traumatic memories were



Figure 6.4. Witches offering children to the Devil. The sinister imagery of Satanic Ritual Abuse involving Devil worship, child sacrifice, and cannibalism approximates the imagery current during the witch-hunt years in Europe. Francisco Goya's *The Witches' Sabbath* (1798).

believed to be buried deep in the subconscious (Sagan 1995: 155). Using suggestive and controversial memory recovery techniques, such as hypnotic age regression, therapists worked long and hard, over many months of treatment, to recover suppressed memories of ritual abuse, inattentive to the issues of false memories, confabulation, suggestibility, contagion, and iatrogenic factors. Patients were extorted to believe and were guided on how to tell their tales. Almost all allegations of satanic abuse emerged in the context of therapy and the majority of victims were not aware of the abuse until they started treatment (Bottoms and Davis 1997: 115; Bader 2003: 676). Corroborative evidence was not an issue. Therapists claimed that their job was to be supportive, not to question or be skeptical. Anecdotes were used as data and the assumption was that compelling personal narratives were sufficient to validate otherwise implausible tales. Thus, as in the case of the European witch-hunts, even the most outlandish accounts were accepted as true.

Remarkably, proponents were unconcerned with the lack of empirical evidence and took the absence of corroborating evidence as proof of the effectiveness of the satanic conspirators in hiding their atrocities. Implausibility in the stories, such as accounts of people flying on broomsticks, were explained away as Satanists deliberately confusing matters through hypnotic suggestion, or programming, so as to lessen victims' credibility should they talk to outsiders. When police failed to unearth bodies of reported murder victims, the rejoinder was that cult members ate them (Showalter 1997: 179–180). As in the case of the European witch-trials, absence of evidence was used as evidence. Like the Inquisitors of European history, therapists publicly defended the truth of the allegations and validated each other's assertions and tried to educate others about the scale of the problem. The idea of ritual-abuse was spread among professionals through seminars, books, and articles.

There was great moral uproar. Evangelical Christians latched on to the idea of satanic-abuse, fulfilling their on-going objective of finding satanic explanations for all social ills, including child abuse. Many of the experts raising the alarm about Satanism in America, such as mental health specialists and law enforcement personnel, who offered seminars on the topic, were Christian fundamentalists (Sagan 1995: 159). Churches embraced the idea of ritual-abuse. Sensationalist media reports contributed to the proliferation of the fear and alarm. Skeptics were urged to believe. Networking between therapists, Evangelical Christian Satanism experts, and alleged victims led to the homogenization of the confabulations of a few into a unitary narrative of Satanism of grand proportions (Showalter 1997: 180).

Thousands of cases of satanic ritual-abuse were reported. An atmosphere of witch-hunting prevailed. People were subjected to lengthy trials and imprisoned.

Families were broken up and lives were ruined. No physical evidence was ever offered in courts. This does not question the reality of actual child abuse, for which there is overwhelming evidence, only the reality of organized, transgenerational, satanic cults of child molesters.

In the end, the police and the FBI failed to locate any satanic child abusing cults (Lanning 1992). In fact, there was no corroborating evidence for any of the charges. As allegations became more bizarre and as more and more court cases were dismissed for lack of evidence, people grew uneasy (Showalter 1997: 173). Eventually, professionals and even the media became increasingly skeptical. Thus, as Bette Bottoms and Suzanne Davis (1997: 113) conclude:

These beliefs have been effectively attacked by skeptics, and ritual abuse is now viewed by many professionals to be part of a more general tendency of certain individuals, especially clients of certain psychotherapists, to manufacture memories of abuse that never occurred.

The case of satanic ritual abuse in the United States has striking similarities to the European witch-hunts. It is a stark reminder that no society is free from the dangers of falling into a witch-hunting mentality.

Magic and Divination

To many the word “magic” brings to mind parlor tricks and sleight of hand techniques that are the forte of stage magicians and illusionists. In the ethnographic context, magic refers to spells and rituals that are intended to bring about desired ends through supernatural means. Anthropologists have been interested in magic since the early days of the discipline. Two major early ethnographic studies of magic are Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935) and Edward Evans-Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1937), mentioned in the previous chapter.

People are fascinated with magic and magical thinking is pervasive (see Davies 2012; Greenwood 2009). As Malinowski (1955: 70–71) put it:

magic—the very word seems to reveal a world of mysterious and unexpected possibilities. Partly perhaps we hope to find in it the quintessence of primitive man’s longing and of his wisdom—and that, whatever it may be, is worth knowing. Partly because “magic” seems to stir up in everyone some hidden mental forces, some lingering hopes in the miraculous, some dormant beliefs in man’s mysterious possibilities.

Magic, as anthropologist Michael Brown (1997: 130) has put it, is “an enduring quality of the human imagination.”

In his classic work, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (1922 [1890]), James Frazer set forth the underlying principles of magic. Magic, he wrote,

functions through the Law of Sympathy, the notion that “things act on each other at a distance through secret sympathy.” The Law of Sympathy consists of two principles: “first that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause; and second, that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after physical contact has been severed” (Frazer 1959: 35). The first principle is called the Law of Similarity and the second is known as the Law of Contagion.

The Law of Similarity is the basis of imitative magic (also called homeopathic magic). The basic idea is that two things that look alike are causally connected; affecting one will affect the other. An example of this is the “voodoo doll,” an effigy made to resemble a person who can be harmed or killed by sticking pins into it. Paleolithic cave art in Europe of animals drawn with spears and arrows thrust in them is thought by some to have been acts of imitative magic (Howells 1962: 50). The tradition of homeopathic medicine, popular in the United States, is based on the Law of Similarity. Its central premise (called the doctrine of signatures) is that plants that resemble human body parts, like liverwort which resembles the human liver, can be used to treat those parts. Certain yellow plants resembling the color of bile are used to treat digestive problems, certain red plants resembling the color of blood are used to treat blood problems, and so forth.

The Law of Contagion is the basis of contagious magic. Things that were once together remain so supernaturally even when they are apart. Thus, things in contact with a person, such as a lock of hair, fingernail clippings, or an item of clothing worn, can be used to perform contagious magic. Subjecting these things to various procedures will affect their owner in the same way. One can harm an enemy through contagious magic by putting harmful medicine or broken glass in his footprints. Australian Aborigines attempt to lame a kangaroo by putting hot embers in its tracks. A person’s name can be put in a spell to cause harm. This is the basis of the taboo against using an individual’s name freely in many tribal cultures (Howells 1962: 53). The same is true of photographs. Similarly, mirrors, which register the images of a person, can be used in contagious magic.

Magic and Religion

Anthropologists consider magic to be a part of religion because it entails the manipulation of supernatural forces. Earlier writers, however, saw magic and religion as separate endeavors. Frazer saw humanity as passing through three stages of intellectual development: magic, religion, and science. Magic, Frazer maintained, was pseudoscience through which humans tried to control nature. It was based

on the erroneous correlation of cause and effect, as in the case of the laws of similarity and contagion. When people developed higher intelligence and realized that magic does not work, they posited the existence of higher powers, such as supernatural beings. Religion evolved when people tried to supplicate these beings through offerings and sacrifice. Once humans developed even higher intelligence and recognized the errors of the past, science arose.

Frazier's evolutionary scheme is problematic. Despite the ascendancy of science in the West, forms of magic persist in Europe and North America (Brown 1997: 130). For example, many beliefs and practices labeled as "paranormal" may be subsumed under the category of magic (see chapter 8). Moreover, there has been a revival of magic with the emergence of Neo-Paganism (see chapter 6).

Others as well have made a distinction between magic and religion. For Malinowski (1955: 87–90), magic and religion are different because magic has an immediate and useful purpose, while religion is "an end in itself." As he put it, "while in the magical act the underlying idea and aim is always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremonies there is no purpose directed toward a subsequent event."

Durkheim approached the problem in terms of social context and observed that magic has no church and no congregation. Magical practice is done on an individual basis. Religion is communal, engaged in for the benefit of the community as a whole. "In all history," Durkheim wrote (1961: 59–60), "we do not find a single religion without a Church. ... There is no church of magic."

Many contemporary writers do not make such distinctions and acknowledge the similarities between magic and religion and speak of beliefs and actions pertaining to the supernatural as magico-religious.

The Function of Magic

In his study of the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski focused upon the functions of magic. His approach centered upon the way in which magical beliefs fulfilled the psychological and emotional needs of the individual.

Malinowski maintained that magic should not be treated merely as "primitive science," a view taken by Frazer, nor as a manifestation of pre-logical mentality, as advocated by the philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) (see Lévy-Bruhl 1978). Magic, he added, is rooted in tangible human emotions that emerge in times of frustration and uncertainty. Malinowski noted that the Trobrianders deemed magic a necessary procedure associated with certain enterprises, such as gardening or open-ocean voyages. For example, Trobrianders believe that their

gardens will not produce yams unless they use magic (Malinowski 1935: 62). Magic and gardening, while they appear to be different activities, are interrelated:

To the natives, magic is as indispensable to the success of the gardens as competent and effective husbandry. It is essential to the fertility of the soil. ... Magic is to them an almost natural element in the growth of the gardens (Malinowski 1935: 62).

The question Malinowski asked was: Why do people who are proficient in gardening feel that they need to resort to magic? He discovered that despite the Trobrianders's expertise in horticulture, there are aspects of gardening that are beyond their control. These include variations in such things as temperature, rainfall, and number of sunshine hours that can influence the yield obtained from the same garden from one year to the next. When confronted with forces beyond their comprehension and control, the Trobrianders resort to magic.

Another area of uncertainty in which Trobrianders rely upon magic is open-ocean fishing, an enterprise that is both unpredictable and dangerous. In contrast, they rely upon their skills rather than magic when fishing in the calm lagoons, which is not as hazardous and is comparatively easy (Malinowski 1935: 17, 433). Malinowski therefore concluded that:

Magic, as the belief that by spell and rite results can be obtained ... always appears in those phases of human action where knowledge fails man. Primitive man cannot manipulate the weather. Experience teaches him that rain and sunshine, wind, heat and cold, cannot be produced by his own hands, however much he might think about or observe such phenomena. He therefore deals with them magically (Malinowski 1944: 198).

For Malinowski, magic is an institutional expression of human emotional states. Magic, therefore, really works. Not in the way that those performing magical rites might think—yams don't grow larger, fish don't bite with greater frequency, and so forth—but rather because magic creates effects upon individuals and their psychological needs.

Baseball Magic

The anthropologist George Gmelch (1982) reached a comparable conclusion in his study of "baseball magic" in America. Baseball players, Gmelch points out, behave like Trobriand fishermen. Players use magic to control the element of chance in the game. Chance plays a critical role in pitching and hitting. Consequently these are the areas where magical rituals, taboos, and fetishes, are used the

most. Fielding, however, is less subject to chance and the use of ritual is absent from this area, just like Trobriand lagoon fishing.

Players' magical activities or routines are rituals—"prescribed behaviors in which there is no empirical connection between the means (e.g., tapping home plate three times) and the desired end (getting a base hit)." As Gmelch (1982: 255) points out:

Many hitters go through a series of preparatory rituals before stepping into the batter's box. These include tugging on their caps, touching their uniform letters or medallions, crossing themselves, and swinging, tapping, or bouncing the bat on the plate a prescribed number of times. Consider the Dodger's Nomar Garciaparra. After each pitch he steps out of the batter's box, kicks the dirt with each toe, adjusts his right batting glove, adjusts his left batting glove, and touches his helmet before getting back into the box. He insists that it is a routine, not superstition. "I am doing it to get everything tight. I like everything tight, that's all it is, really." Mike Hargrove, former Cleveland Indian first baseman, had so many time-consuming elements in his batting that he was nicknamed "the human rain delay." Both players believe their batting rituals helped them regain their concentration after each pitch.

Gmelch (1982: 255) explains:

Rituals grow out of exceptionally good performances. When a player does well, he seldom attributes his success to skill alone; he knows that his skills don't change from day to day. So, then, what was different about today which can explain his three hits? He makes a correlation. That is, he attributes his success, in part, to an object, a food he ate, not having shaved, a new shirt he bought that day, or just about any behavior out of the ordinary. By repeating those behaviors, the player seeks to gain control over his performance, to bring good luck.

Gmelch (1982: 255) concludes:

Obviously the rituals and superstitions of baseball do not make a pitch travel faster or a batted ball find gaps between the fielders, nor do the Trobriand rituals calm the seas or bring fish. What both do, however, is give their practitioners a sense of control, and with that added confidence. And we all know how important that is. If you really believe eating chicken or hopping over the foul lines will make you a better hitter, it probably will.

Thus, just as magic alleviates the anxieties over the vicissitudes of gardening or open-ocean fishing for the Trobrianders (Malinowski 1955: 29), it alleviates the vicissitudes of hitting the next homerun for the American baseball player.

People everywhere resort to magic in those areas of life over which they otherwise have little or no control, such as the number of sunny days, the timing and

amount of rainfall, severe illness and epidemic diseases, or stormy seas. Magic “gives people something to do in situations where there really is nothing to do” (Howells 1962: 62). A prayer to the gods is simply a request, it may or may not work. But magic, when performed correctly, is guaranteed to work. Magic allays anxiety and bestows hope that a solution to an otherwise daunting problem is at hand. As Howells (1962: 65) observes, “magic must come from a side of human nature not appealed to by any other form of religion ... it is the final refuge of wishful thinking.”

Magical Death

The power of magical rituals on humans is illustrated by instances of “magical death” (Cannon 1942). In such a case, the individual learns that he has been the target of spells, or curses, becomes emotionally agitated, loses a sense of control, rapidly sickens and dies (Helman 2001: 306–309). Stress resulting from culturally instilled beliefs produces the “nocebo effect,” which is the opposite of the placebo effect. One example of this phenomenon is the “bone pointing” magic among the Australian Aborigines (Figure 7.1). The perpetrator takes a kangaroo bone, sharpens it, and drills a hole at one end. He then inserts a strand of hair from his victim through the hole, tying it into a knot. Then the magician points the bone at the victim in front of witnesses. The results are horrifying. According to one eyewitness:

A man who discovers that he is being boned by an enemy is, indeed, a pitiable sight. He stands aghast, with his eyes staring at the treacherous pointer, and with his hands lifted as though to ward off the lethal medium, which he imagines is pouring into his body. ... His cheeks blanch and his eyes become glossy, and the expression of his face becomes horribly distorted, like that of one stricken by palsy. He attempts to shriek but usually the sound chokes his throat, and all that one might see is froth at his mouth. His body begins to tremble and the muscles twist involuntarily. He sways backwards and falls to the ground, and after a short time appears to be in a swoon but soon after he begins to writhe as if in mortal agony, and, covering his face with his hands, begins to moan. After a while he becomes more composed and crawls to his wurley [hut]. From this time onward he sickens and frets, refusing to eat and keeping aloof from the daily affairs of the tribe (in Cannon 1942: 172).

However, the victim can be saved by counter magic. According to Walter Cannon (1942: 173):

The Nangarri [medicine man], when persuaded to exercise his powers, goes through an elaborate ceremony and finally steps toward the awestricken relatives, holding in



Figure 7.1. Bone pointing magic among the Australian Aborigines. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

his fingers a small article—a stick, a bone, a pebble, or a talon—which, he avows, he has taken from the “boned” man and which was the cause of the affliction. And now, since it is removed, the victim has nothing to fear. The effect ... is astounding. The victim, until that moment far on the road to death, raises his head and gazes in wonderment at the object held by the medicine-man. He even lifts himself into a sitting position and calls for a drink of water. The crisis is passed, and the recovery is speedy and complete. Without the Nangarri’s intervention, the boned fellow ... would certainly have fretted himself to death. The implicit faith which a native cherishes in the magical powers of his tribal magician is said to result in cures which exceed anything recorded by the faith-healing disciples of more cultured communities.

Not all magic is for negative or evil ends. In the majority of cases, magic is performed for beneficial purposes (called white magic). Practitioners of white magic are well thought of. This form of magic is primarily aimed at curing sickness based on the knowledge of the magical properties of plants and animals. A considerable part of it is aimed at counteracting black magic and witchcraft, the real causes of sickness and death as many traditional people believe.

Efficacy of Magic

Magic works because many of the things it tries to accomplish will come to pass on their own. Rain making magic is conducted at the end of the dry season. The ritual is performed and eventually it will rain. The magic works. Many illnesses treated by magical means have a finite cycle. The patient will recover or go into remission with or without treatment. Hunting magic is performed and eventually game is killed (see chapter 10).

If the desired outcome is not achieved, it is the magician to blame, not magic itself (Howells 1962: 61). Perhaps a spell was uttered incorrectly, some omission occurred in the ritual, or counter magic was encountered. Failure of magic is itself concrete proof that ritual or spell was rendered incorrectly, not that magic failed. Also, there is the factor of human memory. We tend to remember successful instances and forget or explain away past failures. Magic, as far as we can remember, really works.

Divination

People abhor uncertainty and attempt to reduce it. One way to do this is to seek information magically so as to make better decisions regarding the present or the future. Divination is ubiquitous across cultures and history (see Curry 2010). Divination is a type of religious communication intended to ascertain information about the future or about things unknown by ritual means from non-human sources. It is a way of dealing with the vicissitudes of life by being forewarned. Divination as well plays an important role in diagnosis and healing (see Winkelman and Peek 2004). It is also a means of relating to the natural world (Harrop 2010) (see chapter 10).

The word “divination” has the same root as “divinity,” suggesting that deities have a part in it. For example, the prophecies of the ancient Greek oracle at Delphi involved the deity Apollo. However, not all forms of divination involve the gods. Divination among the Azande, for instance, is a technique that brings forth results automatically.

Divination employs omens as well as mechanical procedures through an experiment in the form of an oracle. Omens are based on signs, such as eclipses, comets, or lightning, on the basis of which certain actions are to be taken or avoided. The ritual suicide of members of the Heaven’s Gate cult was triggered by the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet in 1997 (see Figure 8.8), which was taken as a portent for the arrival of an alien spacecraft that was to convey the souls of followers to a designated destination (see chapter 8).

Animals serve as a means of divination as well. Ornithomancy involves reading signs from the pattern of bird flights. Reading the entrails of animals, called haruspication, is another method of gaining access to hidden information. This was particularly popular in the ancient world as well as among many contemporary traditional cultures.

Other techniques of divination include oneiromancy, the interpretation of dreams; necromancy, or divination by contacting the spirits of the dead, apantomancy, encountering an animal such as a black cat crossing one's path; dowsing, the use of a forked branch or copper rods to locate subterranean water; palmistry, examining the lines on the palms of the hand; phrenology, interpreting the structural features of the human skull; and tasseography, reading tea leaves. Astrology is reading heavenly bodies for signs and is based on the idea that the configuration of planets and stars impact human destiny (Figure 7.2). Other methods of extorting answers to hidden questions include the manipulation of objects, such as throwing dice or the knuckle bones of an animal, flipping a coin, reading Tarot cards, and operating a Ouija board.



Figure 7.2. A Nepalese astrologer foretelling the future. Photo by H. Sidky.

Another form of divination involving animals is scapulimancy, heating the shoulder blade of a sheep or deer over a fire and reading the cracks produced by the heat. An example of this is Naskapi divination, discussed in chapter 10. The varieties of methods of divination are nearly endless. As Howells (1962: 73) puts it:

People have stared at crystals, at fires, at fountains, at smoke, at the wind in the trees and the clouds in the sky and the surface of water; they have swung rings, shears, and sieves from pieces of string; they have stuck knives into books, thrown grain into the air, dropped hot wax into water, and so on and so on and so on.

In his book *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1937), Evans-Pritchard described the various divination techniques of the Azande. One of these is the “termite oracle.” A man simply has to find a termite mound and insert two branches of different trees into one of their runs and return the next day to determine which of the two the termites have consumed. When inserting the branches, the termites are addressed: if the answer is yes let the termites eat a branch of one kind, if no, let them eat the other. A prophecy of good or bad fortune depends upon which branch is eaten by the termites. When neither branch is eaten, it is said that the termites refused to talk and another termite mound is sought.

The most powerful oracle among the Azande is the poison oracle, described at length by Evans-Pritchard. This involves a strychnine-like poison called *benge*, which is fed to chickens (Figure 7.3). A particular characteristic of *benge* is that it kills some chickens and leaves others unharmed. Answers are determined on the basis of whether the chicken lives or dies. The poison itself is revered for its supernatural powers and various taboos exist in connection with its use, such as dietary restrictions and sexual abstinence on the part of the handler. The poison oracle is consulted in private, far from the villages and the harmful gaze of women. According to Evans-Pritchard (1937: 295):

There may be only one man or there may be several who have questions to put to the oracle. Each brings his fowls with him in an open-woven basket. As it has been agreed beforehand where the oracle consultation is to take place they know where to foregather. As each person arrives he hands over his basket of fowls to the operator who places it on the ground near him. A man who is used to acting as questioner sits opposite to it, a few feet away ... When everyone is seated they discuss in low tones whose fowl they will take first and how the questions shall be framed. Meanwhile the operator pours some water from a gourd at his side into his leaf cup and from the cup on the poison which effervesces. He mixes the poison and water with his finger-tips into a paste of the right consistency and, when instructed by the questioner, takes one of the fowls and draws down its wings over its legs and pins them down between and under his toes ... He takes his grass brush, twirls it round in the poison, and holds



Figure 7.3. The Azande poison oracle. The operator is shown feeding *benge* to a chicken. Answers are determined on the basis of whether the fowl lives or dies. From Edward Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (1937). By permission of Oxford University Press.

it in the leaf filter. He holds open the beak of the fowl and tips the end of the filter into it and squeezes the filter so that the liquid runs out of the paste into the throat of the fowl. He bobs the head of the fowl up and down to compel it to swallow the poison ... At this point the questioner, having previously been instructed by the owner of the fowl on the facts which he is to put before the oracle, commences to address the poison inside the fowl. He continues to address it for about a couple of minutes,

when a second dose of poison is usually administered ... The questioner does not cease to address the oracle, but puts his questions again and again in different forms, though always with the same refrain, 'If such is the case, poison oracle, kill the fowl,' or 'If such is the case, poison oracle, spare the fowl.' From time to time he interrupts his flow of oratory to give a technical order to the operator. He may tell him to give the fowl another dose of poison or to jerk it between his toes by raising and lowering his feet (this stirs up the poison inside the fowl). When the last dose of the poison is administered and he has further addressed it, he tells the operator to raise the fowl. The operator takes it in his hand and, holding it legs between his fingers so that it faces him ... gives it an occasional jerk backwards and forwards. The questioner redoubles his oratory as though the verdict depended upon his forensic efforts, and if the fowl is not already dead he then, after a further bout of oratory, tells the operator to put it on the ground. He continues to address the poison inside the fowl while they watch its movements on the ground ... The poison affects the fowl in many ways. Occasionally it kills them immediately after the first dose, while they are still on the ground. This seldom happens, for normally a fowl is not seriously affected till it is removed from the ground and jerked backwards and forwards in the hand. Then, if it is going to die, it goes through spasmodic stretchings of the body and closing of the wings and vomits. After several such spasms it vomits and expires in a final seizure. Some fowl appear quiet unaffected by the poison, and when, after being jerked backwards and forward for a while, they are flung on the ground peck about unconcernedly. Those fowls which are unaffected by the poison generally excrete as soon as they are put to earth. Some fowl appear little affected by the poison till put to earth, when they suddenly collapse and die. It is very seldom that a fowl seriously affected by the poison finally recovers.

On the importance of the poison oracle for the Azande, Evans-Pritchard (1937: 263) notes that:

The oracle tells a Zande what to do at every crisis of life. It reveals his enemies, tells him where he may seek safety from danger, shows him hidden mystic forces, and discloses past and future. Truly a Zande cannot live without his *benge*. To deprive him of that would be to deprive him of life itself.

The Oracle of Delphi

The most famous oracle in the Western world in ancient times was the Oracle of Delphi (Figure 7.4). The temple of Apollo at Delphi, in Greece, where the Oracle operated, was one of the most famous sacred sites in the ancient world. The Oracle was consulted by people from all over Greece on numerous matters, such as when to undertake a journey, begin a business enterprise, or fight a battle, and so forth.



Figure 7.4. “The Oracle of Delphi Entranced” by the German artist Heinrich Leutemann (1824–1905). Famous in the ancient world, the Oracle of Delphi was consulted by people on numerous matters.

The Oracle conveyed its messages through a female medium, called Pythia. In order to operate, the medium sat on a seat located above a geological fissure in the ground that emitted a divine gas. She inhaled the gas and entered into a trance (Broad 2006). Pythia received questions written on lead tablets and gave her enigmatic answers, which were interpreted by priests of the Oracle. The importance of the Oracle in Greek civilization cannot be underestimated. According to William Broad (2006: 12):

We have little hope of understanding the Greeks unless we understand the Oracle, her grip on the religious imagination, her reputation for accuracy, her sway, her pre-eminence. She moved effortlessly from the sacred to the mundane. The high priestess advised rulers, citizens, and philosophers on everything from their sex lives to affairs of the state, most specially by forecasting the outcome of wars and political actions. She did so thousands of times. The evidence suggests that her words repeatedly changed the course of history. Over a vast period—ages in which peoples came and went, empires rose and fell—the Oracle proved to be the most durable and compelling force ... She was the guide star of Greek civilization. We have no equivalent. No religious figure, no pope or imam, no celebrity or scientist commands the kind of respect

that the Greeks accorded the Oracle of Delphi. Her sacred precinct on the flanks of Mount Parnassus was the spiritual heart of the Hellenic world.

The Ordeal

Another type of divinatory exercise found across cultures is the ordeal in which the body of the accused person is put to a test in a trial by divination (see Bartlett 1986; Kerr et al., 1991; Roberts 1965). In the ordeal by fire the innocent are unharmed, but the guilty are burned. This could take the form of a red hot blade pressed against the skin, dipping a hand in boiling oil or water (Figure 7.5), licking a red-hot utensil, or walking barefooted over red-hot plowshares. John Biddulph (1880: 95) described the ordeal by fire among the Burusho people of Hunza:

Seven paces are measured and a red-hot axe-head is placed on the open palm of the accused, on which a green leaf has first been spread. He must then deposit the hot iron at the spot appointed seven paces distant, and should any mark of burn remain on his hand, it is a proof of guilt. The Vakeel [representative] of the Hunza on one occasion offered to subject himself to the ordeal for me, in order to clear his master of a false accusation.



Figure 7.5. The ordeal of boiling water. After a fourteenth-century German manuscript.

Anthropologist Ralph Linton (1933: 156–157) described the ordeal by boiling water among the Tanala of Madagascar:

Water was boiled in a large pot and a stone fastened to a cord, like a plumb-line. The stone was dropped vertically into the pot, but was not submerged. The cord was attached to a stick which rested across the mouth of the pot so that the stone hung about 5 mm above the water. The suspect's hand was washed and examined to see whether he had any scars on it, also whether it had been rubbed with medicine. After the *Anakandriana* [ritual specialist] had made the usual invocation, the accused approached the pot and seized the stone from below, plunging his hand into the boiling water. He then plunged his hand in cold water. The hand was bandaged and the accused shut up in a guarded house. The next morning all assembled to see his condition. If there were blisters on the hand he was guilty. If accused of sorcery he was killed on the spot, or, if the king was merciful, he was expelled and all his goods seized.

The ordeal by water involved tying an accused person's hands and feet and tossing him in a lake or pool of water. The ordeal was intended to test the suspect's buoyancy by immersion in a pool or pond (Figure 7.6). Floating was a sign of guilt, but if the suspect sank, and often drowned, this was a sign of innocence. The swimming ordeal was used during the European witch-hunts of the 16th and 17th centuries (Sidky 1997: 125).



Figure 7.6. The ordeal by water. A page from *Witches Apprehended, Examined and Executed* (1613). London: E. Marchant.

In this chapter I have discussed magic and divination. Divination is an aspect of magic and magic is an aspect of religion. Altogether these beliefs and practices may be subsumed under the category of paranormal. The relationship between religion and the paranormal is the topic of the next chapter.

Religion and the Paranormal

Cognitive science has shown how the human mind is predisposed toward populating the world and universe with supernatural or paranormal beings, such as ghosts, souls, spirits, demons, aliens, and gods (see chapter 2). It comes as no surprise to find that large numbers of people today believe in the existence of such paranormal agents. Harvey Irwin (1993: 1) defines the term paranormal as “hypothesized processes that in principle are physically impossible or outside the realm of human capabilities as presently conceived by conventional scientists.” According to Erich Goode (2000: 18):

Events, phenomena, or powers that scientists regard as contrary to the laws of nature are referred to as “paranormal.” ... Paranormal claims or stories invoke or make use of forces, factors, dynamics, or causes that scientists regard as inconsistent with a satisfying, naturalistic or materialistic, cause-and-effect explanation.

Or as James Lett (1997: 110) has put it, paranormal refers to “putative phenomena whose existence would in fact violate the rules of reality revealed by science and common sense.” He adds:

the term “paranormal” could be applied to an extremely diverse set of transcendental notions, including everything from gods, demons, angels, and souls to extrasensory perception, UFOs, astrology, and the Loch Ness Monster. It would include everything

that anthropologists have traditionally called magical, religious, as well as everything that could be called occult, superstitious, or pseudoscientific (Lett 1991: 305).

Despite widespread belief in such phenomena, the paranormal “is frustratingly elusive.” As sociologist Christopher Bader et al., (2010: 8) put it:

The more than sixty years of reported UFO encounters have still not produced conclusive evidence of extraterrestrials. Purported films, hair samples, photos, footprint casts, and eyewitness reports have failed to convince scientists that the woods are home to a giant ape. Ghosts remain as mysterious as ever, despite tales as old as the written word.

Thus, as Tony Lawrence (2001: 248) observes, “while all argument is against these phenomena, all belief is for them.” According to Lewis Wolpert (2006: 150):

Some 30 per cent of Americans believe in ghosts, 70 per cent in angels, and as many as one in ten has claimed to have seen, or had contact with, a ghost. These experiences include not just ghostly apparitions but also unusual smells and the strong sense of someone or something being present. In addition 25 per cent claim to have had a telepathic experience, and 11 per cent have seen a flying saucer. Around 50 per cent of the population believes in ESP (extrasensory perception), and many US adults have themselves had experience of ESP.

Paranormal beliefs are disseminated through fictional television programs with paranormal themes, purported reality ghost-hunting shows, conferences, internet blogs, and chat rooms. Thus, what was once part of a fringe and hidden subculture has become a full blown aspect of popular culture (Bader et al., 2010: 6).

The relationship between religion and paranormal beliefs is a complex one. For some the paranormal provides an alternative to conventional religious beliefs. Among Christians there are differences in paranormal beliefs in relation to how they view the Bible. There are those who espouse a literal understanding of the Bible and those who believe that the Bible has to be interpreted in light of current events. The latter are more likely to believe in the paranormal. This group also displays higher levels of paranormal beliefs than those who disbelieve in the Bible altogether. It seems that the rationalist who repudiates conventional religion is likely to also reject unconventional supernatural beliefs. According to Bader et al., (2010: 97):

This implies that a certain level of religiosity indeed opens up a person to the paranormal. For someone who believes that the Bible is a holy book but is open to interpretation, it can be a small step from Jesus to flying saucers.

The highest level of interest in the paranormal is found among people who have mid-levels of interest in and commitment to conventional religion.

Someone who attends church *sometimes* and believes that there is *something* supernatural about the Bible is most likely to develop an interest in ... paranormal concepts. It appears that religion can have a conditioning effect that, unless actively curtailed, indeed makes the paranormal but a step away (Bader et al., 2010: 99).

Paranormal beliefs, as mentioned above, have a mystical quality (Wolpert 2006: 138). Like magic, such beliefs hold mysterious possibilities. They are comforting for they open up the possibility of an afterlife and the soul and hidden or occult potential powers that may be cultivated in the quest for personal spiritual discovery and enlightenment. For example, Ronald Finucane's (2001: 17) historical survey of ghosts and apparition reports in the Western tradition shows that "ghosts function primarily as a mechanism whereby beliefs about an afterlife are reinforced."

Paranormal beliefs share with religion the premise that reality cannot be explained by conventional science or materialism (Bader et al., 2010: 85; Goode 2000: 177–186). The presupposition is that "there are exceptions to materialistic or physical causality" and that "strange spiritual agencies and forces, unfathomable to human understanding, are responsible for what occurs in nature" (Kurtz 1986: 454). This is the epitome of magical thinking. For this reason, paranormal beliefs are remarkably resistant to critical scientific scrutiny and masses of contradictory evidence. As philosopher Paul Kurtz (1986: 456) has put it:

Magical, occult, religious thinking persists in many areas of life, particularly when we are beset by quandaries. It is on the borderlands of knowledge and in areas concerning human meaning and purpose that the transcendental leap is especially tempting. The dissatisfaction with ambiguity and the quest for order often tempts us to invoke unknown occult or magical causes.

Thus, because at any point in time our understanding of the world and universe is incomplete we have the proclivity to stretch ahead through imaginative constructions. In this way we impart powers and realities to the universe that express our wishes and meet our psychological requisites.

Ghosts and Entity Encounters

The belief in ghosts has great antiquity. Entities comparable to our conception of ghosts are mentioned in the ancient Sumerian text *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 4000 BC). Despite major strides in our scientific understanding of the world

and cosmos, ghosts and apparitions are still with us, “untouched,” as Lawrence (2001: 248) puts it, “by the microscope or the slide rule.”

Ghosts appear in varying forms (see Evans 2001). There are degrees of life-likeness that can range from vague shrouded phantasms to life-like materializations. Usually, they are dressed in clothes and may or may not have feet. Revenants are spirits of the dead, seen only by a chosen percipient, usually a loved one. Religious visions, which are also an example of an entity-encounter, are similar to revenant experiences. Haunters are spirits of the dead attached to a particular locality and seen by independent percipients unacquainted with the apparent while living. Crisis apparitions are ghosts of known persons seen at the moment of death or some other crisis. Doppelgangers are phantasms of a second self. Bedroom visitors (Figure 8.1) are entities called “old hag,” or “mara,” who appear during the night and seize people, causing sleep paralysis (Hufford 2001: 31). In the same category are extraterrestrial beings, presumed occupants of UFOs, who clandestinely contact private individuals for the purpose of abducting them or to subject them to nefarious medical experiments (see Matheson 1998).

The belief in ghosts and related paranormal beings is based on the contradictory premise that non-physical entities create manifestly physical effects (Nickell 2001: 217). All the evidence is anecdotal and subjective. Scientific support is absent (Nickell 2003: 62–71). Much of this phenomenon is attributable to perceptual illusions and hoaxes. Many ghostly encounters and encounters with other worldly beings, such as extraterrestrials, are the consequences of hypnagogic (falling asleep) and hypnopompic (waking up) hallucinations, when imaginary phenomena appear to be real (Nickell 2001: 215). Altered states of consciousness (ASC), brought on by various means, are also conducive to ghost and entity-encounter experiences.

Suggestion is a powerful factor in perceptions of ghosts. Individuals in a heightened state of excitement can influence others into accepting their beliefs, a phenomenon called *folie à deux*, “folly of two,” a shared fantasy. Similarly, psychological contagion—the dissemination of an idea/behavior from individual to individual in a group—plays a role in multiple sightings of ghosts and other numinous beings. As Joe Nickell (2001: 218) has observed:

From simple wishful thinking to the effects of suggestion, to the realistic experiences of “waking dreams” or other dissociative states (especially the tendency of some imaginative people to fantasize), beliefs affect what people see, hear, and otherwise experience ... “Seeing is believing,” goes the old saying, but it may be added that sometimes “believing is seeing” also.

Deceptive illusions, such as mistaking natural phenomena for supernatural ones, i.e., noises made by neighbors outside taken as events inside the house, can generate perceptions of ghostly encounters.



Figure 8.1. Some entity encounters take the form of bedroom visitors that appear at night and seize people causing sleep paralysis. From *Blicke in die Traum-und Geisterwelt* (1854). Leipzig: F. Voigt.

Hoaxes play a major role in otherworldly encounters, a notorious example being séance-room materializations. Perception can change a hoaxed event into a paranormal one in the minds of audiences. People's own expectations can lead them to misperceive. America's most renowned case of haunting, the Amityville Horror, (Figure 8.2) which has been the subject of numerous books and movies, and which involves elements from nearly every genre of ghost lore, was a hoax perpetrated for monetary gain (Nickell 2001: 218). Hoaxes are also behind an entire category of physical hauntings referred to as poltergeist phenomena, which involve objects moving on their own, dishes breaking, and the overturning of furniture. Physical evidence in the form of ghost photography is attributable to hoaxes or accidents. Accidental images are due to rebounding flashes, double exposures, stuck shutters, simple reflections, lens flares, etc. (Nickell 2001: 222).



Figure 8.2. The Amityville Horror house, site of one of the most renowned cases of haunting in America. The story behind this case was a hoax perpetrated for monetary gain. Photo by Seulat.

Then there is “pareidolia,” images the mind perceives in random patterns. “Ghosts (or angels, the Virgin Mary, or other entities) may thus appear in foliage, shadow patterns, clouds, or other sources of random shapes that may be framed in a photograph” (Nickell 2001: 222). An excellent example is the NASA photograph of “The Face on Mars,” an image of a human face seen in the random light and

shadows on the Martian landscape, interpreted by some as evidence of an extra-terrestrial civilization (Figure 8.3). Theory of mind operations and our agency detection mechanism are crucial to such interpretations (see chapter 2).

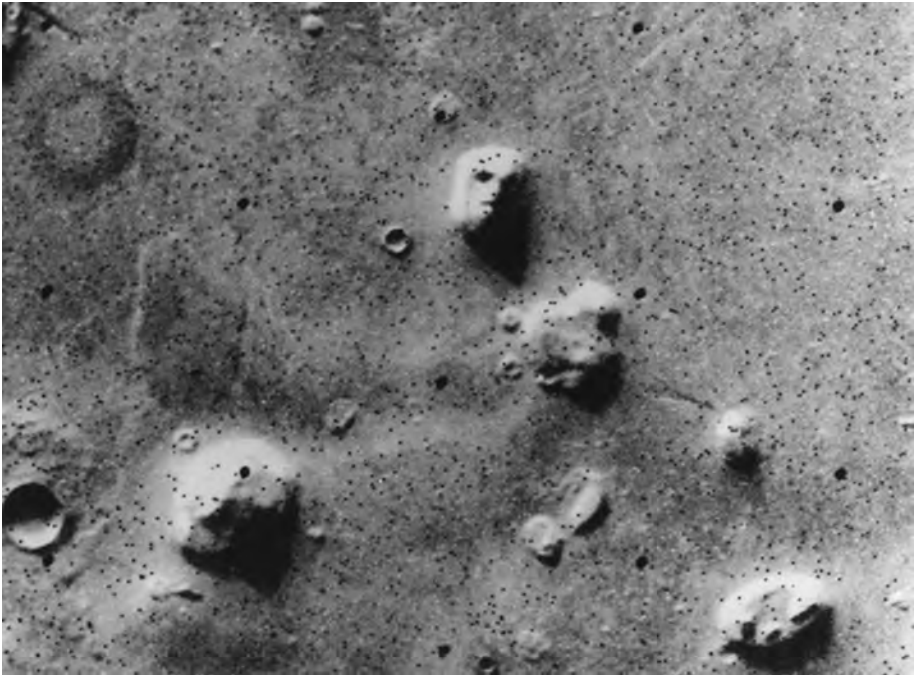


Figure 8.3. The Face on Mars. The random light and shadows in this image of the Cydonia Region of Mars taken during the 1976 NASA mission gives the illusion of a human face. This is an example of pareidolia. NASA Photo PIA01141.

UFOs and UFO Religions

The UFO (unidentified flying objects, a.k.a. flying saucers) phenomenon began on June 24, 1947, when a pilot by the name of Kenneth Arnold reported seeing crescent-shaped objects that looked like saucers skipping across the surface of water flying over Mount Rainier, in Washington State, while he was searching for a downed airplane (Thompson 1991: 1–10). The story was quickly picked up by the news media and disseminated worldwide. This was followed two weeks later by the Roswell UFO incident, on July 7, 1947, when a flying object (a secret Project Mogul spy balloon) crashed on a ranch near Roswell, New Mexico. Shortly afterwards rumors spread that the United States government had recovered an alien spacecraft or flying saucer at Roswell (Figure 8.4). The modern myth of



Figure 8.4. Brigadier General Ramey and Colonel Thomas Dubose examine the debris of the Roswell UFO. The purported remains of the alien spacecraft were actually the debris from a secret military spy balloon (Project Mogul). The Roswell event contributed significantly to the rise of the modern myth of UFOs. Courtesy, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* Collection, Special Collections, The University of Texas at Arlington Library, Arlington, Texas.

UFOs began with these two incidents (cf. Ellwood 1995: 393; Peebles 1994; Saler et al., 1997). These events were followed by thousands of new sightings of alien aircraft from around the world, both from eyewitnesses and from those who made direct contact with the occupants of the mysterious flying objects. Believers number in the millions. However, like the belief in ghosts, all evidence is anecdotal and subjective. There is not a single incontrovertible case that holds up to scientific scrutiny.

Upon close inspection, most UFOs become IFOs, identified flying objects, such as stars, meteors, the moon, planets such as Venus, Mars, Jupiter, balloons, helicopters, military aircraft, missiles, re-entering rockets, satellites, search lights, flares, ground lights, birds, bolt lightning, kites, cloud formations and other visual anomalies (Klass 2003: 124–131; Kurtz 1986: 435). Many sightings and virtually all photographs and videos of supposed UFOs are hoaxes (cf., Peebles 1994: 47–50). The few cases that have not been explained due to an absence of corroborating evidence are enveloped with a sense of mystery often stemming from a lack of information that might allow for identification, or over-reliance on poor data (such as less-than-reliable early radar systems). Such incidents are attributed to unknown extraterrestrial sources and celestial mysteries and are therefore transformed into paranormal phenomena.

While some observers during the 1950s sought to investigate UFOs scientifically, the experience also acquired religious interpretations and the purported visitors from outer space were cast in the role of “spaceborne saviors” (Ellwood 1995: 393). The noted psychologist Carl Jung, in his book *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies* (1959), called space aliens “technological angels,” who had assumed the role once played by gods, angels, and other celestial saviors. The UFO experience itself acquired the form of a salvationist myth cast in the idiom of science and technology. Such beliefs tell us more about human psychology and the need to believe in mysterious possibilities than about actual extraterrestrial beings. As Kurtz (1986: 443) observes:

UFOlogy is the mythology of the space age. Rather than angels dancing on the heads of pins, we now have spacecraft and extraterrestrials. It is the product of the creative imagination. It serves a poetic and existential function. It seeks to give deeper roots and bearings in the universe. It is an expression of our hunger for mystery, our demand for something more, our hope for transcendental meaning. The gods of Mt. Olympus have been transformed into space voyagers, transporting us by our dreams to other realms. The transcendental temptation has again overcome us. And so we see what we want. We fashion a universe to our liking.

The 1950s produced a number of UFO “contactees,” prophet-like figures of UFO-ism who in books and lectures related narratives of personal encounters with alien beings (see Saliba 1995a). The first contactee to transmit spiritual wisdom from alien visitors was George Adamski (1891–1967), coauthor of *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953). The message from the extraterrestrials was that things could be better, that war and poverty could be overcome, and that there are technologically superior beings willing to assist humankind in this enterprise, ideas surprisingly reminiscent of themes portrayed in the 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Figure 8.5).



Figure 8.5. Klaatu and Gort depart in their flying saucer. A screen shot from the trailer of the science fiction movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) by 20th Century Fox. The film depicts a humanoid alien emissary called Klaatu and his fearsome robot Gort who come to earth in a flying saucer to give humans an ultimatum regarding their violent ways. This movie had a major influence on UFO contactee discourse during the 1950s.

At this time, UFO beliefs acquired the characteristics of mediumistic spiritualism, with a number of individuals claiming that they could “channel” messages from the “space brothers.” A good example is George King (1919–1997), who founded a UFO religion in 1955 known as the Aetherius Society. King claimed to channel

messages from cosmic masters of the “interplanetary parliament” an extraterrestrial or galactic oversight group. According to King, Jesus is a higher being from Venus, who communicates with people by means of a human channel. However, Jesus also travels in flying saucers, which are orbiting the earth to safeguard it from evil forces and to warn people of impending disasters (Saliba 1995b: 28). Thus, UFO sightings are of great significance to members of this group who carefully watch and interpret such phenomena.

Other groups that accept psychic contactees as channels of space aliens have also created organizations to spread the message of the extraterrestrials from far-away galaxies with themes of salvation, prosperity, spiritual development, and healing (Palmer 2004: 12–30; Saliba 1995b: 23). These organizations become cults centered around contactees whose ability to channel alien messages leads them to assume the role of a prophet. An interesting and detailed first-hand sociological study of an apocalyptic channel-based saucer religion associated with the prophet Marian Keech is provided by Festinger et al., in the classic study *When Prophecy Fails* (1956).

Over time a transformation took place in spiritual UFOism from benevolent to malevolent, resulting in a series of reports about alien abductions, “missing time,” bizarre medical procedures, and sexual assaults (Clancy 2005; Ellwood 1995: 397; Matheson 1998). Abductions take place at night in secrecy and are in most cases recalled under hypnosis. Such experiences are related in Whitley Strieber’s books *Communion* (1987) and *Transformation* (1988). The most celebrated and well-documented case of UFO abduction is that of Betty and Barney Hill (September 19, 1961). As Robert Ellwood (1995: 397) has put it, “these accounts strongly recall parallel narratives in folklore, mythology, and the psychology of religion.”

The Raëlian Movement

The largest UFO religion in the world is the Raëlian Movement (see Palmer 2004). This religion was established by a French racecar driver and journalist named Claude Vorilhon after he met an extraterrestrial being called Yahweh from the planet Elohim during a mountain hike near Auvergne, France, in 1973 (Figure 8.6). The event is related in Vorilhon’s work *The Book Which Tells the Truth* (1974), available in English together with several other works as *Intelligent Design: Message from the Designers* (2005). Over a six day period, Yahweh instructed Vorilhon on the true meaning of the Bible, gave him new commandments, and selected him as the messenger of the Elohim (Palmer 2000: 249). Following this encounter Vorilhon changed his name to Raël, a moniker given to him by Yahweh meaning representative of the Elohim, and began spreading

the message of the extraterrestrial visitor. The message was to warn people that since the nuclear explosion in Hiroshima in 1945 humans have entered the “Age of Apocalypse.” Humans have the choice of obliterating themselves with nuclear weapons or rising to the level of planetary consciousness to become eligible to receive advanced scientific knowledge from the extraterrestrials (Palmer 1995: 106).



Figure 8.6. The Prophet Rael standing in front of a model of the Elohim spacecraft he encountered. Courtesy of the International Raëlian Movement, www.rael.org.

Beginning as a contactee circle, the Raëlian Movement emerged as a full-fledged religion in 1976 (Palmer 2004; Reece 2007: 186–191). The group’s symbol is the swastika inside the Star of David in the form of a medallion. The Raëlians espouse liberal views on sexuality and are advocates for world peace, democracy, nonviolence, environmentalism, genetic modification, and cloning.

The Raëlians are organized hierarchically. At the top is Rael, the Guide of Guides, then follows Bishop Guides, Priest Guides, and then there are Animators, Assistant Animators, and finally there are the Probationers. Raëlism has an estimated 65 thousand followers and offices in 52 countries (Palmer 2004: 20).

According to Vorilhon, all life on earth was created by the Elohim, extraterrestrial scientists who terraformed planet earth and bioengineered humans from their own DNA. The Raélians reject Darwinian evolutionism and espouse a form of evolution by design of extraterrestrial scientists who visited the earth in the past—"an atheist intelligent design theory." These ideas are reminiscent of Erich von Däniken's (1968) "ancient astronaut theory" and the works of the ancient astronaut advocates Zecharia Sitchin (1976, 1990) and Jean Sendy (1973). According to the narrative provided on the Raëlian website:

Thousands of years ago, scientists from another planet came to Earth and created all forms of life, including human beings, whom they created in their own image. References to these scientists and their work can be found in the ancient texts of many cultures. Due to their highly advanced technology, they were considered as gods by our primitive ancestors and often referred to as '*Elohim*' which in ancient Hebrew meant 'Those who came from the sky.'

Despite being a plural word, *Elohim* was mistranslated over time to the singular 'God' reference that appears in modern-day Bibles.

Nevertheless, these people who came from the sky (the *Elohim*) educated humanity through the ages with the help of various messengers (also called prophets) with whom they had made contact. Each messenger was given a message suitable for the level of understanding prevailing at the time, with the primary purpose of instilling basic principles of non-violence and respect. Once humanity reached a sufficient level of scientific understanding, the *Elohim* decided to make themselves more visible in UFO sightings and to conceive their final message.

Throughout history, according to Vorilhon, the extraterrestrials have maintained contact with humanity through such individuals as Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, and Joseph Smith, immortal prophets born from the union of mortal women and Elohim. Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Mormonism are therefore religions inspired by the extraterrestrial scientists.

It is prophesized that the Elohim will come back to earth before the year 2035 to share their vast scientific knowledge with humanity. This event will transpire on two conditions: first, that the Raélians spread the message of the Elohim as widely as possible to establish peace on earth; second, that they build an embassy ("the Third Temple of Israel" in Jerusalem) to publicly receive the extraterrestrial emissaries when they land on earth.

In his book *The Extraterrestrials Took Me to Their Planet* (1975), also available in English in *Intelligent Design: Message from the Designers* (2005), Vorilhon claims that during a second encounter the extraterrestrials took him to the planet Elohim, where he learned about meditation techniques to enhance telepathy

and grow new brain cells, DNA experiments, and their system of government, described as *geniocracy*, or rule by the most intelligent (Palmer 2000: 249). The latter is a utopian ideal the Raëlians wish to impose upon society.

The Raëlians hold four annual festivals, commemorating Raël's visitations and revelations, during which new members are initiated through "transmission of the cellular plan." This involves Vorilhon or a Bishop in the organization dipping his hand in water and placing it on the novice's forehead. Through this procedure the initiate's genetic code is recorded by Elohim computers in spaceships flying overhead for future cloning if the individual is worthy (Palmer 2000: 250).

To become members, the initiates must disavow all other religions and send a letter of apostasy to the religious organization of their birth. They must also sign a contract authorizing a mortician to cut out a piece of their forehead ("the third eye") upon their death to be stored awaiting the arrival of the Elohim (Palmer 1995: 107). Members are forbidden from drinking alcohol or caffeine, smoking cigarettes, or using recreational drugs. This is necessary to maintain the purity of their genetic code.

Raëlian practice involves daily meditation while listening to a tape to enhance telepathic powers, grow new brain cells, and achieve harmony with the universe. There are also monthly group oxygenation and guided relaxation sessions.

The Raëlians do not believe in a soul or reincarnation, but through the process of accelerated cloning and brain transfer, something which they feel is a scientific possibility, a person could be resurrected and live perpetually through science. Cloning is how the Raëlians strive for immortality.

In 1997, the Raëlians established a company called Clonaid to conduct research on human cloning and offer cloning services to investors. The company made the controversial and unverified claim in 2002 that they cloned a baby girl named Eve, the first human clone. The group garnered considerable publicity as a result of this announcement (Palmer 2004: 177–194).

There are a number of controversies centered on the movement. These include their liberal sexual attitudes, views on cloning, rejection of Darwinian evolutionism, the swastika symbol, and their ideal of *geniocracy* as the basis for government (Palmer 2000: 251).

Heaven's Gate UFO Cult

Among the most notorious and tragic UFO religions was HIM (Human Individual Metamorphosis), later known as Heaven's Gate (Balch 1995; Goode 2000: 186–189; Reece 2007: 150–155). It appeared in the 1970s and was led by a middle

aged man and woman who called themselves “Bo” (Marshall Herf Applewhite) and “Peep” (Bonnie Lu Nettles), “Do and Ti,” or the “Two,” after the witnesses mentioned in the Book of Revelations. Their doctrine was a mixture of Christian elements, such as the idea of physical resurrection, Rapture, and the Kingdom of Heaven, and UFOlogy, such as the notion that UFOs are piloted by benevolent spiritual beings. Their theology also made reference to television programs such as *Star Trek* and *The X-Files* (Goode 2000: 187).

Applewhite (Figure 8.7) presented himself as a messianic figure who, like Jesus before him, had been sent to earth by his “Father” from the “Kingdom of Heaven” as a “Representative” of “the Next Evolutionary Level” to lead people to the Kingdom of Heaven. This was portrayed by Applewhite as the same message as that of Christ two millennia ago: “the same ‘grace’ that was available at the end of the Representative’s [Jesus] mission 2000 years ago is available now with our presence.”

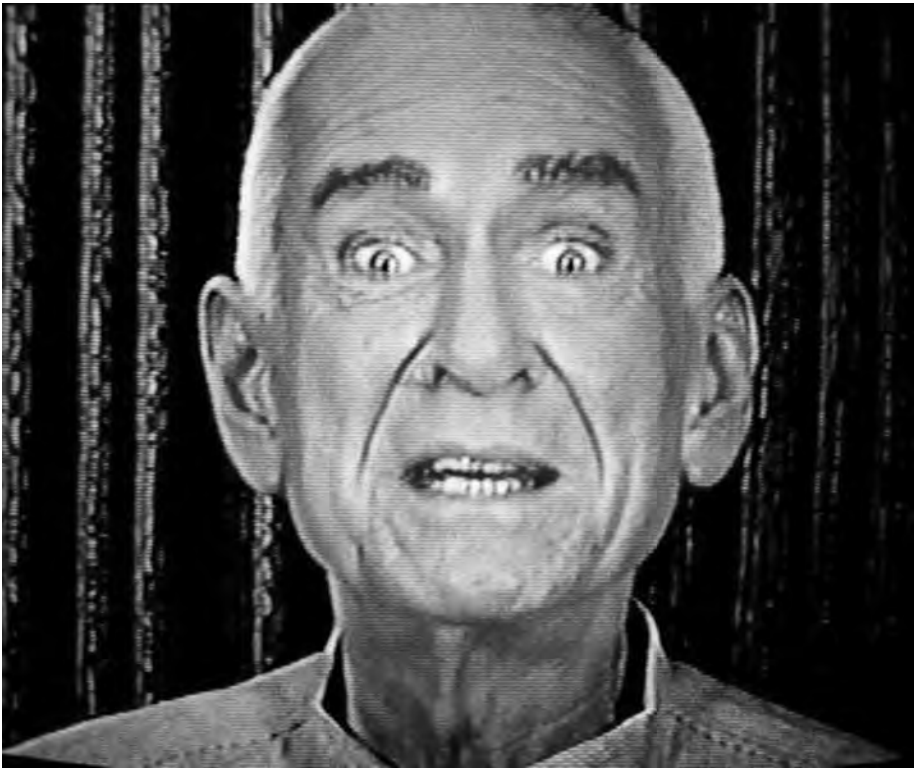


Figure 8.7. Marshall Herf Applewhite, prophet of the Heaven's Gate UFO cult, proselytizing in a recruitment video.

Applewhite and Nettles taught that millions of years ago, aliens had planted the seed of humanity on planet earth (the Garden) and that the time for reaping the harvest of that experiment was at hand. Spiritually advanced individuals would be physically transported in spacecraft by aliens to the “Evolutionary Level Above Human,” or the “Kingdom of Heaven,” where as androgynous immortal beings they will join UFO crews. Only a few will be selected for this transition (i.e., hard-core members of the cult), while the earth and all those who remained behind will be demolished. The group’s apocalyptic declaration was that:

The earth’s present “civilization” is about to be recycled—“spaded under” in order that the planet might be refurbished. Its inhabitants are refusing to evolve. The human “weeds” have taken over the garden and disturbed its usefulness beyond repair.

During years of preparation, followers were instructed to sever all ties to family and friends and their earthly existence, overcome sexual desires and other human frailties, and undergo rigorous spiritual exercises, called “the overcoming process,” to prepare for the transition, i.e., being picked up by flying saucers. As part of their preparations, several members of the group, including Applewhite, underwent voluntary castration as a way of overcoming their sexual proclivities (Balch and Taylor 2002: 220).

Initially, the transition to the Level Above Human was thought to involve an actual physical ascension to the flying saucers, in a kind of “technological rapture” (Lewis 2000: 149). Later, Applewhite revised this view by stating that the ascension or departure from earth by the group would be spiritual in nature by members shedding their human vessels or bodies. This alternative was inspired by Nettles’s (Ti) death in 1985 of liver cancer. The reasoning was that Ti had left her vessel and returned to the Next Level, therefore cult members could do likewise by committing suicide. The idea that suicide was a viable option was the logical extension of Heaven’s Gate ideology and was not prompted by external threats or exacted through coercion (Balch and Tylor 2002: 209), as in the case of Peoples Temple or the Branch Davidians (see chapter 16).

The decisive event for the group was the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet in 1997. An internet posting by an outsider, which the group retrieved, stated that a massive UFO hidden behind the comet was coming to earth. Applewhite attributed apocalyptic significance to this event and considered it as the sign that the departure from earth was at hand (Figure 8.8). The group declared that:

its arrival is joyously very significant to us at “Heaven’s Gate.” The joy is that our Older Member in the Evolutionary Level Above Human (the “Kingdom of Heaven”) has made it clear to us that the Hale-Bopp’s approach is the “marker” we’ve been waiting for—the time for the arrival of the spacecraft from the Level Above Human to take



Figure 8.8. Comet Hale-Bopp. The ritual suicide of members of the Heaven's Gate cult was triggered by the appearance of Hale-Bopp in 1997, which was taken as a portent for the arrival of an alien spacecraft (hidden behind the comet) that was to convey the souls of followers to a designated destination. Photo © Philipp Salzgeber.

us home to “Their World”—in the literal Heavens. Our 22 years of classroom here on planet Earth is finally coming to a conclusion—“graduation” from the Human Evolutionary Level. We are happily prepared to leave “this world” and go with Ti’s crew.

To ascend to the UFO arriving with the comet, Applewhite and 38 of his followers voluntarily committed suicide by ingesting Phenobarbital and vodka and placing

plastic bags over their heads to cause suffocation. Their bodies were discovered on March 26, 1997. They were in their bunk beds dressed in uniforms with armbands that said “Heaven’s Gate Away Team,” and packed suitcases by their feet. As James Lewis (2000: 146) has observed:

The deaths of Heaven’s Gate members embody a sinister aspect of apocalyptic religiosity, one that propels millenarians to engage in radical acts of preemptive violence as a way of invoking the final end.

In the end, Heaven’s Gate turned out to be just another irrational suicide cult, one of many in recent history.

In the context of a rapidly transforming global cultural landscape, as grand narratives have eroded, new ideologies have appeared to fill the part once played by “conventional religions.” Paranormal beliefs, such as those discussed in this chapter, are among these new ideologies.

Religion: Organization and Evolutionary Patterns

In his discussion of the fundamental patterns of religion, Anthony Wallace (1966: 52–96) surmises that “religion is not a single internally coherent, carefully programmed set of ritual beliefs.” Instead, he argues that religions are constructed from thirteen elementary building blocks. These include: (1) prayer, customary ways of addressing supernatural beings; (2) music, involving dancing, singing, chanting, and playing instruments; (3) physiological exercise, procedures to induce psycho-physiological states of ecstasy, including drugs, sensory deprivation, mortification of the flesh, and deprivation of food, water, or air; (4) exhortation, addressing another person who has close communication with the supernatural world; (5) reciting the code, statements of pantheon and cosmology that assert what is true, such as myth; (6) simulation, such as magic, witchcraft, and ritual; (7) mana, the transmission of sacred qualities from powerful things through touch; (8) taboo, prohibition against touching certain things; (9) feasting, the consumption of food in a religious context; (10) sacrifice, immolation, offerings, and payment of fees; (11) congregation, or communal activities; (12) inspiration, cultivation of experiences attributed to divine intervention, such as revelation and mystical experience; (13) symbolism, the manufacture and use of representational objects.

These are the minimal units of religious behavior. They can be combined into constellations of behaviors to make up “ritual complexes.” Ritual complexes, together with the beliefs associated with them, make up “cult institutions.” Wallace

(1966: 75) defines a cult institution 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.” There are often several loosely related cult institutions that make up the religion of a society. As Wallace (1966: 89) puts it, “The religion of any community is ... more a conglomeration than synthesis of its various cult institutions.” One religion differs from another in terms of the organization of its cult institutions. Wallace identifies four cult institutions: individualistic, shamanic, communal, and ecclesiastical.

Individualistic Cults

The most basic cult institution is the individualistic cult. Rituals are performed by individuals on their own initiative and for their own objectives and benefits. Prayers, customs related to luck, taboos, and protective rites, are all categorized as individualistic rituals. There are no specialist intermediaries, such as shamans or priests.

An example of an individualistic cult is the vision quest among the Great Plains Indians. This was an effort to obtain spiritual power through direct contact with the supernatural world. Success in life depended upon the acquisition of such power, whether in hunting, battle, love, or illness. In some cases, the spirits themselves would contact a person in a dream or while out alone. In most instances, however, individuals had to deliberately seek out spiritual power by fasting, isolation, and mortification of the flesh. Anthropologist Robert Lowie (1883–1957) describes the vision quest among the Crow:

Most North American Indians attached great importance to visions, and in the Plains these took precedence in religious life. ... The normal procedure was to go into solitude, fast and thirst for four days, and supplicate the spirits to take pity on the sufferer. A Crow usually cut off a finger joint of his left hand or in some other way mortified his flesh by way of arousing supernatural pity ... a lad grew up, constantly hearing that all success in life was derived from visions, hence, being eager for horses and for social recognition, an adolescent would go out to fast, praying for rich booty, for a chance to strike a coup, or for some other benefit. A mature man or woman would seek a vision whenever a special cause arose—if his children were sick, if he had lost his property, if he longed to revenge the killing of a close relative, and so on. ... The supernatural beings who befriended a man vary enormously in character. Animals were very frequent visitants of Plain Indians, buffalo, elk, bears, eagles (sometimes conceived as birds producing thunder by flapping their wings), and sparrow hawks constantly figure in the narrative, but also quiet lowly beasts such as dogs or rabbits. ... The spirit normally taught the Crow a sacred song, instructed him on how he must dress in battle or

if a man was to become a doctor what medicines or curing devices he must use, and frequently imposed certain taboos as to diet or behavior. Any infraction of the rules was liable to precipitate a loss of the guardian's protection or even a dire calamity. Often the visionary not only wore some token of his vision or painted it on, say, his shield cover, but also on the strength of successive visions assembled ingredients to build up a "medicine bundle," i.e., a wrapper containing a set of sacred objects indicated by the spirit (Lowie 1954: 157–160).

Shamanic Cults

Shamanic cult institutions involve a part-time specialist, called a shaman, who works on behalf of clients for a fee (see chapter 3). Shamans are considered to be the most ancient of all religious practitioners and are generally associated with the culture of hunting-gathering peoples. The shaman's power is based on personal, direct visionary contact with supernatural beings. The shaman enters into an altered state of consciousness during which he either travels to the realm of the spirits or absorbs spirits into his body and uses their powers for the benefit of clients. As Howells (1962: 125) has put it:

A shaman is a medium and diviner, but his powers do not stop here. He differs from men in general, and resembles a witch, because he can shift gears and move in the plane of the supernatural. He can go at will to the other world, and he can see and treat with souls or spirits, meeting them on their own ground. And that is his business. He differs from the witch, who exists solely in the head of the victimized, in that he is an actual person, who not only conducts his profession publicly, making people think that he goes on brave errands among ghosts and goblins, but in many if not most cases really believes he has the powers he claims ... he acts as though he can and does do the things which are traditionally his to do, and the public believes and acclaims him.

Shamanic rituals seek to obtain the assistance of supernatural beings to address the needs of clients for improving health, protection, divination, success in hunting, and related matters.

Communal Cults

Communal cult institutions involve groups of laymen who perform calendrical or occasional rituals for the benefits of an agglomeration of people, such as particular kinship groups, age grades, secret societies, or entire communities. Full-time religious specialists are absent. While rituals may include specialists, such as a shaman, professional speaker, or dancer hired to perform specific functions, the

event is conducted under the auspices of the group. Examples of communal cult institutions are agricultural rituals, ancestor cult rituals, and puberty rites.

Ancestral cults are found among clans and other descent groups. The basic assumption is that the spirits of deceased lineage members remain behind after death and become ancestral spirits. These dead ancestors monitor the behavior and interests of living members of the descent group. They can render favors or punish people for social and moral infractions. Rituals are conducted to intercede with ancestral spirits for favors or to appease their wrath. The belief in ancestral spirits functions to maintain social solidarity and group cooperation.

Anthropologist John Middleton describes the ancestral cult among the Lugbara of Uganda. The Lugbara are organized into patrilineages under the authority of group elders. The elders are the guardians of society. When an elder dies his soul becomes an ancestral spirit whose task is to oversee the group and punish those who violate the rules of social conduct. The ghosts are ready to strike with sickness anyone who misbehaves, quarrels with elder lineage members, steals, or hampers group interests in any way. In such a case, a living elder invokes the ancestral spirits to deal with the wayward lineage mate:

[the living elder] sits near his shrine in his compound and thinks about the sinner's behavior. His thoughts are known by the ghosts and they send sickness to the offender. He 'thinks these words in his heart'; he does not threaten or curse the offender. For a senior man to do this is part of his expected role. It is part of his 'work,' to 'cleanse the lineage home.' Indeed, an elder who does not do so when justified would be lacking in sense of duty toward his lineage (Middleton 1965: 76).

Ecclesiastical Cults

Ecclesiastical cult institutions are the most complex form of cult organization, which involve a professional bureaucratically organized clergy whose members perform rituals for the benefit of an entire congregation. These specialists are known as priests. A priest is a full-time religious practitioner who holds an office in a formalized ecclesiastical organization that trains and inducts functionaries. He acquires his authority by virtue of the office he holds rather than divine calling. The role of the priest requires mastery of a body of dogma and correct performance of rituals, achieved through years of training. Priests monopolize all public rituals and the congregation is reduced to the status of passive observers. The function of the congregation is to support the priesthood through the payment of tax, tribute, or other offerings. Rituals are conducted according to precise formulae, passed on from generation to generation, and a set calendar. The priest's job is to serve as the

preserver of orthodoxy. Priests often function in a designated space, such as a temple or shrine. Priesthoods develop in complex, stratified food producing societies where religion is institutionalized and is under the control of the government or is interwoven with secular power. In the ancient states, the priesthood sanctioned the ruling order.

Powerful gods make up the pantheon of ecclesiastical cults. These can be an Olympian pantheon, consisting of multiple independent deities, or they can be a monotheistic pantheon, consisting of a Supreme Being.

An example of an ecclesiastical cult organization is the religion of the Aztecs of Mexico. The Aztecs had 5,000 priests who were responsible for the task of appeasing the gods and ensuring the continuity of the universe. This made the priesthood indispensable to the ruling order and society at large. According to Aztec cosmology, the world had gone through four separate ages, each one of which ended in chaos and collapse. The continuity of the current age was in the hands of the priesthood. This task was accomplished through efforts to appease the innumerable deities who rule the earth and universe. These were wrathful and blood thirsty gods who could only be propitiated with human sacrifice. The victims were predominantly male prisoners of war, although on occasion women and children were sacrificed as well.

Aztec priests followed a ridged ritual calendar that marked the critical periods in the annual cycle when the end of the world was likely and required human sacrifice to avert. Sacrifices were conducted atop temple-pyramids in the presence of the nobility and masses of ordinary spectators. The victims were dragged to the top of the temple-pyramids one at a time. The manner of execution was to place the victim face upwards on the sacrificial altar, while four priests held his arms and legs. A fifth priest cut open the victim's chest with an obsidian knife and pulled out his heart (Figure 9.1). The still beating heart was offered to the gods and the blood splashed over the idols, while the body was rolled down the steep pyramid steps. It is estimated that tens of thousands of people were thus slaughtered annually.

The Nature of Cult Organizations

According to Wallace (1966: 88), cult organizations form a scale. Societies with ecclesiastical cults will also contain communal, shamanic, and individualistic cults. Societies with communal cults will also have shamanistic and individualist cults. Societies with shamanistic cults will also have individualistic cults. Societies having only individualistic cults, while theoretically possible, do not exist.



Figure 9.1. Aztec priests sacrificing a human. Priests were responsible for appeasing the gods and ensuring the continuity of the universe. From the *Florentine Codex*.

Religions, according to Wallace's scheme, may be categorized according to how their cult institutions are structured. Four organizational types may be identified: shamanic religions, communal religions, Olympian religions, and monotheistic religions.

Shamanic religions contain individualistic and shamanic cult institutions and possess the simplest levels of social organization. According to Wallace (1966: 97), "Pantheon does not include many major deities of day-to-day importance; mythology is abbreviated; ritual is mostly critical and non-calendrical rather than calendrical." Individuals perform rituals on their own behalf, or, if circumstances call for it, seek out the aid of a shaman who performs particular rites.

Communal religions contain individualistic, shamanic, and communal cults. Wallace (1966: 97) notes that, "Rituals are performed in which many lay persons participate actively; a ritual calendar is related to seasonal, life crisis, and other cyclical events. The mythology is rich and variegated, although the gods are not for the most part heroic figures."

Olympian religions contain individualistic, shamanistic, communal, and Olympian ecclesiastical cult institutions. Olympian religions focus upon the propitiation of a pantheon of high gods. According to Wallace (1966: 99–100):

these high gods directly sanctioned the political structure and directly controlled the various departments of nature, and the gods themselves were conceived to be busy with both human and their own (human-like) affairs; they were powerful, arbitrary, and humanly differentiated in character. The worship of these high gods required permanent temples, a full-time priesthood and political affiliation of the priestly bureaucracy, sometimes expressed as a divine kingship.

Monotheistic religions contain individualistic, shamanistic, communal, and monotheistic ecclesiastical cults. Monotheistic religions are similar to the Olympian religions, but focus upon the propitiation of a single supreme divinity or one “who controls other supernaturals and expresses himself through them.” The supreme divinity functions to uphold political institutions and controls the forces of nature.

Religion and Adaptation

In his book *Religion and Adaptation* (2005), anthropologist William Adams provides a useful outline of the historical development of religion from an evolutionary perspective. He amends the anthropological evolutionary stages of bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states by adding the following developmental stages: nomadic chiefdoms, secularizing states, peasantries, and industrial civilizations (Adams 2005: 241). Adams’ ideas are presented below.

Religion in Band Societies

Until ten to twelve thousand years ago all humans lived in hunting-gathering band level societies. Bands are typically composed of between 25 to 50 people, all of whom are related by kinship and marriage and are egalitarian. They are typically nomadic and at the present occupy marginal environments where farming and herding are impossible (Sidky 2004: 418). These areas include high latitudes, dense tropical forests, and deserts. According to Adams, band level people believe in high gods and spirits. High gods are part of a limited pantheon, are vaguely defined, and reside in remote places. They may include the sun and the moon or come in an anthropomorphic form and are removed from day-to-day human activities. Spirits, however, permeate the environment. Animals, plants, and objects have spirits associated with them. Animal spirits are more important and figure prominently in day-to-day affairs and the spirits of powerful species such as the bear, wolf, or jaguar may be especially exalted and made subject of taboos. Religious architecture is absent. Rituals are connected to practical

concerns, such as hunting and healing and focus on animal spirits. Rituals tend to be individualistic rather than collective. Eschatology is underdeveloped. There are vague ideas about an afterlife. However, there are fixed mourning rituals. Divinely inspired shamans are the only religious specialists. They function as healers and intermediaries between humans and the supernatural world. In general, religion is not emphasized and is fairly limited in comparison to tribal groups, chiefdoms, and states (Adams 2005: 241–246).

Religion in Tribal Societies

Tribes form an intermediate stage between bands and chiefdoms (Adams 2005: 246). Aboriginally, tribal people could be found in North America, lowland South America, central and southern Africa, the sub-Arctic regions of Asia, and in highland and insular Southeast Asia. Tribes are comprised of autonomous but interrelated family groups who trace their descent from a common ancestor, occupy a common territory, speak the same language, and have the same religion. Centralized political authority and hereditary rulers are absent and social relations tend to be egalitarian. Tribal people are generally sedentary farmers. However, the natives of the North American Plains were nomadic hunting and gathering tribal peoples. According to Adams, there is a well-defined and enlarged pantheon consisting of numerous anthropomorphic deities and deities in animal form. There are animistic spirits as well. These supernatural beings are all active in the human environment. Tutelary cults emerge. Collective tutelary deities exist as well as individual tutelaries, such as the guardian spirits of North American Indians. Deities are associated with weather and fertility. Ancestor worship is emphasized, especially in South America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Melanesia. Elaborate collective rituals are the basis of social solidarity. Calendrical rites associated with the agricultural year are well developed among farmers. Rites of passage, such as puberty rituals, marriages, and funerals are important. There are also many rituals associated with daily activities. The social function of religion becomes increasingly important. Religion includes expressive costumed pageantry, music, and dancing. Eschatology is more developed than among band level people. There is the belief in an afterlife and burials contain grave goods. Cemeteries appear. Burial and mourning rituals are complex. Shamans are responsible for healing the sick. There are, in addition, part-time priestly ritual leaders who are keepers of mythology and who conduct principal collective rituals or communal rites. Religious architecture is uncommon but not unknown (Adams 2005: 246–251).

Religion in Agricultural Chiefdoms

Agricultural chiefdoms are tribal societies that achieve centralized political authority and hereditary rule (Adams 2005: 251). Chiefs may claim a divine mandate. Such societies could be found in Polynesia and Melanesia, Southeast Asia, and Central and West Africa. The religion of agricultural chiefdoms is in many ways similar to that of tribal peoples. However, new elements include the presence of a royal cult, a priesthood, and rituals focusing on the ruler and his ancestors. Collective rituals are performed by the chief and the priesthood. Anthropomorphic deities become more important than animal spirits. The focus is on higher deities and less on animistic and localized spirits. The pantheon becomes stratified, reflecting the stratification of society. There is elaborate mythology and costumed religious pageantry. According to Adams, because chiefdoms are warlike, frequently male gods are given more importance than female deities. Ancestral spirits remain important, if not more so than among tribal peoples. Sacrificial rites may include human sacrifice. Beliefs in evil spirits and witchcraft are associated with conceptions of illness and misfortune. Collective rituals are elaborate, acquire political dimensions, and include calendrical agricultural rites, war rituals, and rituals honoring the chief's ancestral spirits. Thus, in addition to its social importance, religion also acquires political functions. Eschatology is similar to that of tribal societies. However, funerary rituals and burials with grave goods are more complex. The graves of nobility contain elaborate offerings, including sacrificial animals and human sacrifices. Tombs of the chiefs are likely to be the most impressive monuments. The shaman continues to be significant in the area of sickness and misfortune and aspects of personal religion. A full-time priestly class is now present whose members act as keepers of myth and conduct major ceremonies. Priests are closely associated with the chief's family, making up an aristocracy. Sacred architecture appears (Figure 9.2), consisting of large permanent temples and monuments (Adams 2005: 251–256).

Religion in Pastoral Chiefdoms

Pastoral chiefdoms are to be found in a belt extending from Central Asia through the Near East, the Arabian Peninsula, and sub-Saharan Africa. What distinguishes pastoral chiefdoms from agricultural chiefdoms is the absence of a priestly institution and lack of elaborate organized rituals (Adams 2005: 256). The chief, known as *sheikh* or *khan*, is a secular ruler rather than a divinely ordained headman, and religion in general is not emphasized to the degree that it is among tribal societies



Figure 9.2. The sacred architecture of agricultural chiefdoms includes structures such as Stonehenge located in Wiltshire, England. Photo by H. Sidky.

and agricultural chiefdoms. Energy and effort, Adams points out, are invested in warlike enterprises rather than in religious ones. The scope of the pantheon and mythology is unclear. Prior to their conversion to Islam or Buddhism, the Turco-Mongols of Central Asia practiced shamanism similar to that found in band societies. Groups in the Arabian Peninsula worshiped the stars, moon, and meteorites. With the adoption of Islam, they began to profess religious beliefs based upon the worship of local saints and offered prayers at saintly shrines located along their migratory tracks. Religious specialists are hired when needed from settled village communities. Aside from the profession of the faith, people in pastoral chiefdoms do not practice the Five Pillars of Islam. For religious merit the Mongols depended upon the ritual performances of sons they placed in Buddhist monasteries. Adams (2005: 258) calls this “religion by surrogate” (Adams 2005: 256–259).

Religion in Ancient State Societies

States are autonomous centralized hierarchical polities, consisting of numerous communities and a large population, in which a central authority wields political and economic powers to conscript labor, extract taxes or tribute, and has monopoly over the use of physical force (Sidky 2004: 440). In the Old World, the

original or pristine states emerged in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, and China. In the New World states appeared in the Andes and Mesoamerica. The early states were theocracies ruled by autocrats of divine origins. These rulers headed a large bureaucracy and a priestly class, which formed a royal patronage network. Occupationally ranked commoners, village dwelling peasant farmers, and slaves made up the remaining strata of society. Religion was under state control and reinforced the position of the ruling elite. The priesthood was massive and formed an essential part of the state bureaucratic apparatus. Priests were literate, had extensive knowledge of myth and ritual, occupied different offices, and performed distinct functions. Public ritual was monopolized by the priesthood and members of the congregation acted as spectators. Each temple had a high priest who oversaw the activities of subordinate priests. The priests dictated all aspects of religious behavior, including which gods people had to venerate, which rituals they had to perform, and what monuments they had to construct (Adams 2005: 259–268).

Numerous anthropomorphic gods were worshipped in state societies in the Old World, while anthropomorphic gods were venerated alongside animal deities in the New World. The constellation of gods and their different powers and functions reflected the distribution of power relationships in society (see below). The ruler's ancestral deities were at the top of the hierarchy. Sumerian and Babylonian cities and the Maya city states had their own tutelary gods.

Enormous effort and energy was invested in religious pursuits. Large-scale state ceremonies were conducted around architectural monuments. Sacred monumental architecture in the form of massive temples, pyramids, and royal tombs, reached its apogee and was the focal point of religious endeavors undertaken by the priestly class (Figure 9.3). Costumed religious pageantry was extremely well developed. Among the state ceremonies were calendrical rituals that were conducted throughout the year. There were also ceremonies focused upon the divine ruler, such as his coronation or funeral. Local deities remained important. These gods had their own temples and shrines and priesthoods and were overseen by the state apparatus. Cultic rituals focusing on lineages and clans were conducted in the Old World. Individual rites remained important and were centered upon certain state deities or local ones. Pilgrimage to temples and shrines became an important part of religious expression (Adams 2005: 259–260).

Large-scale sacrifice became highly developed. Human sacrifice was practiced in all early states in association with royal funerals. In Mesoamerica, large-scale human sacrifice was carried out to appease the gods and continued long after the practice disappeared elsewhere.

Eschatology was well developed. Deities of the underworld appear. Prodigious amounts of grave goods, including human and animal sacrifice, is in evidence



Figure 9.3. The Temple of Kukulcan, Chichen Itza. In ancient states sacred monumental architecture in the form of temples, pyramids, and royal tombs reached its apogee. Photo courtesy of Jeb Card, Department of Anthropology, Miami University.

in royal tombs. In some places the practice of mummification becomes widespread. Shaman-like practitioners still existed, but were considered to be inferior to priests. Their activities were focused on healing. Religion was an all-embracing political phenomenon impacting the lives of all citizens (Adams 2005: 259–268).

Religion in Secularizing States

In the subsequent polities religion changes with the emergence of new instruments of governance and economic patterns. Governments became secularized. This first began among the early Greek states. Divine rulers and theocracies disappear. Secular rulers, governing councils, and man-made laws emerge. Adams (2005: 269) ties secularization to the monetization of the economy, which resulted in the development of a secular mercantile and land-owning class. Under these new circumstances religion was no longer all-embracing or pervasive. While the Greek states and their imperial heirs continued to erect temples to city gods, these were not on the same scale as the early states. Although people still had to worship at state temples, the priesthoods no longer wielded all-encompassing power in the government or over the lives of people. Public rituals became attenuated and lost much of their political functions in comparison with those of the early states. Science and philosophy replaced religious cosmology and cosmogony. Pantheons were downsized and made more intelligible to the critical-minded citizenry. Among the Greeks and Romans, Olympian gods were given priority and merged with the

personalities of earlier deities. The intellectual impact of secularizing philosophies surpassed the influence of the priests. Also, there was a shift from ritual enactment to an emphasis on personal piety as the basis of religious merit. This is the start of the process of the “compartmentalization” of religion. Personal religion and the reverence of house gods remained unchanged among the least educated. Shaman-like practitioners still operated along the fringes of society (Adams 2005: 268–270).

Peasant Religions

In both theocratic and secularizing states, the peasant religion of rural villagers to a large degree remained outside the scope of the urban-based religious systems. Peasants had religious beliefs with features similar to religion in tribal societies. These were the religions of the weak who did not place trust in the gods of the urban populations. Their focus was upon locally accessible village deities, such as village gods in India, or manifestations of the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox traditions (Adams 2005: 270–271).

Salvationist Religions

Salvationist religions which appear next represent a revolutionary change, “more so than any other in the entire history of religion” (Adams 2005: 271). It involved a reorientation of how people perceived the afterlife and the relations between this world and the world beyond. The new emphasis was on personal virtue and rewards in the afterlife over collective ritual enactments in the present life. The new perspective espoused the view that humankind and the material world were corrupt, but salvation could be attained through personal virtue. The alternative was eternal damnation in the afterlife. As Adams (2005: 273) puts it:

Unlike any previous religious developments, [these beliefs] did not evolve out of the past but were repudiations of it. They were reactions against the legacy of outworn tradition: of overelaborated pantheons and mythology and ritual, and the influence of a bloated and an increasingly irrelevant priesthood.

Among the key features of salvationist religions were the concepts of sin and eternal damnation, the discarding of earlier rituals, mythologies, pantheons, abandonment of ancient temples, a focus on one or a few exotic deities, like the god of the Hebrews, and the idea of a messiah. Many salvationist cults had their origins in the visionary experiences of divinely inspired messengers, such as Moses, Jesus,

Muhammad, and the Buddha, who instituted new faiths. At first, these salvationist cults were in competition with other cults and the state religions. They were therefore evangelistic, in search of converts to indoctrinate. Salvationist religions reach their zenith during the medieval period. By that time these cults had become state religions themselves, supplanted and eradicated their rivals, and expanded beyond their birthplace. Scriptures, written records of the teaching of the messiahs, became central to medieval religions. While these were transmitted orally in the original salvationist cults, the teachings were now set on paper and compiled into sacred texts.

Another development was the increasing rationalization of religion. Once salvationist cults became established state religions, steps were taken to implement orthodoxy. Religious authority was co-opted by learned elites, jurists, and clerics, who sought to rationalize the system by rectifying doctrinal ambiguities. Salvationist religions henceforth acquired the features of early state religions. The priesthood, headed by a high priest, was expanded and became hierarchical. Religious structures multiplied, culminating in the impressive medieval cathedrals and grand mosques. Salvationist religions now departed from the original emphasis on personal virtue and moved back toward an emphasis on ritual duty and performance (Adams 2005: 271–280).

Religion in the Modern Industrial World

The last stage of religious development Adams treats is religion in the modern industrial world. Most European and North American nations are secular democracies. Many other countries are following along the same trajectory. The separation of the church and state is a characteristic feature of the modern world. Practically all technological, political, and economic institutions are secular in nature. Law and government are wholly secular and theocentric philosophy has been replaced by modern science. The role of the surviving salvationist religions has been greatly diminished. Religion is compartmentalized in an ever decreasing sphere. The response to this has been diversification and heterodoxy in religion. Adams attributes the proliferation of new sects in the West to the de-sacralization of the church as a man-made institution and anti-clericism. Sectarian rivalries have further undermined the respect for the church. While faith in the Scriptures remains high, it is not so with respect to the church as an institution. Moreover, worldly orientation has weakened the idea of salvation in an afterlife. With the exception of fire-and-brimstone fundamentalist cults, the fear of supernatural damnation has waned. There are two reactions to this “erosion of faith.” The first

blames the church and addresses the problem by modernization through “simplification of liturgy” and updating of translations of the Scriptures. The second attributes the erosion of faith to the times and calls for a return to the fundamentals, a stout defense of established doctrine, and the rejection of modernity.

In the secularized industrial democracies, religion still provides moral authority, as encoded in the doctrines of surviving salvationist religions. Also, the church still fulfills the function of religious education, very little of which takes place in homes, and none in public schools (Adams 2005: 282–286).

Religion and Political Economy

Sociologist Guy Swanson (1960) conducted a cross-cultural study of 50 societies around the world to investigate the relationship between religious beliefs and social organization. Among his findings was that the pattern of human interaction with the gods and other supernatural beings is connected to the level of political economy. As we have seen, the types of deities and the degree to which they interfere in daily human affairs vary considerably. Classless societies possess high gods and lesser gods and spirits. The high gods are aloof and unconcerned with earthly affairs, while the lesser gods and spirits are most relevant to human existence. These supernatural beings are similar to one another in terms of importance and powers and their relationships reflect the egalitarian nature of society.

The religions of class societies tend to have pantheons in which greater and lesser gods are arranged hierarchically, mirroring the arrangement of society. The high gods of class societies actively interfere in day-to-day human affairs, punishing and rewarding people according to their moral worth. The presence or absence of the belief that supernatural beings punish and reward people is related to the degree of sociopolitical and economic inequality and coercion. According to Swanson’s findings, the religion of class societies are more likely to have beliefs that the gods punish and reward, while the religion of egalitarian classless societies are less likely to have such beliefs.

In class societies, convincing commoners that the gods demand obedience and conformity to the existing order of things ensures their submission to the ruling elite. In the early states magico-religious specialists accomplished this task by providing ideological support for the ruling elite by sanctifying their privilege and power. Through myths and elaborate rituals the priesthood taught the doctrine of the divine descent of rulers, such as the Pharaoh and the Inca, and inculcated the notion that the very existence of the world and universe depends upon obedience to the divine rulers (Harris 1971: 406–407). According to Harris (1971: 407):

through elaborate, administered doctrines, priesthoods have conditioned large masses of people to accept relative deprivation as necessary, to look forward to material rewards in the afterlife rather than in the present one, and to be grateful for small favors from superiors lest ingratitude call down fiery retribution in this life or in a hell to come.



Figure 9.4. The Pyramids of Giza. Such state-sponsored monumental religious structures functioned as a mechanism of thought control to make people feel powerless and insignificant. Photo courtesy of Mark Peterson, Department of Anthropology, Miami University.

To render such messages state societies funneled disproportionate amounts of resources and energy toward the construction of large-scale monuments, temples, and pyramids (Figure 9.4). As Harris puts it:

From the pyramids of Egypt or Teotihuacan in Mexico to the Gothic cathedrals of Medieval Europe, state-subsidized monumentality in religious structures has had a common theme: to make the individual feel powerless and insignificant. The great edifices, whether seeming to float as in the case of Amiens Cathedral or press down with infinite heaviness as in the case of the pyramids of Khufu, teach all who come before them the futility of discontent and the invincibility of those who rule (Harris 1971: 407).

Religion in this view provides the illusion of contentment, compelling people into accepting their condition of economic and political deprivation as ordained by the gods.

Churches, Denominations, Sects, Cults, and the Organization of Religion

Religion in contemporary large-scale societies comprises churches, denominations, sects, and cults (Crapo 2003: 225–227). Churches are large religious

organizations whose doctrines reflect the ideological values of society at large. They have a bureaucratically organized priesthood and a large and diverse membership. The majority of members are born rather than being recruited through adult conversions.

A denomination is a new religious movement that has splintered off from a mainstream religion but still maintains features of that religion, differing only in some doctrinal issues. Within Christianity the Lutherans, Anglicans, and Baptists are denominations. The Sunni and Shi'a are the rough equivalents of denominations within Islam.

A sect is a new religious movement that has branched off from an established religion and is centered upon a charismatic leader with new revelations about old teachings who exercises direct authority over the group. Sect members hold their own beliefs and practices as correct and valid in comparison to those of other groups, which are seen as having strayed from the truth. Sects are literalist in their interpretation of scriptures and their adherents are recruited mainly through first generation adult conversions. Members see themselves as the chosen or select who have achieved or are about to achieve salvation because of their commitment to the sect's selective doctrines. They oppose the values of the larger society which they see as conflicting with their own beliefs. Consequently, sects are often alienated from, or are openly belligerent toward, society at large. Horrible consequences have ensued where this belligerence has escalated into direct confrontation with outside forces, such as in the case of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple and David Koresh's Branch Davidians (see chapter 16).

Cults are new religious movements that possess innovative beliefs that derive from an alien cultural tradition. Cults in this sense are different from Wallace's cult institutions. Cults are smaller than sects and are led by more authoritative charismatic leaders in comparison to sects, who exercise a high degree of control over all aspects of the lives of members. Like sects, cult members are primarily recruited through first generation adult conversions. Cultists are taught to live segregated lives and have little or no contact or interaction with society at large. Examples of cults include *Aum Shinrikyō* in Japan (see chapter 16) and Heaven's Gate in the United States (see chapter 8).

Religion and Ecology

There are a number of scientific anthropological studies focusing on the effects of religious behavior on human ecological relationships. Rather than treating religion as an epiphenomenon, explicable in psychological or sociological terms alone, and unrelated to concrete matters such as human-environment interactions, these studies explore how religious rituals and beliefs may be adaptive responses to ecological circumstances. In other words, these studies examine how under certain circumstances otherwise irrational supernatural precepts facilitate survival in the natural world.

Naskapi Hunting Magic

Among one of the earliest such studies was an article written in 1957 by psychologist Omar Khayam Moore, entitled “Divination—A New Perspective.” The paper examines how hunting magic works among the Naskapi, a Native American people who live in the Labradorian Peninsula of northeastern Canada. Moore (1957: 69) argues that “some practices which have been classified as magic may well be directly efficacious as techniques for attaining the ends envisioned by their practitioners.”

The Naskapi employ a form of divination known as scapulimancy, which involves looking at the cracks and spots that appear on burnt caribou shoulder

blades. A caribou shoulder blade is defleshed, cleaned, dried, and fitted with a handle. In the divinatory ritual, the shoulder blade is held over hot coals to produce cracks and marks that are then “read” in order to find answers to questions posed. When used in the context of hunting, ordinarily in times of scarcity, the diviner asks what direction the hunter should take to be successful. The answer is provided by the marks and spots on the bone. The hunter follows the diviner’s advice and is successful in obtaining game.

How this process yields positive results has to do with the behavior of the hunters, the tendency of game to respond to hunting pressure by moving away, and the random nature of the patterns on the shoulder blade. Hunters tend to habitually go back to areas where they have had success. Such constant predation pressure results in animals becoming more alert and dispersing. Moore calls this “success induced failure.” The hunters now fail to locate game. Out of necessity, they go to the shaman for advice. The shaman heats the scapula and provides directions by reading the random cracks and spots. The procedure, like throwing dice, creates randomness in the choice of new hunting grounds. It is very likely that the new location is somewhere other than where the hunters have been active. The result: the hunt succeeds.

The Naskapi ritual fulfills two ecological functions. First, it confers an adaptive advantage by enabling the hunters to successfully find game by changing their pattern of game acquisition. Second, it prevents the depletion of game in a particular hunting territory by stopping hunters from habitually hunting in the same location all the time. For the Naskapi hunter, success in this enterprise is due to the shaman’s magic. To the outside observers, success has to do with the behavioral and ecological relationships of humans and animal populations. A distinction to be made here is between emic analysis, based on the rules, concepts, and categories meaningful to members of a particular culture, and etic analysis, based on rules, concept, and categories meaningful to the outside scientific observer. Moore’s account is etic in orientation because it focuses on consequences of religious beliefs that may be unrecognized by members of the culture themselves.

The Taboo on Pork

Another study that explores the idea that religious beliefs can be ecologically adaptive is Marvin Harris’ explanation for the taboo on pork among the ancient Israelites, presented in his book *Cows, Pigs, Wars and Witches* (1974). Harris begins by pointing out that during the early Neolithic in the Middle East people

raised sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs (see Simoons 1961: 13–46). These animals were grazed in the grasslands and forests surrounding villages. As the early state-level societies arose around 4000 B.C. and began to intensify production, due to population expansions, more and more of the grazing lands and forested areas were converted into agricultural fields to cope with increasing demands. This drastically reduced environments suitable for raising pigs. Farming communities experiencing population pressures were forced to decide either to raise more animals or more cereal crops. They opted for increasing the production of cereals. The reason for this choice was simply that cereal crops fed to humans directly, as opposed to being fed to animals whose flesh is then eaten, is energetically more efficient. Domestic animals, however, could not be dispensed with altogether because of their important role in the intensive food production system. These were mixed farming economies based on crop-livestock interactions in which ruminant species (sheep, goats, and cattle) consumed straw and hay, the by-products of cereal production (wheat and barley), to produce manure as fertilizer and milk, meat, hair, wool, and hides for human consumption. Cattle also provided traction for plowing fields and for pulling carts. In this system pigs were out of place.

Unlike ruminants, pigs are raised only for meat. They are incredibly efficient in this regard. However, unlike pastoral animals, pigs cannot be milked, made to pull plows, carry loads, travel long distances over grasslands, or swim across rivers. Moreover, pigs cannot live on the by-product of cereal crops. Instead they have to be fed high quality foods that humans can eat directly. Pigs, in other words, compete with humans for food. Humans also had to bear the costs of providing them with water and shade. Pigs cannot sweat and must have shade in order to thermo-regulate properly. This is why they thrive in forested environments. Under the new ecological conditions in the Middle East, according to Harris, pigs simply became too costly to keep. Raising them posed a danger to the new mode of production. However, pigs remained a tempting source of meat and fat. To avoid this temptation a supernatural proscription against eating pork was established. As Harris (2001: 195) puts it:

For five thousand years the Neolithic people of the Middle East thought pigs were good to eat. Why did they change their minds? The answer surely has something to do with the fact that the entire ecosystem changed, and with it, the cultural and natural system of production and the role of the pig in that system.

Harris (1991: 196–197) adds:

Cultures tend to impose supernatural sanctions on the consumption of animal flesh when the ratio of communal benefits to costs associated with the use of a particular

species deteriorates. Cheap and abundant species whose flesh can be eaten without danger to the rest of the system by which food is obtained seldom become the target of supernatural proscriptions. Animals that have high benefits and low costs at one time, but that become more costly later on, are the principle targets of supernatural sanctions. The most severe restrictions tend to develop when a nutritionally valuable species not only becomes more expensive but its continued use endangers the existing mode of subsistence.

Harris adds, however, that his explanation for the ancient origins of the Israelite taboo on pork does not account for its perpetuation into the present. Once it came into existence, the taboo took on the function of demarcating Jewish ethnicity. Thus, outside the Middle East the taboo becomes useful at the level of social relationships rather than in terms of ecological functions (for a symbolic explanation of the taboo on pork see chapter 13).

Other explanations for the taboo on pork are cognitive and pseudo-medical. The cognitive explanation is based on the idea that pigs are dirty animals that wallow in and eat their own excrement and are intellectually unappealing and therefore these animals were forbidden as a source of food. This explanation ignores the fact that had people felt this way, pigs would have never been domesticated in the first place. Moreover, if this observation is true, people in many other parts of the world, where pigs are loved, would not readily consume pork. The reason pigs wallow in their own filth has more to do with how people raise them rather than pig nature. Pigs cannot tolerate high temperatures and therefore cannot thermo-regulate without shade and moisture. Confined to outdoor pens without moisture or shade to cool them, pigs are forced to rely on their own feces and urine for sunblock. Also, other domesticated animals eat their own feces, for example chickens and cattle, so this is not an exclusive pig characteristic.

The pseudo-medical explanation for the taboo on pork is that pigs harbor the parasite that causes trichinosis, which can be transmitted to humans if pork is not properly cooked. Thus, the ancients in their great wisdom sought to prevent this problem by prohibiting the consumption of pork. However, if the issue was one of food preparation, one would expect a religious rule stating "thou shall cook your pork well," rather than one prohibiting this useful source of protein from being consumed altogether. This pseudo-medical explanation is also unacceptable because pigs reared in hot climates rarely transmit trichinosis. Also, other animals, such as cattle, sheep, and goats, transmit diseases such as anthrax and brucellosis, which are more dangerous to humans than diseases transmitted by swine. Yet these animals are not tabooed (Harris 1991: 200).

The Sacred Cow

In a paper called “The Cultural Ecology of India’s Sacred Cattle” (1966), Harris provides an ecological explanation for the case of the sacred cattle of India. Here again the argument is based upon the idea that the flesh of some animals become taboo when it becomes ecologically too costly to produce. In India, cattle are the object of reverence and are protected by religious law. However, during the Neolithic period in India cattle were raised and eaten. With the development of complex state societies and concomitant population expansion and shortage of land and pasture it was no longer possible to raise enough cattle to serve both as a source of food and traction for pulling plows and carts. Because of the crucial role of cattle in India’s farming ecosystem, raising these animals for meat became too costly. A religious taboo was placed on the slaughter and consumption of cattle reinforced by the Hindu religious doctrine of *Ahimsa*, or non-violence. Protecting cows became a sacred duty of every individual even in times of drought or famine.

It is widely recognized, according to Harris, that there is a protein and calorie deficiency in the diet of the majority of Indians. Yet the consumption of beef is prohibited by Hindu religion. Western economic experts tend to think that the Hindu cattle complex is contrary to rational economic decision making. The maintenance of large numbers of scrawny animals seems highly wasteful. Indeed, old and skinny and seemingly unproductive cattle can be seen roaming freely across the landscape, blocking traffic, scavenging in refuse dumps, and stealing food from roadside markets (Figure 10.1). It seems that farmers refrain from killing even the most decrepit animals because of an irrational religious belief in the sanctity of cattle.

Although the system may seem highly wasteful and inefficient, Harris points out that a closer analysis of the farming ecosystem in India reveals that the taboo against the slaughter of cattle enhances rather than diminishes the capacity of the Indian farming system to sustain human life. How does the maintenance of a large number of scrawny and unproductive animals make a positive ecological contribution? First, cattle are essential for plowing and pulling carts in what is a “low energy animal based system.” Without these animals it would be impossible to produce food, given the technological and economic constraints under which Indian farmers operate.

Second, cows serve an indispensable ecological function by providing dung, which is crucial as a source of fertilizer and cooking fuel. In the absence of a large number of cows, farmers would need to purchase millions of tons of costly factory-made fertilizer and cooking fuel, which many households cannot afford. Cattle inexpensively convert otherwise useless plant matter into products for human use.



Figure 10.1. A sacred cow in the middle of a busy street. The sacred cattle complex of India is posited to have beneficial ecological functions. Photo by H. Sidky.

Cow manure is inexpensive because these animals are sustained almost entirely on the by-product of cereal production, natural vegetation cover along steep hillsides, roads, railway tracks, and other places where land cannot be used for farming. The animals scavenge in these places by day and return to their stalls at night. Cattle survive under these conditions because they are small local species well adapted to local conditions and have strong recuperative powers. Animals are kept in this way because of a dire shortage of land and pasture. Thus, cattle provide useful products and services because they are scavengers and do not compete with humans for food. The system also produces small, but vital, quantities of milk protein and the

animals that die naturally are consumed by the Untouchables, who do not observe the taboo on beef. Given the importance of cattle in the farming ecosystem, the religious ban on the slaughter of these animals becomes critical because it averts the temptation of eating cattle in times of drought and famine that periodically occur in different parts of India.

Aztec Human Sacrifice

Another study that attempts to show how religious beliefs can fulfill adaptive functions is Michael Harner's highly controversial paper, "The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice" (1977). The Aztecs of Mexico sacrificed humans on a massive scale. The deed was done atop temple-pyramids during dramatic public spectacles when victims were stretched over sacrificial altars and their beating hearts were torn from their bodies with sharp obsidian blades. The hearts were offered to the gods and later ritually incinerated. The blood was splashed over the altars and temple walls and the bodies were sent tumbling down the pyramid steps (Figure 10.2). The victims were primarily prisoners of war and the main objective of Aztec war expeditions, according to Harner, was to acquire victims for sacrifice.



Figure 10.2. Aztec human sacrifice. The corpses of sacrificial victims were rolled down the pyramid steps and carried off for consumption by a protein starved population. Some anthropologists surmise that the large-scale Aztec sacrificial complex was cannibalism disguised as the propitiation of the gods. From the *Codex Magliabechiano*.

There were thousands of pyramids with an estimated one to three thousand individuals sacrificed at each temple annually.

Traditional explanations for the Aztec sacrificial complex have been in terms of religion, i.e., that it was part of their belief system. Harner draws our attention away from the dramatic happenings atop the temples to the fate of the human corpses that tumbled to the base of the pyramids. Spanish sources describe the disposition of the sacrificial victims' bodies:

After they had slain them and tore out their hearts, they took them away gently, rolling them down the steps. When they had reached the bottom, they cut off their heads and inserted a rod through them, and they carried the bodies to the houses which they called *calpilli*, where they divided them up in order to eat them (Bernardino Sahagún in Harner 1977: 125).

Harner (1977: 120) elaborates:

A major objective, and sometimes the only objective, of Aztec war expeditions was to capture prisoners for sacrifice. While some might be sacrificed and eaten in the field of battle, most were taken to home communities or to the capital, where they were kept in wooden cages until they were sacrificed by the priests at the temple-pyramids. Most of the sacrifices involved tearing out the heart, offering it to the sun and, with some blood, also to the idols. The corpse was then tumbled down the steps of the pyramid, where elderly attendants cut off the arms, legs, and head. While the head went into the local skull rack, at least three of the limbs were normally the property of the captor, who formally retained ownership of the victim. He then hosted a feast at his quarters, of which the central dish was a stew of tomatoes, peppers, and the limbs of the victim.

The large-scale sacrificial enterprise, Harner (1977: 132) maintains, was cannibalism disguised as the "propitiation of the gods."

Writers such as Nigel Davies (1981: 235), who insist that the Aztec sacrificial complex is to be explained in religious terms alone, point out that:

Regardless of which morsels were involved, the eating of human flesh was part of an elaborate ritual. No native text suggests that people were simply filling their bellies with a form of food that they found palatable.

Harner maintains, however, that Aztec cannibalism was not sacramental people-eating, i.e., the consumption of human flesh for ritual purposes, but cannibalism to feed a protein starved human population. In Mesoamerica ancient hunters had virtually eliminated domesticable herbivores. The deer had been killed off before the Aztec period. The only domesticants were the turkey and the dog. With increasing population pressure, under conditions of environmental circumscription, and the

rise of the state, wild game supplies that could provide protein for the diet were drastically diminished. There was an acute scarcity of meat and fat in the diet. As a result, the Aztec diet included bugs, worms, and algae. But this was not sufficient. As far as vegetable proteins are concerned, people could theoretically get the eight essential amino acids from a diet of beans and corn, the staple crops, but this meant they had to eat a large quantity of each at the same time year round. However, this was not always possible because crop failures and famines were frequent. Harner (1977: 127) depicts the Aztec population as being protein hungry, observing that:

the human body, like that of other organisms perfected under natural selection, is a homeostatic entity that under conditions of nutritional stress naturally seeks out the dietary element in which it is deficient. If living organisms did not have this innate capacity, they would not survive.

Cannibalism, according to Harner, was a way of satiating this protein hunger (Figure 10.3). Under the dire ecological circumstances confronting the Aztecs, large-scale cannibalism disguised as human sacrifice provided the only viable option. Thus, rather than being the consequences of a psychological obsession for gore and mayhem, the Aztec sacrificial complex was a “natural and rational response to the material conditions of their existence,” the concrete subsistence problems distinctive to Mesoamerica and particularly the Valley of Mexico (Harner 1977: 132).

Pigs for the Ancestors

Anthropologist Roy Rappaport’s (1926–1997) ground breaking study, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (1968), attempts to show how religious ritual, in this case pig-slaughtering festivals conducted to appease the spirits of the ancestors, functioned like a thermostat to regulate and maintain ecosystem equilibrium. This study is based upon data on the Tsembaga Maring, a people living in the Bismarck Mountains of Papua New Guinea. The Tsembaga are slash-and-burn cultivators whose domestic economy is based on the production of taro-yams and sweet potatoes and pig husbandry. The bulk of their diet is vegetables. They also eat pork, but their protein intake is marginal.

Among the Tsembaga, raising pigs and gardening are the prerogatives of women. Pigs run free during the day and return home in the evening when they are fed substandard sweet potato tubers obtained as part of the harvest for human food. When pig herds become large, however, people have to harvest specifically for pigs and plant additional gardens in the virgin forest.



Figure 10.3. Cannibalism in Mesoamerica. An Aztec prisoner being sacrificed and eaten. From the *Florentine Codex*.

Pigs are never slaughtered outside ritual context, such as during times of illness, injury, death, or warfare. There are rules regarding pork consumption. In times of fighting only warriors eat pork. When there is illness or injury, only the victim and near relatives consume pork. Misfortunes induce stress, which leads to protein deficiencies, and high protein intake is crucial at this point, especially for a population with marginal protein in its diet. According to Rappaport, it is precisely in times of physiological stress that Tsembaga kill and eat their pigs and then only those experiencing stress get to eat pig flesh. The Tsembaga, however, do not rationalize these activities in this way. They say that they are sacrificing pigs to appease the ghosts of the ancestors. As Rappaport (1967: 20) puts it:

It must suffice to note that the Tsembaga do not necessarily perceive all of the empirical effects which the anthropologist sees flow from their ritual behavior. Such empirical consequences as they may perceive, moreover, are not central to their rationalizations of the performances. The Tsembaga say that they perform the rituals in order to rearrange their relationships with the supernatural world. We may reiterate here that behavior undertaken in reference to their “cognized environment”—an environment which includes as very important elements the spirits of the ancestors—seems appropriate in their “operational environment,” the material environment specified by the anthropologist through operations of observation, including measurement.

A cognized model is an emic description of the environment, while an operational model is an etic scientific description (Rappaport 1979: 97).

The ritual cycle begins when war breaks out. Fighting lasts sporadically for weeks. It is stopped in case there is a rout of the enemy forces. Under these circumstances the losers take refuge with their relatives elsewhere and the victors destroy their gardens and groves and slaughter all their pigs. This makes it difficult for the losers to return. The conquered area is then left to regenerate under fallow. But territory is not annexed immediately because the spirits of the ancestors of the vanquished are thought to remain there. Most fighting, however, ends with a truce between antagonists. Once fighting stops the Tsembaga perform a ritual planting of a tree called *Rumbim*. Every man then puts a hand on the ritual tree and addresses the ancestors, thanking them for their help during the battle and for keeping them alive and promise to hold a large pig festival, or *Kaiko*, when there are sufficient pigs to repay them. Until that time the *Rumbim* will remain in the ground.

Upon planting of the ritual tree all contact with the enemy is terminated. Attacks on the adversary are forbidden so long as the *Rumbim* remains in the ground. The debt to the ancestors and allies is unpaid and further assistance is not expected until the situation is rectified. So “a truce of god” prevails among both parties until the *Rumbim* is uprooted and a pig feast is successfully completed.

During the period of truce all efforts are directed toward raising as many pigs as possible. The ritual tree is not uprooted until sufficient numbers of pigs are raised. This takes five years if conditions are good and ten years if conditions are bad. In the latter case, misfortunes are frequent and demand for killing pigs is high. Under good conditions, such demands are low and pig herds increase quickly and additional land must now be brought under cultivation to produce food for the pigs.

Women have to work harder and harder, raising pigs and cultivating their gardens. The pig population becomes large and burdensome in terms of energy expenditures in their maintenance and due to their destructive habit of raiding other people's gardens. Pigs are now competing with humans for food and pose a danger to the gardens. This causes conflict between garden owners and pig owners. Women start to complain that it is time for a *Kaiko*. This stage occurs, according to Rappaport, before the actual carrying capacity of the territory is reached. It is like a safety valve.

Now, stakes are planted along the territorial boundary. If the enemy continues to occupy its territory, the stakes are planted on the boundary which existed before the last fight. If the enemy has been routed, a new boundary is established, incorporating the territory previously belonging to the enemy, which has been left to regenerate under forest cover for a decade or so. It is presumed that after many years the ancestral spirits of the enemy have joined the defeated in their new residence and the land is now considered vacant.

Next, the *Rumbim* is uprooted and a *Kaiko* is held. Pigs are killed and the flesh is distributed to allies and affines who are invited to come and dance. The pig feast, construed as ritual offerings to the ancestors, lasts a year and friendly groups are entertained throughout this period. Large numbers of potential allies are attracted by these events. The dances are like public displays signaling to the participants information about the size and strength of the host community. They also give the host group information about the number of allies it can expect in the fight to come at the end of the pig festival. Invitation to dance are channels for recruiting allies and a way of judging their strength because, as Rappaport points out, the size of the contingents of warriors who come to dance is the same as the size of the contingent of warriors whose assistance may be expected.

The gatherings facilitate trade and allow the allies to decide if the host is prosperous enough to deserve continued support. There is a connection between raising pigs and military power. A group that cannot raise a sufficient number of pigs is considered to be weak and is unlikely to attract allies. The *Kaiko* reaches a high point with a major pig sacrifice and distribution of pork, which raises the protein intake of the entire group at a critical time. During the *Kaiko* that

Rappaport witnessed, 7,000 to 8,500 pounds of meat was obtained, of which 4,500 to 6,000 pounds was distributed to an estimated two to three thousand people among allies from the previous war. The pig feast and ritual cycle are now complete. The ancestors are thought to be appeased and the economic and ecological prowess of the host has been demonstrated. The local population is now ready to attack its enemy, knowing that the ancestors and the allies will assist them because they have been repaid with pork. The *Rumbim* is uprooted. Fighting breaks out soon after the end of the ritual cycle.

The Tsembaga ritual to appease the ghosts of the ancestors fulfills a number of ecological functions. As Rappaport (1967: 30) observes:

The operation of ritual among the Tsembaga and other Maring helps to maintain an undegraded environment, limits fighting to frequencies which do not endanger the existence of the regional population, adjusts man-land ratios, facilitates trade, distributes local surpluses of pigs throughout the regional population in the form of pork, and assures people of high quality protein when they are most in need of it.

Rappaport refers to the Tsembaga as a “ritually regulated population” and calls their ecosystem “a ritually regulated ecosystem.”

Cosmology and Sound and Unsound Environmental Practice

Thus far we have looked at examples showing how specific religious beliefs or rituals can impact human-environment interactions and engender adaptive environmental practices. It is also the case that a people’s cosmology influences how they orient themselves to their natural environment. Cosmology encompasses beliefs about the nature of the world and universe, and the place of people in them. Is it possible that certain kinds of cosmologies engender adaptive environmental practices, while others do the opposite?

In the Judeo-Christian worldview, God created man in his own image and gave him “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1: 26). And God said to man, “Fill the Earth and Subdue it” (Genesis 1: 28). This is a human centered cosmology that sanctions the conquest of the biosphere. There are no supernatural injunctions that prevent the indiscriminate ravaging of the earth, strip mining, deforestation, unremitting extraction of non-renewable resources, and the obliteration of animal and plant life. The environment is objectified as something passive, as discreet clusters of resources

unconnected with one another, out there to be put to use for humans in ever-increasing rates and quantities. It is a destructive and unsustainable orientation.

In contrast, there are cultures that do not objectify nature but rather emphasize the pervasive affinity between people and their environment as expressed in myth, ritual, and social action. The Australian Aborigines are a good example (Figure 10.4). For 50,000 years, the Aborigines lived in multi-family hunting-gathering bands that camped and foraged together. Each band was associated with a specific religious estate. These were territories over which bands had use-rights, but which belonged to clans that acted as ritual managers. Permission was required from the managers of the land to enter and use it. The clan-band-estate relationship was a resource conservation mechanism that determined the optimum limits of the local human groups utilizing the land (Bodley 1994: 28).



Figure 10.4. An Aborigine initiation rite in Central Australia. Aboriginal culture emphasizes the pervasive affinity between people and their environment as expressed in myth, ritual, and social action. Photo by H. Sidky.

In the universe of the Aborigines, humans and their environment are united via an all-encompassing and complex cosmology called Dreamtime, Dreaming, or the Law. Dreamtime is the source of all creation. Dreaming is a sacred worldview that incorporates different human groups, the ancestors, plant and animal species, and the physical landscape in the past, present, and future, whose relationships and interactions are symbolically defined (Tonkinson 1991: 20–25). Particular geographical locations and features are sacred sites, created by ancestral beings, or Dreamtime ancestors. These locations are centers of ritual activities and represent tangible physical and spiritual junctures linking the ancestral beings, humans, and the land. Each site has a sacred narrative associated with it. Sacred sites are linked by Dreamtime paths, or song lines, which are the routes that ancestral beings took as they dotted the originally featureless topography with sacred sites. This is how the earth was formed. Hundreds of miles long, song lines pass through the territories of many different clans, each of which is responsible for overseeing and ritually maintaining its section of it. Song lines thus tie different human communities to each other and the land.

The spiritual power of the ancestral beings that created particular sacred sites manifests itself at sacred locations. One can harness the spiritual potency of these places by performing rituals. Some sites radiate mystical energy associated with animal species. By conducting rituals in these places the numbers of those species can be enhanced. Conception and pregnancy among humans are connected with the spiritual energy emanating from certain other Dreaming sites and thus ancestral beings, humans, and the land are mystically connected in yet another way.

Every clan is named after a Dreaming species, referred to as totems by anthropologists during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Members of the group observe taboos and maintain a ritual attitude toward these totem species which are treated as mythical ancestors and identifying emblems. They also symbolically represent the relationship between human groups and their ecosystem with which the Dreaming species stands in a specific relationship. Moreover, Dreaming species delineate aspects of the social world, such as the relationship between human groups and their rights and obligations toward one another, including which groups are permitted or forbidden from intermarriage. Aborigines thus organize their social relationships and orient themselves to the landscape and the sacred.

In her book *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values* (1997), anthropologist Veronica Strang explains the Aboriginal construal of human-environment relationships as follows:

Aboriginal Law [Dreamtime] ... provides for every aspect of life, setting out foundational beliefs and values that continue to provide the basis for social and

environmental relations in the community today. The Law, within the land, is the source of all life, creating, identifying and binding people socially and spiritually. It defines who owns and has rights to which country, and who must marry whom. The land is both father and mother: it is alive, listening, watching, nurturing, disciplining and balancing human and natural resources. Humans share with the ancestral beings a responsibility for maintaining the land and their relationship with it, and their well-being depends on that of the land. Thus the Law constructs a relationship with the land that is complex, qualitative and deeply affective (Strang 1997: 261).

Comparison of the Judeo-Christian worldview and that of the Australian Aborigines reveals the remarkable contrasting cosmological orientations of people and their natural environment. The Aborigines have developed a worldview that evolved over 50,000 years of human adaptation, reflecting a deep and pervasive understanding of the spiritual affinity between humans, animals, and the natural environment.

Easter's Collapse: Religion and Environmental Disaster

So far we have seen how religious beliefs fulfill adaptive functions. Can religious beliefs have the opposite effects as well? The most extreme example of how religious beliefs and practices can have devastating environmental consequences is Easter Island, discussed by Jared Diamond in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005). Easter Island, or Rapa Nui, is one of the most isolated islands in the Pacific Ocean, situated 2,182 miles from the coast of Chile, and 1,289 miles from Pitcairn, the closest inhabited island. It is a small volcanic land mass roughly 66 square miles, isolated, possessing an exceptionally fragile environment, with a far southern position. Easter Island is most famous for its megalithic monuments, consisting of stone statues and platforms (Figure 10.5). There are 887 statues, or *moai*, ranging in height between 15 and 35 feet and weighing from 10 up to 88 tons, with one unfinished giant still in the quarry measuring 70 feet in length and weighing 270 tons. There are over 300 stone platforms, or *ahu*s, with a third supporting 393 statues (397 *moai* remain in the quarries and 97 are abandoned enroute). It is still unclear exactly who carved the statues, why, and how they were transported from the quarries to stone platforms miles away.

Easter's megalithic structures are of a scale and complexity that would have required a large and highly organized population and a resource rich ecosystem to sustain it. However, the first Europeans to visit Easter Island, the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen and his crew, who arrived on Easter Sunday, April 5, 1722, found a barren environment devoid of trees and forest cover and an impoverished



Figure 10.5. The megalithic statues of Easter Island. These monuments are of a scale and complexity that would have required a large organized population and a resource rich environment, conditions that were absent by the time of European contact. Photo by H. Sidky.

population of around 2 to 3 thousand people, no domestic animals except for chickens, and no seaworthy watercraft.

Based on the archaeological evidence it appears that at the height of its culture, the island supported an estimated population of around 15 thousand people. Analysis of pollen in cores taken from the island's volcanic lakes reveals that at the time of settlement, around 900 AD, Easter was heavily forested with nearly 20 species of trees.

Once the island was settled there was no more contact with Polynesian groups elsewhere in the Pacific because of the oceanic currents. Isolated and left to their own devices, the Easter Islanders turned their energies inward and began a tradition of giant statue building (cf., Sahlins 1955). The consensus among many scholars is that the statues represent ancestral beings that were venerated as such. Different chiefs and clans competed with one another over who could build the biggest and most impressive statues. This enterprise required the investment of considerable amounts of time, surplus food, the organization and coordination of labor, including cutting down the forest for lumber and fiber for ropes to move the statues into place. Forests were also cut down to make room for plantations to feed the growing population. Through these processes, the forests were gradually destroyed over several centuries, roughly between 1400 AD and 1600 AD, a time coinciding with the construction of the largest statues.

By the time the Dutch arrived in the early 18th century Easter Island's forest cover was completely gone. According to Diamond (2005: 107), this represented one of the most extreme instances of deforestation anywhere on earth. Every species of tree became extinct, which meant the loss of fauna, such as wild bird species, and deficiency of raw materials, such as lumber for building canoes, houses, and for fuel, and poles for moving the statues. Loss of forest cover also led to soil erosion, nutrient leaching, and decline in productivity, creating an economic crisis. As the crisis worsened statue building was intensified. Larger and larger statues were carved to appease the ancestors and obtain their help in this dire time of need. This further depleted the remaining resources. The result was economic collapse, starvation, warfare, a massive population decline, and outbreak of cannibalism (Diamond 1995).

During the chaos and mayhem that ensued, chiefs and priests of the old order, who legitimized their position through competitive statue building and *abu* construction, were deposed. Sacred objects were desecrated and the great statues were toppled and *abus* destroyed (Figure 10.6). War leaders assumed power and instituted a new belief system known as the bird-man religion (Englert 1970).

European contact was made while the island was in the throes of this disastrous conflict and anarchy. What remained of the Easter Island population was



Figure 10.6. Toppled statues. In the chaos following ecological collapse, Easter Island's giant statues were toppled and their platforms were destroyed. Photo by H. Sidky.

further devastated by European slave raiders and the introduction of foreign diseases during the mid-1800s (Metraux 1957). By 1872 there were only 111 islanders left alive.

Diamond (2005: 118–119) attributes the collapse of Easter Island to deforestation, loss of fauna, and competition between clans to create larger and larger statues, which depleted wood, rope, and food resources. The dramatic nature of its breakdown has made Easter Island a parable for the earth's current environmental issues and a metaphor for what may be in store for us in the future if we do to our planet what the Easter Islanders did to their land (see Bahn and Flenley 1992; Young 1991).

If the *moai* were objects of veneration and if competitive statue building led to the destruction of the forest cover, then Easter Island exemplifies how religious beliefs and practices can lead to environmental disaster. Alternative accounts attribute the collapse of Easter not to human initiated ecocide, but to other variables, such as the introduction of Polynesian rats, which came with the colonists and could have devastated the tree cover by eating palm seeds thereby hindering forest regeneration (Hunt 2006; Hunt and Lipo 2011). Also, European contact with the Island, including the possible introduction of foreign diseases, may have occurred earlier and with greater frequency and disruptive power than indicated by extant historical accounts.

Ritual: The Practical Dimension of Religion

Rituals are a type of behavior consisting of patterned, non-utilitarian, repetitive, stereotypic acts and utterances. There are secular as well as religious rituals. Religious rituals range from simple acts and gestures, such as saying a prayer, uttering an incantation, bowing, kneeling, singing, and dancing, to more complicated sequences of acts, gestures, and vocalizations, such as the Roman Catholic Mass (see Alexander 1997; Bell 1992; Nye 2008: 129–151; Zuesse 1987).

Sometimes the terms “ritual” and “ceremony” are used interchangeably. In some instances, the concept of ceremony is used to refer to ritual complexes, such as a mortuary ceremony, and the word ritual is used to delineate specific components of the ceremony, such as burial rites, or rituals of mourning. Alternatively, the word ceremony has been employed to describe specific components of a more extensive ritual process (cf. Pandian 1991: 168).

Ritual behavior is also present among non-human primates and other animals, such as the courting rituals of birds, the fighting behavior of wolves, or the waterfall displays and mourning behaviors of chimpanzees. Ethologists point out that such behaviors are a form of communication through signals to oneself and others that help allay fears and anxieties (see D’Aquili et al., 1979; Huxley 1966). According to Wallace (1966: 224) religious rituals have a basis in this biological proclivity. Among humans, this common form of animal behavior becomes religious by being rationalized with reference to supernatural beings. Thus, Wallace (1966: 102) argues that:

The primary phenomenon of religion is ritual. Ritual is religion in action; it is the cutting edge of the tool ... The primacy of ritual is instrumental: just as the blade of the knife has instrumental priority over the handle, and the barrel of a gun over the stock, so does ritual have instrumental priority over myth. It is ritual that accomplishes what religion sets out to do.

Wallace (1966: 107) defines religion itself as “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.”

Rituals are efforts through which humans enter into a relationship with the supernatural world and are performed with the objective of bringing about desired events or outcomes, or preventing the occurrence of undesirable events or outcomes (Malefijt 1968: 189). As Bobby Alexander (1997: 139) has put it, “Ritual ... is a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed.”

Rituals may be performed in designated places at designated times. In this respect, they are like plays or “cultural dramas.” They can involve various types of action, gestures, use of speech, dancing, sacred objects, masks, body painting, and food. But rituals are more than simply theatre because what is being enacted is not merely pretense. Unlike plays, rituals are conducted for efficacy, not entertainment (see Schechner 1994: 6–16). Rituals join together the participants. By enacting a ritual, participants symbolically demonstrate their membership in a common moral and social community.

Rituals are performed according to precise stipulated sequences of acts and utterances. Efficacy is contingents on correct performance. This is why people tend to be very scrupulous in the enactment of rituals. Often the role of the ritual leader falls upon specialists, such as shamans or priests, found in different cultural contexts.

People perform rituals for a variety of reasons, to ensure health and cure sickness, to harm enemies, to avert disaster, to appease the gods, to make rain and crops grow, to ensure the supply of game animals, to mark the stages of life, to dispatch the ghosts of the deceased to their rightful place, to exorcise demons, to bolster or subvert the status quo, to provide blessing, and so forth. Ritual is basic both to “human interaction and negotiating with the larger ecosystem” (Alexander 1997: 141; Harrop 2010; see chapter 10).

Rituals can be performed for individuals, groups, or entire communities. Some rituals are performed at particular times, while others are conducted as they are needed. The former are referred to as calendrical rituals, and are held daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, or according to the seasonal orientation of the planets and stars. The latter are called crisis rituals and are conducted in the event of major transformation

of an individual's life, such as birth, puberty, betrothal, illness, and death. Calendrical rituals tend to be communal and address regularly occurring events of group significance. Non-calendrical rituals can be communal or individual. All cultures have calendrical and non-calendrical rituals.

Varieties of Ritual

Wallace (1966: 102–166) classifies rituals into the following categories: technological, therapeutic/anti-therapeutic, salvation, ideological, and revitalization (for different categorizations see Bell 1997: 94; Grimes 1982). Technological rituals are aimed at controlling aspects of nature through the performance of rites that are thought to be automatically efficacious. Technological rituals include divination and rites of intensification. People resort to divination when they have to make decisions under circumstances where sufficient information is lacking (see chapter 7). Appealing to the supernatural to fill in the gaps in knowledge is an act of divination. An example of such activity is the Naskapi effort to find game (see chapter 10). Rites of intensification are efforts to manipulate and control the abundance and fertility of game animals, livestock herds, and crops. Here the attempt is made to affect the physical processes of nature that are essential for the successful acquisition and production of game animals and crops. The objective is to transform the “state of nature from stale, cold, dry, lagging conditions to a vigorous, fertile condition,” and to “transform the will of an animal from resistance to compliance” (Wallace 1966: 113).

Therapeutic and anti-therapeutic rituals attempt to affect human health positively or negatively through religious action. The effort of a shaman during a healing ceremony is an example of a therapeutic ritual. Bone-pointing among the Australian Aborigines is an example of an anti-therapeutic ritual, which is intended to cause magical death (see chapter 7).

Salvation rituals are intended to produce transformations of state in individuals. Initiation rites and rites of expiation, intended to bestow a new identity or to shed guilt, are examples of salvation rituals.

Ideological rituals are efforts to control “in a conservative way, the behavior, the mood, the sentiment and values of the group for the sake of the community as a whole” (Wallace 1966: 126). Examples include Sunday morning church attendance, the Jewish Sabbath rituals, daily prayers in Islam, the recitation of myth and legends by storytellers, and other efforts and exhortations to keep the faith alive.

Revitalization rituals address social crises by enabling people to reformulate society or reinvigorate faltering sociocultural and ideological systems. Examples

include millenarian and messianic movements, Cargo cults, and various types of fundamentalisms (see chapter 14).

Rites of Passage

Arnold Van Gennep (1873–1957) provided a theoretical framework for the analysis of ritual, presented in his book *The Rites of Passage* (1960), originally published in 1908. Van Gennep focused specifically upon the cross-culturally recurring rituals involving transitions from one place, condition, or stage of life to another, for example, pilgrimage, birth, puberty, marriage, and death. He called these rites of passage (Van Gennep 1960: 10–11). Van Gennep observed that all rites of passage are tripartite, involving the stages of separation, transition or liminality, and reincorporation. Rites of passage enable the individual to go through the challenges of transition and enables society to accept his or her new identity. Separation disentangles the initiate from his or her previous social identity, transition is a period of statuslessness when ordinary social norms are suspended, and reincorporation represents the initiate's acceptance in a new transformed social identity. This last stage is often highlighted symbolically by bodily mutilation, such as circumcision, subincision, scarification, tooth removal, and other insignia of the transformed social identity.

The British social anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983) made further contributions to Van Gennep's notion of liminality in the context of ritual. According to Turner, during liminality, limbo, or statuslessness individuals are “betwixt and between” all recognized fixed points in the space-time of structural classification and such persons are “no longer classified and not yet classified” (Turner 1967: 97). Liminality is similar to symbolic death: it is a moment “in and out of time” and “in and out of secular social structure” (Turner 1967: 96). The initiates are stripped of all distinctions of rank, status, and gender. Equality, homogeneity, and comradeship are merged. In this state an important realization occurs, namely that there are two modalities of human relationships:

The first is of a society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less.” The second, which emerges recognizable in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *communitas*, or community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders (Turner 1969: 96).

Communitas is “antistructure,” it is a process in which the ordinary ties of social structure are undone, and it impresses upon the individual a realization of the

common human bond among members of society. This seems to be one of the important features of *communitas*:

It is ... a matter of giving recognition to an essential generic human bond, without which there could be no society. Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low (Turner 1969: 97).

Structure imposes differences between males and females, elders and juniors, commoners and chiefs, masters and servants. Membership in society, be it simple or complex, modern or archaic, commits the individual to structure and the antagonisms that come with structural differentiation. As Turner (1969: 130) adds:

Even in simpler societies, the distinction between structure and *communitas* exists and obtains symbolic expression in the cultural attributes of liminality, marginality, and inferiority. In different societies and at different periods in each society, one or the other of these “immortal antagonisms” comes uppermost. But together they constitute the “human condition,” as regards man’s relations with his fellow man.

Turner saw social life itself as a dialectical process involving successive experiences of *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality and transition from one to the other by means of limbo or statuslessness. The “opposites ... constitute one another and are mutually indispensable” (Turner 1969: 97). The dialectic between *communitas* and structure demonstrates the power of ritual upon human experience.

Rituals of Rebellion

One category of rituals that address deep social conflicts and offer their resolution in the ritual arena is called “rituals of reversal” or “rituals of rebellion” (see Babcock 1977). The Mardi Gras and the Brazilian *carnival* are good examples of such rituals. The British anthropologist Max Gluckman (1911–1975) coined the term “rituals of rebellion” to denote instances where conflict between politically subordinate and politically superordinate groups are expressed through enactments involving ridicule, parody, breach of taboos, role reversal or symbolic inversion, and sexual license. Gluckman (1954) argued that the ritual expression of social tensions embodied in such enactments is a form of catharsis that averts real social conflict. As Gluckman (1955: 109) puts it:

These rites of reversal obviously include a protest against the established order. Yet they are intended to preserve and even to strengthen the established order; and in

many rituals their performance is believed to achieve success and prosperity for the group which practices them.

Turner (1977: 287) explains:

One aspect of symbolic inversion may be to break people out of their culturally defined, even biologically ascribed roles, by making them play precisely the opposite roles. Psychologists who employ the socio-drama method as a therapeutic technique claim that by assigning to patients the roles of those with whom they are in conflict, a whole conflict-ridden group can reach a deep level of mutual understanding.

Thus, cathartic release of pent-up impulses and frustrations, normally kept in check, contributes to the maintenance of social and moral order.

Pilgrimage

When believers travel to a sacred site for the purpose of acquiring supernatural rewards or to fulfill sacred obligations they are engaged in a pilgrimage (see Morinis 1992). Pilgrimage sites are places where people express devotion, seek penance, attempt to acquire merit, fulfill obligations, or attain supernatural cures (Winkelman and Dubisch 2005). The main center of pilgrimage for Muslims is the *Ka'ba* and associated sacred sites in Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is the second most important pilgrimage site for Muslims. Jerusalem is also a focal point for Christians who visit places mentioned in the life of Jesus. For Jews, the site for pilgrimage is the Temple wall in Jerusalem. Although pilgrimage is associated with the world religions, many other religions also have sacred places that attract devotees, such as caves, mountain peaks, consecrated grounds, or other locations associated with some miraculous event or supernatural being (Coleman and Eisner 1995). However, pilgrimage is less developed among small-scale societies.

Pilgrimage is a rite of passage. A well-known example is the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca (see Peters 1994; Porter 2012). One of the Five Pillars of Islam, the *hajj* is a religious duty incumbent upon every adult Muslim who has the means and logistical capabilities to embark on once in a lifetime. The pilgrimage is undertaken to fulfill a divine obligation, encapsulating the meaning of Islam as “submission to the will of God,” and to commemorate the deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.

The *hajj* takes place during the first half of the twelfth month of the Islamic Lunar calendar. This is the time when more than a million pilgrims from over 60 nations, arriving in jets and buses, converge on the city of Mecca to demonstrate

their religious oneness and identity, which transcends national, cultural, tribal, or linguistic differences, and expresses Islam's nature as a transnational belief system and community.

Before departure, pilgrims take part in purification and consecration rites, as they withdraw from everyday activities and assume the role of the departing pilgrim. This begins a stage of separation that continues while the pilgrims are in transit to the shrine. Once they arrive outside the city of Mecca, pilgrims undergo additional purification rites, which include observing certain taboos and sexual abstinence. Men have their beards and nails trimmed. They then don a robe consisting of two seamless white sheets similar to the Islamic burial shroud. Women wear white clothing. No jewelry or other personal adornments may be worn. The pilgrims are now in a state of consecration. In this condition they are stripped of their secular and ethnic identities and stand before God as worshippers in unity and equality. This is the liminal stage of undifferentiated *communitas* or communion of equals.

Pilgrims then enter the Great Mosque and circumambulate the *Ka'ba* seven times in a counterclockwise direction (Figure 11.1) and kiss the sacred black stone, *al-hajar Al-aswad*, in the eastern wall of the building. The circling represents oneness with God and the significance of the *Ka'ba* to Abraham, his son Ishmael, and Muhammad. Sermons follow at the Great Mosque. Next, everyone leaves Mecca for Arafat, the place where Muhammad delivered his last sermon. Here they spend an entire day in prayers and stand before God in humility. Pilgrims then go back toward Mecca, stopping for a night near a place called Mina. The night is spent in prayer and meditation. They then gather pebbles which they cast at three pillars at Mina before daybreak, a symbolic stoning of the Devil and repudiation of evil.

On the tenth day of the month, each pilgrim sacrifices a consecrated sheep or goat and distributes the meat to the poor. Now reincorporation back into secular life begins. Men shave their heads and women cut a lock of hair to signify their de-consecration. They shed their white robes and clothing and resume wearing their ordinary attire. Everyone returns to Mecca, where they may circumambulate the *Ka'ba* once again. All ritual restrictions are now lifted and people feast and celebrate. The pilgrim returns home reincorporated into secular life with a new revered identity and the title of *hajji* (male) and *hajjiya* (female).

Pilgrimage, like initiation rites, has a threefold structure. The pilgrims are separated from daily life, enter a liminal stage bereft of their social identities which are replaced by the identity of pilgrim, and return to the mundane world with a new station in life.

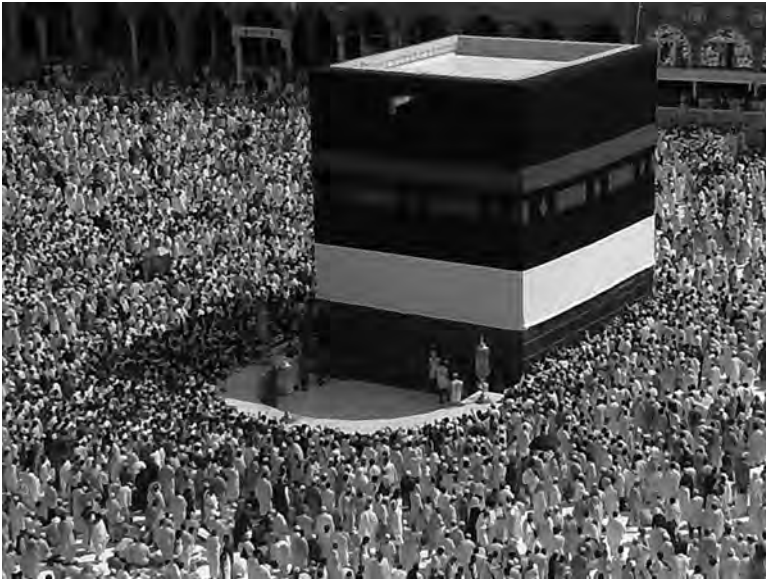


Figure 11.1. Pilgrims gathered around the *Ka'ba* (Mecca, Saudi Arabia). *Hajj* is undertaken to fulfill a divine obligation encapsulating the meaning of Islam as “submission to the will of God” and to commemorate the deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. Photo Al Jazeera English.

Rituals of Death: Human Sacrifice and Capital Punishment

People resort to ritual action in times of uncertainty. These rituals are made up of a “wordless language of symbolic acts” that taken together convey important messages about the social order (Barrett 1991: 135). One such ritualized activity is capital punishment in the United States. What message does this enterprise convey? The primary justification for capital punishment is that it deters crime. However, there is evidence to suggest that this is not the case (see Nagin and Pepper 2012). How, then, can the widespread support for capital punishment in the United States be explained? In an article entitled “Rituals of Death: Capital Punishment and Human Sacrifice,” Elizabeth Purdum and Anthony Paredes (1989) maintain that the answer to this question is to be found through an examination of the ritual components of capital punishment in America.

Purdum and Paredes draw a comparison between “the high drama” of Aztec human sacrifice and the bureaucratically regulated treatment of those condemned to death by electrocution in Florida. Both are forms of state-sanctioned homicide and both processes are highly ritualized. All the salient features of ritual action

are expressed in these events: rituals are meaningful, symbolic, communicative, performative, transformational, and linked to power.

Death row inmates are marginal members of society, with low socioeconomic status and minimal family ties. Aztec sacrificial victims—male prisoners of war as well as slaves, orphans, and children purchased from poor families—were similarly marginalized individuals (Eller 2010: 103–105). Like the variety of methods of execution in the United States, such as hanging, electrocution, lethal injection, poison gas, and firing squad, the Aztecs used various methods of dispatching their victims, such as death by fire, decapitation, arrows, and by tearing out hearts (Davies 1981: 198–241).

Aztec captives received their death warrant when they arrived at Tenochtitlan, the capital of the empire, where priests officially greeted them and publicly informed them of their fate. In the United States, Purdum and Paredes write, the impending death of a prisoner is marked by the signing of a death warrant. The event is publicized through a news release. The superintendent of the prison then formally reads the warrant out loud to the condemned prisoner in person. Thus, like the Aztec sacrificial victim, the Florida inmate learns his fate from officials in charge.

There are also general similarities in the ritualized treatment of prisoners once the death announcement is made. Aztec captives were dressed in cloaks and loincloths, and sandals. They were given tobacco to smoke and fed well so that they would be fat and desirable. Guards were appointed to look after the condemned.

In the United States, the recital of the death warrant begins a period known as the “death watch,” during which time the prisoner is moved to a special cell closer to the electric chair and, as among the Aztecs, a guard is stationed to ensure the prisoner’s wellbeing. According to Purdum and Paredes, tobacco is permitted and the condemned is fed three meals a day. Great care is taken to ensure the prisoner’s good health and measures are taken to prevent him from committing suicide. Prisoners must be in top health in order to be executed. If the condemned goes insane, he will not be put to death until he recovers.

During the second phase of the death watch in Florida precise ritualized day-to-day procedures are implemented. On execution day minus five, the executioner is selected. On execution day minus four the electric devices are tested. In the 48 hours before execution, the condemned is allowed an interview with a reporter. The prisoner inventories his property and indicates in writing how it will be disposed. He also specifies his funeral arrangements. He is then measured for a suit in which he will be buried. On execution day minus two, the execution device is tested again and an “execution squad drill” is conducted. On execution day minus one, the chef takes the order for the condemned man’s last meal.

On the day of Aztec sacrifice visiting dignitaries would take their seats in specially prepared booths and the condemned were paraded before them. The prisoners were well fed and elaborately decorated. The sacrificial priests, each dressed as a god, formed a line according to their rank. Ritualized singing and dancing followed.

According to Purdum and Paredes, in Florida, at midnight on the night before the execution the prisoner is allowed to see a clergyman. However, it is the prison Chaplain who will accompany the condemned to the death chamber, like the Aztec priests accompanying the victims to the pyramid tops. At 4:30 a.m. the last meal is served. At 5:30 a.m. twelve official witnesses arrive. At 5:50 a.m. twelve media witnesses are selected at the “media onlooker area.” Both groups are then taken to the witness room of the execution chamber where they take their seats like the dignitaries observing Aztec sacrifice. At 6:00 a.m. an administrative assistant, three electrical engineers, and a medical doctor are brought into the death chamber. The administrative assistant’s job is to keep phone contact with the governor’s office. At the same time, the prisoner’s head and right calf are shaved for better electrical conductivity. The condemned is then dressed in his new suit. At 6:30 a.m. the electric conducting gel is applied to the prisoner’s head and calf. Then the superintendent reads the death warrant to the prisoner once again.

The Aztec sacrificial victim dressed in fineries, like the condemned prisoner in Florida in his new suite, was taken to the altar atop a pyramid and given divine wine. Then four priests, painted black, placed him on the sacrificial altar, each holding a limb, while a fifth priest sliced the victim’s chest open with an obsidian knife, tore out the beating heart and offered it to the sun (Figure 11.2). The heart was then deposited in a brazier. This symbolic gesture signified that the deed was done.

In Florida the superintendent of the state prison and two officials escort the condemned prisoner to the death chamber at 6:56 a.m. He is then secured to the electric chair. At 7:00 a.m. the inmate is allowed a final statement. The governor then gives the go ahead to the supervisor to commence the execution, concluding with the statement, “god save us all.” The witnesses, now seated in special chairs, observe as the electrician puts the sponge and cap on the inmate’s head. The circuit breaker is engaged, the electrical panel is activated, and the executioner, who is wearing a black hood and robe, throws the switch upon receiving the signal from the superintendent. The doctor examines the victim and pronounces the death and the time is recorded. Finally a white cloth is waved to let the crowd outside the prison know that the deed is done.

After the Aztec prisoner was sacrificed the body was rolled down the stairs of the pyramid from where it was conveyed to a special house and processed. Dignitaries who witnessed the event were rewarded with splendid attire and a feast.

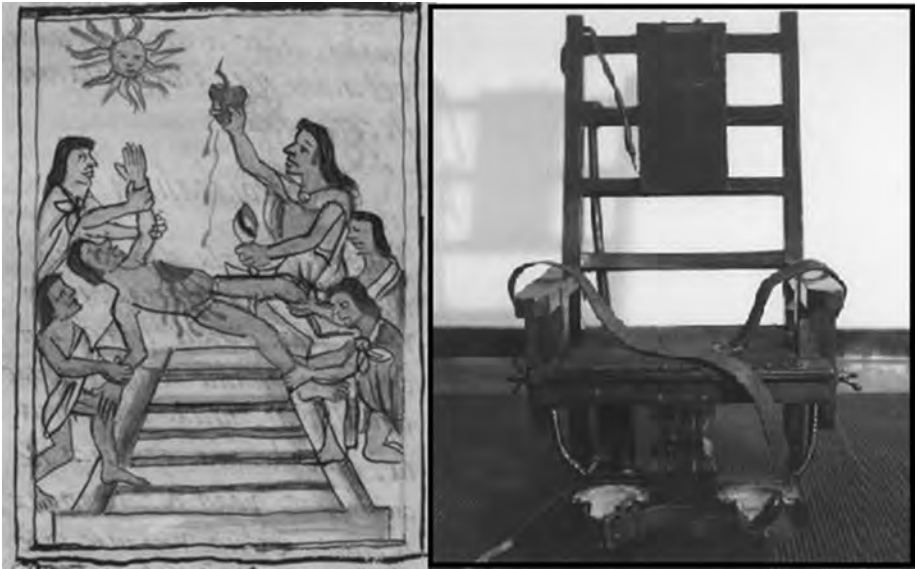


Figure 11.2. Human sacrifice and capital punishment. Like capital punishment in the United States, Aztec human sacrifice was a magical response undertaken to ensure order in the world. From the *Florentine Codex*.

Once pronounced dead, the body of the executed inmate in Florida is taken from the chamber to a waiting ambulance and conveyed to the medical examiner's office. Finally, the body is released to a funeral home for burial or cremation. At the prison, the witnesses are officially debriefed.

According to Purdum and Paredes, the Aztecs explained the sacrificial murders in terms of the belief that the gods must be fed and propitiated to ensure abundance of crops and perpetuation of the sun and the universe. For the American, the answer to the same question would be that such punishments deter others from committing terrible crimes. Others might emphasize the need to give families of the victims a feeling of justice.

There are similarities in "the organization, procedures, and even the physical appurtenances" between Aztec human sacrifice and capital punishment in the United States (Purdum and Paredes 1989: 152). There are obvious differences as well. But the psychosocial functions of human sacrifice in the Aztec empire have their counterpart in similar functions of capital punishment in the United States. As Purdum and Paredes (1989: 152) put it:

Just as Aztec ripping out of human hearts was couched in mystical terms of maintaining universal order and well-being of the state ... capital punishment in the United

States serves to assure many that society is not out of control after all, that the majesty of Law reigns, and that God is indeed in heaven.

For a society where there is perceived disorder, the popular support for capital punishment “springs from the same universal, ancient human impulse to do something in times of stress, even if it is only ritual.” Purdum and Paredes (1989: 153) conclude that:

In the face of all the evidence that capital punishment does no more to deter crime than the bloody rituals of Tenochtitlan did to keep the sun in the sky, we must seek some broader, noninstrumental function that the death penalty serves. We propose, in short, that modern capital punishment is an institutionalized *magical* response to perceived disorder in American life and the world at large, an attempted magical solution that has an especial appeal to the beleaguered, white, God-fearing men and women of the working class. And in certain aspiring politicians they find their sacrificial priests.

Humans respond to circumstances over which they lack control by resorting to ritualized magical procedures. Capital punishment and human sacrifice in the respective cases discussed here are such responses. Ritual actions allay anxiety, give the illusion that the solution to an otherwise daunting challenge is at hand, that something is being done, and that order prevails. Ritual allows people to do something under circumstances where there is really nothing to do, whether it is in the face of sickness, misfortune, the perception of a society gone awry, or a universe in jeopardy.

Myth: The Narrative Dimension of Religion

In scholarly usage the term “myth” (from the Greek *mythos* or story) refers to oral or written accounts about the deeds of culture heroes and supernatural beings long ago. According to Scott Leonard and Michael McClure (2004: 2):

Myths are ancient narratives that attempt to answer the enduring and fundamental human questions: How did the universe and the world come to be? How did we come to be here? Who are we? What are our proper, necessary, or inescapable roles as we relate to one another and the world at large? What should our values be? How should we behave? How should we *not* behave? What are the consequences of behaving or not behaving in such ways?

Every culture has myths set in the context of a broad cultural narrative system. Many Europeans are familiar with myths from ancient Greek literature. The myth of Oedipus, who unwittingly slays his father and marries his mother, has many layers and has been studied by scholars from a variety of fields. Some myths deal with how humans or some aspect of the human condition originated. These are called origin myths. The myth of Prometheus, who bestowed fire upon humankind after stealing it from the gods, is an origin myth. Others involve accounts dealing with the creation of people, the world, and the cosmos. These are referred to as creation myths. The story of Genesis in The Old Testament is a creation myth (Figure 12.1). Myths dealing with the action of gods and other supernatural agents

are called sacred myths. The originators of myths are often unknown. Usually a myth has been told and retold countless times as it has been transmitted across space and time. It is often possible to identify variants of a particular myth, sometimes from around the world. This is in part due to the process of diffusion, but some variants have emerged independently.

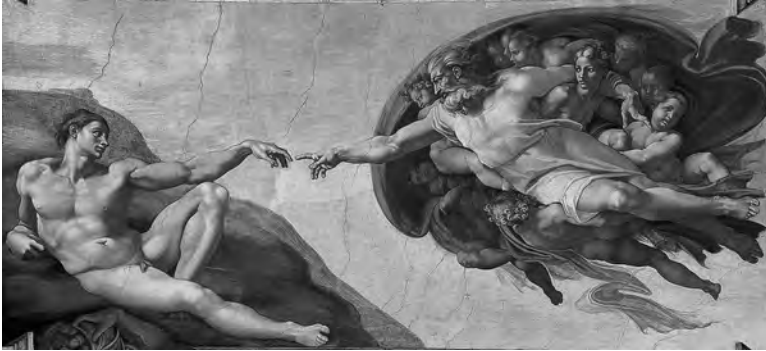


Figure 12.1. “The creation of Adam” by Michelangelo (c. 1511). The story of Genesis in The Old Testament is a creation myth.

Usage of the term “myth” is confusing. In everyday parlance “myth” refers to an erroneous belief or a popular misconception. Sometimes the word is used interchangeably with folktale, fairy tale, and legend. Folklorists, however, make specific distinctions between these categories. The anthropologist/folklorist William Bascom (1996) offers the following under the general category of prose narratives: myths, legends, and folktales.

Myths, according to Bascom (1996: 2):

are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, and disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their main characters are not usually human beings, but they often have human attributes; they are animals, deities, or culture heroes, whose actions are set in an earlier world, when the earth was different from what it is today, or in another world, such as the sky or underworld. Myths account for the origin of the world, of mankind, of death, or for characteristics of birds, animals, geographical features, and the phenomena of nature. They may recount the activities of deities, their love affairs, their family relationships, their friendships and enmities, their victories or defeats. They may purport to “explain”

details of ceremonial paraphernalia or ritual, or why tabus must be observed, but such etiological elements are not confined to myths.

In contrast, legends are prose narratives:

which, like myths, are regarded as true by the narrator and his audience, but they are set in a period considered to be less remote, when the world was much as it is today. Legends are more often secular than sacred, and their principal characters are human. They tell of migrations, wars and victories, deeds of past heroes, chiefs, kings, and succession in ruling dynasties. In this they are often the counterpart in verbal tradition of written history, but they also include local tales of buried treasure, ghosts, fairies, and saints (Bascom 1996: 2).

Folktales are prose narratives that:

are regarded as fiction. They are not considered as dogma or history, they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, although it is often said that they are told only for amusement, they have other important functions, as the class of moral folktales should have suggested. Folktales may be set in any time and any place, and in this sense they are almost timeless and placeless. They have been called “nursery tales” but in many societies they are not restricted to children. They have also been known as “fairy tales” but this is inappropriate both because narratives about fairies are usually regarded as true, and because fairies do not appear in most folktales. Fairies, ogres, and even deities may appear, but folktales usually recount the adventures of animal or human characters (Bascom 1996: 2).

The conventional opening formula of folktales, “once upon a time,” lets the audience know that the narrative to come is fictional and this also sets it apart from myths and legends.

Myths have various complex strata of meaning and symbolism and they have been the subject of study from fields as varied as anthropology, philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, folklore, history, theology, literature, linguistics, cultural studies, and comparative religion.

Myth and Science

Anthropologists have long been fascinated by the corpus of myths dealing with the origins of the human world and cosmos found across cultures. Edward B. Tylor juxtaposed these myths with science. He took myths literally, not poetically, or symbolically. In this view, myth is to “primitive” society what science is to modern culture (Segal 2004: 24). Science and myth both offer explanations of

the natural world. Myths offer personalistic explanations to account for naturalistic occurrences, i.e., supernatural anthropomorphic beings (animism). Science offers mechanical laws and biological and physical processes to explain naturalistic occurrences. In this sense, myth, as a primitive mode of thought, is false, while science, as a modern mode of thought, is true.

The anthropologist James Frazer (1854–1941), author of *The Golden Bough*, held a comparable view of myth in primitive society. He reasoned as follows: In an effort to control the forces of nature humans applied magical rites to nature. When they realized that this does not work, they invented gods whose activities were thought to affect nature. This resulted in the development of religious myths to account for the action of gods. Magical rites were now performed to influence the divine powers of the gods rather than to directly affect nature. Overtime, humans realized that nature is subject to physical laws, giving rise to science. This realization rendered myths obsolete. Frazer saw humankind as progressing from the evolutionary stages of magic, to religion (myth), to science (Segal 2004: 64–70).

According to the perspective espoused by Tylor and Frazer, as Robert Segal (2004: 3) points out, science rendered myth not merely redundant but outright incompatible, so that modern people, who by definition are scientific, had to reject myth. In this view there can be no modern myth—“modern myth is a contradiction in terms” (Segal 1990: 266). The problem here, of course, is that if science has taken over the function that myth once had, i.e., an explanation of the natural world, why has myth been retained alongside science and why does myth resonate so powerfully in the contemporary world?

Attempts to retain myth in the face of science have involved the recasting of the subject and function of myth, as in the works of Bultman, Eliade, and Jung (Segal 2004: 21–35). In the works of these scholars myth is not about explanation of the world but about other things.

The theologian Rudolf Bultman (1884–1976) attempted to “demythologize” myth, not eradicate or “demythify” it, but rather he tried to emphasize its symbolic meaning. Thus, the myth of Noah’s Ark demythologized is rendered to be a symbolic expression of the uncertainties of human life. Demythifying it would be to dismiss it by asking for physical evidence of a worldwide deluge. Viewed in this way, myth is not about explanation, but is an existential symbolic expression of “man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives” (Segal 2004: 48). Through this approach, according to Segal (2004: 48), “myth ceases to be merely primitive and becomes universal. It ceases to be false and becomes true. It depicts the human condition.”

For the religious scholar Mircea Eliade myth is about reactualization—when reenacted myth carries one back to primordial times and brings one into contact with the gods in mythic time (Eliade 1968: 205). Myth has a place alongside

science because it has a regenerative function that science does not have. This is why myth remains with us, “camouflaged” in books, plays, and cinema. As Eliade (1968: 205) puts it:

A whole volume could be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in plays that he enjoys, in the books that he reads. The cinema, that “dream factory,” takes over and employs countless mythical motifs—the fight between the hero and the monster, the initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisaal landscape, hell and so on). Even reading includes a mythological function ... because through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an “escape from time” comparable to the “emergence from time” effected by myths ... reading projects him out of his personal duration and incorporates him into other rhythms, makes him live in another “history.”

For the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), “myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings, and anything but allegories of physical processes.” Thus recast, myth is about the human mind rather than the external world (Segal 1999: 30–35). Jung (1968: 154) adds, “in fact, the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective consciousness.” The collective consciousness, which is posited to be universal, explains the recurrence of the same motifs in myth worldwide.

Myth-Ritual Theory

Myths and rituals are prominent features of religion. What is the relationship between them? The precise connection between myth and ritual has been the focus of study by myth-ritual scholars who posit specific kinds of relationships between the two. There are various versions of this view. As Segal (2004: 38) observes:

The theory claims not that myths and rituals happen to go hand in hand but that they must. In its most uncompromising form, the theory contends that myths and rituals cannot exist without each other. In a milder form, the theory asserts that myths and rituals originally exist together but subsequently go their separate ways. In its mildest form, the theory maintains that myths and rituals can arise separately but subsequently coalesce.

Myth-ritualists are to be distinguished from mythologists such as Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell who maintain that myths can be understood on their own in terms of meaning and symbolism. Myth-ritualists are associated with the ideas of the biblical scholar William Robertson Smith (1846–1894). In his work *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1923 [1889]), Smith argued that in ancient religions the

central emphasis was upon ritual and the correct practice of ritual. Ritual came before myth. Myth served as justification for ritual after the original reason for conducting it was somehow forgotten. Myths therefore arise from rituals. As he put it:

as a rule we find that while the practice [ritual] was rigorously fixed, the meaning [myth] attached to it was extremely vague, and the same rite was explained by different people in different ways, without any question of orthodoxy or heterodoxy arising in consequence (Smith 1923: 18).

For Tylor, myth is to ritual what science is to technology. Myth precedes ritual, which enacts the myth, just like science is put into action by technology.

Malinowski used a version of the myth-ritual theory when discussing the myths of the Trobriand Islanders. In his famous essay, “Myth in Primitive Psychology,” Malinowski (1955: 101) writes:

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 morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.

Put differently, 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 1955: 100).

The anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn (1905–1960) asserted that myth and ritual can work together or distinctly. When they operate in unison, myth explains ritual enactments.

Hence, although the relative importance of myth and ritual does vary greatly, the two tend universally to be associated ... For myth and ritual have a common psychological basis. Ritual is the obsessive repetitive activity—often a symbolic dramatization of the fundamental “needs” of society, whether “economic,” “biological,” “social,” or “sexual.” Mythology is the rationalization of these same needs, whether they are expressed in overt ceremonial or not (Kluckhohn 1942: 78–79).

There are myths without corresponding rituals and rituals without corresponding myths, leaving the causal connection between myth and ritual unresolved. Current

views on the issue stress the independence of myth and ritual and those who do admit a linkage do so for a small portion of myths and rituals. Those who maintain the primacy of ritual do so by looking at ethology. As the anthropologist Alexander Moore (1992: 120) sees it, “Because rituals existed among other animals before the invention of human speech, I treat rituals as coming first. Ritual is primary, myth secondary.”

Structural Analysis and the Trickster Myth

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’ (1908–2009) examination of myth departs from most other approaches. For Lévi-Strauss myths are a system of communication in which the mind, unhampered by empirical constraints, communes with itself (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 10). All myths emanate from the same source, the structure of the human mind, hence the similarities in myths cross-culturally. For example, in his structural analysis of American television show *Star Trek*, the anthropologist Peter Claus (1982) found that it has the same structure as myths in indigenous societies.

Although myths may appear to some to have no practical utility, for Lévi-Strauss they represent thought concerned with significant human dilemmas (oppositions) that create tensions that the mind attempts to resolve or ameliorate. These include the contradictions posed by life and death, the opposition between culture (order) and nature (randomness), and the dilemma posed by humankind’s dual character, being a part of nature and yet separated from it by culture. In the arena of myth, the mind dabbles with these oppositions and transposes and mediates them symbolically (Sidky 2004: 261–264).

According to Lévi-Strauss, the human mind operates on the principle of binary oppositions (up/down, right/left, good/evil, light/dark, etc.). All sociocultural phenomena are shaped by the structural operation of the human mind. Phenomena such as myth, totemism, kinship systems, and so forth are examples of objectified thought, meaning the tangible expression of underlying principles of the mind. Lévi-Strauss’ approach of looking at the underlying structure of myth, not its content, makes it possible to come to grips with the vast diversity of myths, including variants of the same myths, found around the world. What the structural approach aims to do is to determine how humans think, not what they think, in order to enhance our understanding of objectified thought and its mechanisms (Sidky 2004: 261–264).

Lévi-Strauss’ structural analysis of the trickster in Native American mythology illustrates how the dichotomy or opposition between life and death is transformed

in mythic thought. Trickster myths of Native American cultures were collected by the American anthropologist Paul Radin (1883–1959). In his book *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956), Radin describes the ambiguous trickster, often an anthropomorphic raven or coyote, who is:

at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and is always duped himself. ... He possesses no values ... is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being (Radin 1956: xxiii).

Lévi-Strauss remarks, “The trickster in American mythology has remained so far a problematic figure. Why is it that throughout North America his role is assigned practically everywhere to either coyote or raven?” The solution is as follows:

If we keep in mind that mythical thought always progresses from awareness of oppositions toward their resolution, the reasons for these choices becomes clearer. We need only to assume that two opposite terms with no intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which admit of a third one as mediator; then one of the polar terms and the mediator become replaced by a new triad, and so on (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 220–221).

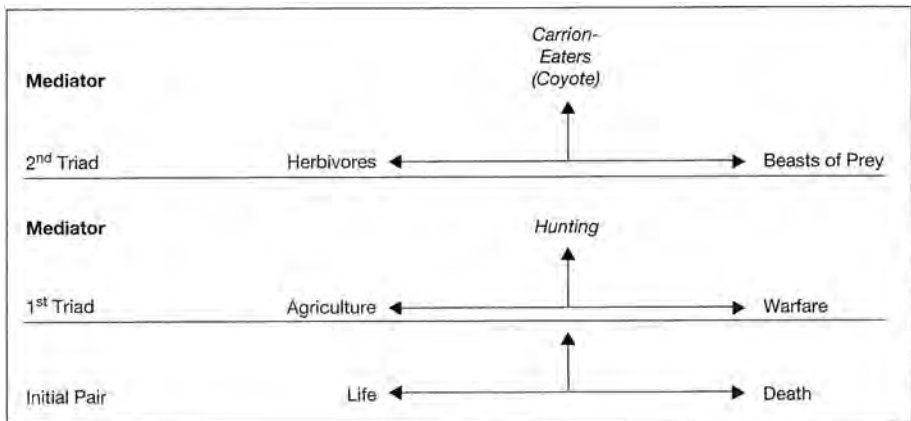


Figure 12.2. Lévi-Strauss' structural explanation for the role of the coyote as "the trickster." After Lett (1987).

Lévi-Strauss arrives at the explanation of the coyote as the supernatural trickster by setting up an opposition between life/death, the initial pair (Figure 12.2). Life and death pose a dichotomy, they are oppositions with no intermediaries and must be replaced by two equivalent terms that admit a third term as mediator to negate them. The analogous opposition to life/death, according to Lévi-Strauss, is

agriculture/warfare. Agriculture sustains life and so means life; warfare leads to killing and therefore signifies death. The mediator between agriculture and warfare is hunting, which sustains life by war against animals. This is the first triad. Agriculture is associated with plant-eating animals and hunting with beasts of prey. The mediator between the two terms is carrion-eating animals, which are anomalous, being like beast of prey because they eat animal flesh, but they are also like plant eaters because they do not kill what they eat. This is the second triad (Sidky 2004: 261–264). Thus because the anomalous carrion-eating coyote mediates between life/death, it becomes the trickster:

the trickster is a mediator. Since his mediating function occupies a position half-way between two polar terms, he must retain something of that duality—namely an ambiguous and equivocal character (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 223).

This example illustrates how in mythical thought the dichotomy between life and death can be rephrased in terms of different sets of oppositions. Lévi-Strauss' analysis suggests that the binary operations of the human mind determine the recurrence of the coyote as a trickster.

There are major problems with this approach. First, the selection of the initial pair and the triads is not self-evident. Second, there is the fact that coyotes are not exclusively carrion eaters (Harris 2001: 200). These intelligent animals do in fact hunt small creatures, like rabbits, rats, mice, and birds, as well as being opportunistic. Moreover, coyotes are extremely intelligent creatures. Thus a more plausible and parsimonious explanation for their role as tricksters could be that Native Americans recognized coyotes as tricky animals. Thus, Lévi-Strauss's structural explanation, some critics have argued, misdirects us from the obvious to the obscure and improbable (Harris 2001: 201).

Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth

Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) was one of the best-known mythologists of the twentieth century (Segal 1999: 135–141). His popularity was in part based on his publications and public lectures and in part because he presented his views on television in a six-part PBS series called *The Power of Myth* (1988). The program reached an audience of millions keen to learn about “universal human truths” in a time of uncertainty (Leonard and McClure 2004: 4). Campbell's greatest achievement, albeit an indirect one, was the enormous success of the *Star Wars* movies, directed by George Lucas, who acknowledged the impact of Campbell's books on the storyline. Campbell was thus instrumental in the creation of a modern living myth. As Robert Ellwood (1999: 127–128) has pointed out:

these films have created out of science fiction what seems to be the dominant living imaginative mythology of our time, comparable to the role of Arthurian fantasy in Victorian England or Wagner's heroes in Wilhelmine Germany.

Campbell approached myth from the perspective of psychoanalysis and literary criticism. Although not a Freudian or Jungian proper, the psychoanalytical ideas of Sigmund Freud, and especially those of Carl Gustav Jung, were important elements of Campbell's approach. Campbell was not concerned with the issues of translation, variants of myths, or the sociocultural, ritual, or religious contexts of the myths he studied. Instead he treated myth as a "timeless story of eternal human significance" (Ellwood 1999: 130). As he writes:

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestations. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth (Campbell 1968: 3).

The interpretation of the meaning of myth was of central concern to Campbell. For him myth is not about explanation of the world, as Tylor would have it. Instead, it is an eternal narrative, expressed in metaphor, about the human condition (Ellwood 1999: 130). Myths, Campbell (1968: viii) tells us, contain "the basic truths by which man has lived throughout the millenniums of his residence on the planet." As Segal (1990: 267) has put it, to Campbell myth "represents a collective Bible for all humanity. It alone contains the wisdom necessary for what amounts to salvation." Through myth it is possible to understand culture, religion, literature, and the mind. For those who have myth "there is an experience both of accord with the social order, and of harmony with the universe" (Campbell 1964: 5). In the absence of myth people are left with "uncertainty" and "disequilibrium:"

With our old mythologically founded taboos unsettled by our own modern sciences, there is everywhere in the civilized world a rapidly rising incidence of vice and crime, mental disorders, suicides and dope addictions, shattered homes, impudent children, violence, murder, and despair. These are facts; I am not inventing them (Campbell 1972: 11).

According to Campbell (1972: 214–215), myths have the following four functions:

The first is what I have called the mystical function: to waken and maintain in the individual a sense of awe and gratitude in relation to the mystery dimension of the

universe, not so that he lives in fear of it, but so that he recognizes that he participates in it, since the mystery of being is the mystery of his own being as well.

The second function of living mythology is to offer an image of the universe that will be in accord with the knowledge of the time, the sciences and the field of action of the folk to whom the mythology is addressed.

The third function of the living mythology is to validate, support, and imprint the norms of a given specific moral order—that namely, of the society in which the individual is to live.

And the fourth is to guide him, stage by stage, in health, strength, and harmony of spirit, through the whole foreseeable course of a useful life.

Myth therefore harmonizes humans and humans, humans and society, and humans and the cosmos, “linking them with everything both outside and within themselves” (Segal 1990: 234). Myth guides people to a deeper reality, both psychological and metaphysical (Segal 1990: 238).

The ancients knew the meaning of myth and were therefore better integrated socially and psychologically, according to Campbell. Modern people have forgotten the meaning of myth and must rely on complicated techniques, such as Jungian psychology, to find the meanings lost to them and hence find reintegration and reconnection with the cosmos.

The rediscovery of myth for Campbell is the means through which humans can solve the social and personal problems of the times. Myth from this perspective is indispensable. People must have myth because myth offers wisdom—the deepest secrets of reality are disclosed in myth (Segal 1990: 270).

Campbell maintained that all myths have the same message. The similarity in myth is due to the fact that they are the products of the human mind which is the same everywhere. Myths arise spontaneously from the unconscious mind (Segal 1990: 206). As Campbell (1968: 4) put it:

For the symbols of myth are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed. They are the spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source.

Myths contain symbols that link to archetypes (recurrent motifs that evoke emotion and prompt action), which are a part of the collective unconscious. One can get in touch with these inner forces by grasping the true meaning of myth:

Through a dialogue conducted with these inward forces through ... a study of myths, we can learn to know and come to terms with the greater horizon of our own deeper

and wiser, inward self. And analogously, the society that cherishes and keeps its myths alive will be nourished from the soundest, richest strata of the human spirit (Campbell 1972: 5).

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), which contains the unchanging core of his ideas, Campbell provides an account of the hero's journey. Hero myths are important and can be found in nearly all cultures. Examples of the hero myth include the near ubiquitous accounts of virgins giving birth to heroes who die and are resurrected, the tale of Prometheus who ascended to the heavens, stole fire from the gods, and returned, the story of Aeneas who descended into the underworld, conversed with the ghost of his father, and ascended, and the great struggle of the Buddha seeking enlightenment (Campbell 1968: 30–31; 1972: 9). According to Segal (1999: 135), for Campbell “heroism is not external but internal: the hero's literal search for wealth or anything else symbolizes the search for self-knowledge. The land to which the hero treks symbolizes the unconscious.” The point Campbell made, according to Ellwood (1999: 174) was that “all myths were one, that behind the thousand faces they had in effect one message, based on the psychic unity of humanity, and proclaimed one intrapsychic path to salvation.” The meaning of myth is the oneness of all things (Segal 1990: 276). It is through myth therefore that the individual obtains a sense of identity and a place in the world.

Campbell (1968: 30) called the basic pattern beneath the thousand variants of hero myths found cross-culturally a “monomyth.” Ellwood (1999: 144) sums up the monomyth as follows:

The basic monomyth informs us that the mythological hero, setting out from an everyday home, is lured or is carried away or proceeds to the threshold of adventure. He defeats a shadowy presence that guards the gateway, enters a dark passageway or even death, meets many unfamiliar forces, some of which give him threatening “tests,” some of which offer magical aid. At the climax of the quest he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward: sacred marriage or sexual union with the goddess of the world, reconciliation with the father, his own divinization, or a mighty gift to bring back to the world. He then undertakes the final work of return, in which, transformed, he reenters the place from whence he set out.

This basic pattern is also to be found in novels, movies, and other artistic expressions, for example, *The Wizard of Oz*, based on the work of L. Frank Baum, J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, George Lucas's *Star Wars*, and the film *The Matrix* by the Wachowski brothers.

The monomyth is the theoretical framework through which all such myths and stories derived from them across cultures could be comprehended. The characters of the monomyth are universally appealing because they are based upon

“universal archetypes linked to inner psychic growth and the development of humanity as a whole” (Bowie 2006: 286).

Campbell was an advocate of what he termed “living mythology,” a spiritual path that would enable individuals to attain a sense of social and spiritual purpose and which would restore society’s moral virtues (Leonard and McClure 2004: 5). Campbell has been criticized for oversimplifying history and for being inattentive to the issues of translation, cross-cultural variants of myths, and the social, ritual, and religious contexts of the myths he studied. In addition, Campbell fails to provide a reason why myth alone is capable of the functions he ascribes to it. Finally, Campbell must be criticized for his reliance on Jung’s pseudo-scientific notion of the universal unconscious mind of humanity and Jungian psychology in general, which has been shown to contain numerous flaws in analysis and methodology (see McGowan 1994).

Symbols: The Representational Dimension of Religion

It is through sacred symbols that supernatural concepts are represented in the natural world. A symbol, according to the definition by anthropologist David Schneider (1968: 1) “is something which stands for something else, or something else, where there is no necessary or intrinsic relationship between the symbol and that which it symbolizes.” Thus the word “kangaroo,” a symbol, does not bear any resemblance to, nor does it sound like, the animal it signifies. In the same vein, anthropologist Leslie White (1949: 25) writes that, “a symbol may be defined as a thing the value or meaning of which is bestowed upon it by those who use it.” A symbol, in other words, is a shared agreed upon meaning ascribed to phenomena. As such, symbols are arbitrary and are comprehensible only in their cultural contexts or as part of systems of symbolic meanings (cf., Nye 2008: 135–137).

A symbol can be an object, a place, a gesture, a word, a sound, or a unit of time. Creating and using symbols is the basis of human communication and culture. As White (1949: 33) points out:

All culture ... depends upon the symbol. It was the exercise of the symbolic faculty that brought culture into existence and it is the use of symbols that makes the perpetuation of culture possible. Without the symbol there would be no culture, and man would be merely an animal, not a human being.

Symbols enable us to talk about the past, the present, the future, about things present or faraway, and they even allow us to create wholly imaginary worlds and universes and populate them with fantastic supernatural beings. Through symbols humans infuse the world with meaning. They then live their lives, conceptualize nature, structure experience, create philosophies, and construct religious ideologies in terms of those meanings. White (1977: 247) elaborates upon how symbols shape human perceptions of reality:

[With symbols] man built a new world in which to live. To be sure, he still trod the earth, felt the wind against his cheek, or heard it sigh among the pines; he drank from streams, slept beneath the stars, and awoke to greet the sun. But it was not the same sun! Nothing was the same anymore. Everything was “bathed in celestial light”; and there were “imitations of immortality” on every hand. Water was not merely something to quench thirst; it could bestow the life everlasting. Between man and nature hung the veil of culture, and he could see nothing save through this medium. He still used his senses. He chipped stone, chased deer, mated and begat offspring. But permeating everything was the essence of words: the meaning and values that lay beyond the senses. And these meanings and values guided him—in addition to his senses—and often took precedence over them.

Religious Symbols

Clifford Geertz (1973: 4) construes religion as “a system of symbols” that provides those who believe the reassurance that life is meaningful. Religious symbols possess power and they evoke cognitive and emotional responses among those who use them. Through symbols spiritual forces and beings become manifest. Thus, abstractions are made concrete and the supernatural world is affirmed. Put differently, symbols manifest the transcendent. As anthropologist Victor Turner (1967: 50) points out, symbolization, the process of creating and utilizing symbols, makes “visible, audible, and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments and psychological predispositions that cannot be directly perceived.” Religious symbolism appears in myth, rituals, and in tangible objects.

Sacred Objects

Sacred objects that are infused with power and meaning are found in all religions. Through them people make contact with and manipulate the supernatural world. The fetish is a spiritually charged object, such as an amulet, charm, or a

medicine bundle, that gives the bearer power or protection from negative supernatural effects. There are also objects that function to facilitate religious practice, called “religious technology,” such as prayer beads used by Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists, prayer wheels, prayer rugs, and the shaman’s drum. Bells, gongs, candles, fire, incense, altars, cups, plates, knives, and food are other objects used in religious practice. Finally, there are the accoutrements that signify a person’s religious affiliation and the status of religious specialists, such as clerical collars, pendants, beads and bells, and clothes, such as robes, turbans, shawls, hats of various designs, and associated paraphernalia.

Masks

The ceremonial use of masks is widespread. Masks often symbolically depict spirits, deities, and primordial ancestors, and have multiple meanings. These objects enable the users to impersonate or become the embodiment of god or other spiritual beings in order to reenact myths or in the context of religious rituals. The *kachina* masks of the Hopi Indians are a famous example. Dogon of Mali are renowned for their elaborate ritual masks. Masks are used throughout Africa, the Northwest Coast of America, Melanesia, and elsewhere, such as in Nepal, Tibet, and Bali, among other places.

Relics

Relics, the body parts of saints and holy men (teeth, hair, bones, and sometimes entire corpses), are believed to be infused with sacred power and capable of working miracles. Relics figure prominently in Catholicism. Buddhists venerate relics of the Buddha, which are often enshrined in structures known as stupas. The tombs of saints are similarly thought to be imbued with sacredness and are centers of pilgrimage and worship in Islam. The vest of the Prophet Muhammad, in Kandahar, Afghanistan and the purported burial cloth of Jesus, the “Shroud of Turin,” (Figure 13.1) are other types of relics based on the idea of sacredness through contact.

Statues

Likenesses of gods, spirits, or other divinities in the form of statues and images are found in many religions. Good examples were the giant Buddhas carved in the



Figure 13.1. The Shroud of Turin, a medieval artifact (c. 1260–1390) purported to be the burial shroud of Jesus of Nazareth. This is a religious relic based on the idea of sacredness through contact.

cliffs of the Bamiyan Valley (fourth and fifth centuries A.D.), northwest of Kabul, Afghanistan. These statues were the inspiration for a tradition of colossal religious statue building that made its way along the Silk Road to China, Korea, and Japan. Statues figure prominently as manifestations of divinity in Hinduism. Such objects were also important in the religions of the ancient Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Greeks. Christianity as well makes use of statuary of divinities, including ones that miraculously bleed and weep.

In contrast to these examples, some religions, Sunni Islam in particular, explicitly forbid visual representations of divinities and consider such efforts as idolatry. This belief ostensibly motivated the Taliban militant Muslims to demolish the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan in March, 2001 (Figure 13.2).



Figure 13.2. The giant Buddha of Bamiyan (left) and what remains after its demolition by Taliban religious extremists (right). Photo courtesy of Carl Montgomery.

Sacred Time

Humans organize religious activities according to particular units of time, such as hours, days, weeks, months, years, and so forth, that have symbolic significance. Ritual calendars demarcate significant periods when certain rituals must be

performed. For example, the Aztec calendar had a natural solar year of 365 days. This was divided into 18 months of 20 days each, totaling 360 days. The five remaining days made up a period of danger requiring ritual action. They also calculated a second type of year based upon 260 days. Both calendars ran concurrently. Every 52 years the first day of the 365 and 260 day calendars would overlap completing a cycle, with the holiest days coinciding with the end of each cycle. During this time priests had to frantically perform elaborate rituals and sacrifice humans to prevent the end of the world.

Sacred Sounds

Music is used during religious rituals to set the mood, induce altered states of consciousness, or to beckon supernatural beings. Around the world, percussion, wind, keyboard, and string instruments are used. In some cultures particular sounds have religious significance. Among the Australian Aborigines the sounds of the didgeridoo are considered to be the voices of spirit beings. Among the *bitans* (mediums) of Hunza the sounds of flutes and drums represent a form of communication with spirits (Sidky and Subedi 2000) (Figure 13.3).

Words can be sacred symbols. Magical formulae, spoken or chanted, are infused with spiritual energy. Chanting and reciting holy words are essential parts of numerous religions. Many religions have sacred texts, like the Torah, Bible, Qu'ran, and the Vedas. These writings contain the words of God, or the gods, and are considered to be sacred objects imbued with mystical power. Verses of the Qu'ran, written on small pieces of paper, are used to make charms and amulets to ward off disease and ensure good luck. The book itself is thought to be laden with spiritual potency and is kept wrapped in cloth and placed in an elevated position so as not to be profaned.

Sacred Spaces

Sacred spaces are locations associated with a spirit or supernatural event. These include particular locales, caves, rivers, or mountain peaks. An example of a sacred location is Bodhi Gaya, a pilgrimage site in the Indian state of Bihar, where Gautama Buddha achieved enlightenment. The sites in Lourdes, France, and Fatima, Portugal, are sacred locations where people have seen the apparitions of the Virgin Mary. The cave of Hira, in the Jabal al-Nour mountain near Mecca is sacred because it was here that the Prophet Muhammad received his first divine message. Mount Kailash in Tibet is considered to be the abode of the gods and is deemed



Figure 13.3. A *bitan* in ASC listening to the sounds of a flute, a form of communication with the spirit world. Photo by H. Sidky.

sacred by Tibetan Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, and followers of the Bön religion of Tibet. The sacred river Ganges is personified as a goddess among Hindus.

The Human Body

The way that the body is represented is a powerful symbolic expression of relations to the natural and supernatural worlds and attitudes toward life (see Bell 1992: 94–117). The body can also provide an analogy of the social system, a theme anthropologist Mary Douglas explores in her book *Natural Symbols* (1973).

Bodily symbolism is used to express conformity or lack thereof, to social norms. Hermits, for instance, express their alienation from secular society by unconventional dress or unshorn hair (Figure 13.4). Some go about naked; others demonstrate their contempt for the body by mutilation and mortification of the flesh. Early Sufi mystics in Bagdad in the 12th century wore coarse wool garments, called *suf*, as a way of mortifying the flesh, while they traveled from place to place preaching asceticism and devotion to God. Through dress and comportment they displayed their contempt for social conventions and demonstrated their obedience to a higher power.



Figure 13.4. A Nepalese ascetic smoking marijuana. Through dress and comportment such ascetics symbolically demonstrate their contempt for social conventions and obedience to a higher power. Photo by H. Sidky.

Closely cropped or shorn hair can mean strict conformity. Catholic monks and Buddhist nuns and monks shave their hair as part of the regimentation of their organizations. Shaving one's head expresses strict discipline. The same is true of uniforms. Monks and nuns don distinctive attire as a sign of their commitment to the spiritual path. This, as anthropologist Richard Barrett (1991: 143) puts it:

is perhaps the ultimate expression of the harnessed body; it is emblematic of regimented order and signifies the degree to which the individual wearing it is at the service of the organization.

Natural Symbols

People everywhere have used attributes that occur in nature as symbols. French sociologist Robert Hertz (1973) focused upon handedness and the ritual significance ascribed to the left and right hands and their association respectively with sacredness and profanity. In many cultures the cardinal directions are natural symbols. The rising sun in the east is associated with light, birth, and regeneration. The setting sun in the west is associated with darkness, evil, death and decay. The sun, moon, planets, stars, and comets are other natural symbols as are elements such as earth, wind, fire, and water. Animals appear in the form of deities, totems, familiar spirits, tricksters, and mythical creatures like dragons, or composite therianthropic figures, such as the Sorcerer at Les Trois Frères (see Figure 2.2). Aspects of the natural landscapes, such as mountain peaks, associated with the heavens, and caves, linked with the bowels of the earth and the underworld, are frequently ascribed supernatural significance. Trees and plants are also attributed with mystical import. In shamanic traditions, the tree often appears as the *axis mundi* that connects the world, heavens, and underworld.

The Anthropological Study of Religious Symbols

In his book *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), Victor Turner provided a theoretical approach for the study of ritual symbols. “Symbols,” according to Turner (1967: 19), “are observable, empirical objects, relationships, gestures, and spatial units in a ritual situation.” A symbol, Turner adds, “is a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought.” For example, among the Ndembu of Zambia, where Turner conducted fieldwork, the sapling of a tree that produces a white milky substance when its bark is scratched, signifies aspects of the female body imagery, such as milk, suckling breasts, and girlish slenderness. These properties are used when the Ndembu employ the sapling of the milk tree in the girl’s puberty ritual. The symbol, according to Turner (1967: 19) “is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is the ultimate unit of a specific structure in a ritual context.”

Turner notes that symbols possess the property of multivocality, the capacity to simultaneously convey and express multiple meanings from which participants construct an understanding relevant to their own circumstances. Symbols in a ritual can convey lengthy messages in abridged form because they are condensations of semantic wealth. This gives symbols their power to evoke feelings of awe, wonderment, or dread, and to create social transformations. For Turner (1967: 44), a symbol has a dynamic nature, it is alive. As he puts it:

It is alive only in so far as it is “pregnant with meaning” for men and women, who interact by observing, transgressing, and manipulating for private ends the norms and values that the symbol expresses.

Symbols are catalysts for social action:

It must not be forgotten that ritual symbols are not merely signs representing known things; they are felt to possess ritual efficacy, to be charged with power from unknown sources, and to be capable of acting on persons and groups coming in contact with them in such a way as to change them for the better or in a desired direction. Symbols, in short, have an orectic as well as a cognitive function. They elicit emotion and express and mobilize desire (Turner 1967: 54).

Symbols and Society

Durkheim maintained that religious rituals comprise “a wordless language” of symbolic enactments that say important things about society (Barrett 1991: 135). The task of the anthropologist is to decode these symbolic messages. To illustrate this point, Barrett (1991: 136–137) gives the example of ancestor worship in pre-communist China. At that time, homes had an altar that included spirit tablets dedicated to dead ancestors. Family members conducted important ceremonies in front of these altars, such as funeral and sacrificial rites. Funeral rites, centered upon the belief in the soul, were intended to dispatch the spirit of the dead family member to the other world. Sacrificial rites involved offerings to the spirits of the ancestors in the form of food and incense. These rites were conducted according to stipulated procedures, requiring each family member to kneel before the altar and offer prayers in turn. The head of the family went first, followed by others according to their gender and birth order. This ritual was therefore a rehearsal of the family organization and its crucial values. It was a symbolic expression and affirmation of the social group. The ritual conveyed an important symbolic message to each family member regarding the centrality of hierarchy, the importance of birth order, and individual prerogatives.

Moreover, the ritual symbolically bestowed a sense of sacredness upon the inculcated values.

Symbols, Purity, and Pollution

In her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), anthropologist Mary Douglas focuses upon the cultural symbols of purity, pollution, and taboos, things that concern humans everywhere. She attempts to elucidate the circumstances under which things are symbolically regarded as unholy and ritually impure.

Douglas begins by pointing out that culture is a symbolic system that people superimpose upon nature to create order. We order things by labeling and putting them into logical mental categories. There is a rationale underlying this cultural ordering of things. The rationale is that things that are classified as being together must be kept together and things that are classified as being apart must be kept apart. The quandary confronting humans everywhere is that not everything falls neatly into their symbolic classification systems. When something does not fit, or is out of place, it creates anomalies or ambiguities. People are uncomfortable when dealing with anomalous things because they arouse a sense of defilement. The way to deal with such out of place or anomalous things is to pronounce them as dirty, impure, polluting, and dangerous. Thus, when we symbolically classify something as dirty or impure we are really saying that it is out of place. The European ideas about dirt were altered by the “germ theory” of disease transmission developed during the 19th century, which makes it difficult to see dirt outside the context of pathogenic transmission. Nevertheless, Europeans still use the logic of dirt as something out of place. As Douglas (1966: 36) observes:

We can recognise in our own notions of dirt that we are using a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems. It is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.

Douglas applies this logic to religious taboos. She reiterates the point that the symbolic classification of something as unholy or ritually polluting is based on the principle of dirt as something out of place. Things are treated as such because they transgress or overlap boundaries. Thus they summon forth dangers. The power

that pollution possesses resides in the symbolic order, which appears as an external force, mystically potent and dangerous. When you separate that which should be together and join what should be separate you unleash the power inhering in the symbolic order.

One way cultures contend with anomalies is by condemning them. It is here that taboos and the idea of ritual impurity come to life. Rules of avoidance are instituted to make the anomaly a tabooed object, something that is polluting and dangerous. Thus, the symbolic classification system is affirmed and bolstered. Douglas suggests that the ideas of purity and pollution function to ensure that people do not transgress the boundaries of cultural order, and therefore order is preserved.

Douglas employs these ideas in her analysis of the religious dietary prohibition among the Israelites, specifically the taboo on pork. Two of the books of Moses, Leviticus (11) and Deuteronomy (14) list the creatures whose consumption is permitted by humans and those that are forbidden:

These are the living things which you may eat among all the beasts that are on the earth. Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals you may eat. Nevertheless among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these: The camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the hare, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the swine, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch; they are unclean to you (Leviticus 11: 7).

The pig is thus proclaimed to be a ritually polluting and unholy creature to be avoided. Douglas relates this to the notion of holiness in the passages of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Holiness is equated with wholeness:

We can conclude that holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused ... Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation (Douglas 1966: 53).

Living a holy life was to follow the culture's symbolic classification system. This symbolic classification system included the zoological taxonomy in the Bible. Certain animals such as cattle, sheep, and goats, upon which the Israelites depended for their livelihood, were symbolically incorporated into the social order. These were cloven hoofed, cud chewing ungulates. Animals that did not fit these criteria were excluded. Pigs were excluded because they are anomalous. As Douglas (1966: 54–55) elaborates:

Note that this failure to conform to the two necessary criteria for defining cattle is the only reason given in the Old Testament for avoiding the pig; nothing whatsoever is said about its dirty scavenging habits. As the pig does not yield milk, hide nor wool, there is no other reason for keeping it except for its flesh. And if the Israelites did not keep pigs they would not be familiar with its habits. I suggest that originally the sole reason for its being counted as unclean is its failure as a wild boar to get into the antelope class, and that in this it is on the same footing as the camel and the hyrax, exactly as stated in the book.

Douglas (1966: 55) concludes that, “in general the underlying principle of cleanliness 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.” In other words, pigs are considered unclean and unfit for humans to eat or even touch because they fail to conform to the divine order (for an ecological explanation of the taboo on pork see chapter 10).

Symbolic Healing

Symbols can have profound transformative effects on people. This is well illustrated in the case of symbolic healing (Dow 1986; Moerman 1997: 241; Romanucci-Ross 1997: 215; Sidky 2010b). Medical anthropologist Cecil Helman (2001: 277) defines symbolic healing as:

healing that does not rely on any physical or pharmacological treatments for its efficacy, but rather on language, ritual and the manipulation of powerful cultural symbols.

Exactly how symbolic healing works is not entirely clear (Helman 2001: 280). However, there are numerous cases in which the ritual use of symbols has resulted in recovery. The healer’s use of religious symbols to pass on important information and elicit cognitive responses seems to have a direct positive effect on human biology, triggering a psychoneuroimmunological response. As anthropologist Daniel Moerman (1979: 62) has put it:

there are substantial pathways which link physiological and cognitive states ... these two realms of human existence, body and mind, are linked and moreover ... these pathways are the stage on which metaphoric concepts of performance may (indeed *must*) “be effective,” that is, influence biological processes.

Laughlin et al., (1992: 193) suggest that symbols can be manipulated in an evocative way to activate neurognostic structures (archetypes) present in the human brain in order to effect a cure. Such evocative practices include music, imagery,

words, figures of speech, recitation of myths, and gestures used alone or in combination with one another (Figure 13.5).



Figure 13.5. Symbolic healing. A Tamang shaman attempts to heal a patient through the evocative use of music, words, figures of speech, gestures, and the manipulation of religious symbols. Photo by H. Sidky.

The symbolism used in ritual healing is taken from the culture's mythological system. Through theatricality involving the usage of religious symbols, the healer coaxes the patient to accept a "particularization of the general mythic world" as a valid model for his own experiences (cf., Helman 2001: 279).

One of the well-known studies of symbolic healing is anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the song used in cases of difficult childbirth by shamans among the Cuna Indians of Panama. Here the healer draws upon the culture's mythological system to address the problem. According to Lévi-Strauss (1967: 192–193):

That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to an objective reality does not matter. The [patient] believes in the myth and belongs to a society which believes in it. The tutelary spirits and malevolent spirits, the supernatural monsters and magical animals, are all part of a coherent system on which the native conceptions of the universe is founded. The [patient] accepts these mythological beings, or, more accurately, she has never questioned their existence. What she does not accept are the incoherent and arbitrary pains, which are an alien element in her system but which the shaman, calling upon the myth, will re-integrate within a whole where everything is meaningful. ... Once she understands, however, she does more than resign herself; she gets better.

What the healer does in cases like this is to rely on symbol and metaphor and draw parallels between the mythic scenario and the patient's physiological condition (Dow 1986: 60). In this way, the patient is given symbolic images with which to conceptualize his own affliction. The healer works through analogies (Samuel 1995: 254). The constant shifting between mythological and physiological themes throughout the ritual functions to obscure in the patient's mind the distinction between the mythical and the real (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 188). Thus, the patient is convinced that the symbolic mythical scenario being offered is a valid model for his own problem (Dow 1986: 60–61).

The healer, it must be noted, not only constructs the mythic scenario, but he also projects, dramatizes, and makes it real for the patient through the manipulation of religious symbols. The symbolic images in use become a communication link between the patient's mind and body. As anthropologist James Dow (1986: 63) has put it:

It is possible to affect processes in the self and unconscious-somatic systems through the manipulation of symbolic parameters at the social level. For this process to work there must be codes in which messages can be sent. *The mythic world contains the symbols that couple the social system to the self system of the patient.*

In this way, religious symbolism produces physiological transformations (cf. Achterberg 1987: 104; Laughlin et al., 1992: 193).

Revitalization Movements and the Origins of Religion

Under conditions of massive cultural disruptions, suffering, exploitation, perceived deprivation, and political subordination, people have turned to the supernatural world either to preserve their traditional way of life or to reconstitute society along radically different lines as a way of coping with undesirable circumstances. Such movements have a number of cross-cultural similarities. They begin with the ecstatic religious experiences of a new prophet, messiah, or savior, carrying a message of redemption or salvation from God, the gods, spirits, or the ancestors. The messiah reveals the reason why people are suffering and lays out plans of how to remedy the situation. The visions and dreams usually foretell the end of the world, the eradication of the oppressors and foreigners, and the establishment of a new order when the ancestors will return, justice will prevail, and the righteous will rule the world. The new vision is often synthetic, or syncretic, incorporating aspects of traditional and impinging alien beliefs and practices.

Anthropologists studying this phenomenon during the 19th and 20th centuries have used the terms millennial movement, millenarian movement, messianic movement, and revivalistic movements. The terms nativistic movement, prophet cult, and crisis cult have been used as well. Anthony Wallace (1966: 30) provides the concept of “revitalization movements,” denoting “any conscious, organized effort by members of society to construct a more satisfying culture” (see Wallace 1956). The effort at change extends beyond the domain of religious activities, as Wallace

sees it, and incorporates society as a whole. The revitalization phenomenon occurs in a uniform sequence: society is in its normal or steady state; society is distorted and disorganized due to political domination, repression, economic depression, and epidemic disease; the revitalization process begins, involving a dynamic religious movement; the establishment of a new formula for social action takes place. Not all such movements complete the sequence or include the mobilization of entire populations. Sometimes only a segment of the population is involved, in which case the process may terminate in the establishment of a cult. Sometimes the process is forestalled altogether by the forces of the dominant culture before reaching its anticipated conclusion.

Wallace goes on to argue that the origins of all religions, denominations, sects, and cults can be traced to revitalization movements. As he puts it:

it is attractive to speculate that all religions and religious productions, such as myths and rituals, come into existence as parts of the program or code of religious revitalization movements. Such a line of thought leads to the view that religious belief and practice always originate in situations of social and cultural stress and are, in fact, an effort on the part of the stress-laden to construct systems of dogma, myth, and ritual which are internally coherent as well as true descriptions of a world system and which thus will serve as guides to efficient action (Wallace 1966: 30).

Anthropologists have paid particular attention to revitalization movements in North America and Melanesia during the colonial period. Such studies shed light on the general processes under which religions arise.

The Ghost Dance

The conquest and subjugation of the Native Americans by European invaders engendered a number of revitalization movements. The most famous of these was the Ghost Dance religion, a remarkable account of which is provided by the 19th-century ethnologist James Mooney (1861–1921) in his book *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (1896).

The Ghost Dance had its origins in the visionary experiences of a Paiute prophet named Wovoka (Jack Wilson), in western Nevada, on January 1, 1889 (Figure 14.1). On that date, Wovoka ascended to heaven in a dream where he received a divine message from God. According to Mooney (1965: 13–14):

On this occasion “the sun died” (was eclipsed) and he fell asleep in the daytime and was taken up to the other world. Here he saw God, with all the people who had died long ago engaged in oldtime sports and occupations, all happy and forever young. It



Figure 14.1. Wovoka, the Paiute prophet whose supernatural vision inspired the Ghost Dance religion. Nevada Historical Society.

was a pleasant land and full of game. After showing him all, God told him he must go back and tell his people they must be good and love one another, have no quarreling; and live in peace with the whites; that they must work and not lie or steal; that they must put away all the old practices that savored of war; that if they faithfully obeyed his instructions they would at last be reunited with their friends in the other world, where there would be no more death or sickness or old age. He was then given the

dance which he was commanded to bring back to his people. By performing this dance at intervals, for five consecutive days each time, they would secure this happiness to themselves and hasten the event. Finally God gave him control over the elements so that he could make it rain or snow or be dry at will, and appointed him his deputy to take charge of the affairs in the west, while “Governor [President] Harrison” would attend to matters in the east, and he, God, would look after the world above. He then returned to earth and began to preach as he was directed, convincing people by exercising the wonderful powers that had been given him.

Some of these themes may have been borrowed from Christianity—Wovoka was certainly exposed to Christian teachings while employed by a Euro-American rancher named David Wilson—but they have precedence in aboriginal eschatology (La Barre 1972a: 233; Malefijt 1968: 345–346). In fact, Wovoka was not the first to preach such a message. A similar doctrine was disseminated in the area by another Paiute visionary in 1870. According to one of Mooney’s sources:

the whites began to come in and appropriate much of the Indian country in Nevada, and in the usual course it turned out that the medicine-men or prophets were looked to for relief. The most influential went up alone into the mountain and there met the Great Spirit. He brought back with him no tablets of stone, but he was a messenger of good tidings to the effect that within a few moons there was to be a great upheaval or earthquake. All the improvements of the whites—their houses, their goods, stores, etc.—would remain, but the whites would be swallowed up, while the Indians would be saved and permitted to enjoy the earth and all the fullness thereof, including anything left by the wicked whites (Mooney 1965: 3).

The message was born out of the frustrations of conquest and subjugation. The prophet of 1870 died before his vision could have significant impact. Wovoka, however, gained a large following. The central tenet of his doctrine was one of peace: “you must not fight. Do not harm anyone. Do right always.”

According to Mooney (1965: 19):

The great underlying principle of the Ghost dance doctrine is that a time will come when the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness ever free from death, disease, and misery.

The new religion was about renewal of the earth, the end of the present order and creation of the next, the resurrection of the dead, and a pan-Indian revival (Kehoe 2006: 7–8) (Figure 14.2). It came at a time when the Native Americans were languishing from European diseases, loss of their land, economic assets, and political freedom, and they were subjected to a deliberate program of ethnocide intended to destroy their way of life (Kehoe 2006: 8).



Figure 14.2. The Ghost Dance among the Arapaho. Photo by James Mooney. Photo Lot 74 (INV00357900), National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Wovoka claimed that he was a messiah, a messenger of God, but other Indians and some Euro-Americans proclaimed him “the Christ” and, as anthropologist Alice Kehoe (2006: 6) puts it, “word spread that the Son of God was preaching in Nevada.” Soon Wovoka’s message was disseminated among different Native American groups by delegates who came to visit him from other nations. The new religion was known by various names; the English “Ghost Dance” comes from the translation of “spirit dance,” the name used by the Sioux (Kehoe 2006: 9).

The main ritual of the new religion was the circle dance. Mooney (1965: 42) provides a description of the dance among the Sioux:

The persons in the ghost dancing are all joined hands. A man stands and then a woman, so in that way forming a very large circle. They dance around in the circle in a continuous time until some of them become so tired and overtired that they become crazy and finally drop as though dead, with foam in mouth all wet by perspiration. All the men and women made holy shirts and dresses they wear in dance. The persons dropped in the dance would all lie in the great dust the dancing makes.

Through the dance, the people could enter into ASC, see the ancestors, and witness the truth of Wovoka's prophecy for themselves. Dancing was also believed to ward off disease and heal the sick. Different dates were assigned for the fulfillment of the prophesy. However, following a few disconfirmations, the date was not specified. It was generally thought to occur in spring.

In the original version of the teachings, believers were taught to "make themselves worthy of the predicted happiness by discarding all things warlike and practice honesty, peace, and good will, not only among themselves, but also toward the whites, so long as they were together" (Mooney 1965: 19). As the new doctrine spread, however, it acquired local accretions. Mooney adds:

[On its central tenet] each tribe has built a structure from its own mythology, and each apostle and believer has filled in the details according to his own mental capacity or ideas of happiness, with such additions as come to him from the trance.

Among the Sioux, the Ghost Dance assumed overt military dimensions:

Among the powerful and warlike Sioux of the Dakotas, already restless under both old and new grievances, and more lately brought to the edge of starvation by a reduction of rations, the doctrine speedily assumed a hostile meaning and developed some peculiar features, for which reason it deserves particular notice as concerns this tribe. The earliest rumors of the new messiah came to the Sioux from the more western tribes in the winter of 1888–89, but the first definite account was brought by a delegation which crossed the mountains to visit the messiah in the fall of 1889, returning in the spring of 1890. On the report of these delegates the dance was at once inaugurated and spread so rapidly that in a few months the religion had been accepted by the majority of the tribe (Mooney 1965: 29).

The Sioux added new elements to the apocalyptic theme, such as the return of the bison, the destruction of the whites in a landslide, and especially the Ghost Dance shirts that were purported to make the wearer impervious to white man's bullets, and which became the symbol of Sioux anti-white belligerency.

There was great anticipation among the Sioux over the impending apocalypse. According to the Indian agent James McLaughlin of Standing Rock agency:

the Sioux under the influence of Sitting Bull, were greatly excited over the near approach of the predicted Indian millennium or "return of the ghosts," when the

white man would be annihilated and the Indian again supreme, and which the medicine-men had promised was to occur as soon as the grass was green in the spring. They were told that the Great Spirit had sent upon them the dominant race to punish them for their sins, and that their sins were now expiated and the time of deliverance was at hand. Their decimated ranks were to be reinforced by all the Indians who had ever died, and these spirits were already on their way to reinhabit the earth, which had originally belonged to the Indians, and were driven before them as they advanced, immense herds of buffalo and fine ponies. The Great Spirit, who had so long deserted his red children, was now once more with them and against the whites, and the white man's gunpowder would no longer have power to drive a bullet through the skin of an Indian. The whites themselves would soon be overwhelmed and smothered under a deep landslide, held down by sod and timber, and the few who might escape would become small fishes in the rivers. In order to bring about this happy result, the Indians must believe and organize the Ghost dance (in Mooney 1965: 19).

The militant nature of the dance among the Sioux frightened the Euro-American settlers and missionaries. They called for troops. Confrontation led to bloody violence and the massacre at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890 (Figure 14.3, Figure 14.4). The bulletproof shirts did not work and the anticipated miracle never transpired. Such miracles have never come to pass, not even once, as is evident from the countless failed messianic movements and disappointed prophets throughout history and across cultures.



Figure 14.3. The slain body of Chief Big Foot of the Lakota Sioux on the Wounded Knee battleground, Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota. The Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, X-31469.



Figure 14.4. Burial of the victims of the Wounded Knee massacre (December 29, 1890) in a trench grave, Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota (January 1, 1891). U.S. Army officers are seen with their weapons posing in the background. The Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, X-31292.

Cargo Cults

The Ghost Dance was an effort to address adversities confronting people by means of ritual. By fastidiously performing the dance, i.e., total commitment to ritual action, all earthly problems would be solved directly by God, who would usher a new era of peace and prosperity. This theme recurs in the context of other revitalization movements, such as the Cargo cults in Melanesia.

During the 19th century, colonization brought missionaries, traders, administrators, and entrepreneurs to Melanesia. Numerous plantations run with native labor were established. Communities were devastated by “black birding,” the kidnapping of people to serve as laborers in the plantations. Colonial exploitation was severe and in many places native life was disrupted. Cargo cults were precipitated by the clash of cultures as a result of contact with the Europeans. The recurrent theme of these movements was the acquisition of the coveted material wealth of the Europeans that mysteriously arrived in ships and later airplanes to which

the term “Cargo” was attached (Burridge 1995; Chochrane 1970; Lawrence 1964; Worsley 1968).

Among the Melanesians the acquisition of prestige and political power is dependent upon the accumulation, display, and redistribution of material goods, pigs, yams, shell money, etc. A big man (political leader) achieves his position through the demonstration of his ability to amass sizeable stockpiles of goods to be given away in lavish feasts. The natives were naturally impressed by the abundance of wealth the Europeans possessed. From the point of view of the indigenous people, the whites did not engage in physical labor or manufacture the goods, food, machinery, weapons, etc., at their disposal. Whenever they wanted fresh supplies they sat in offices made scribbles on pieces of paper, or spoke into radios, and the Cargo mysteriously arrived on ships and planes from some secret location (Lawrence 1964: 228). It was evident that the Cargo originated in the spirit world and the Europeans knew the secret of how to get it (Worsley 1968: 97).

The mysterious customs of the Europeans, such as sitting at tables, filling out requisitions, building beacon towers, airfields, and warehouses, were all rituals that made the Cargo possible. By imitating these mysterious customs, it was reasoned, the natives could secure Cargo for themselves by ritual means, overturning the existing order.

The indigenous people accepted Christianity because they were convinced that the European missionaries knew the secret of Cargo. God created Cargo, missionaries had come to teach them how to follow God, so obedience to the missionaries’ teachings would make God send Cargo to the natives. Christian teachings which emphasized prophets, messiahs, the Resurrection, salvation, the Second Coming, combined with local beliefs and became elements of the origin myth of Cargo (Lawrence 1964: 75). But conversion to Christianity did not produce Cargo. The promise of hard work as the road to economic success did not pay off. Perhaps the missionaries were withholding the secret by excluding the relevant parts of the Bible when they translated it into native vernaculars or Pidgin English (Lawrence 1964: 90). Disenchantment resulted in a different story. Cargo is made by the ancestors in the land of the dead. These goods are intended for the islanders but they are being intercepted by the Europeans, who are preventing their rightful delivery.

Prophets of Cargo appeared with prescriptions on what was to be done. Although there were local variations in rituals and practices adopted, the main elements of the Cargo cults were similar. These, as anthropologist Peter Worsley (1968: 11) puts it, included the following:

A prophet announces the imminence of the end of the world in a cataclysm which will destroy everything. Then the ancestors will return, or God, or some other liberating

power, will appear, bringing all the goods the people desire, and ushering a reign of eternal bliss. ... The people therefore must prepare themselves for the Day by setting up cult organizations, and by building storehouses, jetties, and so on to receive the goods, known as 'cargo' in the local Pidgin English.

In the new paradise on earth, death, illness, old age, and evil will be unknown. The white people will be swept away and their riches will all pass on to the indigenous people. The themes of apocalypse and resurrection of the dead were emphasized.

Followers began to implement the new teachings and rituals revealed by Cargo prophets. They slaughtered all their pigs, ceased work, and posted lookouts to scan the horizon for signs of airplanes and ships bearing the Cargo. Moreover, they discarded traditional masks and ritual paraphernalia, put on military uniforms and marched in the style of the colonials armed with bamboo rifles, built wooden radio towers to communicate with the ancestors, created mock airfields and wharves, and erected warehouses to store the anticipated bounty. These magical acts were necessary to hasten the promised arrival of the phantom ships and the expulsion of the whites.

Despite all this effort, the Cargo did not come. Disconfirmations, however, did not dissuade adherents. Failures were attributed to error in ritual. Splinter groups organized around the correct ritual and purer faith emerged. This is always the case when prophecy fails (cf. Festinger et al. 1956). As Worsley (1968: 202–203) puts it:

And faith did not diminish. Failures were explained in terms of human deficiencies or the use of inefficacious magical formulae, or attributed to interference or trickery by other people, but the spirits themselves were not to be blamed, nor was the belief in the truth of the Cargo myth weakened.

And so prophets of Cargo kept reappearing from place to place.

Among the first well-documented Cargo cult movements was the Vailala Madness, which broke out on the Gulf of Papua in 1919 (Williams 1976: 331–395). The movement originated in the visionary experiences of a man named Evara. He fell into a trance and communicated with the ancestors. According to Worsley (1968: 81):

He prophesied the coming of a steamer, carrying the spirits of the dead ancestors on board, who would bring with them the 'Cargo.' In the initial stages rifles were included amongst the expected goods, and 'vague ideas of Papua for the Papuans were current.' Later teachings stated that the Cargo was to be allotted to villages by the signs of identity on the crates. The spirits revealed that all the flour, rice, tobacco and other 'trade' belonged to the Papuans, not the Whites. The latter would be driven

away, and the Cargo would pass into the hands of its rightful owners, the natives. To obtain these goods it was necessary to drive out the Whites.

Many of the prophet's followers also fell into spontaneous self-induced trances—sometimes the whole village was affected. People had visions and spoke to God and the ancestors, confirming the truth of Evara's prophecies. The ancestors were envisioned as having white skin and wearing European clothes.

Ancient religious customs were banned. These were replaced by rituals of odd European inspiration:

Tables were set up with benches around them, in a central position in the village. Seated at these tables in European style, relatives of dead men held feasts, dressed in their best, while women and children sat on the ground. The tables were ritually decorated daily with beer bottles full of bright corton flowers ... young coconuts, husked, ready for eating, were also provided, since otherwise the dead would be angry. Sickness was a sign that a feast was needed to appease ancestral wrath (Worsley 1968: 83).

Temples, called offices (*abea uvi*), were built in the center of villages, which resembled mission churches. Cult leaders went into trances while sitting in the verandahs of these structures in order to communicate with God or the ghosts. Another cult innovation was the painted flagpole modeled after western radio antennae through which spirits could be contacted and messages received. These towers facilitated communication with the vessels carrying the ancestors. They were also used in times of sickness to conduct divinatory cures because the ancestors, it was said, could heal the sick.

The power of the cult leaders was based upon the monopoly they exercised over the ritual activities. Through their control of the *abea uvi*, the table ritual, the feasting and the flagpoles, the intercourse with the dead for which they acted as mediums, as well as by stimulating waves of possession and dancing, the leaders had a strong grip on the movement. There was no overall control, but a few of the leaders extended their influence by evangelization; they were respected by the people and were themselves proud of their activities (Worsley 1968: 85).

The movement quickly spread to other villages, where ancient sacred objects were burned, opposition squelched, and new converts were promised immediate notification of the arrival of Cargo. In some villages, cult leaders assumed the mantle of leadership. New ethical codes were introduced, stipulating the importance of giving feasts to the ancestors, the evils of theft and adultery, renunciation of old ways, public cleanliness, and the banning of personal adornments. Public accusations and confessions were used as a means of social control (Worsley 1968: 188).

Strict Sunday observance was demanded. Evening prayers were held, followed by reading out loud from books.

While the movement emphasized the adoption of European knowledge and sought Western goods, the white man was considered the main impediment to its objectives. It therefore engendered intense hostilities toward Europeans, whose presence blocked the arrival of Cargo. The Europeans were highly alarmed by the fervor and excitement.

The Vailala movement was in effect the expression of indigenous resentment toward the prevailing social and political conditions and frustration over circumstances that were beyond the control or knowledge of the natives. The cult came under government and mission pressure. Several of its leaders were arrested, the standard colonial response to such movements. Efforts were made therefore to conceal the movement from officials. Eventually, the movement waned and finally died out around 1931. The Cargo never came.

A number of Cargo cult movements emerged after World War II. These movements were similar to the earlier ones. In dreams and trances, the prophets of Cargo related stories of phantom ships and aircraft bringing Cargo from the land of the spirits. Landing strips, thatched-roofed hangers, tin-can microphones, radio towers, and effigy bamboo airplanes were built to entice the ancestors and facilitate the arrival of Cargo. Lookouts were posted to scan the skies and the horizons for signs of the ancestors.

In the subsequent movements, the millenarian aspects were superseded by more important economic and political concerns, such as the call for self-rule, demands for higher wages, and improvement of the infrastructure and social services. These Cargo cults were nascent efforts toward self-governance and political independence (Worsley 1968: 182).

The Cargo cults were attempts by indigenous peoples to make sense of a world gone awry. Unaware of European culture and its technological prowess, the Cargo movements make sense from the perspective of the insider's understanding of the world, an understanding that was based upon "the best counsel they could find in Christianity and their native beliefs" (Worsley 1959: 128).

Wherever oppressed people confronting impossible odds have vested their hopes in dreams of a millennium to come, based upon the best evidence at their disposal at that historical juncture, comparable movements have arisen. As Worsley (1959: 128) concludes:

All parts of the world have had their counterparts of the cargo cults, from the American Indian ghost dance to the communist-millenarist "reign of saints" in Münster during the Reformation, from medieval European apocalyptic cults to African "witch-finding" movements and Chinese Buddhist heresies. In some situations men

have been content to wait and pray; in others they have sought to hasten the day using their strong arms to do the Lord's work.

Sadly, however, no matter how diligently people have sought to hasten the predicted miracle, no matter what they have invested or sacrificed toward that objective, the end result has always been failed prophecies and disillusioned messiahs.

In this chapter we have looked at revitalizations during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the next chapter we shall look at present-day revitalization movements associated with various types of fundamentalisms.

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is a type of revitalization movement that has emerged as a vengeful and reactive global force confronting modernity. As sociologist James Hunter (1990: 52) has put it, “fundamentalism derives its identity from a posture of resistance to the modern world.” According to historian Bruce Lawrence (1989: 6):

All fundamentalists, whether quasi-Hasidic Jews, Sunni or Shi'i Muslims, or Protestant Christians, embrace a canon of scriptural authority as self-conscious advocates of anti-modernist values. In each instance, despite varying creedal loyalties and contrasting cultural settings, the catalyst for fundamentalist loyalties is hatred of the modernist value agenda.

Fundamentalism appears where traditional people experience real or perceived sociocultural dislocations engendered by rural-urban migration, uneven economic development, rapid social change, cultural pluralism, secularization, and the demise of metanarratives concerning the meaning and purpose of human life (Armstrong 2003; Marty and Appleby 1993a: 620). As anthropologist Richard Antoun (2001: 3–4) has pointed out:

The ethos of fundamentalism, its affective orientation, is one of protest and outrage at the secularization of society; that is, at the process by which religion and its

spirit has been steadily removed from public life—from schools, offices, workshops, universities, courts, and markets, and even from religious institutions themselves—churches, mosques, and synagogues.

Fundamentalism is not traditionalism or orthodoxy. Instead, fundamentalism is a movement in conscious organized opposition to those traditions and orthodoxies (Ammerman 1991: 14). Fundamentalism is the loudest, angriest, and at times the most violent form of religious expression in the contemporary world.

Origin of the Term and Its Use

At the end of the 19th century there were efforts by some American Protestant leaders to search for ways of bringing traditional beliefs in line with “modern scholarship and sensibilities” (Ammerman 1991: 1). This liberal theology was seen by other Protestants in the United States as nothing less than heresy and efforts were made to rise to the defense of traditional beliefs from such accommodations. They selected a set of beliefs and concepts considered to be “fundamental” to designate the threatened tenets. In support of this effort, the same group published a series of essays that appeared between 1910 and 1915, called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth*. This signaled the rise of organized fundamentalism (Marsden 1991: 155). This was followed by the establishment of the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association in 1919. In 1920 the editor of a Baptist newspaper used the term “fundamentalist” to designate an individual willing to fight for the basic tenets of the faith. Thus the terms “fundamentalist” and by extension “fundamentalism” entered into the English vocabulary.

While there may be objections to applying the term as descriptive of a range of historically unrelated religio-political movements across the globe (Voll 1991: 347; see Nagata 2001), fundamentalism is a useful analytical concept because there are family resemblances among disparate movements or religiously inspired reactions to aspects of the global process of modernization and secularization. These disparate movements include Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist fundamentalisms.

The Fundamentals

Anthropologist Jack Eller (2009: 284) has conveniently summarized the core tenets of the Christian fundamentalist perspective as follows:

The absolute truth and inerrancy of the Christian scripture; the virgin birth of Jesus; the atonement of sin through the substitutive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross; the bodily resurrection and future second coming of Jesus; the divinity of Jesus and/or the reality of the miracles he performed.

The doctrine of inerrancy of the Bible, on which the fundamentalist position is founded, holds that admitting even a single error of fact or principle in the Scriptures would mean that nothing else in it is certain, including “the redemptive work of Christ” (Ammerman 1991: 5). The Bible must therefore be accepted literally in its entirety as the unfailing word of God. In it the believer has an “accurate description of science and history, as well as morality and religion” (Ammerman 1991: 5). The Scriptures provide clearly defined categories of good and evil, the faithful and the infidel, and the idea of a cosmic war between the forces of light and darkness that offer certainties enabling believers to negotiate the moral and religious ambiguities of modern life.

For adherents, anything that contradicts the Bible is invalid, whether we are talking about science or theology (Meyer 2001: 22). Moreover, anyone who does not accept the literal truth of the Bible—as interpreted by fundamentalists—is not a true Christian, regardless of whether they call themselves Christians or not. Fundamentalists share the certitude that they alone possess the truth and are on the path of righteousness. Further, they espouse an eschatology focused upon the idea of rapture and heavenly escape. Finally, fundamentalists oppose the separation of church and state and see religion as inseparable from law or politics.

Evolutionism and Creationism

Sparked by the publication of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1909 [1859]), anti-evolutionary hostilities became a national phenomenon with the rise of the fundamentalist movement in the United States in the 1920s. The issue waned after the debacle of the 1925 Scopes trial in Tennessee only to reemerge as a major point of contention in the latter part of the 20th century.

The Darwinian principle of natural selection eliminates the role of a divine creator in the origin of species and the evolution of life. Christian fundamentalists perceive this anti-supernaturalistic stance as a direct challenge to the absolute integrity of the Bible. For them, the biblical account of creation is unassailable. Thus, evolutionism is not only wrong, it is wholly immoral. As the creation-science advocate Henry Morris (1976: 75) has put it:

Evolutionism is the root of atheism, of communism, Nazism, behaviorism, racism, economic imperialism, militarism, libertinism, anarchism, and all manner of anti-Christian systems of belief and practice.

Answers to the question of the origin of species, fundamentalists affirm, are to be found, not in scientific treatises, but in the Bible. As Morris adds, “if man wishes to know anything at all about creationism ... his sole source of true information is that of divine revelation ... This is our textbook on the science of creation” (in Marsden 1991: 158).

Proponents of creationism maintain a view of the origins of life based upon a literal reading of the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis. For example, they take the six days of creation as actual 24 hour days and calculate the age of the earth on the basis of the number of generations mentioned in the Bible. From this perspective, the earth is extremely young, only a few thousand years old, and there is simply not enough time for evolution to have taken place. For this reason, creationists do odd things, such as attempting to show the contemporaneity of humans and dinosaurs, in a hopeless effort to repudiate the paleontological record and its time depth.

In place of the scientific Darwinian evolutionary theory, creationists propose an empirically unfalsifiable model based on “special creative and cataclysmic, purposive processes in the past which are no longer operative today and which therefore are not accessible to empirical observation” (Morris 1975: 82). Evolutionism is therefore incompatible with Christian beliefs. As George Marsden (1991: 154) has put it, there is an “insistence on the absolute antithesis between faith in a Creator and biological evolutionism.” Mediating positions, such as theistic evolutionism, espoused by the leaders of the early fundamentalist movement, are summarily rejected. This adversarial stance is considered so important that its denial is thought to lead to the repudiation of the central tenets of faith. As Morris (1975: 61) puts it:

The Biblical doctrine of origins of course is fundamental to all other doctrines, and if this could be refuted, or even diluted, then eventually the other doctrines of Biblical theology would be undermined and destroyed.

Thus for the fundamentalist, belief in creationism and rejection of biological evolution is the hallmark of true faith or a test of fellowship (Marsden 1991: 156). As Lawrence (1989: 188) has stated, “antievolutionism is the shibboleth that most accurately defines fundamentalist opposition to the modernist hegemony and its relativizing force.”

Fundamentalism as a Political Ideology

Fundamentalism is a new political ideology that addresses the crisis of modernity (Meyer 2001: 17). As experts on fundamentalism Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (1993b: 3) observe, fundamentalism is based upon:

a selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs, and practices from a sacred past. These retrieved “fundamentals” are refined, modified, and sanctioned in a spirit of shrewd pragmatism: they are to serve as the bulwark against the encroachment of outsiders who threaten to draw the believers into a syncretistic, areligious, or irreligious cultural milieu. Moreover, these fundamentals are accompanied in the new religious portfolio by unprecedented claims and doctrinal innovations. By the strength of these innovations and the new supporting doctrines, the retrieved and updated fundamentals are meant to regain the same charismatic intensity today by which they originally forged communal identity from the formative revelatory religious experience of long ago.

What is produced through this process is not orthodoxy but novel ideological constructions:

But 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 remake 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 1993b: 3).

Marty and Appleby (1993b: 3) add:

Such an endeavor often requires charismatic and authoritarian leadership, depends upon a disciplined inner core of adherents, and promotes a rigorous sociomoral code for all followers. Boundaries are set, the enemy identified, converts sought, and institutions created and sustained in pursuit of a comprehensive reconstruction of society.

For adherents belief alone is not enough. Believers must fight for those beliefs—they must fight against evolutionary theory, *Roe vs. Wade*, same sex marriage, the sexually permissive society, modernist theologies, and secular humanism. Fundamentalists are therefore engaged in a war with their rivals. They perceive of themselves as fighting back. Thus, “it is no insult to fundamentalists 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” (Marty and Appleby 1991: ix).

To implement their program to reconstitute society, fundamentalists attempt to infiltrate the instruments of government, the educational system, and the media (Eller 2009: 283). Lack of success does not thwart their efforts. Instead, they may establish their own alternative parallel institutions, such as schools, Bible colleges, *madrassas*, radio and television stations and printing presses to produce their own programs and publications. Their efforts to reconstitute society thus continue. In those instances where fundamentalists have seized the governmental apparatus, such as in Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini and Taliban Afghanistan, they have employed political power to implement their projects (Eller 2009: 282–283).

As a political ideology, fundamentalism has its dark side, one that invariably leads to intolerance, oppression, and violence. Because it claims inerrant divine authority, fundamentalism tends to be “anti-democratic, anti-accomodationist, antipluralist and ... it violates, as a matter of principle, the standards of human rights defended, if not always perfectly upheld, by Western democracies” (Marty and Appleby 1993b: 5). Or as Thomas Meyer (2001: 21) puts it:

The closed system of faith and schemes or order of a fundamentalist mould represents a *return of the absolute* in politics to the extent that they assume a public role and shut out criticism, all alternatives, doubts, and open dialogues on their cognitive claims between equals. What generally follows is the total—or sometimes in developed democratic civilization only selective—disregard for human rights, pluralism, tolerance, law and the democratic majority principle in the name of an absolute truth to which the fundamentalists in each case believe themselves to be uncompromisingly committed.

As such, fundamentalists may and sometimes do have recourse to violence such as bombing abortion clinics and federal buildings, burning down houses of worship, gassing subways, assassinating political figures, attacking daycare centers, and propping airplanes into buildings.

Islamic Fundamentalism

For many people, the very “epitome” of fundamentalism is the Islamic variety (Eller 2009: 293–294). Western writers have specifically focused upon the violent nature of Islamic fundamentalism (see Harris 2004). It is true that dramatic instances of violence have been carried out in the name of fundamentalist Islam. However, it must be noted that not every Muslim is a violent fundamentalist and a

distinction must be made between political or militant Islam and traditional practice and observance. Here we will discuss political Islam and its expression in the context of Taliban Afghanistan, where fundamentalism ruled from 1996 to 2001 (Sidky 2006: 80–92).

Political Islam (a.k.a., Islamism, radical Islam, militant Islam) appeared in the post-colonial period in the Islamic world. The origins of political Islam can be traced to the modern institutions of higher education of the twentieth century, such as schools and universities in cities, rather than to society's conservative elements or the learned religious elite. The spread of literacy, electronic media, the internet, and other high-tech communication channels have helped the growth of political Islam. These communication channels have enabled Islamists to assert their own religious authority and definition of what is "Islamic," in opposition to existing state powers and established religious authorities.

Islamists treat Islam more as a political ideology than simply as religion. Their aim is not to reform society but rather to set up an Islamic state purportedly modeled after the original Muslim society during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Nostalgia for that era is a hallmark of their rhetoric. This is why some Islamists refer to themselves as *salafi*, "those who follow the example of the true ancestors." Islamists are fundamentalists who wish not only to impose strict religious practice, but also to establish an ideal society the blueprints for which they alone possess.

For the Islamists, the Qu'ran and *Sunna* (the tradition of the Prophet) are more important than any other sources of law. Because of their insistence on the literal interpretation and inerrancy of the Scriptures, they are able to circumvent the tradition of scholarly discourse on the law that has historically made pragmatic moderation possible. For fundamentalists, Islamic law, or *Sharia*, is more about regulating personal behavior than about establishing social justice. This means instituting punishments called *qisas*, or retaliation in kind (i.e., eye-for-an-eye), and *hudud*, which prescribes stoning to death for adultery, the amputation of limbs for theft, and whipping for drinking alcohol.

Islamist discourse is informed by the works of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) and Hassan al Banna (1906–1949), the chief ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Abdul Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979), creator of the radical *Jamaat-i Islami* party in Pakistan. These ideologues are in agreement that in a truly Islamic society all aspects of existence, not just religious practice, must be governed by the moral principles set forth by God. This is why Islamists dismiss the idea of social justice based on the democratic principle or rule by the majority. Moral principles, they argue, are preordained by God, to be implemented verbatim, rather than being subject to ballot counts. Social justice is the domain of only those who abide

by God's law. Western ideals of secularism (the separation of religion and politics), co-mingling of the sexes, nationalism, and democracy are vehemently dismissed as being counter to Islam and are deemed to be the main causes of the corruption of Muslim society. These ideas stem from *jabiliyaa*, or ignorance, and are to be repudiated. Thus, nationalism is merely the path to the cult of the nation, democracy is the dictatorship of the majority, and secularism, which eschews God's sovereignty over everything, is the guaranteed path to atheism. Anyone who espouses the ideals of Western democracy, secularism, pluralism, or nationalism, is in reality repudiating Islam and forsaking God.

Thus, the true believer must reject modernity and Western ideologies and any system of government that attempts to uphold them. The principal objective of the Islamists is to set up a truly Islamic state, under God's law applied to all dimensions of social existence. Such a society, by virtue of being a moral polity, will be automatically free of all the socioeconomic and political problems afflicting the world today.

For Islamists there is only one way to achieve their objectives: *jihad*, which they say is incumbent upon all individuals. This is how true believers can seize power from atheistic and decadent rulers and establish a just society. *Jihad* is the Islamists' theory of social change. *Jihad* is interpreted as armed conflict, or holy war, directed at atheists and unbelievers. The traditional meaning of *jihad*, as a duty incumbent upon the whole community, is replaced in the Islamist discourse by the idea of *jihad* as incumbent upon the individual. Thus, individual acts of terror in the name of God are justified. This understanding of *jihad* is the reason why Western writers depict Islam as a religion of violence. However, such a construal of *jihad* is by no means shared by all Muslims. Because Islamists underscore *jihad* and call for the establishment of an Islamic state ostensibly modeled after the original community under the Prophet and the first four Caliphs, they are known as *salafi-jihadists*.

The Taliban: Fundamentalism in Charge

The Taliban first appeared as an implacable and reactionary force in Afghanistan in 1994, five years after the Soviet Union ended its military intervention (Sidky 2007: 865–867). The country was in ruins, its state structure had failed, and all traditional institutions for the management of violence were defunct. Political power was fragmented among violent *mujahideen* warlords engaged in a war of mutual destruction. The *mujahideen* were the U.S. backed Islamist military force that fought the Soviets in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989.

Taliban is the plural of the word *talib*, which means “student” of a religious school, or *madrassa*. Although draconian in many respects, the Taliban display many striking similarities to other fundamentalisms. These include the selective retrieval of doctrines from a sacred past (but modified according to their own pragmatic sensibilities), a nostalgia for a golden era long ago, insistence on a literal reading of the Scriptures (the Qu’ran and *Sunna*), extreme intolerance, the imposition of a rigorous socio-moral code, and an uncompromising opposition to modernity, pluralism, democracy, and secularism (Sidky 2006: 80–92).

How the Taliban movement was formed remains a mystery. There are several unverifiable origin myths. One myth holds that the Taliban movement started when its spiritual leader, a previously unknown figure named Mullah Omar, had a dream in which the Prophet Muhammad instructed him to create an invincible army of religious students and undertake a *jihad* to eradicate the rapacious *mujahideen* warlords and establish peace. Another myth traces the origins of the movement to an event in which an infuriated Mullah Omar assembled a group of disciples in order to rescue young women abducted and raped by a local *mujahideen* commander. Omar rescued the women and executed the rapist by hanging him from the turret of his own tank. Immediately appeals for help from other distraught people began to pour in from all over the territory and the Taliban movement was launched. Military successes ensued.

With substantial funding from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the movement gained momentum during the next few years and by 1996 the Taliban were poised to capture Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan and seat of power. At this time Mullah Omar named himself *Amir al-Momineen*, “commander of the faithful,” a moniker first used during the early Islamic period. This signified Omar’s absolute and uncompromising authority. Following the capture of Kabul, he also reconstituted the country as “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” a system of rule modeled after the early Islamic state in which obedience to the *Amir* was a directive from God. While the Taliban ruled, Afghanistan became a haven for Islamic terrorists, including Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

The Taliban had no practical programs for solving the sociopolitical and economic problems of the war-torn Afghan society. Their agenda was to impose a draconian socio-moral code of conduct upon people based on the fundamentalist principle mentioned above that if you act morally God will magically resolve all your earthly tribulations. The Taliban would achieve this objective through the literal application of *Sharia* law. They viewed *Sharia* as a divinely ordained and immutable set of rules and punishments to be rigorously and dutifully implemented without question (Figure 15.1). Omar and his followers thus disavowed the accumulated corpus of Qu’ranic scholarship and interpretation of the law and discredited the Islamic credentials of their more moderate opponents.



Figure 15.1. An innocent woman being executed by Taliban henchmen, an example of the Taliban's draconian application of *Sharia* law. Photo courtesy of RAWA.org.

Taliban Islam lacked a manifesto, had no tradition of scholarly analysis of law and history, and admitted no debate. Its uncompromising vision, which eschewed all accommodation with modernity, had no basis in the religious traditions of Afghanistan or elsewhere. This vision of Islam, like the Taliban themselves, was an anomaly in the context of Afghan culture. Moreover, their conduct, such as beating women in the streets (Figure 15.2), or imprisoning men who did not have beards of a sufficient length, was unthinkable in the context of traditional Afghan society.

With fundamentalism in charge, a bizarre drama of people being stoned to death, amputations, (Figure 15.3) and executions routinely unfolded at Kabul's sports arena and other venues. These events were meant to serve as object lessons for spectators. Objections by human rights organizations were ignored. Divine edicts were beyond question and not something that could be altered by majority votes or because they did not adhere to some set of "human rights" set forth by Western institutions like the United Nations. Compromise was out of the question and the Taliban refused to engage the United Nations or the international community on their policies.

The Taliban were draconian in their treatment of women. They imposed measures that they claimed were for the protection of women, but which the international community saw as misogyny, "gynaeophobia," and "gender apartheid." Schools for girls were shut down and women were forbidden from work outside the home. Women could only venture in public spaces if they were



Figure 15.2. An obdurate Taliban enforcer beating a defenseless woman with a stick. Such behavior was unthinkable in the context of traditional Afghan culture. Photo courtesy of RAWA.org.

covered from head to toe with an enveloping garment called the *chadari* and were accompanied by a male relative. While outside their homes, women were prohibited from speaking or laughing loudly so that men would not hear them and thus be tempted by the feminine presence. Any woman caught wearing cosmetics, brightly colored clothes, or high-heeled shoes that made noise when walking, would be punished. Finally, people in houses with women had to paint their exterior window panes black so that men outside would not see the female occupants. Failure to comply meant public beatings on the spot, imprisonment, or worse.

These extraordinary policies had drastic repercussions. The prohibition on women working outside the home meant the loss of wages for families with no male income. Especially impacted were Kabul's estimated 30,000 to 40,000 widows of war who were the only sources of income for their families. The bulk of Kabul's professionals, 40% of all doctors, 70% of all teachers, and 50% of all civil servants were women, which meant that what little medical care and other services available were severely curtailed and schools were shut down.

The Taliban viewed their policies in terms of social justice and claimed that their gender policies were in place not to harm but to protect the honor and dignity of women and thus fulfilled Islamic obligations. In their logic, permitting women freedom in public would certainly result in adultery and that would spell the obliteration of Islam.



Figure 15.3. A young Talib carrying the severed hands of alleged thieves. The Taliban routinely amputated the hands of purported thieves during public ceremonies. Photo courtesy of RAWA.org.

The Taliban also subjected males to severe restrictions. Men were prohibited from donning Western style clothing. They also had to cut their hair short, wear turbans, and grow beards of a certain length. Public prayers five times a day at mosques was mandatory. There were neighborhood watch groups that recorded the names of men who missed mosque prayers. Offenders were punished.

In addition, all traditional forms of entertainment, such as music, singing, dancing at weddings, cigarettes, card games, chess, gambling, pigeon-flying and kite-flying, were banned. Cinemas were closed, portraits and the possession of photographs of people were forbidden. All western products, including books, television sets, video and audio cassettes were prohibited. In general, anything not mentioned in the Qu'ran was forbidden. Radios were permitted, but only for listening to the programming on the Taliban's "Radio Sharia," which consisted of prayers and official decrees.

The Taliban's only coherent governmental institution was the religious police. Called "The Ministry of Enforcement of Virtue and Suppression of Vice," the function of the religious police was to enforce Taliban decrees and deter resistance by means of intimidation, terror, and violence. Bands of enforcers from the Ministry roamed the streets armed with batons and sticks to ensure compliance and deliver swift punishments, which involved beatings and whippings.

Aside from their abysmal gender policies, the Taliban had a horrible human rights record. This attracted massive negative media coverage in the West. Their human rights abuses included the sectarian killings of Shi'a minorities, murdering civilians, maltreating non-Muslims, torture, arbitrary detentions, and destruction of cultural property (see Figure 13.2). Because of this, the Taliban were internationally isolated, they failed to be recognized by the United Nations, and they were condemned by the West as political pariahs. Many in the Muslim world labeled the Taliban a reactionary and anachronistic force out of touch and out of place in the modern world.

The Taliban were ousted from power by the United States after September 11, 2001. Since then, however, the Taliban have managed to regain control over vast sections of Afghanistan and they are poised to strike once again.

The rise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan illustrates the consequences of putting a fundamentalist project into action through political force. Troublesome are the numerous similarities between the Taliban program and fundamentalisms elsewhere in the globe aspiring to power and control of society.

Religion and Violence

In the post 9/11 world the topic of religion and violence can hardly be ignored. Indeed, as Andrew Murphy (2011: 1) has stated:

The relationship between religion and violence—however one defines either of those terms—forms a central part of the political discourse, as well as the lived reality of modern times.

September 11, 2001 is considered to be a “watershed date” for the study of religion and violence (Avalos 2011: 137). A cascade of books and articles have appeared dealing with the topic in the period after the 9/11 attacks. Most of these studies focus on one type of violence, terrorism, and specifically Islamic terrorism and the threat posed by Islam to the West.

However, the relationship between religion and violence is much broader than Islam and terrorism. Violence is an aspect of the human condition. Violence comes in many shapes and is motivated by many reasons. It is found in many places and many times. All religions sanction some type of violence, such as prescribing punishments and even death for those who violate religious laws and moral injunctions. Religion also provides justification for certain types of violence as necessary or desirable. Religious wars and sectarian violence, sometimes pitting brother against brother, form dark and embarrassing chapters in human history up to the present and are too numerous to mention (see Eller 2010: 241–290).

How Religion Facilitates Violence

Religion facilitates violence by breaking people up into in-groups and out-groups, with the latter being perceived as threatening and less than human (Price 2012: 2). Jews construe themselves as “the chosen people,” separate from and better in the eyes of God than all other nations. Christians differentiate between those who have been “saved” and have accepted Jesus as their savior and those who have not and are condemned to burn in hell. Muslims differentiate between the followers of Islam, the “People of the Book” (Christians and Jews), and the “People of Ignorance” (pagans). Under Islamic governments, the People of the Book were generally tolerated as second-class citizens, while the People of Ignorance were offered the choice of conversion or death. Such distinctions between an in-group and out-group can become a source of conflict and violence.

The idea of God can provide a powerful impetus for violence. For example, the Abrahamic God is an angry and violent deity whose wrath can only be assuaged by death, including the death of “his son” (Price 2012: 2). This God kills and urges his devotees to kill—“You shall not leave any creature alive” (Deuteronomy 20: 16–17). “Then when the sacred months have slipped away, slay the idolaters, wherever you find them, seize them, beset them, be in ambush for them everywhere” (Qu’ran 9: 5). This easily justifies killing to appease God. By killing one can defend God, avert his wrath, or come closer to him. Religious violence becomes transcendent. Thus, bombing abortion clinics or flying airplanes into buildings become a defense of God and his divine law. In the minds of perpetrators, such acts of violence become divinely ordained religious rituals that must be meticulously conducted with the same sense of awe and sanctity necessary in other religious rituals (Price 2012: 5). This is how the 9/11 hijackers construed their violent enterprise (Figure 16.1).

Scriptures, or sacred texts, provide justification for violent acts. The Torah, the New Testament, and the Qu’ran have numerous passages extolling violence in the cause of religion. These texts are deemed to be the verbatim words of God and are taken literally by true believers as “operation manuals” or manuals for political action (McTernan 2003: 45).

Clerics and authority figures, individuals who offer expert interpretations of religious texts, can justify religion-based violence. Similarly, charismatic leaders as impresarios of God can motivate people to violence, including mass self-destruction.

The apocalyptic millenarian worldview espoused by different religions links present-day conflicts with an eternal timeless struggle and a mission of transcendent importance (Ellens 2004: 3). Associated with this worldview is the idea



Figure 16.1. The Twin Towers in flames after being struck by airplanes hijacked by Arab Islamic terrorists, 11 September, 2001. The perpetrators of this act of religious violence construed their enterprise as divinely ordained. Photo by Michael Foran.

that violent human action can usher a new sacred order of peace and prosperity. According to James Rinehart (2006: 23), the components of the millenarian paradigm are:

A community composed of deeply ethnocentric people, disrupted by a perceptibly wicked, evil, and alienating power of seemingly demonic dimension that upsets and menaces their traditional way of life. In the presence of such danger, the community comes to be convinced that their role and purpose must be defended to the death largely because they are God's chosen Elect, destined to ensure that righteousness overcomes evil. Triumph, which is viewed as inexorable and according to God's plan, represents the true finale of history, which reveals itself as heaven on earth.

Another factor associated with religious violence is the presence of a supportive community. There is always a group that bolsters the religious warrior by offering logistical, spiritual, and emotional support that facilitates acts of violence that an individual might not take part in on his own. Religion is a group phenomenon and so is religious violence (Price 2012: 22).

The Nature of Religious Violence

Western analysts consider contemporary religious violence to be particularly sinister. Those who perpetrate such acts are thought to be motivated by pure religious zeal. This renders them deadlier than any other enemy. For example, religious terrorists are different from their secular counterparts because they are unwilling to compromise. Secular terrorists have concrete goals, such as regional independence, or civil rights, and so they are willing to negotiate. Religious warriors act out of the assurance that their cause is divinely ordained, that they alone possess the truth, and that their enemies—shirkers, heathens, and disbelievers—are less than human. Compromise with such foes goes against the will of God and is out of the question. The religious warrior is not engaged in an ordinary battle but in a cosmic war between good and evil based on the millenarian paradigm. According to this logic, “homicide becomes malicide,” meaning that perpetrators of religious violence consider their actions not as killing but as the eradication of evil (McTernan 2003: 42).

In what follows, we shall examine specific cases that illustrate how religious beliefs have engendered destructive actions. In each instance, charismatic leaders indoctrinating a community of believers have led their followers to undertake horrendous irrational acts of violence, killing themselves or others in the cause of their beliefs or in the name of God.

Religious Violence: *Aum Shinrikyō*

The *Aum Shinrikyō* was a religious cult in Japan that gained notoriety after it launched a deadly sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March, 1995 (Lifton 1999), which earned it a designation as a terrorist organization in the United States, Canada, and the European Union. The cult was founded in 1984 by a charismatic partially blind man named Shoko Asahara (see Reader 1996, 2000) (Figure 16.2). *Aum* in Sanskrit means “the powers of destruction and creation in the universe,” and *shinrikyō* means “the teaching of the supreme truth” (Fait 2011: 88). Asahara’s doctrine was a mixture of Christian millennialism, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoist beliefs, Hinduism, as well as the sayings of Michel Nostradamus, the famous 16th-century seer. Initially, Asahara’s mission was to enhance human spiritual consciousness through meditation and yoga and to bring about universal enlightenment (Reader 2003: 193). From such beginnings, idealistic *Aum* members went on to become a group of conspiracy theory obsessed paranoid murderers willing to destroy thousands for the sake of their cause (McTernan 2003: 39).



Figure 16.2. Shoko Asahara in police custody. Asahara was leader of *Aum Shinrikyō*, a religious cult in Japan that gained notoriety after it launched a deadly sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in March, 1995. Photo ASSOCIATED PRESS.

For Asahara, life in human society involved the absorption of negative karma and the path to salvation was to renounce the material world and engage in ascetic practices to purify the mind and body and achieve spiritual transformation. Asahara implemented extreme asceticism among his followers. His methods to make adherents conform involved social isolation, various forms of physical mortification, the ritual use of drugs like LSD, and corporal punishment (Reader 2000: 8–31). The negative karma of the violence and cruelty associated with these measures was explained away by the idea that violence was permissible if used by a compassionate guru to attain spiritual goals (Reader 2000: 32–60).

Asahara's messianic mission was based on a vision of God that convinced him that he was to play a central role in the soon to come cosmic battle between good and evil. He claimed to be “today's Christ” and “Salvation of this Century” and promised his disciples redemption. Overtime, however, Asahara became

disillusioned by his inability to gain widespread support and *Aum's* failure to become a political force. This factor along with provoking oppositional forces, such as recriminations by cult members' families trying to contact their loved ones, sensationalist media coverage, and pressure from a government championing cultural legitimacy, were enough to push Asahara over the edge (Robbins 2003: 59; Reader 2003: 189; Hall and Schuyler 1998: 242). His response to these challenges was to further isolate his followers from mainstream Japanese society and tighten his grip around them. *Aum's* agenda changed as well from the peaceful spiritual transformation of society to that of preparing for the Apocalypse (Reader 1996).

The apocalyptic worldview espoused by Asahara was linked to the idea that a new sacred order could be created through violent human action. Cultists engrossed with Asahara's teachings envisioned themselves as the vehicles of a superhuman agent who would alter history and usher in a millennial kingdom (Fait 2011: 92). They saw themselves as the elect with a sacred cosmic mission, which gave a "transcendental significance" to their baleful activities (Reader 2003).

Asahara preached that skeptics were unworthy of life. To kill the disbelievers was therefore a meritorious act. Accordingly, he ordered the manufacture of sarin gas (a deadly nerve agent and weapon of mass destruction) as a way of dealing with nonbelievers and the unworthy. Asahara thought that a sarin gas attack in Japan would trigger a third world war and start Armageddon. On March 20, 1995, ten cultists boarded five trains at five stations in Tokyo during rush hour and released sarin gas and fled. The focus of the attack was Kasumigaseki station, which is in the proximity of many government offices. The attack was devastating. Twelve commuters were killed and some 5,000 were injured.

Public response went from shock and disbelief to anger. The event had a similar effect on Japanese society as 9/11 had on the United States (Reader 2003: 87). The Japanese government reacted swiftly. Asahara and 104 of his followers were arrested on charges of murder relating to the sarin attack and for the illegal manufacture of drugs.

During the investigation that followed evidence surfaced that *Aum* was also involved in other acts of violence, including the death of seven people in a chemical attack in central Japan in 1994, the murder of a lawyer investigating anti-*Aum* allegations, who vanished with his entire family in 1989, and the slaying of several defectors (Reader 2003: 88). As Ian Reader (2003: 104) observes:

In *Aum* the idealism that underpinned the plans to build a Lotus realm on earth and to bring about worldly salvation and the eradication of evil was transformed into a destructive philosophy in which those who sought to create that new brave world became murderers venting punishment on the unworthy. Members of *Aum* were convinced that even though their actions involved destruction and violence, they

were right and valid, spiritual rather than criminal ... the violence they espoused was in itself a product of their righteousness and of their conviction that they, and they alone, possessed the truth. As such *Aum Shinrikyō* presents us with a potent example of how religion can give rise to peril as well as promise, and of the paradoxical situation in which people fired with spiritual beliefs that promise salvation can end up by killing the people they seek to save.

Aum Shinrikyō is intriguing, as Mark Juergensmeyer (2000: 104) has put it, “because it signaled a new kind of terrorism: one that created a colossal event for the sake of a catastrophic vision of world history and employed for the first time a weapon of mass destruction.”

Religious Violence: Peoples Temple

Founded in 1955 by a preacher named Jim Jones (Figure 16.3), Peoples Temple was an independent Pentecostal church created to address racism in inner-city Indianapolis, Indiana (Chidester 1988; Hall 1995; Moore 2009). Jones was a



Figure 16.3. The Reverend Jim Jones, founder of Peoples Temple, delivering a sermon. Photo courtesy of the Jonestown Institute, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>.

charismatic leader who claimed he could heal people with the help of the Holy Ghost. He staged numerous bogus miraculous cures and feats of clairvoyance using ringers to convince his followers that he had supernatural powers. He also said that he could render decisions regarding the church based on direct revelations from God. Peoples Temple offered a youth program, a soup kitchen for the poor, and other social services, and its members worked hard for desegregation. Peoples Temple could be characterized as an interracial, social service, faith healing ministry (Chidester 1988: 5).

In the summer of 1965, the ministry in search of a safer and more conducive social environment moved to California. Jones' teachings continued to focus on social justice and the establishment of a community that would be free of racism, sexism, classism, and the exploitive impact of capitalism (Seegmiller 2011: 552). The faith healing sessions and clairvoyant acts proceeded as recruitment vehicles.

Peoples Temple attracted a diverse array of people, which included hippies, progressive professionals, Christian fundamentalists, political activists, street people, and the elderly. By 1975 Jones had amassed between 2,500 and 5,000 followers. Members turned over their incomes, homes, and other assets to the organization in return for social services and the opportunity to participate in the community.

Jones portrayed himself as the loving father of his followers (Figure 16.4). He taught his disciples to uphold beliefs that would contribute to a just society. His sermons were interspersed with Marxist themes. He called this "apostolic socialism." Peoples Temple was active in politics, took part in civil rights demonstrations, and hosted religious services in cities along the West Coast. Jones received considerable acclaim during this period. The *Los Angeles Herald* proclaimed him "humanitarian of the year" and the country's "outstanding clergyman" (Chidester 1988: 8; Seegmiller 2011: 553).

In 1973, Peoples Temple established a mission in the remote jungles of Guyana, in South America, called the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, which later became known as Jonestown. This was to be the Promised Land for Jones and his devotees. Meanwhile, the group continued its efforts in California. Throughout this period, Jones' control over his followers increased. He implemented stringent disciplinary practices to ensure conformity. One of these measures was called "catharsis," an event during which transgressions of wayward members were addressed publicly and penalties were decided collectively. Offenders were subjected to corporal punishment. Another way Jones controlled his followers was by using sex. He was a bisexual and he used sex to solidify his power among the men and women in his inner circle. Jones also manipulated people by using privileged information to secure their loyalties through blackmail. This was the dark side of Jim Jones.



Figure 16.4. Jim Jones as the loving father of his followers. From a Peoples Temple brochure (1972). Photo courtesy of the Jonestown Institute, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>.

Jones' sexual conduct and authoritarianism resulted in disaffection. A number of members left the organization between 1975 and 1977. Ex-members formed the Concerned Relatives and Citizens Committee protesting Jones' conduct. This generated considerable negative media coverage. At the same time the government began investigating Peoples Temple's financial affairs. In 1977, amidst growing controversy, a distraught Jones left for Guyana. Others who entrusted Jones with their lives and futures followed. By 1978 there were over 900 parishioners in Jonestown.

Despite Jones' departure, the Concerned Relatives group continued its campaign, accusing him of mistreatment, fraud, brainwashing, forced labor, and torture.

In Guyana, a paranoid Jones and his alarmed congregation perceived themselves as beleaguered by their adversaries. To protect the congregation and prevent anyone from leaving, Jones posted armed guards to patrol the boundaries of Jonestown.

Recriminating apostates, sensational media coverage, and pressure from the government became destabilizing forces that would lead to the unraveling of the sect (cf., Hall and Schuyler 1998). Beginning in the fall of 1977, the Jonestown community engaged in what were called “white nights,” referring to a ritual of crisis when everyone had to gather at the main pavilion of the complex to listen to Jones denounce the forces out to destroy them (Chidester 1988: 143; Seegmiller 2011: 553). During these events suicide rehearsals were conducted as tests of faith. Jones repeatedly preached about the merits of “revolutionary suicide” as a final act of defiance in the face of an immoral enemy and an “inhumane world.” Followers were thus conditioned to believe that suicide was a viable option in the face of overwhelming opposition.

In 1978, the Concerned Relatives organization lobbied the U.S. Congress to investigate its allegations. Activist Congressman Leo Ryan, a group of news reporters, and several former sect members traveled to Jonestown on a fact finding mission. On November 17th they met with Jones and toured his facility. While Ryan was in Jonestown several sect members expressed their desire to leave. The congressman agreed to take them back to the United States. While the delegation was preparing to board the plane at the nearby airstrip for departure the following day, Jones’ security force attacked, killing Ryan and four others and wounding nine.

The fate of the Jonestown community was sealed by this violent dark deed. During the last white night, which started at 6:00 p.m., on November 18th at the main pavilion, Jones related to his followers what had happened at the airstrip and they came to terms with the inevitability of an invasion of their community by government forces. Jones told of the atrocities that would befall them once taken into custody by the authorities. Surrender was not an option. Jones said, “If we can’t live in peace, let us die in peace.” Collective suicide would be the response. The medical staff set up cauldrons of the soft drink Flavor Aid laced with cyanide and tranquilizers. The taking of poison, Jones declared, was a “revolutionary act” through which they could achieve “revolutionary immortality.” His followers apparently believed him.

The first to be poisoned were the young children who were injected with cyanide. Everyone else drank the lethal potion. Armed men made sure that the few recalcitrants complied. Families huddled together in clusters and said goodbyes as their lives slipped away (Figure 16.5). A sect member who was away in Georgetown, Guyana, took her own life after killing her three children. In total, 919 people died: 908 were poisoned, while the rest, including Jones himself, died of gunshot

wounds consistent with suicide. Based on what authorities found, it seems that most of the people took their own lives voluntarily, although there are signs that some were murdered. What was touted as a showcase of a utopian self-supporting egalitarian socialist community thus came to an irrational and horrifying end.



Figure 16.5. Reverend Jim Jones's bloated body lies on the walkway to the main pavilion in Jonestown. The bodies of the deceased Peoples Temple members are to be seen huddled together in the background. This was the largest act of mass suicide in modern history. Photo by Hume Kennerly/Getty Images.

Public reaction in the U.S. was one of shock, disbelief, and derision. As David Chidester (1988: 1) has put it:

The Jonestown event became an emblem of horror and tragedy, a single image of madness and deception, a curious mixture of religion, politics, and violence that defied the imagination.

Religious Violence: Branch Davidians

The Branch Davidians were a schismatic offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. They were a millenarian sect headquartered in a compound in Waco, Texas (Newport 2006; Wright 1995). The Davidians anticipated the imminent return of Christ and the establishment of a new millennium. Their theology was based on the Bible, but supplemented by the revelations of a living prophet.

In 1987, leadership of the group was seized by a young charismatic figure by the name of Vernon Howell. In 1990, Howell changed his name to David Koresh (Figure 16.6), David referring to the biblical King David, and Koresh, the Hebrew name for Cyrus the Great, the Persian ruler who defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland. This name change signified Koresh's claim to be the anointed messiah, a "new Christ," and "the Lamb of God."



Figure 16.6. A police mug shot of David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians, who claimed to be the Messiah.

Koresh's followers were an international group, including people from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. They zealously accepted Koresh as their personal spiritual leader and savior. Koresh's followers were convinced that when the time came they would ascend to heaven with their messiah. The Davidians lived communally, separated from society at large. They led strictly disciplined lives. Television and movies were prohibited. Moreover, there was a strict dress code

for women. The central activity of the group was studying the Bible and attending Koresh's marathon apocalyptic sermons and Christian rock and roll sessions.

Koresh had complete sway over his disciples. He also claimed exclusive sexual rights over the women in the group. This was necessary in order for him to produce many children for the Lord, as required according to his interpretation of the Bible. Everyone else had to observe strict rules of celibacy. Koresh had fifteen wives and is said to have fathered seventeen children.

According to Koresh, the salvation of humankind depended upon his messianic mission. At first, he planned to take his group to Israel to convert the Jews, an act that he said would cause an international crisis and a war that would culminate with an invasion by the United States. This would trigger Armageddon and it would be Koresh who would usher in the "New Jerusalem" (Bromley and Silver 1995: 153). He later changed his mind, stating that Armageddon would commence in the United States with an assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Texas, which he accordingly renamed "Ranch Apocalypse."

To prepare for the cosmic war Koresh adopted a survivalist mindset, stockpiled weapons, ammunition, food, and fuel, and created a small militia. He transformed the Davidian compound into a garrison, complete with guard dogs. All parishioners were required to learn how to use firearms in preparation for the predicted battle with "the Philistines" (Hayward 2011: 429).

Amidst allegations by anti-cult activists of sexual misconduct, statutory rape, child abuse, and warnings about a Jonestown-like mass suicide, the government received a tip that Koresh had secured a large shipment of illegal weapons (Hall 2002). The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) began a full scale investigation. On February 28, 1993 one hundred BATF agents stormed the Davidian compound with search and arrest warrants. Koresh had learned of the impending raid ahead of time and was ready to engage in battle. The Davidians construed the attack in terms of their millennial scenario—prophecy was being fulfilled, the Antichrist was at the door, and Armageddon was at hand. The apocalyptic worldview espoused by Koresh thus transformed the standoff with the authorities into a cosmic war between good and evil. Fighting broke out and by the end of the day four federal agents and six Davidians were dead.

A siege lasting fifty-one days ensued. Negotiations by telephone led nowhere. In the end, on April 19, 1993, FBI agents (who had taken over the investigation), intent on forcing the Davidians out of their hiding place, launched an attack using military vehicles. They smashed holes in the building through which tear gas was released. A fire broke out simultaneously in different parts of the building and quickly engulfed the structure. Koresh and close to eighty followers died. It is believed that sect members themselves started the fire that took their lives (Figure 16.7). This was a mass suicide.



Figure 16.7. Fire engulfing the Branch Davidian building complex. Sect members committed suicide by setting their compound on fire. An FBI photo.

After his death, Koresh became a symbol for anti-government, rightwing Christian militias and ZOG conspiracists. ZOG refers to “Zionist Occupation Government,” an anti-Jewish conspiracy theory that holds that Jews secretly control the government and are engaged in conspiratorial acts to destroy the white race (Hayward 2011: 427). The raid on Koresh’s compound in Waco was mentioned by terrorists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols as the reason why they bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, on April 19, 1995, exactly two years after the Waco disaster (Figure 16.8). One hundred and sixty eight people were killed and more than 690 were injured in this act of religious violence. The Oklahoma City bombing was the deadliest terrorist attack in the United States before 9/11 (Waltman 2011: 146).

Peaceful Religion and Violent Religion

Two divergent perspectives exist on the relationship between religion and violence in the contemporary world. One is that religion is intrinsically good and religious violence is the handiwork of deviants who have distorted otherwise benign religious precepts. The other is that religion is bad by itself and is the source of violence (McTernan 2003: x). In the latter view, religion becomes “a dark, irrational,



Figure 16.8. Aftermath of the April 19, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. This was the work of rightwing Christian terrorists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. FEMA News Photo.

and uncontrollable force that causes irrational behavior, violence, and terrorism” (Price 2012: 215). As James Haught (1990: 14) has put it:

A grim pattern is visible in history: When religion is the ruling force in a society, it produces horror. The stronger the supernatural beliefs, the worse the inhumanity. A culture dominated by intense faith invariably is cruel to people who don’t share the faith—and sometimes to many who do.

Or as Charles Kimball (2002: 1) observes:

history clearly shows that religion has often been linked directly to the worst examples of human behavior. It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history.

In his book *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Sam Harris (2004: 29–31) espouses the view that faith itself rather than “man’s baser nature” inspires violence. It is wrong, Harris argues, to exonerate religion by extolling moderate views as the norm and attributing the bad things that happen in the name of religion to the handiwork of deviants who have corrupted the true teachings. The so-called deviants have their own authoritative clerics, they are the product of the same historical legacy, and they justify their position according to the same texts as peaceful followers of the faith. To call one group deviant and the other normal is an arbitrary value judgment (Price 2012: 34–35).

Religious moderation means interpreting the Scriptures to accord with modern life, Harris writes. This requires that one must ignore large segments of texts that contain cruel, barbaric, and violent injunctions. A moderate reading of the Scriptures is not a product of religion itself, Harris maintains, but rather is due to developments in secular society. Religious moderation simply signifies a failure to live up to the letter of the sacred texts. As such, Harris (2004: 21) adds, religious moderates “betray faith and reason equally.” Moreover, taking a moderate stance means that one has acquiesced to allow literalists to espouse extremist ideas, since moderates are respectful of different religious views.

The main problem concerning religion and violence relates to the nature of religion as an ideological framework. As Reader (2003: 103) points out:

one of the basic problems ... of religious traditions and texts is their very ambiguity. They provide and are open to vastly differing explanations, and their ideas can easily be read in different ways by different people in different contexts. The same set of religious texts—and the same traditions—can inspire multiple voices to emerge articulating multiple visions of truth. They can provide resources simultaneously for a

Gandhi and a fervent Hindu nationalist, for deeply spiritual Japanese Buddhist teachers and for an Asahara, for a Rumi and a Bin Laden, for Saint Francis and a Crusader.

There is “destructive potential” in texts and traditions that are predisposed to contradictory interpretations (McTernan 2003: 22, 158; Steffen 2007: 79). This is the predicament of religion.

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