Chapter 13
Religion

Ritual and Belief
Overview

• All cultures share some form of religion (cosmology) and all exhibit the following:
  • All cultures have ideas about the supernatural and ways to interact with it.
  • All cultures talk about supernatural beings such as gods, spirits, ghosts, and so forth.
  • All cultures have patterned rituals to get through climactic moments birth, coming of age, marriage, death.
• Anthropologists understand that religious beliefs offer a roadmap for behavior and create meaning for people through the use of powerful rituals and symbols.
• Problems of translation
  • The words we use to describe this topic are limited greatly and often gloss over the complexity of religious concepts in others’ cultures.
  • Using English words like God, religion, ghosts, spells glosses over the diversity of cultural meanings.
    • “Belief” is difficult to define in the cross-cultural perspective.
    • “Supernatural” comes from Medieval Christian theology is now dependent upon current scientific understandings.
  • The Western understanding of supernatural has become dependent on the understanding of "nature“ (or science).
  • We have to remember, we use very culture-specific terms when talking about these ideas.
• In the Western world today, there is an attempt to balance the mythos and the logos.

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<th>Differing paradigms do not need to compete</th>
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Anthropologists study religion to understand people.

- And the range of religious beliefs encountered by nineteenth-century scholars, both at home and abroad, made people seem inexplicable.
- Anthropologists, working in small-scale societies with relatively “simple” lifeways and simple technology, assumed that local religious beliefs were also simple.
- Deeper investigation gradually revealed the complexity and diversity of beliefs held throughout the world—and the difficulty of defining “religion” cross-culturally.

**Understanding religion v. 1.0: Edward Tylor (beliefs)**

- From 1871, anthropologist Edward Tylor introduced *animism*: An early theory that primitive peoples believed that inanimate objects such as trees, rocks, cliffs, hills, and rivers were animated by spiritual forces or beings.
  - Tylor argued this represented the most primitive of religious views in his *Primitive culture*.
  - Remember that Tylor was a cultural evolutionist.
    - Tylor proposed that religion evolved in stages from animism to polytheism to monotheism (an ethnocentric view since he came from a largely monotheistic culture).
    - Tylor took this progression a step further, arguing that humans would eventually yield to pure reason and abandon deities altogether—something that has not yet happened.
- *Animatism* was a term coined by Robert Ranulph Marett from his observations of Melanesians.
  - In his book, *The threshold of religion*, he describes animatism as an impersonal force (non-vital) or object.
  - Instead of inanimate objects being animated with supernatural power, they had spiritual power without having a life force. He was describing *mana*.
How to Understand Religion 2

- **Understanding religion v. 2.0: Anthony F.C. Wallace (the supernatural)**
  
  In the twentieth century, **Anthony F. C. Wallace** studied the changing religious ceremonies and rituals (stylized performances involving symbols that are associated with social, political, and religious activities) of the Seneca, one of the Iroquois tribes.
  
  - He did extensive work in Melanesia and outlined some of the types of religious responses of the local populations to colonialism (they overlap in the real world):
    - **Messianic movements**: Leader is designated as a savior of the people.
    - **Millenarian movement**: New era anticipated in which disadvantaged are restored after the apocalypse.
    - **Nativistic or revivalistic movements**: Traditions of the past are restored and the colonialists are ousted.
  
  - His definition of religion became standard in anthropology: “beliefs and rituals concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and forces” (Wallace, 1966, p. 5).
  
  - For Wallace, the characteristic that ties all religious beliefs together is the supernatural.
    - But he recognized the many different forms of supernatural belief: from animism to gods and spirits to more amorphous supernatural forces like the mana.
      - For the native Hawaiians, mana was a belief that sacred power inheres in certain high-ranking people, sacred spaces, and objects.
      - Mana among the Melanesians is thought to be available to all persons and can be found in both animate and inanimate entities.
  
  - Wallace’s approach to religion can be criticized for not doing enough: 1) to explain religious change; 2) for treating religious groups and individuals as intellectually impaired; and 3) for not explaining the overwhelming fervency of religious believers.
How to Understand Religion 3

• Understanding religion v. 3.0: Clifford Geertz (symbolism)
  • Clifford Geertz wanted to explain why people could believe the peculiar ideas that anthropologists had observed around the world.
  • He thought religion could be best understood as a system of symbols.
  • Geertz definition of religion emphasizes symbols that seem intensely real and factual to believers. What, to outsiders, appear to be mythological parables are often, to insiders, historical fact.
   • Regardless of the historicity of these symbols, they create purpose and meaning and help motivate behavior.
   • Religious symbols are a central part of a worldview: A general approach to or set of shared unquestioned assumptions about the world and how it works.
   • Symbols describe a ‘model of’ how the world is, as well as a ‘model for’ how the world (morally) should be.
  • Many anthropologists employ Geertz’s definition of religion as part of an interpretive approach: A kind of analysis that interprets the underlying symbolic and cultural interconnections within a society.
  • Geertz’s approach to religion has been criticized for assuming that people have a basic need for meaning and for making sense of the world, for not adequately distinguishing religion from other domains (science, aesthetics, common sense, or law), for not understanding the emotional experience of belief, and for viewing religion as a personal, rather than a social, phenomenon.
  • Beliefs are powerful because they are socially enacted repeatedly through rituals and other religious behaviors.
How to Understand Religion

- Understanding religion v. 4.0: Welsch & Vivanco (system of social action)
  - Welsch & Vivanco support the view that religion as a system of social action.
    - A solitary nun and millions of believers joining the pope for mass are both practicing Catholicism.
    - Both experiences are interpreted as being different from everyday life.
    - It is the social experience that makes the beliefs, the organization of religion in daily life, and the religious symbols have meaning for every person present.
  - Here, we define religion as a symbolic system that is socially enacted through rituals and other aspects of social life, including these four elements:
    1. The existence of things more powerful than human beings. Although in many societies it takes the form of some supernatural force, we prefer to think of it as a worldview or cosmology that situates the place of human beings in the universe.
    2. Beliefs and behaviors surround, support, and promote the acceptance that those things more powerful than humans actually exist.
    3. Symbols that make these beliefs and behaviors seem both intense and genuine.
    4. Social settings, usually involving important rituals, that people share while experiencing the power of these symbols of belief.
  - There was a time in anthropology where the rituals of other peoples were discussed in ethnocentric terms.
    - A response to this problem was the publishing of *Body rituals among the Nacirema*, an article that drew attention from within anthropology.
    - What do you think?
How to Understand Religion 5

• Suicide bombers
  • Suicide bombings have become a part of daily life in some areas of the Middle East.
  • How can a behavior that is unthinkable to most of the world be so commonplace in this region?
• Most political violence is local, directed at a specific nation-state. Political violence in the 21st century has changed as it has gone global.
  • Richard Falk calls this new form ‘megaterrorism’.
  • Its magnitude, scope and ideology differ, as the goal is to transform the world order, not just challenge a single nation-state.
• Reframing 9/11
  • This question of why the violence is used was not academic to Americans in the wake of 9/11, when that behavior was exported to the United States.
    • Events like this are the most difficult times (even for anthropologists) to apply cultural relativism.
    • Our immediate reaction is to label such acts of violence as irrational evil and leave it at that.
    • But the hijackers did not consider themselves irrational or evil.
  • We are challenged to understand, however contemptible, what they were thinking.
• Situating Al Qaeda
  • The 9/11 hijackers were members of Al-Qaeda, founded by Osama bin Laden (now deceased) to wage a holy struggle (or jihad, in Arabic) against those perceived as oppressing Muslims.
  • Jihad (which means ‘struggle’) has a broader meaning is Islam, most commonly referring to the personal struggle to follow God’s will.
    • Bin Laden “radicalized” hundreds of disaffected young.
    • Men without purpose found it in sharing Bin Laden’s hatred of the West.
Early anthropological scholars of religion viewed technologically primitive people as being primitive in all respects, even religion.

Today, anthropologists don’t rank people or religions on an evolutionary scale of complexity. But there are clear correlations between political organization, mode of subsistence, and religious practices.

Clan spirits and clan identities in New Guinea

Nearly all of New Guinean societies are organized around families and groups of families that belong to the same clan.

In Papua New Guinea, the significance of clan membership is reflected in religious systems.

- The Ningerum live in low–population density forests and view their traditional clan lands as inhabited by a range of spirits -- water spirits, the bush spirits, and the ghosts of dead ancestors -- with human emotions and motivations.
  - These spirits must be appeased with offerings of gifts and pig feasts.
  - When displeased they can cause sickness and death.
- The Elema and Purari live in much higher-density villages full of long houses.
  - Here, clan spirits are seen as inhabiting specially designed house boards — a specific, sedentary location, rather than the forest more generally.
    - These animals are sometimes called totemic species as part of a system of thought that anthropologists call totemism.
    - Totemism associates particular social groups with specific animal or plant species called “totems” as an emblem.
  - Clans associate with specific animal spirits and make offerings to them.
• Totemism in North America
  • Early anthropologists documented how some Native American clans identified with particular animals, often claiming to be descended from them.
  • Totems help create social cohesiveness by stressing group identity, focusing group and private rituals on totems.
  • Early anthropologists interpreted these beliefs as evidence of primitiveness.
  • Ralph Lindon studied Euroamericans during WWI and their reverential attitudes towards emblems such as the rainbow.
  • His interpretations challenged the simplicity of totems.
  • School mascots are most common example in United States, have elaborate myths associated with them.
  • They range from the ferocious (lions, warriors) to the mild (chestnuts, beavers)
  • This appropriation of Indian totems this has created conflict between groups competing to “own” Native American mascot imagery Today major controversy over the use of American Indians as mascots.
  • You may be interested to watch Reel Injun and/or view how African Americans and American Indians are used in commercial settings.
    • Many of the images that portray stereotypes of African Americans are gone or “toned down”.
    • For American Indians this is not as true. Think about the Land O Lakes butter packaging, for instance. Or the Redskins icon.
  • Both Native American clan totems and sports team emblems act as totems (the former spiritual, the latter secular).
Forms of Religion 3

- **Shamanism and ecstatic religious experiences**
  - Common terms used for mediators of sacred power: magicians, sorcerers, witches, spirit mediums, medicine men, shamans. The share some features:
    - Most likely men.
    - Facilitate communication between human beings and the supernatural world.
- **Tungus**
  - The term *shaman* comes from the Tungus people of Siberia.
  - It replaced *witch doctor*; a term that came to be viewed negatively in the West. Today this term, shaman, is used to speak of people conducting similar practices in many cultures globally.
  - *Shaman*: Religious leader who communicate the needs of the living to the spirit world, usually through some form of ritual trance or other altered state of consciousness.
  - This healer uses *trance* (a semiconscious state typically brought on by hypnosis, ritual drumming and singing, or hallucinogenic drugs like mescaline or peyote)
  - Uses *trance* to communicate with his *spirit familiar*: A spirit that has developed a close bond with a shaman.
- **Ju'/hoansi**
  - The Ju'/hoansi believe in the *n/um*, found in the stomach, can be heated up by *n/um k’ausi*, or medicine owners
  - They access the *n/um* through trance.
Shamanism and ecstatic religious experiences (continued)

- The seeking of ways to achieve an altered psychological state is revealed to be a widespread phenomenon:
  - Napoleon Chagnon and Timothy Asch’s (1973) film Magical Death shows the Yanomamo ritual of shamanic healing
    - In this episode a shaman attempts to heal his family by ingesting hallucinogenic snuff made from a local plant.
    - The shaman is supernaturally assisted by a spirit familiar.
  - Barbara G. Myerhoff (1974) studied the peyote religion of the Huichol Indians (wee-choal) of northern Mexico, in which the hunt for and use of peyote provide social order.
  - Closer to home, Pentecostal and charismatic Christian traditions engage in rituals like snake handling and speaking in tongues: The phenomenon of speaking in an apparently unknown language, often in an energetic and fast-paced way (called “glossolalia” by linguists).
- All these example share the concept of group identity and that these identities are linked to religious symbols.
- A side comment: Achieving an altered state is found in non-human primates as well as is shown in these video clips:
  - Drunk monkeys at beach resort.
  - Lemur on millipede.
• **Ritual symbols & hierarchical order**
  • Religious symbols can unify people around a shared identity but also reinforce social hierarchies.
  • For example, in the former kingdom of Benin, the Oba was considered divine and symbolized by a leopard. The Oba’s palace was an architectural model of the cosmos. Leopard imagery in the palace, arts, and festivals depicted, and maintained, the social order.
  • Among Catholics, the robes and location of the priest above the congregation are symbols of the hierarchical order.

• **Polytheism**
  • Egyptian pharaohs were viewed as earthly manifestations of the gods, along with many others in their polytheistic system.
  • Nearly all ancient societies in the Mediterranean and Middle East were polytheistic like Egypt.
  • Today, Hinduism is the largest of the polytheist religions.

• **Monotheism**
  • In Egypt, around 1335 B.C.E., the pharaoh, Akhenaten, attempted to convert his people to monotheism. He failed.
  • Today, the three largest monotheistic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
  • All are “Abrahamic religions”.
  • All became state religions, whose religious message and ritual supported the government of the state.
• **World religions**
  • As opposed to locally variable deities, monotheistic systems present themselves as **world religions**: Religions that claim to be universally significant to all people.
  • There are about a dozen religions that can be called “world religions” in that they are found outside of one single region: Baha’i Faith; Buddhism; Christianity; Confucianism; Hinduism; Islam; Jainism; Judaism; **Shinto**; Sikhism. Wicca, and Zoroastrianism.
  • One thing that distinguishes world religions is that they have written sources and standardized rituals.
  • The presence of world religions suggests that concept of **syncretism** (cultures tend to absorb from other cultures) is applicable in that we note:
    • Incorporation of borrowed elements from the world religion into the local culture.
    • That the world religion often absorbs local features as well.
• **What about atheism?**
  • Many anthropologists view atheists, agnostics, and other nonbelievers as having a worldview just as Christian, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists do.
  • The details of their worldviews are usually secular, but they are nevertheless built around symbols.
How Do Rituals Work? 1

- There are plenty of everyday secular rituals (e.g., tooth brushing). What sets religious rituals apart from these?
  1. Part of it depends on our perception of them—very few see brushing our teeth as spiritually significant.
  2. Another distinction is that religious rituals are often described as “magical” in some sense.
- Magical thought in non-Western cultures
  - In anthropology, magic refers to an explanatory system of causation that does not follow naturalistic explanations, that often works at a distance without direct physical contact.
    - This definition differs from our everyday sense of magic as an intentional illusion (i.e. David Copperfield’s stage act).
    - To believers in magical powers, these forces are very real and consequential.
    - Whether we, as anthropologists, believe in magic is beside the point. We seek an emic understanding of magic and its role in our informants’ lives.
  - Further, Americans are not immune to magical thinking:
    - Consider George Gmelch’s (1978) study of baseball magic.
      - In his paper he describe the baseball game in terms of routines and rituals, taboos, & fetishes.
      - This always reminds me of the popular movie, Bull Durham.
    - We teach our children to believe in Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, the tooth fairy.
    - We carry our lucky pennies and rabbit feet, ensure the lucky horseshoe is facing upward, save our 4-leaf clovers.
How Do Rituals Work? 2

- **Sympathetic magic**
  - Anthropologist Sir James G. Frazer’s book, *The golden bough: A study in magic and religion*, was one of the first efforts to look for pan-cultural discussions of religion.
  - In this book he divided magic into two categories:
    - He coined the term *sympathetic magic*: Any magical rite that relies on the supernatural to produce its outcome without working through some supernatural being such as a spirit, demon, or deity.
    - He also discussed *contagious magic*: Where objects in contact with magic continue to retain that essence.
      - Heirlooms are a way of maintaining a connection with ancestors.
      - Discarded hair or other parts of the body make one vulnerable.
  - **The laws of magic**
    - Frazer’s *law of similarity* (also called *imitative magic*) encompasses things like voodoo dolls—harming an imitation or effigy of a real person is believed to harm that person.
    - Likewise, harming a representative object “contaminated” by a person is believed to harm the person via the *law of contagion*.
    - These laws are not mutually exclusive; they can, and do, co-occur in religious rituals.
  - **Applying these principles**
    - For example, Catholic communion combines them with its symbolic wafer and wine.
    - For example, the *Doctrine of Signatures*, is of Greek origin and is based on the concept of affinity.
    - For example, another related idea is the concept of the *4 humors*. The concept of *hot-cold theory* (as one of many culture-specific diseases); this is related through a corollary to the law of similarities: the *law of opposites*. 
Applying these principles (continued)

- **Paul Rozin** and **Carol Nemoroff** (1994) conducted a set of social experiments, which they reported in their article, *The contagion concept in adult thinking in the United States: Transmission of germs and of interpersonal influence*:
  - They see the law of contagion in terms of transfer of essence from one to another. Hairbrush experiment: They found more willingness to share a brush with someone one likes than with one who one does not.
  - For the law of similarity, Chocolate replica of a pile of vomit: Put between lips?: Chocolate dog feces: Eat? They found the law of similarity decreased with the age of the subject.

- Malinowski suggested that we distinguish between three related concepts:
  - **Science**: *Instrumental* (does things), based on *rational understanding and empirical knowledge*. All cultures practice science, based on an empirical knowledge of the world.
  - **Magic**: *Instrumental*, but invokes the *supernatural power* through words or acts (spells). It is coercive, and based on faith/belief.
  - **Religion**: *Based on belief/faith*, works through the *beseeching of the supernatural* (prayer).

- These are ‘ideal types’. Problems:
  - Some cultures do not separate natural/supernatural.
  - Some cultures do not distinguish between coercion and beseeching.

- **Michael F. Brown** (1984) reminds us that the boundaries are fuzzy through his analysis of women raising chickens in the Amazonian rainforest.
  - When the women sing a song and feed the chicken duckweed, at first it looks like contagious magic (evoking the spirits through song).
  - But he learns the duckweed is highly nutritious..
Augury

- Reading tea leaves, palm reading, dealing Tarot cards, using Ouija board, asking the mirror on the wall are forms of divination.
- **Augury** is the examination of common objects or performance of simple procedures to find answers to basic questions (form of divination).
- **Scapulamancy** (reading of the cracks in animal bones) is 6000 years old in China
  - Holding shoulder blade bone (scapula over hot coals to predict the future)
  - May function within the ecological system
  - Used when hunting knowledge failed
  - Randomizes hunting patterns
- **Bird watching** in Borneo
  - Read the flights and songs of birds to plant gardens
  - Randomization gives better chances for success
- Examples from our childhoods:
  - Picking a daisy and reciting, “he loves me, he loves me not”.
  - The [fortuneteller](http://www.8-ball-magic.com/)
  - Twisting the stem of an apple to determine your future husband
  - **Banana augury** (thanks, Thom Lee) where you cut the non-stem tip of the banana and ask yes/no question. The shape of the seed design gives the answer.
  - The magic eight ball game online: [http://www.8-ball-magic.com/](http://www.8-ball-magic.com/)
How Do Rituals Work?

- **Rites of passage**
  - One of the most common forms of ritual worldwide is the rite of passage.
  - Rite of passage: any life-cycle rite that marks a person’s or group’s transition from one social state to another.
  - This idea was first described by Arnold van Gennep (1908) in his work, *Rites of passage*.
  - These rituals are probably evident in many of the events students have experienced (i.e.; graduation).

- **Three phases:**
  - **Rites of separation** is the stage that results in one’s removal from the group.
  - **Transition rites** ("liminal period"): ritual reversals of ordinary life take place.
    - Symbolic ambiguity of the social positions.
    - Period of transition marked by strange behavior.
  - **Rites of incorporation** (now called reincorporation) is where one is welcomed back into the community in new role.

- **Rites of intensification**
  - Ceremonies that dramatize and reaffirm the social network.
  - They are intended to validate one’s status, not change it.
    - Prototypical ceremony is funeral.
    - Other examples are weddings, baptisms, family reunions, and so forth.

- **Rituals of inversion**
  - Where the community creates a change to ignore the norms
  - Example: Mardi Gras, Halloween (I might add Spring Break in Fort Lauderdale)
In 1966, *Time* magazine questioned if religious identification would decline in the United States as it had in Europe.

- Despite a recent increase in Americans who don’t associate with any religious tradition, religious affiliation has remained stable and even risen in some categories since 1966.
- **Why does the United States remain so unique among Western industrialized nations in terms of its religiosity (contrary to *Time*’s prediction)?**
- **Why is a secular worldview (that does not accept the supernatural as influencing current people’s lives) relatively rare in the United States?**

- There are complex historical and political answers to these questions.
  - One factor is that science and reason have not replaced religious belief, as *Time* speculated they might (the assumption was the more “modern” the more secular).
  - Another factor was that religious some religions groups resisted social change.
    - For instance, same-sex marriage rights.
    - For instance, abortion rights.

- **Rise of fundamentalism**
  - Religion, politics, and social change remain intertwined, especially with the rise of fundamentalists: People belonging to conservative religious movements that advocate a return to fundamental or traditional principles.
  - The post-1960s rise in Christian fundamentalists in the United States was paralleled by increasing Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East.
  - The term “fundamentalism” is sometimes used pejoratively to imply, at best, scientific illiteracy and, at worst, violent extremism.
  - Here, we use fundamentalism to mean conservative religious movements that advocate a return to fundamental or traditional principles (i.e., not inherently ignorant or violent).
Understanding fundamentalism

- In the 1990s, the Fundamentalism Project at the University of Chicago explored fundamentalism across a wide range of religious groupings (many not traditionally associated with fundamentalism): Christianity, Islam, Zionist Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Sikhism.
- The project identified key themes common to all groups:
  1. All are threatened by secularization and perceive themselves as fighting to return to “proper” gender roles, sexuality, and education.
  2. They derive meaning and purpose from political and military efforts to defend their beliefs about life and death (especially those issues related to the beginning and end of life).
  3. Fundamentalists define themselves in relation to what they are not: outsiders, modernizers, and moderates.
  4. They are zealous, committed, and firmly convinced that they have been chosen to carry out the will of a deity.
- What’s most interesting about fundamentalism from an anthropological standpoint is how it differs from religious expression in smaller communities. In small-scale societies, religion often supports the existing social order. Fundamentalism in larger societies sets itself up in opposition to the social order.
- This process of belonging and the social action associated with group membership is bolstered by important symbols—anthropologists have known about this for a long time.