Introduction to Anthropology: Holistic and Applied Research on Being Human

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ISBN: 9798858723769

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MODULE 18: RELIGION

What is Religion?

In this chapter, we explore anthropological approaches to understanding the diversity of religions across cultures. In Module 1: Introduction, we looked at human universals: things you would find if you visited any human society in time or around the world because they are central to what it means to be human (e.g., language, technology, aesthetics, or a healing system). Religion is also, arguably, a human universal.

It may seem odd to argue this: it's true that the proportion of people in the United States today who claim to have no religious affiliation has grown (from 16% in 2007 to 23% in 2015). Also, there are increasing numbers of people in the U.S. and elsewhere that identify as secular, atheist, or spiritual rather than religious. Looking across cultures to broaden our definition of what religion is can help us understand how religion and ritual practice occur in contexts outside of formal, organized denominations. By studying religion and ritual, anthropologists explore some of the deepest questions at the heart of the human experience: how do people encounter the unknown? How do we make meaning of life considering shared, universal experiences related to being human, like birth, sickness, healing, and death? How do we use rituals to navigate and shape these experiences? Across cultures, religion helps people make sense of their place in the universe, reaffirm or challenge their place within social structure, build belonging and exclusion, connect to the divine, define what is sacred, and transcend the mundane.

The study of religion is an important topic as globalization brings different people into contact with each other, increasing opportunities for interfaith encounters. Anthropology offers a lens to think holistically and comparatively about the nature, meaning, and importance of religious diversity.

Defining Religion is Not So Simple

Anthropologists have long been fascinated by religion, in part because religion allows us to explore the complexity and diversity of human culture. One of the earliest anthropologists, E.B. Tylor (1832-1917), whom we previously discussed in Module 2: A Brief History of Anthropology, was interested in studying religion across cultures. From the vantage point of the 19th century, he sought to understand how religion may have originated, as our ancestors sought to understand death, dreams, and trancing (a sense of leaving the body and connecting with the spirit world). Tylor speculated that people sought to explain these experiences without the perspective of science, giving rise to a belief in the spirit or soul that may reside in people, or other aspects of the natural world (**animism**) (see Figure 18.1). Tylor also believed that, eventually, science would replace religion as a way to know and explain the mysteries of the world around us.

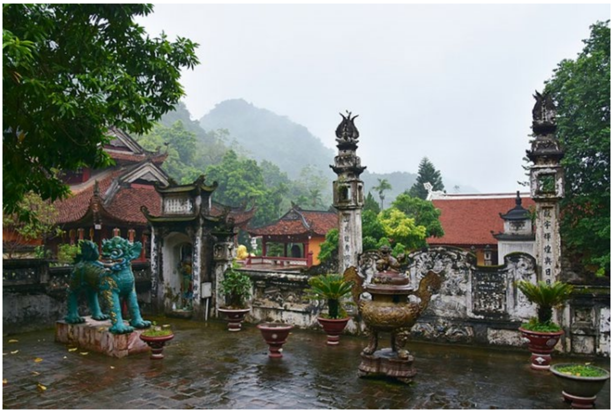

Figure 18.1. Animist shrine near the Heavenly Kitchen Pagodam in Northern Vietnam. Animist religions believe that souls are not restricted to people, but they can be found throughout the natural world. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Tylor was wrong. Over 150 years later, religion is still around. 84% of the global population identifies with a religious group, and several world religions are growing in membership. The fastest growing religion, Islam, is growing more than twice as fast as the overall population growth rate. Christianity, declining in Western Europe, is growing fastest in sub-Saharan Africa. This is because religion isn't just an intellectual enterprise. Religion also fulfills social, emotional, and spiritual roles.

When Tylor developed his theory of religion, he was drawing from the lens of his own culture and the vantage point of Judeo-Christian tradition. The emphasis in this tradition is on faith and belief, but across cultures, religion isn't always thought of as a matter of faith or something that you must believe in. According to anthropologist Conrad Kottak, Betsileo communities of Madagascar view dead ancestors and witches as real people who play roles in ordinary life. People don't always view religion as an entity that is separate from other parts of their lives. If we define religion by only looking for aspects that we feel should be present based on our personal view of religion, we risk viewing other cultures as "incomplete," "backwards," or "superstitious." Additionally, anthropologists aren't interested in proving or disproving religious beliefs as true or false. Instead, we consider the significance of religious worlds for those who believe in them, and the ways they intersect with other systems of meaning and power.

Adopting a definition from anthropologists Stein and Stein, we define religion broadly as: "The realm of culture that concerns the sacred supernatural." Religion, then, is more than a system of beliefs promoted by religious institutions and practitioners that people must have faith in. The "sacred supernatural" points to a dynamic and diverse realm of culture. In addition to formal denominations, religion includes magic, witchcraft, and the diverse range of beliefs and behaviors that exist across societies.

Are We Hardwired for Religion?

If religion is a human universal, does it have a biological basis? Neuroscientists compared brain scans of people in deep meditation to baseline images. The results show increased activity in the frontal lobe and decreased activity in the parietal lobe during meditative states. The parietal lobe is the area that processes sensory information and helps orient the self to the rest of the world in time and space. With decreased activity in this part of the brain, the sense of the boundary between the self and the world, or the self and the divine, begins to blur and dissolve. Other studies show that patients suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy report having profound religious experiences during seizures. If our brains are designed to blur the line between self and other, and generate a feeling of transcendence or oneness, does this mean we seek out these experiences?

Other studies suggest that the human mind has a natural tendency to **anthropomorphize** the world; that is, attribute human characteristics and motivation to the non-human things around us. Just as people recognize feelings, motivations, or desires in other people, they extend this perception to other forces, beings, objects, or noises in the environment. Known as the **Hypersensitivity Agency Detection Device (HADD)**, this attribution of agency is, arguably, an adaptive trait. Is a predator causing the rustling in the bushes, or is it the wind? Believing you might get eaten would trigger you into taking a life-saving action in case there's a predator waiting to pounce. This detection device may cause us to attribute agency to events and to puzzling patterns. Rather than seeing things as random and capricious, something is at work causing fortune or misfortune.

Video 18.1. Check out the video from *Archaeologist Alexander Martin describing how archaeology can shed light on the origins and diversity of religion.*

Anthropological Approaches to Studying Religion: Making Meaning of the World

Tylor's understanding of religion as an intellectual endeavor that would ultimately be replaced by science may have been a narrow view, but we can still view religion as a way that people make meaning of the world. For many people, religion exists alongside science because it asks different kinds of questions (see Module 4: Evolution and Genetics).

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) was a British anthropologist who conducted several periods of ethnographic research in Central, East, and North Africa prior to WWII. His research with Azande communities in North Central Africa is known as a classic study of witchcraft in small-scale society. In Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard described witchcraft as a way that people made sense of misfortune. In Azande communities, people spent a fair amount of time sheltering from the sun under the shade of granaries (heavy structures made of wood beams and clay that households use to store grain). Old granaries sometimes collapsed due to weight, the decay of wood over time, or termites. Azande people knew full well how granaries collapsed, but they sought answers to why a given granary might collapse at the precise moment when someone was sitting beneath it.

Video 18.2. Check out the video from ***Oracle clip from Witchcraft among the Azande (link to the full video below).***

Witchcraft explains that misfortune. Not to be confused with Wicca and other neo-pagan religions, the anthropological study of witchcraft across cultures defines it as the ability to cause harm through supernatural power that resides in the body. Among Azande communities, witchcraft was an openly and frequently discussed part of daily life. Azande described witchcraft as **mangu**, a substance in the body of a witch that is inherited at birth. Mangu is physical in substance, but psychic in action, and causes misfortune in its victims. Furthermore, witchcraft often followed lines of social tension in the community, and accusations of witchcraft grew out of negative emotions, behaviors, or strained relationships. In short, witches were never strangers. Evans-Pritchard described how efforts to determine the cause and source of misfortune could identify and smooth over social tension in the community (see Figure 18.2). Evans-Pritchards' work focused on the value of looking at things from an **emic** (insider) perspective, which helps reveal the logic of practices that seem superstitious from an outsider perspective.

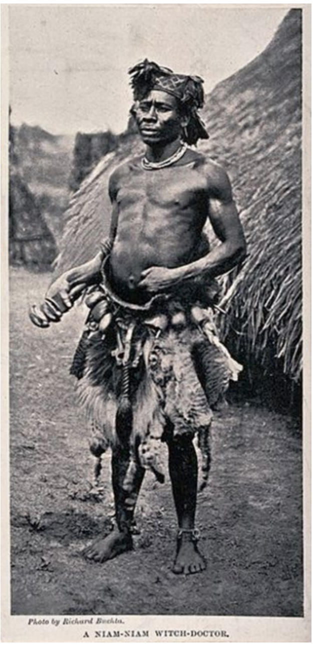
Photo by Richard Buchta.
A NIAM-NIAM WITCH-DOCTOR.

Figure 18.2. A Niam-Niam medicine man from equatorial Africa. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Seeking Control

Anthropological studies of religion include magic as an aspect of how people understand and interact with the supernatural. **Magic** involves supernatural beliefs and practices oriented towards achieving a particular end, and refers to the ways people can compel the supernatural to behave for a particular purpose. Magic includes **divination**, which are rituals performed to gain information about the unknown, the future, or distant places.

Even though there are huge variations in magic practice across cultures, there are certain principles that magic tends to follow. **Imitative magic**, also known as sympathetic magic, is based on the idea that there is a causal relationship between similar things. For example, some practices believe in influencing or harming a person or animal via acting on a representation of them. Some anthropologists speculate that early cave art depicting successful hunts may have been a form of imitative magic drawn to make this outcome a reality. On the flip side, there are beliefs that a violent act or sacrifice can give rise to sudden good, and the power of a magical ingredient is proportional to the pain of the sacrifice.

The other main domain of magic is **contagious magic**, which is based on the idea that once things make contact, they maintain a connection with each other. An example would be the belief that you could influence or harm someone through something that was once connected to them, like hair or clothing. In folk magic in the U.S., attempts to heal people often involved contagious magic. For example, one cure for warts involved rubbing a penny on the wart, and then burying the penny.

These classic examples suggest that magic is part of a primitive past. It isn't. The exercise of magic is an exercise of power in virtual space. Magic, witchcraft, and **sorcery** (which also refers to the manipulation of the supernatural) are part of how communities around the world make sense of and interact with globalization, and the opaque forms of power that can reorient people's lives and subject them to violence. In his study of sorcery in post-conflict Mozambique, Harry West describes how misfortune and illness are often attributed to sorcerers, who challenge each other to harm or heal as they enact their own imaginative visions on the world. West's coworkers resisted his theory that sorcery lions (lions constructed by sorcerers to devour their victims) were just metaphors for tensions in the community because people insisted that they were, in fact, very real. West discovered that people in Mozambique also saw his work as an ethnographer as a kind of sorcery because ethnography constructs an interpretation or imaginative vision that has a presence or force in the social world. Further, Whitehead and Finnström argue that magic and witchcraft rituals are like the workings of modern high-tech warfare, which are rooted in simulations, virtual attacks, and the magical conversion of people into dehumanized non-persons.

All societies have ways of empirically investigating their environments and using this knowledge to act in and on the world. However, they also face things that are beyond their direct control, unpredictable, or highly risky, like drought that might destroy crops, or fishing expeditions that venture far from shore. When Malinowski studied culture in the Trobriand Islands, he learned that people used fishing magic when venturing into the open sea, but they *did* *not* use magic when they were fishing in lagoons close to land. Rather than dismissing magic as superstitious or backwards, Malinowski argued that magic operated according to a rationale: it was more likely to be used when the outcome is uncertain, dangerous, or higher stakes. People may use magic to exert control and agency in the context of uncertain outcomes.

The Trobriand Islands are not unique. Magical behaviors frequently arise in social settings when things are difficult to control and somewhat risky. In these situations, we are more likely to associate positive outcomes with actions or items that we feel have influenced past events. **Rituals** are patterned and recurring behaviors performed at particular times and places. Anthropologist George Gmelch studied magical behavior among professional baseball players and described ritualized behaviors that athletes engaged in, like eating the same meal before each game, wearing lucky socks, or straightening one's hat the same way after every pitch. However, not everyone did these activities all the time; they mostly happened before hitting and pitching (activities that were higher stakes and more difficult to control). Perhaps, in these circumstances, magic can work. Can we enhance our success if we believe in our power to bring about a certain outcome? Alternately, if we fail to do these rituals properly, does it set us up for expectations of failure? Can you think of similar situations in which magic is used? The study of magic across cultures suggests that there are common ways in which people attempt to understand and influence causality when faced with things beyond our control.

The Power of Symbols and Social Cohesion

French sociologist **Emile Durkheim** (1858-1917) emphasized the social function of religion as a source of social cohesion and stability and introduced concepts that are still widely used today. Faced with radical social transformations in Western Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century, Durkheim was concerned with identifying the things that hold societies together. Observing rising suicide rates, he argued that people need a cohesive social order that structures life and meaning beyond the individual. In fact, he argued that suicide rates could be explained without reference to individual psychology, and by using social statistics that identified the presence or decay of a cohesive social order. Durkheim believed that religion provided a powerful source of this social solidarity, and it did so through the power of symbols.

Durkheim believed that religion was a system of beliefs and practices related to the **sacred**, anything that is considered holy, revered, and set apart from the everyday world. Religious symbols tend to mark the institutions of human society that are necessary for survival as sacred. Durkheim pointed out that gods or sacred beings across cultures had powers that, like the powers of society, determined moral rules, existed above individuals, created sacred times and spaces, and defined socially valued behaviors. Focusing on Aboriginal Australian religions, Durkheim also argued that totems (aspects of the environment considered sacred and representative of particular groups of people) served as powerful symbols that united people and made these social groupings sacred. If the social order is seen as sacred, totems can be a powerful source of the cohesion and stability that Durkheim intended to identify. Consequently, as religious rituals reinforce symbols of the sacred, they also uphold and reinforce the social order. Durkheim also believed that religious rituals promoted social solidarity through **effervescence,** which is an intense channeling of emotion through collective worship.

While Durkheim introduced the concept of "sacred" to explore the social function of religious symbols, later anthropologists focused on interpreting the complex and powerful meaning of symbols within and between cultures. Why and how do religious symbols become meaningful and powerful? **Clifford Geertz (1926-2006)** explored how **symbols** are central to religion as a system of ideas that can evoke powerful feelings and motivations. Objects made of mundane materials come to have profound significance far beyond being a mere chunk of wood or metal. These symbols help shape a larger worldview, or systems of ideas about what is real, what exists, how they relate to each other, and why things happen the way they do.

Consider powerful religious symbols. For Christians, the cross symbolizes many things, including the Christian faith itself. The symbol of the cross also has many variations, which is an example of how symbols vary across space, time, and religious denominations. For Hindus, cows are considered sacred because they represent **ahimsa**, a Hindu principle of non-violence toward living things. However, symbols are not limited to physical objects. Dance and music can be powerful symbols that communicate meaning, represent the sacred, and tell religious stories. The cohesion of religion is evident through how members of a religion, even those who have never met each other, invest similar meanings and powers in a symbol, and they will rally around that symbol because of their shared belief.

Social Solidarity

Social solidarity can be generated through rituals known as **rites of passage**. Rites of passage are rituals that assist in the transformation from one stage of life to another. They can be individual or collective, but they affirm the beginning of a new social status or role in the community.

Around the world, rites of passage accompany major life transitions such as birth, aging, and death. Marriages, baptisms, naming ceremonies, graduations, bootcamp, or pledging a sorority or fraternity can also involve rites of passage. Rites of passage that mark a coming of age to adulthood include the vision quest of Plains Native Americans: the youth is separated from their community during a sacred time of fasting in the wilderness until they gain a vision of their spirit animal. Rites of passage to adulthood can also be collective: in Maasai communities in East Africa, young boys pass through a ceremony together that takes two months and culminates in circumcision and a period of healing.

Video 18.3. Check out the video from *Kenya Citizen TV presenting the Maasai rites of passage, part 1.*

It may not seem particularly remarkable that rites of passage are a human universal, but the fact that there are common elements in these rituals across societies is fascinating. Anthropologist **Victor Turner (1920-1983)** described three phases for all rites of passage: separation, liminality, and incorporation. **Separation** happens as the first stage when the person or group of people is set apart from ordinary social life. The second phase, **liminality**, is an in-between time that exists before they rejoin ordinary life in a new social role. Liminality is not seen as ordinary, and many elements mark this time as unique: liminal people live in and out of time, they may be marked with special clothing, normal behaviors or rules might be reversed. People undergoing liminality together often undergo liminal features: they may dress alike, adopt a common hairstyle, be expected to abandon previous social ties, and adhere to different expectations around sexuality and behavior. Turner described the experience of liminality as including **communitas**, or an intense feeling of equality and togetherness. During the final stage of **incorporation**, these reversals are put back in order as the people undergoing a rite of passage rejoin ordinary social life with a new social status.

Liminality can be a useful concept to illuminate the experiences of people who exist between and outside of particular social orders, such as refugees, deportees, or stateless people. For example, Jennifer Riggan explores the ways in which Eritreans deported from Ethiopia after a border conflict broke out in 1998 occupied a liminal space in Eritrea. They were trapped between nations, and not seen as being fully Eritrean or Ethiopian. Although this liminal space was dangerous and subjected them to suspicion and surveillance by the Eritrean government, communitas became the grounds for new social solidarities to take shape.

Religion, Adaptation, and the Environment

Religion is not only a way that people make meaning of the world, but it can be a way in which people reshape the world. Some classic studies in environmental anthropology explore the relationship between religion and ecosystems. Steven Lansing's research in Bali explores how a complex of water temples serving a water goddess structures religious rituals that regulate irrigation for an extremely complex system of rice farms. The ritual timing of irrigation distributes water in ways that ensure access to farmers at various elevations while timing production to minimize pests. In sustainable operation for over 1,000 years, these water temples seemed primitive to development experts from outside the community. In the 1970s and '80s, Green Revolution technologies and methods, including scientifically engineered high yield seed varieties, pesticides, herbicides, and planting as many crops a year as possible, were introduced by the government to modernize rice production. The result was a disruption to the complex social-ecological system, a boom in pest populations, water shortages, and the contamination of soil and waterways that damaged local coral reefs. In 1988, the government allowed farmers to return to their centuries-old practices. The complex social-ecological system hinges on extensive social cooperation that is supported by religious worldviews in Bali that connect the spiritual, human, and natural world.

Through an analysis of sacred cow beliefs in India, **Marvin Harris (1927-2001)** investigates how religious beliefs can be **adaptive**, or ensure long-term stability and resilience of eco and food systems. For many Hindu practitioners in India, the sacred cow symbolizes respect for all life (the Hindu principle of ahimsa) (see Figure 18.3). Zebu cattle wander freely, eat from market stalls, and eating beef is prohibited. Prohibitions against eating cattle in a nation where hunger occurs may seem irrational to outsiders, but Harris reveals that cattle are the cornerstone of the rural farming system because their dung provides critical fertilizer and fuel. Furthermore, if the cows were culled and eaten, they would not produce the oxen that are essential for planting, harvesting, and transporting crops. Without oxen, a family risks losing their land and livelihood. Religious prohibitions on eating beef protects the cattle population even during times of hardship. Harris developed the theory of **cultural materialism** to argue that many aspects of culture, including religion, were shaped by the relationship that people have with the material world and how they make a living. Religious belief systems often posit a particular relationship between humans and the non-human (or more-than-human world).

Figure 18.3. Kamdhenu cow figurine. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Are humans above and outside of nature, and in a position of dominance? Or are humans a part of the natural world that are seen as having agency or personhood? In her ethnography, *Do Glaciers Listen?*, Julie Cruikshank explores how indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest see glaciers as entities with consciousness, living beings, and historical actors that shape the world alongside people. They are described as animate beings. They can be offended by the actions of people and are embedded in social relationships. This is very different than the Western concept that glaciers and other parts of nature are inanimate objects. The effects of global climate change disproportionately impact the Arctic region, which has warmed at nearly twice the rate of the rest of the world in the past 30 years (a phenomenon called **Arctic Amplification**). Both glaciers and human communities continue to have their fates tangled together (see Figure 18.4). Cruikshank's research contributes to scholarship that highlights indigenous communities' sophisticated environmental knowledge and cultural models of the relationship between people and nature.

Figure 18.4. Dogsled group passing Apusiaajik Glacier. Are glaciers animate or inanimate? Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Religion and Social Control

Religion can have a powerful influence on attitudes, behavior, and social action. On an individual level, people may internalize a system of rewards and punishments that pushes them to behave in particular ways. On a collective level, religion can be mobilized by leaders to persuade people to act in certain ways or accept the power of elites in positions of authority. For example, through various time periods, positions of authority, status, and power have been understood as divinely sanctioned or spiritually ordered. In European history, the principle of the **Divine Right of Kings** legitimatized the rule of monarchs and prevented them from being held accountable for their actions. Among communities in Melanesia (the South Pacific), **mana** is considered to a sacred power or impersonal force inherent in objects, the environment, or people. While this belief varies across the South Pacific, in Polynesia, chiefs and nobles were believed to have mana in greater concentration than others. In Polynesia, mana was believed to come from the gods, and chiefs were believed to hold the most mana because they were descended from the gods. Objects filled with mana could be used to increase the success or luck of gardens, hunts, or other activities. However, the mana of chiefs was so powerful that it was dangerous to commoners, and they had to avoid the bodies of chiefs, walking in the chief's footsteps, or making contact with items recently touched by chiefs. **Taboos** (objects or behaviors that are supernaturally prohibited, or off-limits to ordinary people) were in place to protect people from this power.

Supernatural sanctions play a role in witchcraft allegations as well. Azande practices of witchcraft, mentioned earlier, use divination to identify the person who caused misfortune through witchcraft. This may happen without the knowledge or intent of the person with mangu. The witch was never a stranger, rather, witchcraft took shape through strained relations of intimacy. However, in some contexts such as European history and places today, witchcraft allegations lead to witch-killings. People accused of witchcraft are often women and perceived as being deviant or odd. Fears of being labeled a witch can be a powerful motivator for social conformity.

There are other ways that religion can legitimize social inequalities. 19th century political philosopher **Karl Marx (1818-1883)** developed a vocabulary to analyze class conflict in global capitalism. His famous description of religion as "the opium of the people" shows how strongly he believed that religion maintained an unequal society. Opiates are painkillers, so, how does religion dull people's pain? Marx argued that religion gave people at the bottom of the social hierarchy assurance that their suffering would be rewarded in heaven. This assurance may deter people from resisting exploitation in this life. However, religion doesn't merely blind people to economic realities; Marx saw it as providing fortitude and release to those who suffer social and economic exploitation. In Marx's analysis, the economy is the base on which society and culture take shape. But culture, including religion, is shaped by economic relationships and operates as an ideology to obscure or legitimate the workings of power.

Religion and Social Change

Building on Marx's analysis of the relationship between economy and culture, **Max Weber (1864-1920)** was a German philosopher who sought to understand how social classes formed. However, rather than viewing culture as blinding people to their inequalities, he saw culture, particularly religion, as actively shaping society and the economy. He argued that religious beliefs and practices could either prohibit or pave the way for the expansion of capitalism. In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber argued that early Protestantism allowed capitalism to grow because of the Protestant ethics of self-denial and self-discipline. One form of Protestantism, Calvinism, also saw worldly success as a sign of salvation and emphasized hard-work and discipline.

Today, Evangelical Protestantism is spreading rapidly in many parts of the world, and represents another way that people navigate and shape their lives in the context of precarity and economic crisis. Rather than ushering in capitalism, it's one way they deal with the challenges that the global economic system poses to people in zones of resource extraction.

Summary

Religious beliefs and practices are found across cultures. Elements of the sacred, ritual, and magic are found in contexts that are secular, or outside the domain of what many people in the United States would recognize as "religious." For example, magic in the Trobriand Islands is like the ritual practices of American baseball players who face unpredictable, risky, and challenging situations. Similarly, people across societies engage in rites of passage as they transition to new social statuses and pass through a stage of liminality in which they do not fully belonging to society. Liminality can help us understand the social experiences of other groups that do not have full belonging in society, such as refugees or migrants. Also, Durkheim's notion of effervescence involves intense feelings of togetherness experienced in ways that promote social solidarity. While early theories about religion across cultures proposed that religion would be replaced by science, this has not occurred. Religion is a way that people confront and make sense of the unknown or ask questions different from those asked by scientists. As such, anthropologists who study religion across cultures don't seek to disprove beliefs. Rather, we seek to understand how religion is part of culture as it can provide a way for people to identify causality, generate feelings of togetherness, provide emotional solace, and work to shape social and social-environmental relationships.

Review Questions

- **T/F.** Religion is universally characterized by faith and belief.
- **T/F.** The HADD is an innate defense mechanism where humans attribute human-like qualities to non-human objects.
- **T/F.** The anthropological study of witchcraft examines how supernatural powers cause harm to people or communities.
- **T/F.** Magic is a part of humanity's primitive past and is not found in civilized communities today.
- **T/F.** Rites of passage can be divided into three categories, including the liminality phase (people live in and out of time simultaneously).

Discussion Questions

- Reflect on a rite of passage that you have experienced. Were there three stages? What was the liminal stage like? What would happen if you didn't have this rite of passage to experience a change in social status?
- Have you experienced effervescence in the context of religious or secular settings? The pandemic limited many social gatherings, arguably diminishing opportunities for people to experience effervescence. Do you think that a loss of effervescence has an impact individually or collectively?

If magic involves rituals performed during high stakes and unpredictable circumstances, such as those faced by pitchers and batters in Major League Baseball, can you think of similar situations in which you might engage in these practices?

Activities

1. Symbols Exercise
   - Fold a blank piece of 8 ½ x 11" paper in half (or whatever you have handy—it can be from a notebook if that's more convenient), then in half again. Unfold it. Draw a circle in the middle. Now, tear it up. Did tearing it up bother you? Probably not.
   - Now, fold a second blank sheet. This time, draw lines in the bottom and upper quads—any kind, any number. In the last quad add some stars—again, any size and number. Tear it up. Did you feel uncomfortable tearing the second one up? Or perhaps, understandably, even refuse to do so? If so, you probably perceived it as the American flag, even though I did not tell you to draw the American flag.

   The stars and stripes are strong symbols for Americans, but not for those from another culture because they are given meaning through our shared historical and cultural experience. The circle you ripped up the first time would have been meaningful if you grew up in Japan or Korea, and you would have had the same concern for ripping that up. This activity is a modification of Dickie Wallace's activity, "Flags, the Power of Patriotism and Nationalism: the Arbitrariness of Symbols and Significant: A Classroom Exercise That'll Wake 'em Up" published in Strategies in Teaching Anthropology, edited by Patricia Rice and David McCurdy. Prentice Hall, New York. 1991.

2. Religious Site

   Visit a religious site, preferably one that is unfamiliar or at least less familiar to you. What symbols can you identify? Is there communitas visible? What marks the 'sacred'? Describe the symbols that are present. What imbues them with power? Finally, do you think it is easier or harder to do these observations if you are yourself a believer/practitioner? Can we fully understand a religion without being a practitioner? Alternately, can we objectively study a religion that we are a member of?

3. Ritual and Taboo

   Give an example of a ritual (or taboo) that you or someone you know (can be a famous athlete or something similar) engages in. Note that rituals are different than habits, which have no "psychological edge" so to speak (e.g., you probably brush your teeth every day, but this is for hygiene, not to bring good luck or positive outcome to a vulnerable/anxious situation). For example, top tennis player Rafael Nadal always sets out the same number of water bottles, in the same order, label facing out, and drinks them in the exact order EVERY game. Silly? Maybe, but he's been ranked #1 for YEARS so you can't blame him. It might be psychological, but if it works, then why change anything, right? Rituals serve the same purpose, be they in religious or secular contexts!

4. Contemporary Religion
   - After reading this chapter, can you apply the writings of Durkheim, Marx, Turner, or Geertz to thinking about contemporary religious practice?
   - Watch the video report about snake handling churches of Appalachia.
   - Can we use theories from anthropology to better understand why people handle deadly snakes during their worship service? **Which of the following concepts are useful? Explain.**

     - Sacred and profane objects/acts and communitas (Emile Durkheim)
     - Effervescence (Victor Turner).
     - Karl Marx's critique of religion as 'the opium of the people.'
     - The power of religious symbols (Clifford Geertz).

Key Terms

Adaptive: A life forms ability to successfully adjust to an environment to survive and reproduce, ensuring long-term stability and resilience of ecosystems and food systems.

Ahimsa: A Hindu principle of non-violence toward living things.

Animism: A belief which holds that spiritual forces, beings, or souls, may reside in inanimate objects, people, or other aspects of the natural world.

Anthropomorphize: To attribute human characteristics and motivations to nonhuman phenomena.

Arctic amplification: The phenomenon where the effects of global climate change (ice melting reveals more darker land or ocean surfaces which absorb more energy from the Sun, causing additional ice loss) disproportionately impact the Arctic region, which has warmed at nearly twice the rate of the rest of the world in the past 30 years.

Azande: A member of a people in North Central Africa, the Congo-Sudan region. The Azande are known to practice witchcraft as an openly and frequently discussed part of their daily lives.

Communitas: An intense feeling of equality and togetherness.

Contagious magic: Magic practiced based on the assumption that things or persons once associated or in contact can affect one another when separated by maintaining a connection, so that anything done to an object will affect its former owner. An example would be the belief that you could influence or harm someone through something that was once connected to that person, like hair or clothing.

Cultural materialism: The idea that many aspects of culture, including religion, were shaped by the relationship that people had with the material world.

Divination: Rituals performed to gain information about the unknown, the future, or distant places**.**

Divine Right of Kings: The doctrine that kings derive their authority from God, not from their subjects, legitimatizing the rule of monarchs and preventing them from being held accountable for their actions.

Durkheim, Emile (1858-1917): A French sociologist known for his work on the evolution, function, and structure of societies, and for establishing sociology as an academic discipline.

Effervescence: An intense channeling of emotion through collective worship.

Emic perspective: A personal perspective of a culture developed within that culture, through immersion and participation. See associated concept, **etic perspective** (Modules 1 & 3).

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. (1902-1973): A British anthropologist known for his ethnographic research in Central, East, and North Africa in the decade preceding WWII.

Geertz, Clifford (1926-2006): An American anthropologist who focused on symbolic and interpretive anthropology, exploring the power of religious symbols.

Harris, Marvin (1927-2001): An American anthropologist known for his work on cultural materialism.

Hypersensitivity Agency Detection Device (HADD): The tendency to attribute agency and intentionality where it does not exist or is unlikely to exist, arguably an adaptive trait. Just as people recognize feelings, motivations, or desires in other people, they extend this perception to other forces, beings, objects, or noises in the environment. This detection device may cause us to attribute agency to events and to puzzling patterns. Rather than seeing things as random and capricious, something is at work, causing fortune or misfortune.

Imitative Magic (Sympathetic Magic): Magical rites that rely on the assumption that a desired result can be produced by mimicking it. Based on the idea that there is a causal relationship between similar things, supernatural practices often involving harming a person or animal via acting on a representation or image of them is a common example of this magic.

Incorporation: The third stage of rites of passages, where a person or group of people undergoing a rite of passage rejoin ordinary social life with a new social status.

Liminality: The second stage of rites of passages, representing an in-between time before a person or group of people rejoin ordinary life in a new social role.

Magic: The ways in which people can compel the supernatural to behave in certain ways, using supernatural techniques for a particular purpose.

Mana: A sacred power or impersonal force that is inherent in objects, the environment, or people.

Mangu: A substance in the body of a witch that is inherited at birth.

Marx, Karl (1818-1883): A 19th century German political philosopher, also referred to as 'The Father of Marxism,' who is known for his ideas on capitalism and communism.

Religion: The realm of culture that concerns the sacred supernatural.

Rites of passage: Rituals that assist in the transformation from one stage of life to another.

Ritual: Patterned and recurring behaviors performed at particular times and places.

Sacred: Anything that is considered holy, revered, and set apart from the everyday world.

Sorcery: A magical strategy, often using various objects to manipulate the supernatural, that is believed to bring about either harmful or beneficial results.

Separation: The first stage of rites of passages, where the person or group of people are set apart from ordinary social life.

Symbols: A system of ideas that can evoke powerful feelings and motivations.

Taboos: Objects or behaviors that are supernaturally prohibited or off-limits to ordinary people**.**

Totems: Aspects of the environment that are considered sacred and representative of particular groups of people.

Turner, Victor (1920-1983): A British anthropologist known for his work on rituals, cultural performance, and social change.

Vision Quest: A Plains Indians rite of passage where youth are separated from the community during a sacred time of pasting in the wilderness until they gain a vision of their spirit animal.

Weber, Max (1864-1920): A German philosopher who focused on how culture and religion shape society and the economy.

Witchcraft: The religious practice of magic many cultures believe can cause harm through supernatural powers that reside in the body.

Suggested Readings

Cruikshank, J., 2007. *Do glaciers listen?: local knowledge, colonial encounters, and social imagination*. ubc Press.

Durkheim, E., 2011. *Durkheim on Religion: A selection of readings with bibliographies and introductory remarks*. ISD LLC.

Evans-Pritchard, E.E., 1937. *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* (Vol. 12). London: Oxford.

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Videos

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Von Petzinger G. 2012. The roots of religion. *TEDxVictoria*. Electronic document, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Zgwz_m7sRs, accessed 14 February 2022.