

PERSPECTIVES: AN OPEN INVITATION TO CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

*Edited by Nina Brown, Laura Tubelle de González, and
Thomas McIlwraith*

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RELIGION

*Sashur Henninger-Rener, University of LaVerne and the Los Angeles Community College District
sashur.henninger@gmail.com*

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define religion and explain its significance in human cultures.
- Summarize theories developed by anthropologists to explain the importance of supernatural beliefs in human communities.
- Identify the four elements of religion (cosmology, belief in the supernatural, rules of behavior, and rituals) and explain how each element contributes to religious practices.
- Define rites of passage, rites of intensification, and rites of revitalization and explain the purpose of each type of ritual.

Humans have always wondered about the meaning of the life, the nature of the universe, and the forces that shape our lives. While it is impossible to know for sure how the people who lived thousands of years ago answered these kinds of questions, there are some clues. Fifty thousand years ago, human communities buried the dead with stone tools, shells, animal bones, and other objects, a practice that suggests they were preparing the deceased for an afterlife, or a world beyond this one. Thirty thousand years ago, artists entered the Chauvet cave in France and painted dramatic scenes of animals on the cave walls along with abstract symbols that suggest the images were part of a supernatural belief system, possibly one focused on ensuring safety or success in hunting (Figure 1).¹ A few thousand years later, collections of small clay sculptures, known as Venus figurines, began appearing across Eurasia. They seem to express ideas about fertility or motherhood and may have been viewed as magical (Figure 2).²

Because ideas about the supernatural are part of every human culture, understanding these beliefs is important to anthropologists. However, studying supernatural beliefs is challenging for several reasons. The first difficulty arises



Figure 1: An image from the Chauvet cave painted about 32,000 years ago. The paintings may have been part of religious ceremonies intended to ensure success in hunting.



Figure 2: The Venus of Willendorf figurine was made between 28,000 and 25,000 BC and may have been associated with spiritual beliefs about motherhood or fertility.

from the challenge of defining the topic itself. The word “religion,” which is commonly used in the United States to refer to participation in a distinct form of faith such as Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, is not a universally recognized idea. Many cultures have no word for “religion” at all and many societies do not make a clear distinction between beliefs or practices that are “religious,” or “spiritual” and other habits that are an ordinary part of daily life. For instance, leaving an incense offering in a household shrine dedicated to the spirits of the ancestors may be viewed as a simple part of the daily routine rather than a “religious” practice. There are societies that believe in supernatural beings, but do not call them “gods.” Some societies do not see a distinction between the natural and the supernatural observing, instead, that the spirits share the same physical world as humans. Concepts like “heaven,” “hell,” or even “prayer” do not exist in many societies. The divide between “religion” and related ideas like “spirituality” or even “magic” is also murky in some cultural contexts.

To study supernatural beliefs, anthropologists must cultivate a perspective of cultural relativism and strive to understand beliefs from an emic or insider’s perspective. Imposing the definitions or assumptions from one culture on another is likely to lead to misunderstandings. One example of this problem can be found in the early anthropological research of Sir James Frazer who attempted to compose the first comprehensive study of the world’s major magical and religious belief systems.

Frazer was part of early generation of anthropologists whose work was based on reading and questionnaires mailed to missionaries and colonial officials rather than travel and participant-observation. As a result, he had only minimal information about the beliefs he wrote about and he was quick to apply his own opinions. In *The Golden Bough* (1890) he dismissed many of the spiritual beliefs he documented: “I look upon [them] not merely as false but as preposterous and absurd.”³ His contemporary, Sir E.B. Tylor, was less dismissive of unfamiliar belief systems, but he defined religion minimally and, for some, in overly narrow terms as “the belief in supernatural beings.” This definition excludes much of what people around the world actually believe.⁴ As researchers gained more information about other cultures, their ideas about religion became more complex. The sociologist Emile Durkheim recognized that religion was not simply a belief in “supernatural beings,” but a set of practices and social institutions that brought members of a community together. Religion, he said, was “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”⁵

Durkheim’s analysis of religion emphasized the significance of spiritual beliefs for relationships between people. Subsequent anthropological research in communities around the world has confirmed that rituals associated with beliefs in the supernatural play a significant role in structuring community life, providing rules or guidelines for behavior, and bonding members of a community to one another. Interestingly, religious “beings,” such as gods or spirits, also demonstrate social qualities.

Most of the time, these beings are imagined in familiar terms as entities with personalities, desires, and “agency,” an ability to make decisions and take action. Supernatural beings, in other words, are not so different from people.⁶ In keeping with this idea, **religion** can be defined as “the means by which human society and culture is extended to include the nonhuman.”⁷ This definition is deliberately broad and can be used to encompass many different kinds of belief systems.

Many religions involve ideas or rituals that could be described as “magical” and the relationship between religion and magic is complex. In his book *A General Theory of Magic* (1902), Marcel Mauss suggested that religion and magic were two opposite poles on a spectrum of spiritual beliefs. Magic was at one end of the spectrum; it was private, secret, and individual. Religion was at the opposite end of the spectrum; it was public and oriented toward bringing the community together.⁸ Although Mauss’ formulation presented religion and magic as part of the same general way of thinking, many contemporary anthropologists are convinced that making a distinction between religion and magic is artificial and usually not particularly useful. With this caution in mind, **magic** can be defined as practices intended to bring supernatural forces under one’s personal control. **Sorcerers** are individuals who seek to use magic for their own purposes. It is important to remember that both magic and sorcery are labels that have historically been used by outsiders, including anthropologists, to describe spiritual beliefs with which they are unfamiliar. Words from the local language are almost always preferable for representing how people think about themselves.

THEORIES OF RELIGION

Sir James Frazer’s effort to interpret religious mythology was the first of many attempts to understand the reasons why cultures develop various kinds of spiritual beliefs. In the early twentieth century, many anthropologists applied a functional approach to this problem by focusing on the ways religion addressed human needs. Bronislaw Malinowski (1931), who conducted research in the Trobriand Islands located near Papua New Guinea, believed that religious beliefs met psychological needs. He observed that religion “is not born out of speculation or reflection, still less out of illusion or apprehension, but rather, out of the real tragedies of human life, out of the conflict between human plans and realities.”⁹

At the time of Malinowski’s research, the Trobriand Islanders participated in an event called the kula ring, a tradition that required men to build canoes and sail on long and dangerous journeys between neighboring islands to exchange ritual items. Malinowski noticed that before these dangerous trips several complex rituals had to be performed, but ordinary sailing for fishing trips required no special preparations. What was the difference? Malinowski concluded that the longer trips were not only more dangerous, but also provoked more anxiety because the men felt they had less control over what might happen. On long voyages, there were many things that could go wrong, few of which could be planned for or avoided. He argued that religious rituals provided a way to reduce or control anxiety when anticipating these conditions.¹⁰ The use of rituals to reduce anxiety has been documented in many other settings. George Gmelch (1971) documented forms of “baseball magic” among professional athletes. Baseball players, for instance, have rituals related to how they eat, dress, and even drive to the ballpark, rituals they believe contribute to good luck.¹¹

As a functionalist, Malinowski believed that religion provided shared values and behavioral norms that created solidarity between people. The sociologist Emile Durkheim also believed that religion played an important role in building connections between people by creating shared definitions of the sacred and profane. **Sacred** objects or ideas are set apart from the ordinary and treated with

great respect or care while **profane** objects or ideas are ordinary and can be treated with disregard or contempt. Sacred things could include a God or gods, a natural phenomenon, an animal or many other things. Religion, Durkheim concluded, was “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices that unite, into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”¹² Once a person or a thing was designated as sacred, Durkheim believed that celebrating it through ritual was a powerful way to unite communities around shared values.¹³ In addition, celebrating the sacred can create an intense emotional experience Durkheim referred to as **collective effervescence**, a passion or energy that arises when groups of people share the same thoughts and emotions. The experience of collective effervescence magnifies the emotional impact of an event and can create a sense of awe or wonder.¹⁴

Following Durkheim, many anthropologists, including Dame Mary Douglas, have found it useful to explore the ways in which definitions of sacred and profane structure religious beliefs. In her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas analyzed the way in which cultural ideas about things that were “dirty” or “impure” influenced religious beliefs. The kosher dietary rules observed by Jews were one prominent example of the application of this kind of thinking.¹⁵

The philosopher and historian Karl Marx famously called religion “the opium of the people.”¹⁶ He viewed religion as an ideology, a way of thinking that attempts to justify inequalities in power and status. In his view, religion created an illusion of happiness that helped people cope with the economic difficulties of life under capitalism. As an institution, Marx believed that the Christian church helped to legitimize and support the political and economic inequality of the working class by encouraging ordinary people to orient themselves toward the afterlife, where they could expect to receive comfort and happiness. He argued that the obedience and conformity advocated by religious leaders as a means of reaching heaven also persuaded people not to fight for better economic or social conditions in their current lives. Numerous examples of the use of religion to legitimize or justify power differences have been documented cross-culturally including the existence of divine rulers, who were believed to be empowered by the Gods themselves, in ancient Egyptian and Incan societies. A glimpse of the legitimizing role of religion is also seen in the U.S. practice of having elected officials take an oath of office using the Bible or another holy book.

The psychologist Sigmund Freud believed that religion is the institution that prevents us from acting upon our deepest and most awful desires. One of his most famous examples is the Oedipal complex, the story of Oedipus who (unknowingly) had a sexual relationship with his mother and, once he discovered this, ripped out his own eyes in a violent and gory death. One possible interpretation of this story is that there is an unconscious sexual desire among males for their mothers and among females their fathers. These desires can never be acknowledged, let alone acted on, because of the damage they would cause to society.¹⁷ In one of his most well-known works, *Totem and Taboo*, Freud proposes that religious beliefs provide rules or restrictions that keep the worst anti-social instincts, like the Oedipal complex, suppressed. He developed the idea of “totemic religions,” belief systems based on the worship of a particular animal or object, and suggested that the purpose of these religions was to regulate interactions with socially significant and potentially disruptive objects and relationships.¹⁸

One interesting interpretation of religious beliefs that builds on the work of Durkheim, Marx, and Freud is Marvin Harris’ analysis of the Hindu prohibition against killing cows. In Hinduism, the cow is honored and treated with respect because of its fertility, gentle nature, and association with some Hindu deities. In his book *Cow, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* (1974), Harris suggested that these religious

ideas about the cow were actually based in an economic reality. In India, cows are more valuable alive as a source of milk or for doing work in the fields than they are dead as meat. For this reason, he argued, cows were defined as sacred and set apart from other kinds of animals that could be killed and eaten. The subsequent development of religious explanations for cows' specialness reinforced and legitimated the special treatment.¹⁹

A symbolic approach to the study of religion developed in the mid-twentieth century and presented new ways of analyzing supernatural beliefs. Clifford Geertz, one of the anthropologists responsible for creating the symbolic approach, defined religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations... by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."²⁰ Geertz suggested that religious practices were a way to enact or make visible important cultural ideas. The symbols used in any religion, such as a cross or even a cow, can be interpreted or "read" by anthropologists to discern important cultural values. At the same time, religious symbols reinforce values or aspirations in members of the religious community. The Christian cross, which is associated with both death and resurrection, demonstrates ideas about sacrifice and putting the needs of others in the community first. The cross also symbolizes deeper ideas about the nature of life itself: that suffering can have positive outcomes and that there is something beyond the current reality.

A symbolic approach to religion treats religious beliefs as a kind of "text" or "performance" that can be interpreted by outsiders. Like the other theories described in this section, symbolic approaches present some risk of misinterpretation. Religious beliefs involve complex combinations of personal and social values as well as embodied or visceral feelings that cannot always be appreciated or even recognized by outsiders. The persistently large gap between emic (insider) and etic (outsider) explanations for religious beliefs and practices makes the study of religion one of the most challenging topics in cultural anthropology.

ELEMENTS OF RELIGION

Despite the wide variety of supernatural beliefs found in cultures around the world, most belief systems do share some common elements. The first of these characteristic is **cosmology**, an explanation for the origin or history of the world. Religious cosmologies provide "big picture" explanations for how human life was created and provide a perspective on the forces or powers at work in the world. A second characteristic of religion is a belief in the **supernatural**, a realm beyond direct human experience. This belief could include a God or gods, but this is not a requirement. Quite a few religious beliefs, as discussed below, involve more abstract ideas about supernatural forces. Most religions also share a third characteristic: **rules governing behavior**. These rules define proper conduct for individuals and for society as a whole and are oriented toward bringing individual actions into harmony with spiritual beliefs. A fourth element is **ritual**, practices or ceremonies that serve a religious purpose and are usually supervised by religious specialists. Rituals may be oriented toward the supernatural, such as rituals designed to please the gods, but at the same time they address the needs of individuals or the community as a whole. Funeral rituals, for instance, may be designed to ensure the passage of a deceased person to the afterlife, but also simultaneously provide emotional comfort to those who are grieving and provide an outlet for the community to express care and support.

Religious Cosmologies

Religious cosmologies are ways of explaining the origin of the universe and the principles or “order” that governs reality. In its simplest form, a cosmology can be an origin story, an explanation for the history, present state, and possible futures of the world and the origins of the people, spirits, divinities, and forces that populate it. The ancient Greeks had an origin story that began with an act of creation from Chaos, the first thing to exist. The deities Erebus, representing darkness, and Nyx, representing night, were born from Chaos. Nyx gave birth to Aether (light) and Hemera (day). Hemera and Nyx took turns exiting the underworld, creating the phenomenon of day and night. Aether and Hemera next created Gaia (Earth), the mother of all life, who gave birth to the sky, the mountains, the sea, and eventually to a pantheon of gods. One of these gods, Prometheus, shaped humans out of mud and gave them the gift of fire. This origin story reflects many significant cultural ideas. One of these is the depiction of a world organized into a hierarchy with gods at the top and humans obligated to honor them.

Traditional Navajo origin stories provide a different view of the organization of the universe. These stories suggested that the world is a set of fourteen stacked “plates” or “platters.” Creation began at the lowest levels and gradually spread to the top. The lower levels contained animals like insects as well as animal-people and bird-people who lived in their own fully-formed worlds with distinct cultures and societies. At the top level, First Man and First Woman eventually emerged and began making preparations for other humans, creating a sweat lodge, hogan (traditional house), and preparing sacred medicine bundles. During a special ceremony, the first human men and women were formed and they created those who followed.²¹ Like the Greek origin story, the Navajo cosmology explains human identity and emphasizes the debt humans owe to their supernatural ancestors.

The first two chapters of the Biblical Book of Genesis, which is the foundation for both Judaism and Christianity, describe the creation of the world and all living creatures. The exact words vary in different translations, but describe a God responsible for creating the world and everything in it: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The six-day process began with the division of light from darkness, land from water, and heaven from earth. On the fifth day, “God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good.”²² On the sixth day, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”²³ This cosmology differs from the others in describing an act of creation by a single deity, God, but shares with the Greek and Navajo versions a description of creation that emphasizes the relationship between people and their creator.

Reading these cosmologies also raises the question of how they should be interpreted. Are these origin stories regarded as literal truth in the cultures in which they originated? Or, are the stories metaphorical and symbolic? There is no simple answer to this question. Within any culture, individuals may disagree about the nature of their own religious traditions. Christians, for instance, differ in the extent to which they view the contents of the Bible as fact. Cultural relativism requires that anthropologists avoid making judgments about whether any cultural idea, including religious beliefs, is “correct” or “true.” Instead, a more useful approach is to try to understand the multiple ways people interpret or make sense of their religious beliefs. In addition it is important to consider the function a religious cosmology has in the wider society. As Bronislaw Malinowski observed, a myth or origin story is not an “idle tale, but a hard-worked active force.”²⁴

Belief in the Supernatural

Another characteristic shared by most religions is a concept of the supernatural, spirits, divinities, or forces not governed by natural laws. The supernatural can take many forms. Some supernatural entities are **anthropomorphic**, having human characteristics. Other supernatural forces are more generalized, seen in phenomena like the power of the wind. The amount of involvement that supernatural forces or entities have in the lives of humans varies cross-culturally.

Abstract Forces

Many cultures are organized around belief in an impersonal supernatural force, a type of religion known as **animatism**. The idea of *mana* is one example. The word itself comes from Oceania and may originally have meant “powerful wind,” “lightning” or “storm.” Today, it still refers to power, but in a more general sense. Aram Oroi, a pastor from the Solomon Islands, has compared mana to turning on a flashlight: “You sense something powerful but unseen, and then—*click*—its power is made manifest in the world.”²⁵ Traditionally, the ability to accumulate mana in certain locations, or in one’s own body, was to become potent or successful.²⁶ Certain locations such as mountains or ancient sites (*marae*) have particularly strong mana. Likewise, individual behaviors, including sexual or violent acts, were traditionally viewed as ways to accumulate mana for oneself.

Interestingly, the idea of *mana* has spread far beyond its original cultural context. In 1993, Richard Garfield incorporated the idea in the card game Magic: The Gathering. Players of the game, which has sold millions of copies since its introduction, use mana as a source of power to battle wizards and magical creatures. Mana is also a source of power in the immensely popular computer game World of Warcraft.²⁷ These examples do show **cultural appropriation**, the act of copying an idea from another culture and in the process distorting its meaning. However, they also demonstrate how compelling animist ideas about abstract supernatural power are across cultures. Another well-known example of animism in popular culture is “the Force” depicted in the George Lucas *Star Wars* films. The Force is depicted as flowing through everything and is used by Luke Skywalker as a source of potency and insight when he destroys the Death Star.

Spirits

The line between the natural and the supernatural can be blurry. Many people believe that humans have a supernatural or spiritual element that coexists within their natural bodies. In Christianity, this element is called the soul. In Hinduism, it is the *atman*.²⁸ The Tausūg, a group who live in the Philippines, believe that the soul has four parts: a transcendent soul that stays in the spiritual realm even when a person is alive; a life-soul that is attached to the body, but can move through dreams; the breath, which is always attached to the body, and the spirit-soul, which is like a person’s shadow.²⁹

Many people believe that the spirit survives after an individual dies, sometimes remaining on Earth and sometimes departing for a supernatural realm. Spirits, or “ghosts,” who remain on Earth may continue to play an active role in the lives of their families and communities. Some will be well-intentioned and others will be malevolent. Almost universally, spirits of the deceased are assumed to be needy and to make demands on the living. For this reason, many cultures have traditions for the veneration of the dead, rituals intended to honor the deceased, or to win their favor or cooperation. When treated properly, ancestor spirits can be messengers to gods, and can act on behalf of the living



Figure 3: A spirit house in Thailand. The houses provide shelter for local spirits that could trouble humans if they become displeased.

and even natural phenomena like weather have a spiritual or supernatural element are called **animism**. The first anthropological description of animism came from Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who believed it was the earliest type of religious practice to develop in human societies.³² Tylor suggested that ordinary parts of the human experience, such as dreaming, formed the basis for spiritual beliefs. When people dream, they may perceive that they have traveled to another place, or may be able to communicate with deceased members of their families. This sense of altered consciousness gives rise to ideas that the world is more than it seems. Tylor suggested that these experiences, combined with a pressing need to answer questions about the meaning of life, were the basis for all religious systems.³³ He also assumed that animist religions evolved into what he viewed as more sophisticated religious systems involving a God or gods.



Figure 4: The first torii at the entrance to Nikkō Tōshō-gū, Tochigi Prefecture, Japan.

after receiving prayers or requests. If they are displeased, ancestor spirits can become aggravated and wreak havoc on the living through illness and suffering. To avoid these problems, offerings in the form of favorite foods, drinks, and gifts are made to appease the spirits. In China, as well as in many other countries, **filial piety** requires that the living continue to care for the ancestors.³⁰ In Madagascar, where bad luck and misfortune can be attributed to spirits of the dead who believe they have been neglected, a body may be repeatedly exhumed and shown respect by cleaning the bones.³¹

If humans contain a supernatural spirit, essence, or soul, it is logical to think that non-human entities may have their own sparks of the divine. Religions based on the idea that plants, animals, inanimate objects,

Today, Tylor's views about the evolution of religion are considered misguided. No belief system is inherently more sophisticated than another. Several animist religions exist today and have millions of adherents. One of the most well-known is Shintoism, the traditional religion of Japan. Shintoism recognizes spirits known as *kami* that exist in plants, animals, rocks, places and sometimes people. Certain locations have particularly strong connections to the kami, including mountains, forests, waterfalls, and shrines. Shinto shrines in Japan are marked by *torii* gates that mark the separation between ordinary reality and sacred space (Figure 4).

Gods

The most powerful non-human spirits are gods, though in practice there is no universal definition of a “god” that would be recognized by all people. In general, gods are extremely powerful and not part of nature—not human, or animal. Despite their unnaturalness, many gods have personalities or qualities that are recognizable and relatable to humans. They are often anthropomorphic, imagined in human form, or **zoomorphic**, imagined in animal form. In some religions, gods interact directly with humans while in others they are more remote.

Anthropologists categorize belief systems organized around a God or gods using the terms monotheism and polytheism. **Monotheistic** religions recognize a single supreme God. The largest monotheistic religions in the world today are Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Together these religions have more than 3.8 billion adherents worldwide.³⁴ **Polytheistic** religions include several gods. Hinduism, one of the world’s largest polytheistic religions with more than 1 billion practitioners, has a pantheon of deities each with different capabilities and concerns.³⁵

Rules of Behavior

Religious beliefs are an important element of social control because these beliefs help to define acceptable behaviors as well as punishments, including supernatural consequences, for misbehavior. One well-known example are the ideas expressed in the Ten Commandments, which are incorporated in the teachings of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism and prohibit behaviors such as theft, murder, adultery, dishonesty, and jealousy while also emphasizing the need for honor and respect between people. Behavior that violates the commandments brings both social disapproval from other members of the religious community and potential punishment from God.

Buddhism, the world’s fourth largest religion, demonstrates the strong connection between spiritual beliefs and rules for everyday behavior. Buddhists follow the teachings of Buddha, who was an ordinary human who achieved wisdom through study and discipline. There is no God or gods in Buddhism. Instead, individuals who practice Buddhism use techniques like meditation to achieve the insight necessary to lead a meaningful life and ultimately, after many lifetimes, to achieve the goal of *nirvana*, release from suffering.

Although Buddhism defies easy categorization into any anthropological category, there is an element of animatism represented by *karma*, a moral force in the universe. Individual actions have effects on one’s karma. Kindness toward others, for instance, yields positive karma while acts that are disapproved in Buddhist teachings, such as killing an animal, create negative karma. The amount of positive karma a person builds-up in a lifetime is important because it will determine how the individual will be reborn. **Reincarnation**, the idea that a living being can begin another life in a new body after death, is a feature of several religions. In Buddhism, the form of a human’s reincarnation depends on the quality of the karma developed during life. Rebirth in a human form is considered good fortune because humans have the ability to control their own thoughts and behaviors. They can follow the Noble Eightfold Path, rules based on the teachings of Buddha that emphasize the need for discipline, restraint, humility, and kindness in every aspect of life.³⁶

Rituals and Religious Practitioners

The most easily observed elements of any religious belief system are rituals. Victor Turner (1972) defined ritual as “a stereotyped sequence of activities ... performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests.”³⁷ Rituals have a concrete purpose or goal, such as a wedding ritual that results in a religiously sanctioned union between people, but rituals are also symbolic. The objects and activities involved in rituals “stand in for” or mean more than what they actually are. In a wedding ceremony in the United States, the white color of the wedding dress is a traditional symbol of purity.

A large amount of anthropological research has focused on identifying and interpreting religious rituals in a wide variety of communities. Although the details of these practices differ in various cultural settings, it is possible to categorize them into types based on their goals. One type of ritual is a **rite of passage**, a ceremony designed to transition individuals between life stages.³⁸ A second type of ritual is a **rite of intensification**, actions designed to bring a community together, often following a period of crisis.³⁹ **Revitalization rituals**, which also often follow periods of crisis in a community, are ambitious attempts to resolve serious problems, such as war, famine, or poverty through a spiritual or supernatural intervention.⁴⁰

Rites of Passage

In his original description of rites of passage, Arnold Van Gennep (1909) noted that these rituals were carried out in three distinct stages: separation, liminality, and incorporation. During the first stage, individuals are removed from their current social identity and begin preparations to enter the next stage of life. The liminal period that follows is a time in which individuals often undergo tests, trials, or activities designed to prepare them for their new social roles. In the final stage of incorporation, individuals return to the community with a new socially recognized status.⁴¹

Rites of passage that transition children into a new status as adults are common around the world. In Xhosa communities in South Africa, teenage boys were traditionally transitioned to manhood using a series of acts that moved them through each of the three ritual stages. In the separation stage, the boys leave their homes and are circumcised; they cannot express distress or signs of pain during the procedure. Following the circumcision, they live in isolation while their wounds heal, a liminal phase during which they do not talk to anyone other than boys who are also undergoing the rite of passage. This stressful time helps to build bonds between the boys that will follow them through their lives as adult men. Before their journey home, the isolated living quarters are burned to the ground, symbolizing the loss of childhood. When the participants return to their community, the incorporation phase, they are recognized as men and allowed to learn the secret stories of the community.⁴²

Rites of Intensification

Rites of intensification are also extremely common in communities worldwide. These rituals are used to bind members of the community together, to create a sense of **communitas** or unity that encourages people to see themselves as members of community. One particularly dramatic example of this ritual is the Nagol [land diving](#) ceremony held each spring on the island of Pentecost in Vanuatu in the South Pacific. Like many rituals, land diving has several goals. One of these is to help ensure a good harvest by impressing the spirits with a dramatic display of bravery. To accomplish this, men

from the community construct wooden towers sixty to eighty feet high, tie ropes made from tree vines around their ankles, and jump head-first toward the ground (Figure 5). Preparations for the land diving involve almost every member of the community. Men spend a month or more working together to build the tower and collect the vines. The women of the community prepare special costumes and dances for the occasion and everyone takes care of land divers who may be injured during the dive. Both the preparations for the land diving and the festivities that follow are a powerful rite of intensification. Interestingly, the ritual is simultaneously a rite of passage; boys can be recognized as men by jumping from high portions of the tower witnessed by elders of the community.⁴³



Figure 5: Land Diving on Pentecost Island, Vanuatu.

Rites of Revitalization

All rites of revitalization originate in difficult or even catastrophic circumstances. One notable example is a ritual that developed on the island of Tanna in the South Pacific. During World War II, many islands in the South Pacific were used by the U.S. military as temporary bases. Tanna was one of these locations and this formerly isolated community experienced an extremely rapid transformation as the U.S. military introduced modern conveniences such as electricity and automobiles. In an attempt to make sense of these developments, the island's residents developed a variety of theories about the reason for these changes. One possible explanation was that the foreign materials had been given to the islanders by a powerful deity or ancestral spirit, an entity who eventually acquired the name John Frum. The name may be based on a common name the islanders would have encountered while the military base was in operation: "John from America."

When the war ended and the U.S. military departed, the residents of Tanna experienced a kind of trauma as the material goods they had enjoyed disappeared and the [John Frum ritual began](#). Each year on February fifteenth, many of the island's residents construct copies of U.S. airplanes, runways, or towers and march in military formation with replicas of military rifles and American blue jeans. The ritual is intended to attract John Frum, and the material wealth he controls, back to the island. Although the ritual has not yet had its intended transformative effect, the participants continue the ritual. When asked to explain his continued faith, one village elder explained: "You Christians have been waiting 2,000 years for Jesus to return to Earth, and you haven't given up hope."⁴⁴ This John Frum custom is sometimes called a **cargo cult**, a term used to describe rituals that seek to attract material prosperity. Although the John Frum ritual is focused on commodities, or "cargo," the term cargo cult is generally not preferred by anthropologists because it oversimplifies the complex motivations involved in the ritual. The word "cult" also has connotations with fringe or dangerous beliefs and this association also distorts understanding of the practice.

Religious Practitioners

Since rituals can be extremely complicated and the outcome is of vital importance to the community, specialist practitioners are often charged with responsibility for supervising the details. In many settings, religious specialists have a high social status and are treated with great respect. Some may become relatively wealthy by charging for their services while others may be impoverished, sometimes deliberately as a rejection of the material world. There is no universal terminology for religious practitioners, but there are three important categories: priests, prophets, and shamans.

Priests, who may be of any gender, are full-time religious practitioners. The position of priest emerges only in societies with substantial occupational specialization. Priests are the intermediaries between God (or the gods) and humans. Religious traditions vary in terms of the qualifications required for individuals entering the priesthood. In Christian traditions, it is common for priests to complete a program of formal higher education. Hindu priests, known as *pujari*, must learn the sacred language Sanskrit and spend many years becoming proficient in Hindu ceremonies. They must also follow strict lifestyle restrictions such as a vegetarian diet. Traditionally, only men from the Brahmin caste were eligible to become *pujari*, but this is changing. Today, people from other castes, as well as women, are joining the priesthood. One notable feature of societies that utilize full-time spiritual practitioners is a separation between ordinary believers and the God or gods. As intermediaries, priests have substantial authority to set the rules associated with worship practice and to control access to religious rites.⁴⁵

The term **shaman** has been used for hundreds of years to refer to a part time religious practitioner. Shamans carry out religious rituals when needed, but also participate in the normal work of the community. A shaman's religious practice depends on an ability to engage in direct communication with the spirits, gods, or supernatural realm. An important quality of a shaman is the ability to transcend normal reality in order to communicate with and perhaps even manipulate supernatural forces in an alternate world. This ability can be inherited or learned.⁴⁶ Transcending from the ordinary to the spiritual realm gives shamans the ability to do many things such as locate lost people or animals or heal the sick by identifying the spiritual cause of illness.

Among the Chukchi, who live in northern Russia, the role of the shaman is thought to be a special calling, one that may be especially appropriate for people whose personality traits seem abnormal in the context of the community. Young people who suffer from nervousness, anxiety, or moodiness, for example may feel a call to take up shamanistic practice.⁴⁷ There has been some research suggesting that shamanism may be a culturally accepted way to deal with conditions like schizophrenia.⁴⁸ If true, this might be because achieving an altered state of consciousness is essential for shamanic work. Entering an altered state, which can be achieved through dreams, hallucinogenic drugs, rhythmic music, exhaustion through dance, or other means, makes it possible for shamans to directly engage with the supernatural realm.

Shamans of the upper Amazon in South America have been using *ayahuasca*, a drink made from plants that have hallucinogenic effects, for centuries. The effects of *ayahuasca* start with the nervous system:

One under the control of the narcotic sees unroll before him quite a spectacle: most lovely landscapes, monstrous animals, vipers which approach and wind down his body or are entwined like rolls of thick cable, at a few centimeters distance; as well, one sees who are true friends and those who betray him or who have done him ill; he observes the cause of

the illness which he sustains, at the same time being presented with the most advantageous remedy; he takes part in fantastic hunts; the things which he most dearly loves or abhors acquire in these moments extraordinary vividness and color, and the scenes in which his life normally develop adopt the most beautiful and emotional expression.⁴⁹

Among the Shipibo people of Peru, ayahuasca is thought to be the substance that allows the soul of a shaman to leave his body in order to retrieve a soul that has been lost or stolen. In many cultures, soul loss is the predominant explanation for illness. The Shipibo believe that the soul is a separate entity from the body, one that is capable of leaving and returning at will. Shamans can also steal souls. The community shaman, under the influence of ayahuasca, is able to find and retrieve a soul, perhaps even killing the enemy as revenge.⁵⁰

Anthropologist Scott Hutson (2000) has described similarities between the altered state of consciousness achieved by shamans and the mental states induced during a rave, a large dance party characterized by loud music with repetitive patterns. In a rave, bright lights, exhausting dance, and sometimes the use of hallucinogenic drugs, induce similar psychological effects to shamanic trancing. Hutson argues that through the rave individuals are able to enter altered states of consciousness characterized by a “self-forgetfulness” and an ability to transcend the ordinary self. The DJ at these events is often called a “techno-shaman,” an interesting allusion to the guiding role traditional shamans play in their cultures.⁵¹

A **prophet** is a person who claims to have direct communication with the supernatural realm and who can communicate divine messages to others. Many religious communities originated with prophecies, including Islam which is based on teachings revealed to the prophet Muhammad by God. In Christianity and Judaism, Moses is an example of a prophet who received direct revelations from God. Another example of a historically significant prophet is Joseph Smith who founded the Church of Latter Day Saints, after receiving a prophecy from an angel named Moroni who guided him to the location of a buried set of golden plates. The information from the golden plates became the basis for the Book of Mormon.

The major distinction between a priest and the prophet is the source of their authority. A priest gets his or her authority from the scripture and occupational position in a formally organized religious institution. A prophet derives authority from his or her direct connection to the divine and ability to convince others of his or her legitimacy through charisma. The kind of insight and guidance prophets offer can be extremely compelling, particularly in times of social upheaval or suffering.

One prophet who had enormous influence was David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians, a schism of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The Branch Davidians were **millenarians**, people who believe that major transformations of the world are imminent. David Koresh was extremely charismatic; he was handsome and an eloquent speaker. He offered refuge and solace to people in need and in the process he preached about the coming of an apocalypse, which he believed would be caused by the intrusion of the United States government on the Branch Davidian's lifestyle. Koresh was so influential that when the United States government did eventually try to enter the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas in 1993 to search for illegal weapons, members of the group resisted and exchanged gunfire with federal agents. Eventually, under circumstances that are still disputed, a fire erupted in the compound and eighty-six people, including Koresh, were killed.⁵² Ultimately, the U.S. government helped to fulfill the apocalyptic vision of the group and David Koresh became a martyr. The Branch Davidians evolved into a new group, “Branch, Lord our Righteousness,” and today many await Koresh's return.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Religion is of central importance to the lives of people in the majority of the world's cultures; more than eight-in-ten people worldwide identify with a religious group.⁵⁴ However, it is also true that the number of people who say that they have no religious affiliation is growing. There are now about as many people in the world who consider themselves religiously “unaffiliated” as there are Roman Catholics.⁵⁵ This is an important reminder that religions, like culture itself, are highly dynamic and subject to constant changes in interpretation and allegiance. Anthropology offers a unique perspective for the study of religious beliefs, the way people think about the supernatural, and how the values and behaviors these beliefs inspire contribute to the lives of individuals and communities. No single set of theories or vocabulary can completely capture the richness of the religious diversity that exists in the world today, but cultural anthropology provides a toolkit for understanding the emotional, social, and spiritual contributions that religion makes to the human experience.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter describes theories about religion developed by Durkheim, Marx, and Freud. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each theory? Which theory would be the most useful if you were attempting to learn about the religious beliefs of another culture?
2. Rites of passage and rites of intensification are an important part of many religious traditions, but these same rituals also exist in secular (non-religious) contexts. What are some examples of these rituals in your own community? What role do these rituals play in bringing people together?
3. Durkheim argued that a distinction between the sacred and the profane was a key characteristic of religion. Thinking about your own culture, what are some examples of ideas or objects that are considered “sacred”? What are the rules concerning how these objects or ideas should be treated? What are the penalties for people who do not follow these rules?

GLOSSARY

Animatism: a religious system organized around a belief in an impersonal supernatural force.

Animism: a religious system organized around a belief that plants, animals, inanimate objects, or natural phenomena have a spiritual or supernatural element.

Anthropomorphic: an object or being that has human characteristics.

Cargo cult: a term sometimes used to describe rituals that seek to attract material prosperity. The term is generally not preferred by anthropologists.

Collective effervescence: the passion or energy that arises when groups of people share the same thoughts and emotions.

Cosmology: an explanation for the origin or history of the world.

Cultural appropriation: the act of copying an idea from another culture and in the process distorting its meaning.

Filial piety: a tradition requiring that the young provide care for the elderly and in some cases ancestral spirits.

Magic: practices intended to bring supernatural forces under one's personal control.

Millenarians: people who believe that major transformations of the world are imminent.

Monotheistic: religious systems that recognize a single supreme God.

Polytheistic: religious systems that recognize several gods.

Priests: full-time religious practitioners.

Profane: objects or ideas are ordinary and can be treated with disregard or contempt.

Prophet: a person who claims to have direct communication with the supernatural realm and who can communicate divine messages to others.

Reincarnation: the idea that a living being can begin another life in a new body after death.

Religion: the extension of human society and culture to include the supernatural.

Revitalization rituals: attempts to resolve serious problems, such as war, famine or poverty through a spiritual or supernatural intervention.

Rite of intensification: actions designed to bring a community together, often following a period of crisis.

Rite of passage: a ceremony designed to transition individuals between life stages.

Sacred: objects or ideas are set apart from the ordinary and treated with great respect or care.

Shaman: a part time religious practitioner who carries out religious rituals when needed, but also participates in the normal work of the community.

Sorcerer: an individual who seeks to use magic for his or her own purposes.

Supernatural: describes entities or forces not governed by natural laws.

Zoomorphic: an object or being that has animal characteristics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sashur Henninger-Rener is an anthropologist with research in the fields of comparative religion and psychological anthropology. She received a Master of Arts from Columbia University in the City of New York in Anthropology and has since been researching and teaching. Currently, Sashur is teaching with The University of LaVerne and the Los Angeles Community College District in the fields of Cultural and Biological Anthropology. In her free time, Sashur enjoys traveling the world, visiting archaeological and cultural sites along the way. She and her husband are actively involved in animal rescuing, hoping to eventually found their own animal rescue for animals that are waiting to find homes.

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