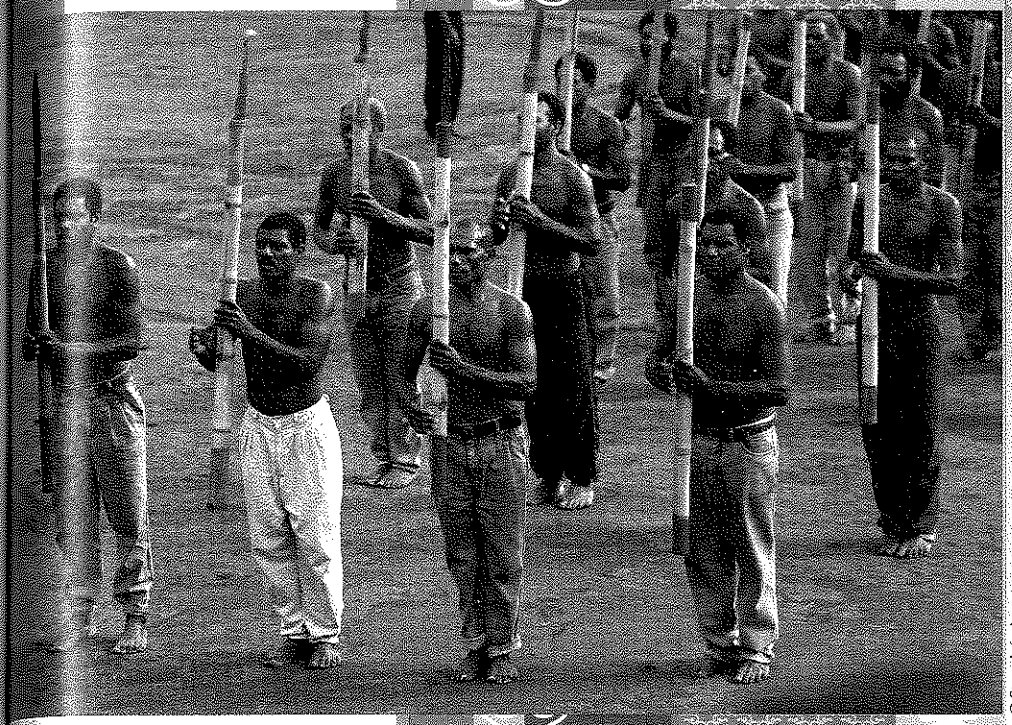

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On Vanuatu, the John Frum movement is a classic example of what anthropologists call a cargo cult. Here, John Frum worshippers celebrate by marching in military formation. The letters USA are painted in red on their chests.

CHAPTER 11

RELIGION

CHAPTER OUTLINE

CARGO CULTS

HIGH on a mountaintop in New Guinea, a group of men are performing a ritual around the body of a small plane that crashed there years ago. Their ritual is aimed at ensuring the arrival of *cargo*, their word for the trade goods of Western culture that are the focus of their desires, stimulated by the encounters with Europeans, Americans, and Japanese over the past hundred years. Outsiders frequently promised wealth and political equality, but members of these groups soon realized that their words did not match reality. Not only did Melanesians fail to gain riches and power, but, in many cases, they grew poorer and were more deeply oppressed under colonial rule.

Melanesians observed that whites did not seem to work but instead made "secret signs" on scraps of paper, built strange structures, and behaved in strange ways. For example, they built airports and seaports with towers and wires, and they drilled soldiers to march in formation. When they did these things, planes and ships arrived, disgorging a seemingly endless supply of material goods. Melanesians, who did so much hard physical labor, got nothing.

In Melanesian culture, secret knowledge was the source of power and wealth. Plainly, the whites knew the secrets of cargo and were keeping it from the islanders. If Melanesians could learn the secret knowledge and rituals of cargo, they believed they could rid their societies of oppressive colonial governments and gain access to this immense wealth for themselves.

Cargo cults usually began with a local prophet who announced that the world was about to end in a terrible catastrophe, after which God (or the ancestors, or a local culture hero) would appear, and a paradise on earth would begin. The end of the world could be caused or hastened by the performance of rituals that copied what they had observed the whites doing. In some places, the faithful sat around tables dressed in European clothes, making signs on paper. In others, they drilled with wooden rifles and built wharves, storehouses, airfields, and lookout towers in the hope that such ritual would cause planes to land or ships to dock and disgorge cargo.

Cargo cults are not limited to Melanesia. In the United States and Latin America, millions of followers of prosperity theology or the Word-Faith movement believe that God wants Christians to be wealthy (Van Biema and Chu 2006). Promoted by Oral Roberts and other televangelists, the movement teaches their adherents that if they give money (the more the better) to movement churches and pray with sincerity, devotion, and frequency, God will reward them with cash and other material wealth, such as cars and houses. In other words, if they perform the correct rituals, they will receive cargo. If they remain poor, it is because they failed to properly ask God for wealth.

But perhaps cargo is not merely a cult in the United States but is central to our culture. Westerners do seem obsessed with cargo: an endless desire for consumer goods and the belief that buying specific brands of cars, drinks, or clothing will make them forever young, sexy, and powerful (Lindstrom 1993). Some might say that this is as likely to happen as it is for cargo to descend from the skies in Melanesia.

DEFINING RELIGION

Recent research links religious experience to specific capacities of the right temporal and right parietal lobes of the brain (Chan et al. 2009, Johnstone and Glass 2008). Since religiosity is a biologically based capacity of humans, it is unsurprising that all societies have spiritual beliefs and practices that anthropologists refer to as *religion*. Yet because of the great diversity of these beliefs and practices, defining religion is surprisingly difficult. Most definitions focus on the supernatural. Because Westerners make a clear distinction between natural and supernatural, this seems logical. But some religions explicitly deny that supernatural beings exist, whereas others do not distinguish them from what Westerners call the natural.

The phenomena that anthropologists identify as religion share five common characteristics. First, religions are composed of sacred stories that members believe are important. Second, religions make extensive use of symbols and symbolism. Third, religions propose the existence of beings, powers, states, places, and qualities that cannot be measured by any agreed-upon scientific means—they are nonempirical (for convenience, we refer to the nonempirical as supernatural, even though, as previously noted, this term is problematic). Fourth, religions include rituals and specific means of addressing the supernatural. Fifth, all societies include individuals who are particularly expert in the practice of religion. Thus, we might define **religion** as a social institution characterized by sacred stories; symbols and symbolism; the proposed existence of supernatural beings, powers, states, places, and qualities; rituals and means of addressing the supernatural; and specific practitioners.

Early anthropologists were primarily interested in the development of religion. They argued that religion had evolved from **animism**, the belief that all living and nonliving objects are imbued with spirit, passed through a stage of polytheism and finally arrived at monotheism. They held that this evolutionary process was characterized by increasing levels of logic and rationality. However, this view has been discredited. Today anthropologists understand that there is no orderly process of religious evolution and

religion A social institution characterized by sacred stories, symbols, and symbolism; the proposed existence of immeasurable beings, powers, states, places, and qualities; rituals and means of addressing the supernatural; specific practitioners; and change.

animism The notion that all objects, living and nonliving, are imbued with spirit.

that no religion can be considered any more logical or evolved than any other. Anthropologists today are interested in exploring religion in terms of its functions, its symbolism, and its relation to both social stability and change.

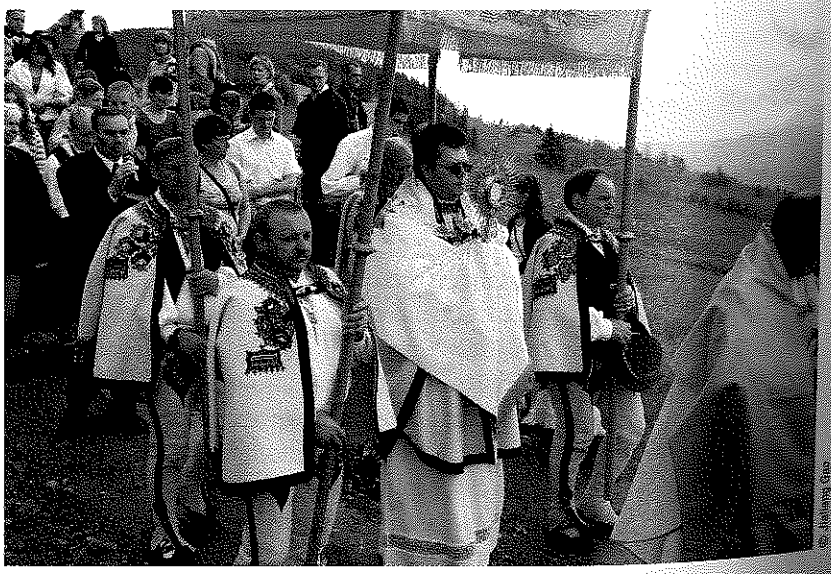
SOME FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION

Religion has many and varied functions in society. It may provide meaning and order in people's lives. It may reduce social anxiety and give people a sense of control over their destinies. It may promote and reinforce the status quo. But, it does not always do these things. In some cases, religion may make people profoundly disquiet or fearful. It may be an important force resisting the status quo and it may catalyze radical politics and, on occasion, even murderous violence.

The Search for Order and Meaning

cosmology A system of beliefs that deals with fundamental questions in the religious and social order.

A basic function of religion is to explain important aspects of the physical and social environment. Thus, religions provide a **cosmology** or framework for interpreting events and experiences. Cosmologies may include sets of principles or beliefs about the nature of life and death, the creation of the universe, the origin of society, the relationship of individuals and groups to one another, and the relationship of humankind to nature.



Religions provide a sense of order and meaning in a world that often seems chaotic. Here in the village of Kościelisko, Poland, a priest leads a procession on the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Cosmologies give meaning to the lives of believers. By defining the place of the individual in society and through the establishment of moral codes, they provide people with a sense of personal identity, a sense of belonging, and a standard of behavior. When people suffer a profound personal loss or when life loses meaning because of radically changed circumstances or catastrophic events, religion can supply a new identity or new responses that become the basis for personal and cultural survival.

Reducing Anxiety and Increasing Control

Many religious practices are aimed at ensuring success in human activities. Prayers, sacrifice, and magic are often used in the hope that they will aid a particular person or community. The practice of these rituals is frequently related to risk. The less predictable an outcome is, the greater the likelihood they will be used. For example, if you have studied for a test and know the material well, you are unlikely to spend much time praying for success. You are more likely to pray if you have not studied, and you may even bring your lucky pencil or another charm to the test.

Praying or doing magic to help or hurt an individual seems to have no effect, if that person does not know about your prayers or magical activities (see Flamm 2002, Tessman and Tessman 2000). However, when such attempts are known, they may have profound effect, altering the emotional state of the individuals involved. Bringing your lucky pencil to the exam may give you added confidence and improve your performance. Anthropologists in many parts of the world have observed cases in which sorcery is used to increase anxiety, and even cause death. In a study of such reports, Walter Cannon (1942) argued that an individual who was aware that he or she was being attacked by sorcery could exhibit an extreme stress reaction that might lead to death. Much work in biomedicine in the past 60 years confirms Cannon's ideas and details the specific biochemical pathways through which such reactions may occur (Sternberg 2002).

Reinforcing or Challenging the Social Order

Religion, culture, and society tend to reinforce one another, and religion generally works to preserve the social order. Through religion, dominant cultural beliefs about good and evil are reinforced by supernatural means of social control. Sacred stories and rituals provide a rationale for the present social order and give social values religious authority. Religious ritual intensifies social solidarity by creating an atmosphere in which people experience their common identity in emotionally moving ways. Finally, religion is an important institution for transmitting cultural values and knowledge.

In reinforcing the social order, religion generally serves the needs of the powerful. However, it may also serve the needs of the powerless. At times, religion may provide an escape from a grim political reality. Through religious belief in a glorious future or the coming of a savior, powerless people who live in harsh and deprived circumstances can create an illusion of power. In these circumstances, religion may provide an outlet for individual frustration, resentment, and anger, thus deflecting opposition to the state. However, religion can also focus this same frustration, resentment, and anger against political or social targets, thus catalyzing rebellion and revolution. The American civil rights movement, the Iranian revolution, the rise of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and the rise of the Tea Party movement in the United States are all examples of this (see Warner 2010).

CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGION

As previously noted, all religious traditions share certain similarities. They involve stories—sacred narratives and myths. They have symbols. They are characterized by nonempirical or supernatural beings and states. There are rituals, and there are practitioners who perform the rituals. We explore each of these characteristics in this section.

Sacred Narratives

At a fundamental level, all religions consist of a series of stories told by members of a group. These **sacred narratives** are powerful ways of communicating ideas. Sometimes, such stories are held to have a sacred power that is evoked when they are told. Sacred narratives may recall historic events, although these are often clothed in poetic language.

myths (sacred narratives) Stories of historical events, heroes, gods, spirits, and creation that members of a religious tradition hold to be holy and true.

Sacred narratives are often called **myths** and, in some ways, this is appropriate as they often include stories of heroes, explanations of origins, and distortions of reality. However, we frequently use the word *myth* to denote a false belief (or one we do not share). Clearly we should apply the same terminology to others' religious beliefs that we apply to our own.

By explaining that things came to be the way they are through the activities of sacred beings, sacred narratives legitimize beliefs, values, and customs. Malinowski (1992/1954:146) noted that myths "are not merely idle tales, but a hard-worked active force [that functions] to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value. . . ."

The origin narrative of the Hopi, an agricultural people of Arizona and New Mexico, provides a clear example of what Malinowski meant.

The Hopi subsist mainly on blue corn, a variety that is more difficult to grow than other varieties of corn but is stronger and more resistant to damage. According to Hopi belief, before their ancestors appeared on the earth's surface, they were given their choice of subsistence activities. The ancestors chose blue corn and were taught the techniques for growing it by the god Maasaw. The Hopi believe that in growing blue corn, they recreate the feelings of humility and harmony their ancestors experienced when they first chose this form of agriculture. Thus, the Hopi live their religious understanding of the world as they grow blue corn. The stories that accompany this action reinforce social traditions and enhance solidarity.

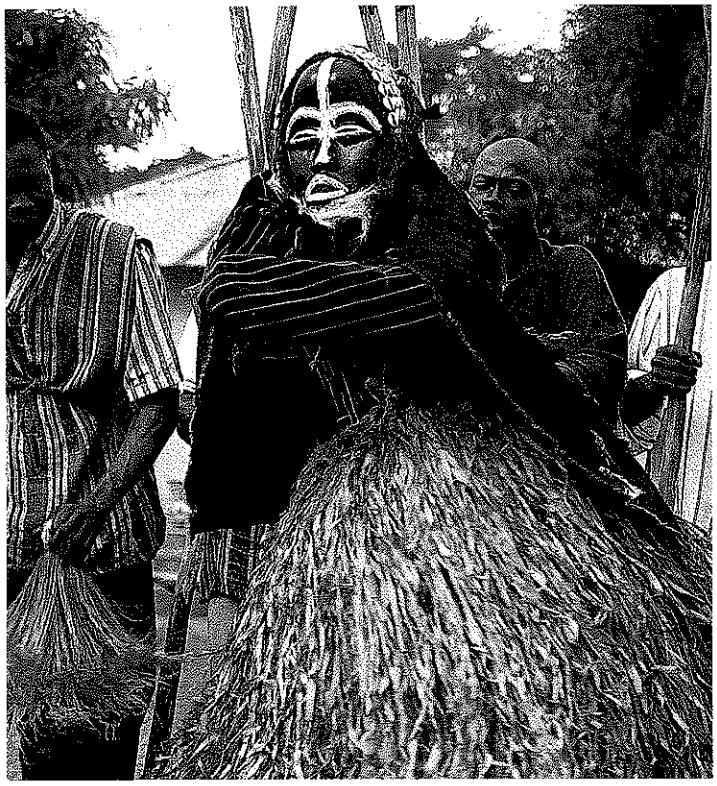
Symbols and Symbolism

Religious stories depend on symbolism, which may be expressed in words, in material objects such as masks and statues, in body decorations, by objects in the physical environment, or through performance. The use of symbolism connects the realms of religion and art. Indeed, art is very often used to express religious ideas. Some religious symbols may have supernatural power in and of themselves, such as the masks used in African ceremonies or the wafers used in Catholic communion.

Part of the power of religious symbols (like art) is that they pack many different and sometimes contradictory meanings into a single word, idea, object, or performance. Consider the Christian cross. Among its meanings are death, love, sacrifice, identity, history, power, weakness, wealth, poverty, and many more.

Because they carry so many meanings, religious symbols often have great emotional and intellectual power. As a result, they can be used in leadership. For example, since the first centuries of Christianity, the cross has been used as a military symbol and to rally people to political causes. Desecration of the cross may inflame passions and provoke very strong reactions as well.

Symbolic representation allows people to grasp the often complex and abstract ideas of a religion without much concern or knowledge of the underlying theology. The Christian ritual of communion, for example, symbolizes the New Testament story of the Last Supper, which communicates the abstract idea of communion with God. In Hinduism, this idea is represented in plays, paintings, and sculptures as the love between the divine Krishna, in the form of a cowherd, and the milkmaids, particularly Radha, who are devoted to him. The dramatic reenactments and devotional singing about the love of Krishna and Radha offer paths to communion with God that ordinary people can understand and participate in.



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In religious ritual, humans may be transformed into supernatural beings. This masked dancer from Cote d'Ivoire is not just a person wearing a mask, but a person who has become a supernatural being.

Supernatural Beings, Powers, States, and Qualities

Although many religions do not separate the natural from the supernatural, all religions propose that there are important beings, powers, emotional states, or qualities that exist apart from human beings. These are nonempirical in that there is no scientifically agreed-upon way to measure them. For example, although many people claim to see proof of God's existence, there is nothing that members of all religions, as well as those who do not believe in any religion, could agree to measure that would demonstrate the existence of God. Thus, science, which depends upon such empirical measurement, can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God.

Most religions populate the world with nonempirical beings and spirits. These can be happy or unhappy, stingy or generous, or can experience any other human emotion. The understanding of spirits and souls of animals among the Netsilik Inuit provides a good example. The Netsilik depend upon hunting and believe that if the soul of an animal they kill receives the proper religious attention, it will be pleased. Such an animal will reincarnate in another animal body and let itself be killed again. An animal soul that does not receive the proper attention, however, will be angered and will not let itself be killed a second time. Particularly offended animal souls might become bloodthirsty monsters and terrorize people (Balikci 1970:200–01).

god (deity) A named spirit who is believed to have created or to have control of some aspect of the world.

polytheism Belief in many gods.

monotheism Belief in a single god.

The term **god (or deity)** is generally used for a named spirit believed to have created or to have control of some aspect of the world. Gods, who are the creators of the world and the ultimate powers in it, are present in only about half of all societies (Levinson 1996:229).

Polytheism refers to belief in many gods, and **monotheism** to a belief in a single god. However, the difference between these two is sometimes small. In polytheistic religions, the many gods may be different aspects of one god. For example, India has millions of gods, yet Indians understand these are all aspects of one divine essence. Conversely, in monotheistic

religions, the one god may have several aspects. For most Christians, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all part of a single, unitary God.

In addition to supernatural beings, religions posit the existence of supernatural states, qualities, or powers, such as the enlightenment of Buddhist tradition, the saintliness of Catholicism, or the nirvana of the Hindus. Religious beliefs often include the notion of a spiritual force that anthropologists call **mana** (a term of Polynesian origin). Mana may be concentrated in individuals (for example, the Tahitian chiefs discussed in Chapter 9), in objects, or in places. Mana is like electricity: It is powerful, but dangerous if it is not approached with caution. That is why a belief in mana often is associated with an elaborate system of taboos, or prohibitions.

mana Religious power or energy that is concentrated in individuals or objects.

Rituals and Ways of Addressing the Supernatural

People enact their religion through **ritual**, a ceremonial act or a repeated stylized gesture used for specific occasions involving the use of religious symbols (Cunningham et al. 1995). Religious rituals may involve the telling or acting out of sacred stories; the use of music, dance, drugs, or pain to move worshippers to a state of trance; or the use of ritual objects to convey religious messages.

ritual A ceremonial act or a repeated stylized gesture used for specific occasions involving the use of religious symbols.

The stories, symbols, and objects of worship that make up the content of religious rituals are exceedingly diverse, yet there are commonalities. Most religious rituals involve a combination of prayer, sacrifices, and magic to contact and control supernatural spirits and powers. Further, despite great diversity, some types of rituals, including rites of passage and rites of intensification, are extremely widespread, if not universal.

The Power of the Liminal

The word **liminal** refers to those objects, places, people, and statuses that are understood as existing in an indeterminate state, between clear-cut categories. Objects that are liminal often play important roles in religious ritual.

liminal The stage of a ritual, particularly a rite of passage, in which one has passed out of an old status but has not yet entered a new one.

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) wrote that rituals frequently generate liminal states in which the structured and hierarchical classifications that normally separate people into groups such as caste or class are dissolved. Because of this, in ritual, people can behave in ways that would be clearly unacceptable under other circumstances. In some cases, this includes role reversals. For example, many Japanese festivals included ritual transvestism, where community members dance in the clothing of the opposite sex (Norbeck 1974:51). In the Wubwang'u ritual among the Ndembu of Zambia, men and women publicly insult each other's sexual abilities and extol their own, but no one is allowed to take offense

(V. Turner 1969:78–79). Ritual role reversals include class as well as gender. In Holi, the Hindu harvest festival, members of the lower class and castes throw colored powder (and in the old days, excrement and urine) at males of the middle and upper classes.

communitas A state of perceived solidarity, equality, and unity among people sharing a religious ritual, often characterized by intense emotion.

More controversially, Turner argued that in liminal states people experience a state of equality and oneness he called **communitas**. In communitas, the wealthy and the poor, the powerful and the powerless are, for a short time, all equals. In the United States, one example of communitas is the incredibly diverse crowd of over a million people who gather on New Year's Eve to watch the falling of the illuminated ball in the center of Times Square.

In state-level societies, institutionalized liminal statuses sometimes emerge. Organizations such as monasteries and convents where people live permanently as members of a religious community embody liminality.

antistructure The socially sanctioned use of behavior that radically violates social norms; frequently found in religious ritual.

Anthropologists often refer to rituals and statuses involving liminality as **antistructure**. Although all societies must be structured to provide order and meaning, according to Turner (1969:131), antistructure—the temporary ritual dissolution of the established order—is also important, helping people to more fully realize the oneness of the self and the other.

Turner's ideas are provocative, but people in higher statuses may experience the unity of communitas more than the powerless. The powerless may use liminal symbols and rituals of reversal to subvert the social order (even if temporarily), expressing feelings not of oneness, but of conflict with the powerful. Further, where liminal groups exist, either temporarily, during rituals or religious festivals, or permanently, associated with certain occupations, they frequently have low status and an ambiguous nature. This, paradoxically, is the source of their supernatural power and their perceived subversion of the social order, as illustrated by the hijras of India (see pp. 180–181), whose sexual ambiguity contains the power both to bless and to curse.

Rites of Passage

rite of passage A ritual that moves an individual from one social status to another.

Rites of passage are public events that mark the transition of a person from one social status to another. Rites of passage almost always mark birth, puberty, marriage, and death and may include many other transitions as well. Rites of passage involve three phases (van Gennep 1960/1909). The first phase is separation, in which the person or group is detached from a former status. The second phase is transition and is often characterized by liminality. The individuals in this phase have been detached from their old statuses but not yet attached to a new one. The third stage is reincorporation, in which the passage from one status to another is symbolically completed. After reincorporation, the person takes on the rights and obligations of his or her new social status.

The rites of initiation for boys and girls described in Chapter 8 are good examples of rites of passage. Before these rituals, the boys and girls have the public status of children. Afterward, they have the public status of grown men and women. Other rites of passage affect similar changes of status. Baptisms and other ceremonies around birth move the new child from the status of not-a-community-member to membership in the community. Quinceañeras mediate between the status of childhood and that of young womanhood, eligible for dating. Marriages mediate between single and couple status. Funerals mediate between the living and the dead.

Basic training for military service is an example of a rite of passage with which many Americans are familiar. In basic training, recruits are separated from their friends and families and are taken to a military post where they are given identical haircuts and identical uniforms. All signs of differences among them are minimized; no matter their position in life before joining the military, ideally they are treated identically during training. Training itself involves a wide variety of rigorous exercises and tasks designed to impart knowledge and build trust and camaraderie. In this state, they experience communitas, a shared identity along with the breaking down of barriers between individuals. Training ends with a large ceremony that reintegrates the recruits, now soldiers, into society with a new identity.

Rites of Intensification

Rites of intensification are rituals directed toward reinforcing the values and norms of the community and strengthening group identity and well-being. Through these rituals, the community maintains continuity with the past, enhances the feeling of social unity in the present, and renews the sentiments on which social cohesion depends (Elkin 1967).

rite of intensification A ritual structured to reinforce the values and norms of a community and to strengthen group identity.

In some groups, rites of intensification are connected with totems. A **totem** is an object, an animal species, or a feature of the natural world that is associated with a particular descent group. Totemism is a prominent feature of the religions of the Australian aborigines. In aboriginal Australia, groups of related individuals are linked with particular totemic species which, usually, they are prohibited from eating (see Verdon and Jorion 1981).

totem An object, an animal species, or a feature of the natural world that is associated with a particular descent group.

In their religious rituals, members of each group assemble to celebrate their totem. The ceremonies explain the origin of the totem (and hence, of the group) and reenact the time of the ancestors. Through singing and dancing, both performers and onlookers are transported to an ecstatic state in which they no longer recognize themselves and feel as though they are being carried away to a special world (Durkheim 1961/1915:247–251).

Emile Durkheim, a pioneer in the anthropological study of religion, believed that totems were symbols of common social identity. When people

worshipped totems, they were worshipping that common identity and at the same time reinforcing the moral and social order of their society. The ecstatic religious experience of their shared identity helped to bind them together.

The religious rituals of the Australian aborigines may seem exotic, but Americans participate in similar observances, some religious but many secular, to the same effect. The rallies associated with college football games are a good example. If the game is "good" or the school has "spirit," these gatherings produce enormous excitement among their fans and transport them to "a special world," increasing collective identity and intensifying loyalty to the school (and hopefully motivating financial donations from them as alumni). Schools, like Australian descent groups, also have totems (animal mascots).

Prayer, Sacrifice, and Magic

Prayer, sacrifice, and magic are found in most religious traditions. Although theoretically differentiated by the degree of control that humans believe they exert over the spirit world, the distinctions between them are more a matter of degree than of exclusive classification.

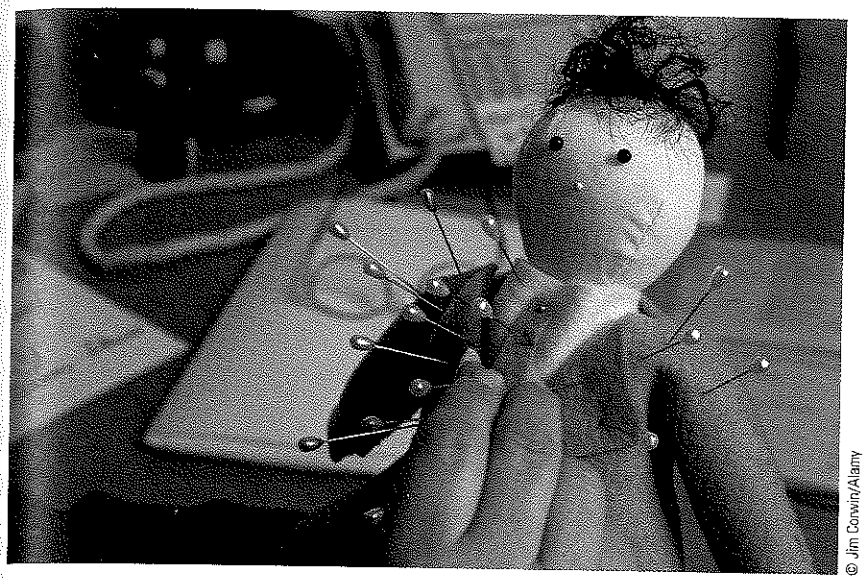
prayer Any conversation held with spirits and gods in which people petition, invoke, praise, give thanks, dedicate, supplicate, intercede, confess, repent, and bless.

Prayer is any conversation held with spirits and gods in which people petition, invoke, praise, give thanks, dedicate, supplicate, intercede, confess, repent, and bless (Levinson 1996). A defining feature of prayer is that people believe the results depend on the will of the spirit world rather than on actions performed by humans. When prayer involves requests, the failure of a spirit to respond to a request is understood as resulting from its disinclination rather than from improper human action. Prayer may be done without any expectation of a particular response from the beings or forces prayed to. There are many forms of prayer. In the West, prayer mainly involves words recited aloud or silently, but in Buddhist tradition, people may pray by hoisting flags or spinning wheels with prayers written inside them.

sacrifice An offering made to increase the efficacy of a prayer or the religious purity of an individual.

Sacrifice occurs when people make offerings to gods or spirits to increase their spiritual purity or the efficacy of their prayers. People may sacrifice the first fruits of a harvest, animal lives, or, on occasion, human lives. Changes in behavior are often offered as sacrifices, as in the Muslim practice of fasting for Ramadan or the Christian practice of giving up something for Lent, a sacrifice intended to help the worshipper identify with Jesus, show devotion, and increase purity. In many religions, people make a vow to carry out a certain kind of behavior, such as going on a pilgrimage or building a place of worship, if a prayer is answered.

Among many East African cattle pastoralists, such as the Nuer or Pokot, cattle sacrifices are central to religion, and cattle are killed and eaten only in the context of religious ritual. This is clearly adaptive. In the absence of refrigeration, animals must be consumed rapidly after they are slaughtered. One family could not consume a whole steer by itself, but



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A voodoo doll is an example of both imitative and contagious magic.

offering it to the community in a ceremonial setting solves this problem. Cattle sacrifices happen in community feasts that occur about once a week. In addition, the religious taboo that a person who eats ritually slaughtered meat may not take milk on the same day results in making milk more available to those who have no meat (Schneider 1973).

Magic is an attempt to mechanistically control supernatural forces. When people do magic, they believe that their words and actions *compel* the spirit world to behave in certain ways. Failure of a magical request is understood to result from incorrect performance of the ritual rather than the refusal of spirits to act, as in prayer.

magic A religious ritual believed to produce a mechanical effect by supernatural means. When magic is done correctly, believers think it must have the desired effect.

Imitation and contagion are two of the most common magical practices. In **imitative magic**, the procedure performed resembles the result desired. A voodoo doll is a form of imitative magic based on the principle that mistreatment of a doll-like image of a person will cause injury to that person. **Contagious magic** is based on the idea that an object that has been in contact with a person retains a magical connection with that person. For example, one might attempt to increase the effectiveness of a voodoo doll by attaching a piece of clothing, hair, or other object belonging to the person he or she wishes to injure. People in the United States often attribute special power and meaning to objects that have come in contact with famous or notorious people. Signed baseballs, bits of costumes worn by movie stars, and pens used to sign famous documents all become collector's items and are imbued with special power and importance.

imitative magic The belief that imitating an action in a religious ritual will cause the action to happen in the material world.

contagious magic The belief that things once in contact with a person or object retain an invisible connection with that person or object.

In many cultures, magical practices accompany most human activities. Among the people who live along the upper Asaro River in Papua

New Guinea, when a child is born, its umbilical cord is buried so that it cannot later be used by a sorcerer to cause harm. To prevent an infant from crying at night, a bundle of sweet-smelling grass is placed on the mother's head, and her wish for uninterrupted sleep is blown into the grass. The grass then is crushed over the head of the child who, in breathing its aroma, also breathes in the mother's command not to cry (Newman 1977:413). In cultures where magic is not universally used, it may accompany risky activities. Professional baseball players in the United States are more likely to use magic for hitting and pitching, the least predictable aspects of the game. Few magical practices are invoked in outfielding, which has little uncertainty. For example, after each pitch, one major league pitcher would reach into his back pocket to touch a crucifix and then straighten his cap. Detroit Tigers infielder Tim Maring wore the same clothes and put them on exactly in the same order each day during a batting streak. One baseball myth is that eating certain foods will give the ball "eyes," that is, the ball will seek the gaps between fielders, so eating certain foods on the day of a game is another example of baseball magic (Gmelch 2000).

divination A religious ritual performed to find hidden objects or information.

Divination is a widespread ritual practice directed toward obtaining useful, hidden, or unknown information from a supernatural authority. Divination may be used to predict the future, diagnose disease, find hidden objects, or discover something about the past. In many cultures, divination is used to discover who committed a crime. Many Americans are familiar with divination techniques such as tarot cards, palmistry, flipping coins, and reading auras.

Divination makes people more confident in their choices when they do not have all the information they need or when several alternative courses of action appear equal. It may be practiced when a group must make a decision about which there is disagreement. If the choice is made by divination, no member of the group feels rejected.

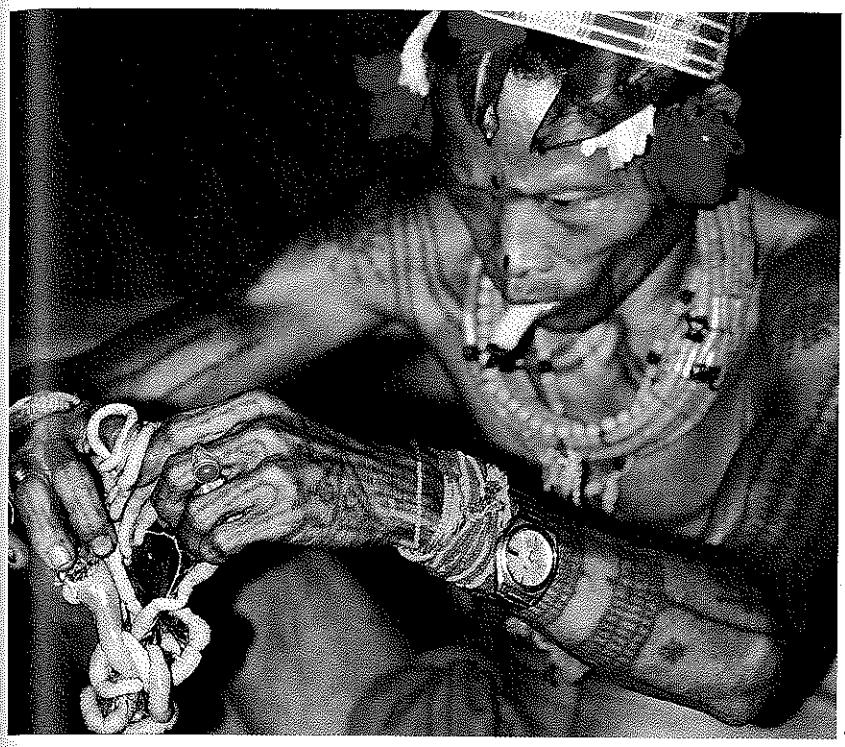
Religious Practitioners

Every society includes people who are believed to have a special relationship with the religious world and who organize and lead major ritual events. There are many kinds of religious practitioners but anthropologists generally organize them into two broad categories: shamans and priests.

Shamans

shaman An individual socially recognized as being able to mediate between the world of humanity and the world of gods or spirits but who is not a recognized official of any religious organization.

A **shaman** is a part-time practitioner who otherwise works like an average member of his or her community. The activities of shamans are reserved for specific ceremonies, times of illness, or crises. Learning to be a shaman may involve arduous training, but such study is never sufficient. The distinctive characteristic of shamans is that they have direct personal



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Among the Mentawai of Indonesia, shamans read the entrails of chickens and pigs to diagnose and cure illness.

experiences of the supernatural that other members of the community accept as authentic. Shamans use prayer, meditation, song, dance, pain, drugs, or any combination of techniques to achieve trance states in which they understand themselves (and are understood by their followers) as able to enter into the real world of the supernatural. They may use such contact to search for guidance for themselves or for their group, to heal the sick, or to divine the future. Almost all societies have some shamans, but in foraging and tribal societies shamans are likely to be the only religious practitioners.

In some cultures, almost every adult is expected to achieve direct contact with the supernatural. In some Native American societies, this was achieved through a vision quest in which individuals developed a special relationship with a particular spirit from whom they received special kinds of power and knowledge and who acted as a personal protector or guardian. The vision seeker might fast, might isolate himself or herself at a lonely spot, or might use self-mutilation to intensify his or her emotional state to receive the vision.

Particularly before the advent of modern medicine, many societies treated illness by means that today would be considered primarily spiritual rather than medical. Illnesses were thought to be caused by broken taboos,

sorcery, witchcraft, or spiritual imbalance, and shamans had an important role in curing. The shaman, usually in a trance, would travel into the supernatural world to discover the source of illness and how to cure it.

In the modern world, shamanic curing often exists alongside modern technological medicine. People go to shamans for healing when they have diseases that are not recognized by modern medicine, they lack money to pay for modern medical treatment, or they have tried such treatment and it has failed. Shamanistic curing can have important therapeutic effects. Shamans frequently treat their patients with drugs from the culture's traditional pharmacopoeia, and some (but not all) of these have been shown scientifically to be effective (Fábrega 1997:144). Shamanic curing ritual also uses symbolism and dramatic action to bring together cultural beliefs and religious practices in a way that enables patients to understand the source of their illness. Such rituals present a coherent model of sickness and health, explaining how patients got ill and how they may become well again, and these models can exert a powerful curative force (Roberts et al. 1993).

Priests

priest One who is formally elected, appointed, or hired to a full-time religious office.

In most state societies, religion is a formally established institution consisting of a series of ranked offices that exist independently of the people who fill them (a bureaucracy). Anthropologically, a **priest** is a person who is formally elected, appointed, or hired to a full-time religious office. Priests are responsible for performing certain rituals on behalf of individuals, groups, or the entire community. Jewish rabbis, Muslim imams, Christian ministers, and Hindu *purohits* all fit the definition of priests. Priests are most often associated with powerful gods and, where they exist, there is a division between the lay and priestly roles. Laypeople participate in ritual largely as passive respondents or as an audience rather than as managers or performers.

People generally become priests through training and apprenticeship and are certified by their religious hierarchy. Although in mainstream religious denominations in the United States, priests need not have ecstatic religious experiences, this is not the case in all priestly religions. Ultimately, the priest's authority derives from a priestly office. However, in some cultures, like the ancient Maya, such office may also give a person the right to seek direct ecstatic contact with gods and spirits.

State societies generally attempt to suppress independent shamans or bring them under bureaucratic control. Shamans claim the ability to directly contact the supernatural without certification by any institutionalized religion, and this challenges the authority of church and state.

Witches and Sorcerers

witchcraft The ability to harm others by harboring malevolent thoughts about them; the practice of sorcery.

Belief in the existence of witches and sorcerers is widespread but not universal. In some societies, **witchcraft** is understood as a physical aspect

of a person. People are witches because their bodies contain a magical witchcraft substance, generally acquired through inheritance. If a person's body contains the witchcraft substance, his or her malevolent thoughts will result in misfortune among those around him or her.

The Azande of East Africa, a classic example, believe that witches' bodies contain a substance called *mangu,* which allows them to cause misfortune and death to others (Evans-Pritchard 1958/1937). People who have the witchcraft substance may not be aware that they are witches and are believed to be unable to prevent themselves from causing evil. They are suspected of witchcraft when evil befalls those around them, particularly family members.

Sorcery is the conscious manipulation of words and ritual objects with the intent of magically causing either harm or good. For example, in Melanesia, a sorcerer may make a magical arrow of a pointed object. He then catches sight of his victim and viciously stabs the air as if to wound the individual and twist the point in the wound (Malinowski 1984/1922:75). A similar technique was employed among the Nez Perce, a Native American group (Walker 1967:74).

sorcery The conscious and intentional use of magic.

Although people do actually practice witchcraft and sorcery, their main effects on society are through witchcraft accusations. Leveling witchcraft accusations against friends and neighbors is common in many cultures and serves various purposes. The most common form of witchcraft accusation serves to stigmatize differences. People who do not fit into conventional social categories are often suspected of witchcraft, exemplified by the Western image of the witch as an evil old hag dressed in black. In traditional Western European society, social norms dictated that women should have husbands and children (or alternatively become nuns). Impoverished women who remained in the community yet were unmarried or widowed without children violated this social convention and might be subject to witchcraft accusations (Brain 1989; Horsley 1979). Although such witches were sometimes killed, they were usually allowed to remain in a community, serving as valuable negative role models, examples of what not to be. The lesson that a young girl might have derived from the witch is that you should get married and have children or you might end up accused of being a witch.

Witchcraft and sorcery accusations may be used to scapegoat. In times of great social change when war, disease, calamity, or technological change undermines the social order, people's lives lose meaning. Under such circumstances, a community may turn to witchcraft accusations, blaming their misfortunes on the presence of evildoers—witches and sorcerers who must be found and destroyed to reassert normality.

In Europe, for example, the witch craze, which resulted in the death of thousands of men and women, occurred primarily in the 16th and 17th

centuries, a time of great artistic and technological achievement but also of great social disasters (Hester 1988). Plague swept repeatedly through Europe, and the medieval social and religious order collapsed in war and chaos. Where governments and religious institutions remained strong, witchcraft accusations were relatively scarce. However, where these institutions collapsed, accusations were frequent (Behringer 2004). Under these circumstances, people were willing to believe that witches were the cause of their misery and to pursue reprisals against people they suspected of witchcraft.

Recent times in Europe and the United States have seen the emergence of religious worshippers who call themselves witches, Wiccans, or neo-pagans. Such individuals have little connection with the types of witchcraft and sorcery previously described. Many Wiccans say they practice an ancient religion of nature worship. The "threefold law" is a basic principle of most Wiccan belief and states that whatever good or ill people do in the world returns to them threefold. Wiccans are no more likely to commit evil acts than are members of more mainstream religious groups.

RELIGION AND CHANGE

As we have seen, religion is generally a force that preserves the social order. This may be particularly evident in stratified societies where the elite invoke religious authority to control the poor. In such situations, religion acts as a way of maintaining social, economic, and political inequality. However, even when religion does not support oppression, it is usually a conservative force, promoting the idea that the way that society has historically been ordered is right and proper.

Most religions contain implicit or explicit visions of the ideal society—images of the way a correct, just social order should look. No society actually achieves its vision; people never live exactly the way they are supposed to. However, most of the time religion validates society. As a result, most people feel that the society they live in is reasonably good.

However, if societies change very rapidly (as a result of colonization, disease, or technological change) or if groups are systematically enslaved and oppressed, the vision of the ideal world painted by people's religious beliefs may move far from their daily experience. People may feel that they are lost, that their vision of the ideal cannot be attained, or that it is simply wrong. Under these conditions, prophets may emerge, and new religions may be created. Religious movements vary in the effectiveness with which they bring social and political change. Even those that fail in these respects may create powerful new identities among their members.

In the United States, rapid cultural and economic change, economic oppression, and powerlessness have frequently led to new religious movements, sometimes with dire results. The prophecies of People's Temple leader Jim Jones and the Branch Davidian David Koresh provided new lives for their followers, giving them consistent and meaningful (if, in others' view, misguided) ways of understanding the world. However, these prophecies also led to the deaths of Jones, Koresh, and most of their followers.

Religion offers a series of principles, encapsulated in story, symbol, and interpretation. Thus, it can be a powerful force for social change, providing people with the rationale and motivation for political involvement and personal renewal. From the Iranian Revolution and the Taliban to the Christian Coalition and the 700 Club, religious leaders can have a powerful political impact. However, prophets may also give their followers convincing models that cannot exist in our material, social, and political world. When that happens, the results may be explosive.

Varieties of Religious Prophecies

To begin a new religion or substantially modify an existing one, prophets must identify what is wrong with the world, present a vision of what a better world looks like, and describe a method of transition from the existing world to the better world. Religious movements can, to some degree, be characterized by what they believe about this better world and the ways to achieve it.

Many religious movements are either nativistic or vitalistic. A nativistic movement aims to restore what its followers believe is a golden age of the past. The nativistic message is generally that things in the past were far better than at present. The reason things have degenerated is because the people have fallen away from the ways of the ancestors. The glorious past may be regained if certain practices are followed.

The Ghost Dance is a good example of a nativistic religious movement. It arose in the late 19th century among the Plains Indians of the United States and was a response to the disastrous effects of European invasion. Disease, warfare, and technological change had undermined native cultures. As a result, prophets emerged whose visions were directly related to the expansion of Euro-American power (Wallace 1970). In 1889, the prophet Wovoka had a vision in which "he saw God, with all the people who had died long ago engaged in their old time sports and occupations, all happy and forever young" (Mooney 1973/1896:771). Wovoka taught that the arrival of paradise could be hastened if Indians returned to their traditional practices and performed specific rituals, including dances, songs, and the wearing of specially designed "ghost shirts." Some of Wovoka's followers believed these had the power to protect them from bullets. Although Wovoka called for

peace with the whites, he also taught that the whites either would be carried away by high winds or would become Indians (Lesser 1933).

The Ghost Dance prophecy spread widely among Native Americans, especially the Sioux, for whom the conditions of conquest and reservation life were particularly oppressive. After their defeat of Custer in 1876, they had been restricted to agriculture on nonproductive reservations and nearly starved to death. Thus, Wovoka's vision of the disappearance of their oppressors and the return of traditional ways was compelling. U.S. government agents became increasingly frightened that the Ghost Dance movement would lead to a Sioux war against the whites and ordered the Sioux to stop the dance. Some Sioux did, but others fled into the Badlands and continued to perform the Ghost Dance and to await the cataclysm that would sweep their oppressors from the Plains. In December 1890, the 7th Cavalry captured the last remaining band of Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee. In the ensuing battle, about 350 Sioux Ghost Dancers, including many women and children, were killed. This battle effectively ended the Ghost Dance, although it continued among small groups up until the 1960s.

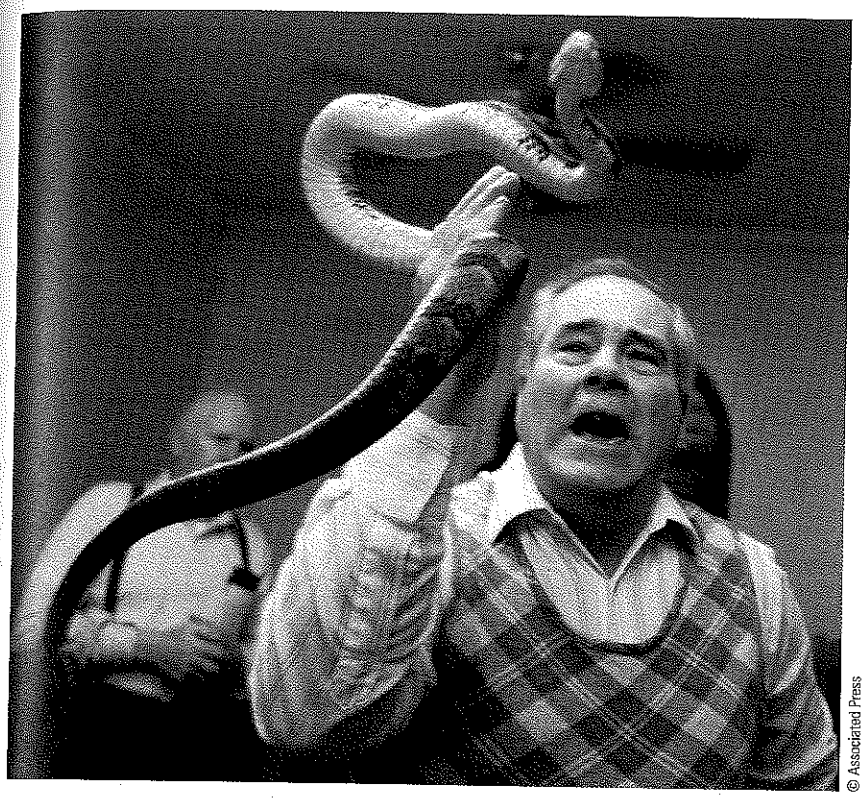
A vitalistic prophecy looks to the future rather than the past. For the vitalist, the past is either evil or neutral. The golden age is in the future and can be achieved following the teachings of the prophet. Though it is not specifically religious, an example of a vitalism with which most Americans are familiar is Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. In that speech, King describes a future where "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" and where children "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." King thus looks ahead to a future then unprecedented in American history.

Often, the poor and powerless in a society create religions that challenge those of the mainstream. Such religions may rationalize their lower social position and emphasize an afterlife in which their suffering will be rewarded. In some cases, these religions have a **messianic** outlook; they focus on the coming of a special individual who will usher in a utopian world. Other religions are **millenarian**; they look to a future disaster that will destroy the current world and establish a world characterized by their version of justice. In many messianic and millenarian religions, members participate in rituals that give individuals direct access to supernatural power. They experience states of ecstasy heightened by singing, dancing, handling dangerous objects such as snakes, or using drugs.

messianic Focusing on the coming of an individual who will usher in a utopian world.

millenarian Belief that a coming catastrophe will signal the beginning of a new age and the eventual establishment of paradise.

The holiness churches common among coal miners and the rural poor in Appalachia are a good example of a religion that has emerged in response to poverty and hardship. In church services, loud music, singing, and dancing cause some members to experience "being filled with the



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In states of religious ecstasy, members of holiness churches in Appalachia handle poisonous snakes. They believe they are instructed to do so by a passage in the Gospel of Mark. For church members, such practices demonstrate their ability to gain access to God's power.

Holy Spirit." In this ecstatic state, they handle poisonous snakes. Snake handlers are frequently bit and sometimes die. However, for members, snake handling proves that "Jesus has the power to deliver them from death here and now" (Daugherty 1976:344). For them, such ecstatic practices demonstrate their ability to gain access to God's power. The fact that social elites are rarely members of such groups is proof that holiness members have access to forms of power that social elites lack (Covington 1995; Burton 1993).

Religious **syncretism** is often found among deeply oppressed people. In syncretism, people merge two or more religious traditions, hiding the beliefs, symbols, and practices of one behind similar attributes of the other. Santeria, an African-based religion originating in Cuba, is a good example (Murphy 1989). Santeria emerged from slave society. Europeans attempted to suppress African religions, but the slaves resisted by combining African religion, Catholicism, and French spiritualism to create a new religion (Lefever 1996). They identified African deities, called orichas, with Catholic saints and used them for traditional purposes such as curing and casting spells, and influencing other aspects of the worshipper's life. In this

syncretism The merging of elements of two or more religious traditions to produce a new religion.

way, they could appear to practice Catholicism as they continued to practice their own religions.

Fundamentalism and Religious Change

fundamentalism A proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition that is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society that is believed to have strayed from its cultural moorings.

In the past two decades, there has been an increase in religious **fundamentalism**. Islamic fundamentalism is implicated in numerous conflicts around the world. Membership in American Christian denominations that describe themselves as fundamentalist has ballooned. Jewish ultraorthodox groups such as the Lubavitch Hasidim have also been growing. Fundamentalism is well known in the United States, but other countries have seen fundamentalism grow as well. For example, in India, there are numerous Hindu fundamentalist organizations including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which plays a very important role in national politics.

Although members of fundamentalist groups sometimes see their religious beliefs as unchanging, the rise of fundamentalism is an important religious change. Further, fundamentalist movements tend to have specific founders and locations of origin. For example, much of the American fundamentalist movement began with the publication of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, a series of books published between 1910 and 1915. Modern Islamic fundamentalism is associated with the work of Sayyid Qutb (born in the Egyptian village of Musha described in Chapter 5) and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The rise of fundamentalism raises important questions for anthropologists. First, it is clear that the people we call fundamentalist have greatly varying beliefs, but do fundamentalist groups have commonalities despite these differences? Second, have these groups emerged in response to purely local forces or are there global forces at work that have encouraged the development of fundamentalism in so many different locations? Finally, is fundamentalism a problem and, if so, what should be done about it? None of these questions can be answered easily or definitively but we can propose some partial explanations.

Scholars have shown that fundamentalisms have similar properties. Fundamentalists tend to see religion as the basis for both personal and communal identity. They tend to believe that there is a single unified truth that they can possess and understand. They tend to envision themselves as fighting in a cosmic struggle of good against evil. In this battle, demonizing the opposition is a perfectly appropriate tactic. Fundamentalists tend to perceive themselves as a persecuted minority even when this is not the case. They are selective about which parts of their tradition they emphasize and which parts of modernity they accept and reject (Hadden and Shupe 1989; Almond, Sivan, and Appleby 1995).

Determining the reasons for the surge in the popularity of fundamentalism is difficult. To some degree, the pattern of emergence fits the model described in this chapter. In the past 50 years, the world has faced truly revolutionary changes. The forces of technology and global capitalism have permeated societies and brought people of disparate cultures together in a vast global network. However, this process has not been peaceful and has not produced equity. Traditional livelihoods, from cloth dyeing in West Africa to family farming in the Midwestern United States, have been undermined. The gap between the wealthy and the poor has grown. Governments have been discredited. Faced with profound change, people look for stability and certainty. For some, fundamentalism seems to offer a solution. Much (but not all) fundamentalism is nativistic; it presents a call to return to the society and values of an earlier time, a time that believers understand as better than the current era. However, specific local histories also play an extremely important role in the emergence of fundamentalisms. It would be impossible, for example, to explain the appearance of the fundamentalist group Hamas without reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Similarly, the development of the Taliban is directly related to the events surrounding the Russian invasion of Afghanistan.

The forces that create rich ground for fundamentalism do not seem likely to abate any time soon. In fact, continual political and technological change seems likely to create even more extreme dislocations in the future. Various fundamentalisms will probably continue to experience strong growth. This poses an extraordinarily difficult problem. On the one hand, people are surely entitled to their religious beliefs. The vast majority of people who might be classified as fundamentalist are innocent of any wrongdoing; they neither promote nor condone violence. They live peacefully with neighbors of different religious beliefs. On the other hand, fundamentalist beliefs have been repeatedly implicated in murderous violence: from the bombings of abortion clinics and the Olympic Games in Atlanta to the 9/11 attacks on the United States to the repeated anti-Muslim and anti-Sikh violence perpetrated by Hindu fundamentalists in India.

There is no doubt that much violence is enflamed by the harsh political and economic conditions of life and by the subversion of long-standing cultural practices. Promoting prosperity, more equitable distribution of resources, greater cultural sensitivity, and more responsive and honest government will certainly reduce popular support for violence. However, a small percentage of believers in all fundamentalist traditions understand the world in absolutist terms and see violence as a divinely ordained response.

BRINGING IT BACK HOME: RELIGION, ART, AND CENSORSHIP

". . . [T]his show is disgusting," said New York City's then (1999) Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, commenting on an art exhibit called "Sensation," at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. He was referring specifically to a painting by the African artist Chris Ofili called "The Holy Virgin Mary." The painting depicted a black Madonna in a colorful flowing robe, dabbed with a clump of elephant dung and surrounded with images of women's buttocks and genitals clipped from pornographic magazines (Steiner 2002).

In 2009, Sony released the video game *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* to worldwide protest by Hindu groups (Hanuman is a Hindu deity and a central figure in one of the epics of Hinduism).

Rajan Zed, a leader of the protest and president of the Nevada-based Universal Society of Hinduism, said that controlling Hanuman with a joystick was denigrating. "Lord Hanuman was not meant to be reduced to such a 'character' in a video game and be in the company of *America's 10 Most Wanted, Bad Boys, Jackass,* and *Killer7*" (Das 2009).

In spring 2010, an episode of *South Park* depicted Muhammad as being inside a bear suit (presumably to avoid showing his image). Following the airing of the episode, a radical Islamic website warned the show's creators that they could be killed. In the following episode, Muhammad was replaced by Santa Claus, and Comedy Central, which airs the show, censored numerous scenes (Pilkington 2010).

In the United States, religious freedom and freedom of speech are both deeply held cultural values. Yet, Americans also believe, as Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (1841–1935) said, "the right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins" (Trachtman 2009:87). In an age of complexity, diversity, and instant global communication, someone's nose seems always to be in the way.

YOU DECIDE

1. Have you experienced portrayals of your own beliefs that you found offensive? If so, did you think they should be censored? What role did your culture play in your opinion?
2. If the majority in a community finds a religious representation offensive, should it be censored? Why or why not? Does it make a difference if censorship comes from the government or from a corporation like Sony or Viacom (the company that owns Comedy Central)?

3. Art offensive to religion has sometimes led to violence and death (consider deaths resulting from protests over the Danish cartoon depictions of Muhammad or the Nazis' use of anti-Semitic art). Is fear of violence sufficient justification for censorship?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. Although the great diversity in beliefs and practices worldwide makes religion difficult to define, all religions include sacred stories, ideas about the supernatural (or nonempirical), rituals, and specialized practitioners.
2. Through religion, societies create meaning and order in the world, explain aspects of the physical and social environment, and reduce anxiety in risky situations. Religions generally reinforce the social order but may sometimes challenge it.
3. All religions have sacred narratives, sometimes called myths, that legitimize beliefs, values, and customs.
4. Religious ideas are often expressed in symbols that have multiple meanings and emotional power. Symbols allow people to grasp the complexities of religion without much knowledge of the underlying theology.
5. Religions assume that there are nonmeasurable beings, powers, emotional states, and qualities that exist apart from humans but are important to them.
6. All religions use ritual. One important aspect of ritual is liminality, a state of betweenness in which people may experience radical equality or role reversals. Rites of passage and rites of intensification are two important types of ritual.
7. Shamans and priests are two kinds of religious practitioners. Shamans receive power through claims of direct contact with the supernatural and are found in almost all societies. Priests are members of bureaucracies and are appointed, elected, or hired to their positions. They are most common in state-level societies. Witches and sorcerers are those believed to be able to harm people through magical means.
8. Under conditions of rapid social, economic, technological, and political change, prophets emerge who call for religious change.
9. Religious prophecy may be nativistic, calling for a return to a past golden age, or vitalistic, looking to a future golden age. It may emphasize the coming of a savior or a period of destruction after which a new world will emerge.
10. Fundamentalism tends to occur in times of rapid change. Fundamentalists often view religion as a basis of identity, believe in a single

truth, understand life as a battle between good and evil, and believe they are a persecuted minority. They are selective in their acceptance of modernity.

KEY TERMS

Animism
Antistructure
Communitas
Contagious magic
Cosmology
Divination
Fundamentalism
God (deity)
Imitative magic
Liminal
Magic
Mana
Messianic
Millenarian
Monotheism
Myths (sacred narratives)
Polytheism
Prayer
Priest
Religion
Rite of intensification
Rite of passage
Ritual
Sacrifice
Shaman
Sorcery
Syncretism
Totem
Witchcraft