

Religion

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Abstract

Although all known societies have religious beliefs and practices, religions vary greatly from society to society. This module summarizes what cross-cultural research tells us about predictors and possible explanations of religious variation.

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Figure 1: A Nahua ritual specialist reads the lie of corn kernels in an effort to divine the cause of a disease. Photo by Pamela Efrein Sandstrom and Allen Sandstrom (all rights reserved).

Religion

Religious beliefs and practices vary widely from society to society and change over time. Different societies not only have varying types of gods, spirits, and supernatural forces, they have different types and numbers of religious practitioners, different types of ritual, and different ways of interacting with supernatural forces.

What is Religion?

Religion may be defined as “any set of attitudes, beliefs, and practices pertaining to *supernatural power*, whether that power be forces, gods, spirits, ghosts, or demons” (C. R. Ember, Ember, and Peregrine 2019, 500). Defining the line between what is “supernatural” and “natural” is sometimes difficult, especially since some societies do not make such distinctions. However, most societies do (A. B. Child and Child 1993, 10). Alice and Irvin Child asserted that what all religions have in common is a concept of “mystical power” – power that is different from and greater than physical forces and social interaction. Thus, the supernatural is an extension of this idea of “mystical power.”

Regardless of the many societal differences in how religion is structured and

practiced, religion has been identified in all studied cultures (Glazier 1999, 2). Why religion is universal has been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion.

Religion serves many functions and has consequences for both individuals and societies. Religions offer explanations (Segal 2013; Butler 2010). Religion can be both comforting (Xygalatas et al. 2013) and terrifying (Acevedo and Thompson 2013; Winkelman 1998). Most researchers subscribe to Émile Durkheim's notion that religion acts as a "glue" (some think the most important "glue") that holds society together (Atran and Henrich 2010). Support for the idea that religion provides a cohesive force was found in a comparison between religious and secular communes in 19th-century America. Religious communes outlasted those motivated by secular ideologies (such as socialism) by many years (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008, 34; Sosis and Ruffle 2003). One explanation of their greater longevity may be that religious communes impose more than twice as many costly requirements as secular communes (Sosis and Ruffle 2003). The requirements include food taboos and fasts, constraints on material possessions, marriage, sex, and communication with the outside world. Costliness appears to not only demonstrate greater commitment by individuals, but also increases the likelihood of in-group loyalty and cooperation. But others point out that while religion may be socially integrating, it can also be socially disruptive (Sosis, Kress, and Boster 2007; Dirks 1988; Skali 2016).

A common explanation for religion is that it helps humans deal with stress, anxiety and uncertainty. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud concluded that religion gives people assurance in the face of insecurity because humans can never master the universal privations intrinsic to mortality (A. B. Child and Child 1993: 230). Nigel Barber (2011) reasons that if religion helps people cope psychologically with dangerous or unpredictable situations, then religious disbelief in God should increase with greater existential security. In a cross-national study Barber found that disbelief is higher in countries with more economic development, less income inequality, more redistribution, and better healthcare.

Religion not only serves many functions, but variation in religion is also predictive of many aspects of social and cultural life, including type of property, craft specialization, political hierarchy, and kin-based communities (McNett 1973, 245). Religion is also associated with material objects and buildings and it is these that help archaeologists infer the presence of religion in past societies.

Variation in Religious Belief

Animism

Edward Tylor (1958) postulated that animism ("belief in spirits") was the earliest, most elementary form of religion. Animism is predicated on the assumption that all objects, places, and creatures have a distinct spiritual essence. Potentially, animism encompasses everything—animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems,

human handiwork, and perhaps even words—as animated and/or alive. But animism takes a variety of forms in different societies (Harvey 2013; Bird-David 1999).

What kind of societies are likely to be animistic? If animism were the earliest form of religion, it presumably should be widespread amongst hunter-gatherer groups since humans were hunter-gatherers for most of human history. Moreover, it should also be found in ancestral hunter-gatherer groups. We don't have observational evidence to tell us what religious beliefs were found in prehistory, but Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe (2016) used language trees to reconstruct evolutionary history of recent hunter-gatherers. Looking at many religious traits, they concluded that the oldest and the most basic form of religious belief is animism as Tylor suggested. Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe (2016) also proposed a specific sequence of religious types. Animism was the first form, followed by belief in an afterlife, which, in turn, was followed by shamanism and ancestor worship. They found that ancestor spirits and/or high gods thought to be active in human affairs were probably absent among early humans perhaps reflecting a deep history of egalitarianism in hunter-gatherer groups.

Gods and Spirits

Gods and spirits are a major category of supernatural forces. Gods are thought to be of non-human origin, while many spirits were once human. Gods are named personalities. Spirits may or may not be named, are considered less powerful than gods, and are usually accorded less prestige. Gods and spirits are almost always “anthropomorphic” (conceived as the image of a person). As Stewart Guthrie (1999, 178) astutely observed, “if oxen (and horses) and lions. . . could draw with hands and create works of art like those made by men, horses would draw pictures of gods like horses, and oxen of gods like oxen.”

High Gods

In three major world religions today (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), there is but one god viewed as more powerful than all other supernatural beings. Guy Swanson (1975, 866) defined a “high god” as a “spirit who is said to have created all reality and/or is reality's ultimate governor. . . . [This] includes spirits whose sole act was to create the other spirits who, in turn, produced the natural world.” Not all societies have high gods. And even when high gods are present, they may be inactive or active in human affairs. Some active high gods attempt to push a moral agenda. Others do not.

High gods are generally found in societies with more social and political complexity.

Most researchers have concluded that religion and complexity are co-dependent (i. e., that religion and complexity have “co-evolved” – see Alcorta and Sosis 2005; Atran and Henrich 2010; Bulbulia et al. 2013; Sanderson and Roberts



Figure 2: Members of the Islamic Mevlevi Order of Sufis during the Sama ceremony, a physically active meditation in remembrance of God. Photo by Schorle. CC by 3.0 via Wikimedia.

2008).

More specifically, high gods are associated with three or more hierarchical decision-making groups (Swanson 1960, 81; Davis 1971; Underhill 1975; Simpson 1979; Peregrine 1996; Stark 2001; Sanderson and Roberts 2008)

Why? Swanson (1960), expanding on Durkheim's (1995) idea that religion stems from the power that society over individual members, suggested that the conception of gods comes more specifically from the types of social relationships in groups that persist over time and have distinctive purposes. He focused on groups he calls "*sovereign groups*" that "exercise original and independent jurisdiction over some sphere of social life" (p. 42). So, when there are hierarchical decision-making groups, it is likely that gods have hierarchical power over other gods and spirits.

Other predictors of high gods include:

- Higher dependence on food production, particularly pastoralism (Underhill 1975; Peoples and Marlowe 2012).
- Social differentiation, particularly stratification (Peoples and Marlowe 2012, 257)
- Patrilocality and patrilineality (Roes 2014, 241)
- Childrearing predictors of the high god's character or how people interact with gods

- Societies with hurtful or punitive child-training practices are more likely to believe that gods are aggressive and malevolent; societies with less punitive child training are more likely to believe that the gods are benevolent (Lambert, Triandis, and Wolf 1959).
- The more parents give children what they ask for, the more likely religious ritual is believed to be able to compel the gods to give adults what they wish for. In contrast, the more parents are punitive to children, the more likely gods are thought to be capricious (Spiro and D'Andrade 1958).

Why? Some scholars have suggested – following Freud – that god-human relationships are modeled after parent-child relationships. A related finding is that where parents are more neglectful of infants or are more punitive, the more a society fears ghosts of the dead at funerals (J. W. Whiting 1967, 156–7) Interestingly, adolescence is the most important time for the transmission of religious knowledge (Alcorta and Sosis 2005).

Ancestor Worship

The belief in ghosts is reportedly a near-universal (Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976, 51). And it may be a near-universal that people believe that these ghosts have some influence over their lives (Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley 1996). Most of the time these ghosts are dead relatives and friends, not strangers (Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976, 55). But societies vary in how important these dead ancestors are in the life of living people. In some societies such ancestors are important spiritual beings who play important roles in peoples' lives and people pay considerable attention to these spirits through appeals for help, supplication and sacrifices, and shrines where they can show respect to them.

Predictors of ancestor worship include:

- Descent groups (particularly unilineal descent groups). Societies have more involvement with ancestral spirits when they participate in kin-based groups larger than the nuclear family (Swanson 1975, 864, 1960, 97–108; Sheils 1975)

Why? Ancestor worship may function as a mechanism of social control that strengthens cohesion among kin and maintains lineal control of power and property (Sheils 1975; Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley 1996; Swanson 1960).

- Foraging societies tend to lack the concept of ancestor spirits or if present, they are relatively inactive in human affairs (Sheils 1975; Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe 2016).



Figure 3: Reburial during Famadihana, the Malagasy people's turning of the bones ceremony. Photo by Hery Zo Rakotondramanana. CC by 2.0 via Wikimedia.

Religion and Morality

For many Westerners, it seems obvious that religions should emphasize moral prescriptions. Morality has been a major focus of many Western religions. But the ethnographic record suggests that in many religions, gods are not particularly concerned about morality. For much of evolutionary history, humans lived in small-scale societies of foragers or horticulturalists where one typically finds no unified or explicit doctrine about spirits or ancestors, or gods, or established religious organizations. Moral concerns are not paramount. Instead, issues of moral behavior were mostly handled informally by communities.

What conditions favor the presence of gods who are concerned with human behavior?

- Societies living in uncertain or stressful environments are most likely to have gods with moral concerns. Such conditions include water scarcity, drought, environmental harshness, climatic instability, and lower environmental productivity (Snarey 1996; Brown and Eff 2010; Peoples and Marlowe 2012; Botero et al. 2014)

Why? Many scholars believe that the ecological duress and uncertainty increases the need for cooperation among individuals. Although there are costs to helping others, the gains in cooperation often outweigh the costs.

But there is often the problem of “free riders”—individuals who enjoy the benefits provided by others, but avoid doing their share. The belief in a judging god may be particularly effective in dealing with “free riders” and enforcing cooperative behavior where it is most needed. The “need” for such moral judgment by a supernatural may be particularly important in larger social groups where public opinion alone is insufficient to enforce norms of cooperation and where scarcity made conflict more likely.

- Animal husbandry (Brown and Eff 2010; Botero et al. 2014)
- Political organization beyond the community (Johnson 2005; Botero et al. 2014; Watts et al. 2015)
- Money and credit (Johnson 2005).
- Flexibility in inheritance and credit

Why? Societies with money and flexible credit exhibit differences in individual wealth. Under these circumstances, maintaining obligations for exchange and return on loans are more problematic and may require enforcement by godly sanctions (Swanson 1967, 233–41).

The Afterlife

The notion of afterlife is based on the idea that some aspect of an individual’s personal identity or consciousness continues to exist after the death of the body. The specific aspect of an individual that lives on after death varies from culture

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to culture. Survival may be partial or complete and individuals may or may not maintain personal identity. Belief in an afterlife—whether natural or supernatural—contrasts with a belief in oblivion or “nothing” after death. In some African societies, “the entire process of death and burial is simple, without elaborate rituals and beliefs in an afterlife. The social and spiritual existence of the person ends with the burial of the corpse” (Obayashi 1992).

In some societies, the afterlife is conceived as being like this life—only better (Robben 2017; Hall 1997; Glaser and Strauss 1971). Miller (2000) found that in Asia religious affiliation and the performance of prescribed rituals ultimately determines the quality of one’s afterlife. In some religions, the place one goes to after death is believed either to be a result of one’s own actions or the judgement of a moralizing god.

Some religious traditions postulate that the dead go to a specific plane of existence after death (Taylor 2000). In Hinduism, the nature of the continued existence is determined directly by the actions of the individual in the ended life, rather than through the decision of a supernatural being (Swanson 1960).

- Belief in an afterlife is widespread. One study reports that such beliefs are present in 79% of world societies (Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe 2016).
- Less economically productive societies (foragers with relatively little agriculture) are likely to lack the idea that where you go in the afterlife reflects a reward or punishment for behavior, whereas societies that are more productive (with more agriculture, particularly intensive agriculture) are likely to have such beliefs - Dickson et al. (2005).

Reincarnation

Reincarnation beliefs are common in preindustrial societies. Depending upon the sample, estimates range from 34% to 60% (Matlock 1993; 1994; Somersan 1984; Swanson 1960).

Beliefs about human-to-human reincarnation include the idea that after biological death the deceased person leaves his or her mortal body and returns to the human world in another human bodily form through rebirth (e.g., see Matlock 1993; Somersan 1984; Swanson 1960; Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976). Gananath Obeyesekere (2002) suggested that reincarnation emerged due to the desire of the bereaved to identify their loved-ones and to ensure that they return amongst them, rather than to another clan or lineage. This does not, however, explain why people use signs of continued identity in regions where non-kin are also perceived as able to reincarnate (Matlock 1993; Matlock and Mills 1994; Rosenblatt 1971).

- The presence of human-to-human reincarnation beliefs exists in about 30% of world cultures, including those of Melanesia, South Asia, North America, Australia and Europe. These beliefs are also predominant in West Africa, India, and Northwestern North America (Matlock 1993; Obeyesekere 2002).



Figure 4: A Buddhist merit-making ceremony at Wat Phan Tao in Thailand on Visakha Bucha Day 2014. Merit-making activities are believed to have positive impacts on participants' reincarnation outcomes. Photo by John Shedrick. CC by 2.0 via Flickr.

- Beliefs in reincarnation are likely to appear where the pattern of settlement is by small hamlets, compounds of scattered rural neighborhoods, or other units smaller than a village (Swanson 1960, 113), but this may not be the case if the ultimately sovereign group is kinship-based (1960, 115). However, Peregrine (1996) found no support for either hypothesis.
- In some regions where reincarnation beliefs are prominent -- such as West Africa, South Asia, and North America -- there is substantial ethnographic evidence that people interpret perceived similarities between the deceased and living as evidence that reincarnation has taken place (Matlock and Mills 1994; White 2016), and in societies where every ancestor is thought to reincarnate as a newborn child, reincarnation affords a way for people to maintain equilibrium in social structure through the continuation of rules regarding names, kinship systems and territory.

Variation in Religious Practices

In all societies, individuals have differential access to supernatural forces, gods, and/or spirits. Sometimes, the interaction is undertaken primarily by religious specialists, while in other societies, religion is more individual and almost anyone can interact with the supernatural.

There are many types of interactions ranging from performing rituals, practicing

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Figure 5: A busy church front in Riobamba, Ecuador. Attending church is a common ritual in Christian religions. Photo by Leon Doyon (all rights reserved).

avoidances, using methods for divination, performing sacrifices, giving offerings, and saying prayers.

Ritual

From a worldwide perspective, religious rituals are extraordinarily diverse, but as Atkinson and Whitehouse (2011) have pointed out, diversity of ritual is not without limits. According to Atkinson and Whitehouse, clusters of ritual features will result from cognitive and functional constraints as well the broader social system in which they are embedded. Two dimensions for religious ritual are the degree to which they are emotionally arousing and their frequency. Emotional rituals can inspire positive emotions (euphoria—such as trance dancing) and/or promote negative emotions (dysphoria—involving pain, fear, or terror). Some rituals lack much emotional involvement, focusing for example on repetition of doctrinal statements or prayers. These two dimensions are related or clustered (Atkinson and Whitehouse 2011):

1. Emotionally arousing rituals (particularly dysphoric rituals) do not occur with high frequency; conversely low emotion rituals occur frequently
2. Dysphoric rituals are more likely in societies with small communities, less agriculture, and with religions in which gods lack concern with morality

Why? In smaller social systems, dysphoric rituals may act to create fusion among group members, particularly if they are faced with high-risk and dangerous activities (such as hunting large animals or warfare). In larger social systems, where activities often involve strangers, more repetitive

rituals may be needed to produce group identification (Whitehouse et al. 2014). A related idea is that in societies with more differentiation of people, rituals will become more regularized (such as rites tied to the annual calendar) and apply to more people. Indeed, higher population density predicts more calendrical rites (Reeves and Bylund 1989).

3. In another study of rituals for males, Sosis, Kress, and Boster (2007) found that the most costly (painful and risky) rites are more likely found whenever:
 - warfare is present
 - polygyny is present
 - foraging is high
 - social stratification is low

Witchcraft and Sorcery

Witches and sorcerers invoke the supernatural to bring about illness, injury, and death. Anthropologists often use the terms sorcery and witchcraft interchangeably, but native peoples distinguish these terms. A most famous case is that of the Azande of Sudan who gave a great deal of attention to witchcraft accusations, but also asserted that there were no sorcerers (practitioners of witchcraft) in their villages (Evans-Pritchard 1937).

A major distinction between sorcerers and witches is that sorcerers manipulate physical objects and medicines. Witches, on the other hand, accomplish their goals by means of thoughts and emotion. Witches are commonly believed to have special powers in the eyes or mouth, can turn themselves into animals, have magic “familiars,” move at high speed at night, “eat” other humans, and gather in secret conventions. Beliefs in witchcraft are distributed unevenly across the globe. In developed countries, they have faded among indigenous populations but persist in many immigrant communities. In Asian and Latin America countries, belief in witches remains active (Koning 2013).

- Witches and sorcerers tend to have lower social and economic status than shamans and priests (Winkelman 1986).
- Belief in witchcraft is less prominent among foragers. It is widespread among agricultural communities with embryonic or patrimonial state systems (Koning 2013).

Why? Koning (2013, 163) explained witchcraft based on subsistence type. He suggested that In small foraging bands, individuals’ fear systems evolved to detect deceit and other social dilemmas. Following a transition to farming communities, the fear system could become overstimulated, resulting in accusations of witchcraft. Various factors such as centralization of political control, property rights, and urbanization mark a shift toward



Figure 6: The Thaipusam Festival in Malaysia. Offerings and sacrifices are made in the name of Murugan, the Hindu god of war. Photo by Peter Gronemann. CC by 2.0 via Flickr.

more collectivist forms of social paranoia. Semi-sedentary foraging, and-tool horticulture, plow agriculture, and pastoralism were found to be positively associated with witchcraft belief

- Witchcraft tends to occur where there are uncontrolled or un-legitimated relationships (Swanson 1960, 127). This refers to relationships between people which have no clear mechanisms for resolution (such as where the highest sovereign group is the community, but where marriages need to be arranged between communities.)
- Sorcery is more likely in societies lacking in superordinate punishment (B. B. Whiting 1950).

Why? The belief that someone you anger can hurt you with sorcery or witchcraft can act as a successful deterrent in societies lacking judicial authorities.

Offerings and Sacrifice

Sacrifice is the offering of food, objects or the lives of animals to supernatural beings as an act of worship. While sacrifice implies the ritual killing of an animal, the term “offering” can also be used for bloodless sacrifices of food or inanimate objects.

Animal sacrifice is practiced by adherents of many religions as a means of pleasing

the gods and/or changing the course of events. Sacrifice aspires to be selflessness, a perfect surrender that anticipates no return—but often, it is governed by an algebra of expected returns: this for that, wealth for merit, my life at the expense of another's. At its simplest, sacrifice is a violence performed to obtain a desired effect, such that the latter—the gain or benefit—is entailed by the loss or destruction of *something*; call this “something” the offering (Reinert 2016).

- Sacrifice exists in almost all cultures, but a much smaller percentage of societies practice human sacrifice (Winkelman 1998).
- While human sacrifice is rare, among preindustrial societies those with full-time craft specialists, slavery, and the *corvée* are the most likely to practice human sacrifice (Sheils 1980)

Why? The suggested explanation is that the sacrifice mirrors what is socially important: Societies that depend mainly on human labor for energy (rather than animals or machines) may think of a human life as an appropriate offering to the gods when people want something very important (Sheils 1980).

- Societies with human sacrifice are likely to be at a mid-range level of political complexity, having alliances and confederacies with other polities but only weak political integration (Baker and Winkelman 2005). Such societies also seemed to be subject to population pressure and frequently carried out warfare for land and other resources. Human sacrifice, with humans from the outside groups, may have been an attempt to terrorize people from the other polities.

Types of Practitioners

In all societies, there are multiple types of religious practitioners. Michael Winkelman (2010) identified five types of practitioner: shamans, shaman/healers, healers, sorcerers or witches, mediums, and priests. He claims that there is a general evolutionary sequence of practitioners with simpler societies tending to have one type (usually shamans) and complex societies possessing all five types.

- Shamans can be male or female, but they are usually male (Townsend 1999; Winkelman 2010).
- Shamans are usually male part-time religious specialists with high status; they often enter trance (see the module Altered States of Consciousness) to interact with spirits; shamans are often the only religious practitioner in hunting and gathering societies (Winkelman 2010).
- Shamans endure rigorous training that may take over a decade and involve the use of drugs to attain an altered state of consciousness (Winkelman 2010).

- Shaman/healers retain the use of trance, but their focus is on healing. They are usually found in agricultural societies in conjunction with priests.
- Mediums tend to be females. These part-time practitioners are thought to be possessed by spirits while in possession trances; they are described as having tremors, convulsions, seizures, and temporary amnesia. Mediums are found in more complex societies with either political hierarchy beyond the community or with social classes (Winkelman 1986)
- Priests are generally full-time male religious specialists. They have relatively high status and are thought to interact with superior or high gods. In most societies that have priests, the people who get to be priests obtain their offices through inheritance or political appointment (Winkelman 1986, 2010, 50–58)

What We Would Like to Know Better

- Does a higher intensity of religious practice provide more in-group cooperation but decrease cooperation between groups? What about in-group and intergroup hostility?
- What kinds of societies lack the idea of an afterlife? In what kinds of societies is there a good or a bad place in the afterlife.
- Under what conditions do societies drop beliefs in their gods and spirits and convert to a new religion?
- What conditions explain religious syncretism, or the creation of an amalgam of religious beliefs?
- Do societies with religious texts have stricter rules about religious practices and prohibitions?
- How much does the character of the gods reflect the norms and values of the society? Do more punitive societies have more punitive gods?
- Although religious beliefs are universal, some societies seem less concerned with religion than others. What conditions predict a lower or higher concern?
- What predicts the separation of men and women during religious rituals?

Exercises Using eHRAF World Cultures

Explore some texts and do some comparisons using the [eHRAF World Cultures](#) database. These exercises can be done individually or as part of classroom assignments. See the [Teaching eHRAF Exercise on Religion](#) for suggestions.

Credits

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Glossary

Animism The belief in the supernatural

Ancestor spirits the ghosts of dead relatives

Anthropomorphism perceiving gods as being like humans (see Guthrie 1999; Fisher 1991; Barrett and Keil 1996)

Mana an impersonal force that inhabits certain objects and is believed to confer success and strength.

Polytheism A religion with many gods

Monotheism A religion with one god

Shamans healers who have direct contact with the spirit world

Priests permanent religious specialists who learn their profession from other priests

Supernatural powers are believed to be non-human and are not subject to the laws of nature (see A. B. Child and Child 1993).

Rites of passage rituals that mark a change of status

Ritual any repetitive behavior

Belief is an assertion held to be true (see Needham 1974; Smith 1977)

Further Reading

Readers seeking a broader introduction to the anthropology of religion are encouraged to consult de Waal Malefijt (1989), A. B. Child and Child (1993),

Klass (1995), Eller (2014), Glazier (1999), Glazier and Flowerday (2003), and Bielo (2015) as well as Andrew S. Buckser's on-line overview "Religion"

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