

Third Edition

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**THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF
RELIGION, MAGIC, AND
WITCHCRAFT**

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Study Questions

1. With the growth of urban centers, U.S. funerals have moved out of the family context into the commercial world. As in any commercial venture, a special vocabulary develops that replaces many familiar terms. Look up some websites for funeral homes and cemeteries and examine the vocabulary that is used. What terms are used today in place of older terms such as *undertaker*, *coffin*, *corpse*, and *death*? What other examples can you find?
2. We can divide methods for disposing of the body into two main categories: those that preserve the body or part of the body and those that result in the complete disappearance of the body. Is there any correlation between these two categories and how a religion views death and the afterlife?
3. Discuss the practice of cryogenics as a method of handling a body after death. How is cryogenics similar to mummification?
4. Describe the customs surrounding the festival of Halloween in contemporary U.S. society. Do you see any religious elements in this festival today? What elements that are secular today are derived from religious elements in the past?
5. Many Hollywood movies show images of ghosts, vampires, and zombies. How do these images resemble or differ from these entities as they appear in actual religious systems?

Endnotes

1. N. Barley, *Grave Matters: A Lively History of Death around the World* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), p. 27.
2. A. Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: Noonday, 1997).
3. D. W. Plath, "Where the Family of God Is in the Family: The Role of the Dead in Japanese Households," *American Anthropologist*, 66 (April 1964), pp. 300–317.
4. B. Jordan, "Yurei: Tales of Females Ghosts," in S. Addiss (Ed.), *Japanese Ghosts and Demons: Art of the Supernatural* (New York: George Braziller, 1985), p. 25.
5. P. Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 16. Copyright © Yale University.
6. Ibid.
7. W. Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Touchstone, 1985).
8. K. Heider, *Grand Valley Dani: Peaceful Warriors* (3rd ed.) (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1997), p. 132.

Gods and Spirits

Ghosts, ancestors, and vampires are transformed human beings. However, there are many supernatural beings that generally do not have human origins. These supernatural beings include **gods** and **spirits**. Although we recognize these as two separate types of supernatural entities, this division is to some degree arbitrary. Generally speaking, gods are individualized supernatural beings, each with a distinctive name, personality, and sphere of influence that encompasses the life of an entire community or a major segment of the community. Spirits are generally less powerful than gods and usually are more localized. Frequently, they are collections of nonindividualized supernatural beings that are not given specific names and identities.

Supernatural beings are usually a crucial aspect of a religious system; many anthropologists have defined religion by the presence of such beings. Myths describe the actions of these beings, and their behavior may be seen as a model for human behavior. Rituals are often directed toward superhuman beings—to placate, praise, or make requests.

SPIRITS

Nonindividualized spirits include the leprechauns of Ireland, the jinn of the Middle East, and the kami of Japan. There are also spirits that are individually recognized, such as a guardian spirit, an ancestral spirit, and a shaman's spirit helper. In contrast with gods, spirits are less powerful and are more focused on particular individuals, families, or groups of specialists.

Whereas gods may live in a remote location, such as Mount Olympus, the home of the Greek gods, spirits live in the human world, interacting with humans and concerned about what humans are up to. Spirits often exhibit complex personalities. They may be friendly or harmful. They provide protection, success, and luck but also are blamed for minor mishaps. One can ask for their assistance, because they are closely connected to people and are involved in everyday human affairs. Offerings, entertainment, and attention will promote the development of a beneficial relationship between people and the spirit world. But ignoring their presence or, worse yet, doing something to harm or offend them can have negative consequences, such as the loss of a crop, infertility, illness, or the death of a child.

Because spirits live in the human world, they often reside in various physical objects—some natural, others human-made. Places of special beauty or unusual characteristics, such as a sacred grove or a waterfall, are said to be inhabited by spirits. Such places may also be considered

dangerous. They may be venerated, and people will often travel to such places to seek solutions to problems or to ask favors of the spirits. Unusual natural objects—such as a remarkable or strange stone or plant—may contain a spirit, as might a human-made object such as a statue or a **shrine**. Sometimes special structures are built and spirits are enticed to take up residence in them to provide protection or good luck to the builder.

The Dani View of the Supernatural

The Dani live in the highlands of New Guinea, in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya. This description of spirits is based on a study of the Mulia Valley Dani.

The study of Dani religion brings the paired concepts of emic and etic into clear focus (Chapter 1). Because the Dani themselves seldom articulate their belief system, it becomes exceedingly difficult for an outsider to learn about Dani religious practices from an insider, or emic, perspective. As is the case with many religions, to the outsider, Dani religion appears to be confusing and illogical. Questions about rituals and beliefs are greeted either by silence or by the familiar “That is just the way we do things” or “This is the way our fathers did it.” Sometimes the question elicits a specific myth.

An anthropologist, using an outsider or etic perspective, can attempt to understand the underlying structure and logic of Dani beliefs and practices, although the Dani themselves might not understand or accept this structure and logic. For example, anthropologist Douglas James Hayward notes that the Dani appear to organize their world into complementary pairs.¹ Their physical landscape is divided into cultivated and noncultivated land, and animals are divided into those that live in association with people and those that do not. Their society is organized in terms of a system in which all individuals are placed into one of two social groups that intermarry with one another. Using the principle of complementary pairs, Hayward divides the Dani supernatural world into several categories by using three criteria: Are the beings physical or spirit? Are they beneficent or malevolent? Are they close or far away?

The beings that inhabit the Dani world are either spirit or physical (“truly present”). Physical beings are mortal and are subject to the laws of nature. They include people, animals, and plants. Spirit beings are immortal and are not subject to the laws of nature. However, this classification does not necessarily correspond to our dichotomy between spirit and physical. For example, the sun is believed to be a real woman and thus a physical being, albeit one with unusual abilities.

The identification of a being as beneficent or malevolent also is not as easy as it first appears, for the categorization of a being as beneficent or malevolent often depends on context. For example, ghosts are spirits of the recently deceased that linger near the village in which they once lived, reluctant to leave. If the community fails to perform funeral rituals in a satisfactory manner, the ghost becomes disappointed and may cause trouble for the community. Although ghosts have a negative influence on Dani life, they also can be beneficent. Ghosts are consulted in divination ceremonies. They also warn the community of the approach of an enemy raiding party.

The focus of Dani rituals is aimed at those spirit beings that live close by and play significant roles in their lives. This includes close beneficent spirits such as guardian spirits. Everyone has a guardian spirit, but whereas boys are introduced to their spirits during initiation rituals, women never get to know their guardian spirits.

An important group of close beneficent spirits is spirits associated with nature. These include forest spirits, rain spirits, and flood spirits. The *weya* spirits control the rains. When they become violent, they send lightning storms, and trees that have been struck by lightning are

evidence of their presence and power. However, they are classified as benevolent beings because they bring the rain.

Included among the close malevolent spirits are forest spirits and swamp spirits. In the forest lurk male forest spirits who seduce women traveling alone through the forest. The forest also contains female forest spirits, who seduce men by taking the form of their wives and girlfriends. Sexual intercourse with such a spirit brings about death for the man (unless a pig has been sacrificed) as well as the birth of a child that looks exactly like a human child but only has half a human soul.

Many close malevolent spirits are associated with illnesses. These spirits often are identified with particular animals. For example, a spirit associated with frogs causes illnesses characterized by cold, clammy hands and feet; a spirit associated with owls bring about sore throats; and a spirit associated with lizards is responsible for the swelling of the limbs and joints.

Remote malevolent spirits live in other people’s territories. They are a danger only when someone brings a spirit with him into Dani territory. When returning home from a journey, the traveler closes the trail behind him by placing a “spirit restrainer,” composed of clumps of grass on sticks. The spirit cannot go beyond or around the restrainer and therefore cannot follow the traveler home.

Apart from the enemy, the only other malevolent nonspirit beings are a community of little people who live in the sky. Being lazy, they stole food from their neighbors’ gardens rather than growing it themselves. They were finally driven out by the Dani and climbed into the sky. Eventually, they learned how to farm. However, these little people like to urinate on their former enemies during rains. Men do not like to go out of doors on days when it is raining or misty.

Guardian Spirits and the Native American Vision Quest

An important element in many Native American cultures is direct contact with supernatural beings and supernatural power. An example is the vision quest, in which the individual enters into an altered state of consciousness, makes contact with the world of spirit beings, and receives a gift of supernatural power. The spirit beings that are encountered in these visions are often referred to as guardian spirits. An individual, usually male, may attempt to make contact with a guardian spirit either as part of a coming-of-age ritual or continually throughout his adult life, as a means of attaining protection, guidance, and identity. According to their worldview, it is only through the attainment of this connection with the supernatural and the receipt of supernatural power that a person can be successful in life.

Among the Ojibwa of the Great Lakes area, the vision quest is carried out at puberty. However, children begin preparing early in life with periodic fasting. They are given instruction in how to induce a vision and how to recognize and reject a bad vision. At the appropriate time the boy is led into the forest to a platform that has been constructed in a tall pine tree. He is left there alone to fast until he receives his vision. The vision is interpreted as a journey into the supernatural world. The boy is shown the path his life should take and the spirit beings who will be his guardian spirits. He is also told of certain objects that he can acquire that will serve as physical symbols of his relationship with the guardian spirits. After a successful vision quest the boy assumes the status of an adult man.

Among the Wind River Shoshoni of Wyoming, vision quests are undertaken not just at puberty, but throughout life. Supernatural power can be attained from guardian spirits in visions and in dreams. In the vision quest the supplicant, usually male, rides to a place with rock drawings in the foothills. After cleansing himself in a creek or lake, he goes to the rock ledge

beneath the drawings. Naked except for a blanket, he waits for the vision. The vision is brought on by a combination of fasting, enduring the cold, sleep deprivation, and smoking tobacco. What is actually seen varies but commonly includes trials to be overcome before the spirit appears, often as an animal, to bestow supernatural power. The spirit frequently gives the man specific instructions, such as wearing a special item or avoiding certain people or behaviors. For example, a deer spirit that gives the gift of speed while running might instruct the man to wear a deer tail sewn on his clothes or on a ribbon around his neck. Among the Shoshoni, a man can acquire several guardian spirits to aid him.

Jinn

The Qur'an tells of God's creation of three types of conscious beings: humans made from clay, **angels** made from light, and **jinn** made from fire without smoke. Jinn are normally invisible, but they can make themselves visible, and in doing so, they often take the form of a human or an animal. Once visible, they can alter their shape and features at will. Jinn are born, live, and die; they marry, mate, and have families. Some have great powers; others do not. Many are specifically known and named; others occur as a part of an unnamed collective of spirits. Like people, jinn have different personalities, some good and some bad. They may lie and deceive people; they enjoy playing tricks and kidnapping people; and they often tempt humans into sexual intercourse.

Sometimes a person can forge a special relationship with a jinn, and then the jinn becomes a source of special powers. For example, a person can enter into an alliance with a jinn and become a powerful magician. The Genii of the Aladdin story is a jinn, and the stories of the *Arabian Nights* are largely stories involving jinn. But generally, people try to keep a distance between themselves and jinn because, more often than not, jinn are troublemakers. People will frequently recite verses from the Qur'an or avoid situations that attract the attention of jinn. This is the origin of many tabus surrounding blood, childbirth, and marriage, because these are situations that are very attractive to jinn. The very existence of jinn causes people to be careful, yet they also provide an explanation for illness and bad luck.

SPIRIT POSSESSION IN THE SUDAN. Anthropologist Janice Boddy describes the presence of jinn in the small Arabic-speaking village of Hofriyat in the northern Sudan.² The Hofriyati recognize three types of jinn. White jinn have little effect on humans, whereas black jinn, or devils, are dangerous, and possession by black jinn often leads to serious illness and death. However, the most frequently encountered are red jinn called *zairan* (singular: *zar*). The red color symbolizes an association with blood and fertility. *Zairan* are capable of causing illness. Such illnesses must be dealt with, but they are seldom fatal.

The world of the *zairan* parallels the world of humans. *Zairan* belong to different religions, occupations, and ethnic groups, and they exhibit a range of behaviors, some good and some bad. In other words, they are very much like humans, mixing both good and bad traits, but generally they tend to be amoral and capricious. The Hofriyati recognize jinn that are identified as representing diverse ethnic and social groups. Some are Europeans, West Africans, Ethiopians, Arabs, and so forth, representing outside groups with which they have had contact in the past. Yet there are no *zairan* who resemble the Hofriyati themselves.

Spirit possession occurs when a *zar* enters the body of a woman. Most possession occurs in women of childbearing age, and close to half of the adult women in the community are possessed. In these communities the life of a woman is very restricted. Physically, she

remains within the high walls of the family compound, where she is segregated from the men, eating and even sleeping in separate quarters. Her worth and happiness depend on her fertility and her ability to produce sons. The production of sons and their survival are women's tasks, and men are not to blame in the case of failure. A woman who does not have children, miscarries, or has only daughters or whose children die young is accorded a very low position in the society. She may be divorced by her husband or may have to accept a co-wife in the marriage.

Therefore there is a great deal of anxiety in marriage, and this anxiety often leads to depression. In this case a woman may be possessed by a *zar*. However, it also is possible that the *zar* is responsible for the misfortune surrounding her reproductive life. Once the *zar* has entered her body, she will continue to be possessed from that time on.

Although *zar* possession is a lifelong condition, it would not be accurate to describe this possession as an illness. During ceremonies each *zar* is drummed into each woman in turn; the woman then goes into a trance. Through this relationship the woman regains a measure of well-being, although she must constantly pay attention to the wishes of the spirit by attending possession ceremonies on a regular basis. The possessed woman must also meet certain demands of the spirit. She must eat certain foods, wear gold and clean clothing, avoid anger, and manifest other ideal feminine behaviors. As long as the relationship continues, the woman will maintain a "cure." From the spirit's point of view, this relationship gives it access to the human world. Once it possesses its host, the *zar* will be entertained and can engage in various activities.

When she is not possessed, a woman will participate in singing and drumming. Such all-female rituals provide an important outlet for otherwise isolated women. They are much more than curing rituals and are also enjoyable social events in a world where such social activities are relatively rare.

Christian Angels and Demons

Angels and demons are spirit beings that appear in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In these monotheistic religions angels act as mediators between God and human beings. Angels are often represented as agents of revelation, executors of divine will, or as witnesses to divine activity. Angels appear in both Greek and Jewish writings but tend to play a limited role. In the New Testament of Christianity, angels are frequently mentioned. ("And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him" [Luke 22:43].)

However, much of the popular Christian belief about angels comes not from the Bible, but from the sixth-century writings of Saint Dionysus. In his work *The Celestial Hierarchy*, he established a rank order of angels that included, in descending order, seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominations, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and angels. Belief in angels is widespread in modern U.S. society. A poll conducted in 2007 found that 68 percent of those surveyed believe that angels and demons are active in the world.³ Despite these numbers, there is little consensus on exactly what angels are or how they look. Descriptions range from a glowing light to a very human appearance, or perhaps the presence of the angel is felt but not seen. In general, angels are said to appear to help people in need, often as workers or messengers of God.

At the other end of the spectrum are **demons**. Although frequent mention is made of demons in the Christian Bible, no one passage gives a full account of their creation or workings. However, several Church writings have been published that clarify the subject, such as the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council from the Catholic Church in 1215. Here it says that both the Devil and the demons were originally angelic creatures, created by God as good, innocent beings. They became evil by their own actions. Satan and his minions rebelled against God and, after a

battle with the good angels, were cast from heaven. Satan and the demons are believed to be closely associated with human evil, including the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden and their dominion over hell.

One common activity of demons, as described in the New Testament, is demonic possession. This was considered a major cause of strange behaviors by humans and much of Jesus' healing ministry involved performing demonic exorcism.

In the period roughly between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, Christian demonology reached its peak. Beliefs about demons were elaborated and had much social influence. Ornate doctrines were produced detailing the hierarchies, invocation, methods, and exorcism of demons. This was the era of the infamous Witchcraze (see Chapter 10), during which there was a particular interest in **incubi** and **succubae**. Incubi and succubae are, respectively, male and female demons who have sex with humans while they sleep. Sex with an incubus was said to be responsible for the birth of demons, witches, and deformed children.

The belief in demonic possession is still common today among conservative Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. For many of these groups a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible requires a belief in demons and demonic exorcism, because they are mentioned so frequently in the New Testament. See Box 9.1 for a discussion of Christian exorcism.

GODS

Generally speaking, gods are more powerful than spirits. They possess great supernatural power and control or influence major forces of nature, such as the wind, rain, and fertility. Gods are personalized individuals with names, origins, and specific attributes. Some gods are associated with social and political units such as clans and villages. The number of gods found within a religious system varies from one to more than a thousand.

BOX 9.1

Christian Demonic Exorcism in the United States

Possession as a source of illness that requires exorcism for healing is found cross-culturally, including in the United States. As is discussed in this chapter, the Christian belief in demons and demonic exorcism is taken directly from the New Testament. There we learn that Satan and his demons harass, torment, and possess humans. This possession sometimes is shown in new skills or strength that the person then has (by virtue of the demon). In general, possession was described as an illness, and much of Jesus' healing ministry involved performing demonic exorcism. In the New Testament, Jesus is able to perform exorcisms by merely demanding that the demons leave; his disciples do the same in the name of Jesus. ("And in the synagogue there was a man, which had a spirit of an unclean devil, and cried out with a loud voice, Saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art; the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the devil had thrown him in the midst, he came out of him, and hurt him not" [Luke 4:33–37]).

In his book *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty*, Michael Cuneo argues that the phenomenon of Christian demonic exorcism is both influenced by and reflects wider American culture. For example, he cites the great influence of the book and later film *The*

BOX 9.1 (Continued)

Exorcist in the early 1970s. Following the release of *The Exorcist* and other popular books, the reported incidence of demonic possession and requests for exorcism greatly increased. The film depicted a specifically Catholic event. However, official Catholic exorcisms were—and are—difficult to come by. Although the Catholic Church does believe in demonic possession and the need for exorcisms, these are seen as rare events. The priest is advised to be skeptical and look for other causes first, such as mental illness. The exorcism ritual can be officially performed only with permission of a bishop.

However, some exorcisms were available through unofficial channels, particularly priests who do not agree with the modernization of the church following the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s and among charismatic Catholics. In the 1970s and 1980s, exorcism rituals also became popular in other Christian religions, particularly among people belonging to a religious movement called neo-Pentecostalism or the charismatic renewal. In general, members of this movement were seeking a more personal and dramatic religious experience. This experience was called baptism in the Holy Spirit and was believed to be associated with various spiritual gifts (or charisms), such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing. Part of this healing was exorcisms—or deliverance ministries, as they were often called. The demons involved were often personal demons such as demons of lust, anger, resentment, and addiction, as well as demons of specific illnesses, such as cancer.

Exorcism also became popular with certain groups of evangelical Protestants, particularly in the early 1980s. Cuneo estimates that there are at least 500–600 evangelical exorcism ministries today and that the number might even be two or three times this amount.

Cuneo points out that the exorcism movement fits in very well with other cultural ideas that were popular in the late twentieth century in the United States. Like other self-help regimens and therapies of the era, the exorcism movement teaches that people are victims and not responsible for the bad things in their lives. Demons are to blame in much the same way that more mainstream therapies blame the ubiquitous "dysfunctional family." Cuneo writes, "Exorcism may be a strange therapy, it may be the crazy uncle of therapies, but it's therapy nonetheless. And no less than any of the countless other therapies in the therapy-mad culture of post-sixties America, it promises liberation for the addicted, hope for the forlorn, solace for the brokenhearted. It promises a new and redeemed self, a self freed from the accumulated debris of a life badly lived or a life sadly endured."^a

As was said in Chapter 4, religious healing can be very effective, and this is often the case with exorcism as well. From an outsider's perspective the ritual attention paid to the afflicted person alone is likely to be helpful.

^aM. Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 273.

Gods are **anthropomorphic**; that is, they resemble people in their physical appearance and personalities. They are born, marry, and sometimes die. They love and lust, are wise and dull, loving and hateful, generous and miserly. Some are sympathetic to human beings; others are hostile. And like humans, gods can be influenced by gifts in the form of offerings and sacrifices and by praise and flattery, and sometimes they can be tricked.

The behavior of humans on earth reflects the orders and commandments of the gods. Gods set up codes of behavior and punish people who do not observe them. They may prescribe that certain ritual activities be performed and bring down misfortune when they are not. Some gods are very concerned about the fate of human beings and will establish close relationships with them and have a great influence in human lives.

Types of Gods

Within a particular religious system, the gods as a collective make up a **pantheon**. Usually, the gods within the pantheon form a hierarchy with a **supreme god** at the top. They are related to one another in various ways, often making up a large family unit characterized by family relationships, such as those seen in the Greek pantheon (Figure 9.1). The community of the gods often mirrors human society. If the human society is highly hierarchical and warlike, so is the society of the gods.

In many ways a pantheon resembles a human society, often with a division of labor. Specific gods are associated with the forces of nature, human fertility and the human life cycle, economic activities, and war. Specialized deities are called **attribute gods**. The relative importance of such gods depends largely on the importance of various activities within human society. For example, if a society is very warlike, the war gods may be featured prominently in religious rituals.

The gods within a pantheon have specific spheres of influence and control. Sometimes there is a relatively small number of gods, each controlling a rather large slice of human activity. Sometimes there are a great many gods, each highly specialized. For example, instead of a single god associated with agriculture, the Roman pantheon had a rather lengthy list of gods who were responsible for very specific activities within the farming cycle (Table 9.1).

Although there is a tremendous variety of gods that can be listed, certain types seem to appear over and over as we move from society to society. **Creator gods** are responsible for the creation of the physical earth and the plants and animals that live on it. Creator gods can be very powerful deities and often occupy the top rung of a hierarchy of gods. Creation is not necessarily the work of a single god. Often various aspects of creation are divided among several gods, or, usually after the creation of the physical earth, different gods are responsible for the creation of

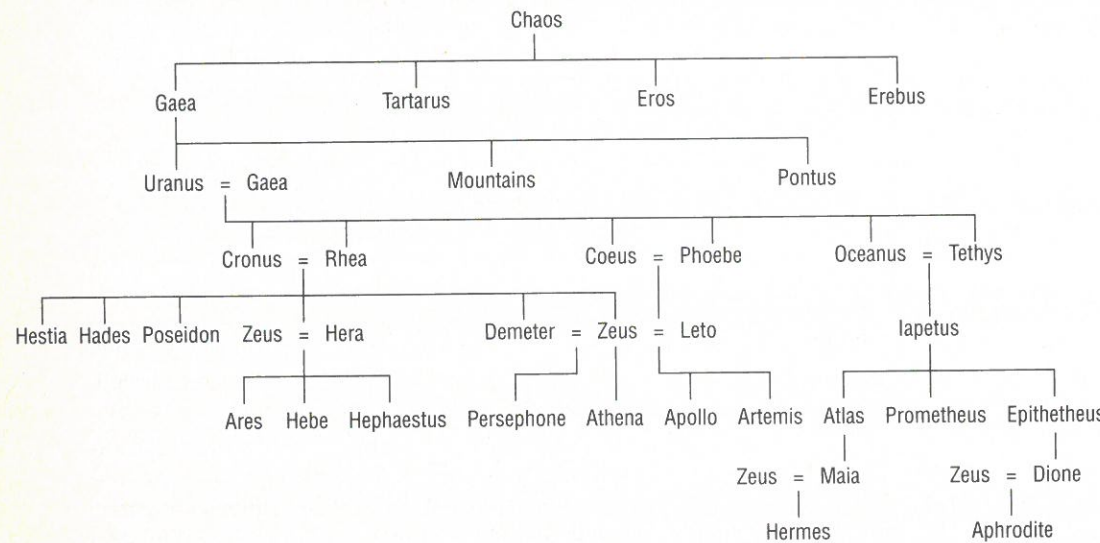


FIGURE 9.1 The Greek Pantheon. This diagram portrays the relationships among the better known gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon. Unlike human families, gods and goddesses are able to marry brother to sister and to produce children without a mate.

TABLE 9.1 The Roman Gods and Goddesses of Agriculture

Deity	Responsibility
Seia	The sprouting of the seed
Segesta	The shoots coming through the soil
Proserpina	Forms the stalks
Nodotus	Forms sections of the stem
Volutina	Forms protective sheath around seeds
Patelana	Later removes sheath around seeds
Lacturnus and Matuta	Ripening of grain (at two stages)
Flora	Makes plant blossom

specific types of plants and animals or the plants and animals that occupy a particular area. This includes the creation of people.

However, sometimes the creator god creates the world and then withdraws from active interactions with the world. These **otiose gods** are too remote and too uninterested in human activities to participate in the activities and fate of humans. Therefore rituals are seldom performed to influence and to ask favors from such gods. Sometimes these gods maintain interest in humans through lesser, intermediary deities.

A common form of supernatural being found in cultures in many diverse areas is the trickster. Ambiguity is one of its major characteristics, which often makes it difficult to define. Most often male, the trickster is able to transform himself into a series of beings—human, animal, and deity. The various parts of his body may detach themselves or be severed from the body. In some trickster stories he is seemingly destroyed by being burned, crushed, or disemboweled—yet he is able to reassemble himself. Often the trickster is a creator who is responsible for bringing many technologies, customs, and activities into the world, such as fire, healing, and magic. Although on the one hand he is powerful, courageous, and creative, he is also vindictive, selfish, cowardly, and destructive. Perhaps his two most frequently mentioned characteristics are gluttony and lust; he has a voracious appetite for food and sex. He is always finding ways to find and steal food and is never sexually satisfied. Among the best-known tricksters are those of North America, such as Raven, Coyote, and Hare. (Box 2.5 tells a story of the Haida trickster.)

The trickster figure plays a number of roles in human societies. The stories point out human frailties through satire, because the trickster represents the antithesis of what it is to be human and places human society in its position in an environment that is not always stable and predictable. Sam Gill writes, “In Trickster is embodied the human struggle against the confinement felt by being bound to place, even with the obvious necessity of such definition in order to prevent chaos. In many of his adventures, Trickster permits people to experience the vicarious thrills and freedoms of a utopian existence. But his folly reveals the very meaning of the boundaries that give order to human life.”⁴ The trickster may also find a place in situations of contact and social conflict. In San society the trickster is frequently seen as a participant in society who flouts society’s rules. In many stories the trickster finds himself interacting with the nonnative, dominant population, in which case the stories become protest and resistance stories in which social situations are reversed and the trickster outwits the dominant individual.

Gods and Society

Émile Durkheim first proposed the idea that religious symbolism marks as sacred important institutions of human society that are necessary for the group's survival.⁵ Durkheim's approach is a functionalist one, seeing religious and other cultural phenomena as serving some essential purpose in maintaining the society. In his analysis of gods, he points out that the powers commonly attributed to gods are similar to those of society: creating sacred times and spaces, designating moral rules and punishing offenders, existing above all individuals, requiring sacrifice. Values that we learn in society, such as obligation, loyalty, respect, and hierarchy, are mirrored in our relationship with supernatural beings.

The imagery that is used for gods, such as their anthropomorphic nature, is taken from social categories and statuses. Gods are rulers, fathers, mothers, daughters, and sons. We relate to them through social interactions in ways learned in society. Whatever the themes are in a particular culture will be reflected in the nature and domains of the gods. The values and concerns of a culture are projected onto the gods themselves, and the behavior of humans toward the gods is an expression of the social behaviors valued by that culture.

In a similar vein, British anthropologist Robin Horton suggests that supernatural beings function to extend the realm of social relations.⁶ Again, the focus is on gods as anthropomorphic beings who reflect human behavior. Horton suggests that the behavior of the gods provides a model for humans. He explored his ideas by looking at various African religions. Although a high god is found in almost all of these religions, the nature of this god ranges from an otiose god to one who is in active control of the universe. Horton thought that two variables explain much of this variation.

The first variable is how often people in that society encounter other peoples and the world in general outside their own local community. Horton thinks that lesser gods are associated with the interpretation of events occurring in the immediate area while a high god is more important for interpreting that immediate world in relation to the greater world beyond the local area. With this greater level of contact, issues that people face are more likely to be seen as being part of just being human. Thus the greater the contact a society has with the larger world, the greater the need for a high god who has universal features and is associated with humanity in general rather than just with a local group.

The second variable proposed by Horton was the degree to which an individual's status in the society is **ascribed** or **achieved**. An ascribed status is one that is given to an individual based on attributes over which they have no control, such as gender and family line. Horton proposed that because an individual's status is determined solely by the community, ideas will focus on lesser gods who themselves are focused on local issues. In contrast, if status is based on an individual's personal achievements, the individual is, at least in part, independent from the community. Therefore explanations of personal success and failure are more likely to reference a high god who rules over a wider realm.

Horton suggests that these variables help to explain the openness of Africa to Islam and Christianity. He correlates the arrival of missionaries in Africa with the opening up of local communities to the wider world and an increase in emphasis on achieved versus ascribed status.

The functionalist perspective was also tested in a 1974 study by Guy Swanson.⁷ In the study, Swanson looked at fifty different societies to see whether social characteristics of a group are predictive of their religious beliefs. Here we will look at two of the predictions he tested that concern the number and nature of supernatural beings.

BOX 9.2

Games and Gods

Among the many expressions of a culture's worldview are the games that are played. For example, are games of chance favored over games of strategy? Do games rely on physical skills or on mental skills? These and other characteristics of games are associated with particular features of a culture. Here we will look at the connection between games and religion.

John Roberts, Malcolm Arth, and Robert Rush classified games into three categories: games of strategy, games of chance, and games of physical skill. They found that games of chance, such as dice games, are associated with religious activities. On the simplest level, success at a game of chance may be attributed to aid received from the supernatural, either magical in nature or through supernatural beings. The authors argue that games of chance are "exercises in relationships with the supernatural." They tested this idea by looking at the nature of supernatural beings in societies where games of chance were the most prevalent type of game played. The dimensions they explored included how aggressive or how benevolent supernatural forces were seen to be and how easy it was to coerce these beings. They hypothesized that gods in these societies would be seen as more benevolent than aggressive and as being relatively easy to coerce. The hypothesis was upheld in their sample of societies. As an interesting side note, the lack of reference to games of chance in the Hebrew Bible suggests that this God was more aggressive than benevolent and not easily coerced.

The study concluded that "games of strategy may be related to mastery of the social system; games of chance may be linked with mastery of the supernatural; and games of physical skill are possibly associated with the mastery both of self and of environment."

Source: John M. Roberts, Malcolm J. Arth, and Robert R. Rush, "Games in Culture," *American Anthropologist*, 61 (1959), pp. 597–605.

First, Swanson looked at religious systems in which there is a high or supreme god who is higher than all other supernatural beings. In Swanson's study, this could be either the only god in the system or the ruler of a pantheon of gods. The essential element was that this god rules over a hierarchy with at least two levels of supernatural beings below it. Swanson reasoned that, on the basis of Durkheim's work, such a religious hierarchy was more likely to be found in a society that also had a decision-making hierarchy that contained at least three different levels. In a kin-based society, for example, this could include families, lineages, and clans (a lineage contains many families, and a clan contains two or more lineages). His study supported this hypothesis. The belief in a supreme god was found in 78 percent of societies with three levels and 91 percent of those with four or more levels but in only 11 percent with only one or two levels.

Swanson also looked at polytheistic systems in which no one god is considered to be supreme. Although they are superior to spirits, each god rules over a particular domain, and none is superior to another. Because these gods are attribute gods, Swanson realized that the presence of this type of god would be connected to the degree of specialization in a society. He found that the number of specialists is positively correlated with the number of such gods.

Sigmund Freud (Chapter 1) and psychosocial anthropologists have a similar perspective. For example, Freud thought that religion as a whole can be seen as a symbolic expression of

relationships between children and their parents.⁸ This can especially be seen in the nature of gods. We think about nature anthropomorphically, and so there is a god of thunder, a god of the mountains, a god of the river, and so on. We then project human qualities, particularly those of parents, onto them. For example, if parents are punitive, so are the gods; if parents are indulgent, so are the gods.

The Gods of the Yoruba

In Chapter 3 we examined the color naming system of the Yoruba and how it applies to the deities called the *orisha*. The Yoruba live in the southwestern region of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin in West Africa. Through the slave trade and more recently immigration, Yoruba culture has spread into the New World. Theirs is an ancient culture, and their religious concepts are found throughout a number of city-states, each associated with a particular urban center. The urban center of Ife is of special importance, for it was here that the first acts of creation were performed. It was here that Olodumare sent the gods to create the earth.

The Yoruba cosmos is divided into two realms: Orun, heaven or sky, and Aiye, the earth, the realm of the living. Residing in Orun is the Creator Olodumare, gods known as the *orisha*, and the ancestors. Olorun is the high god and the source of all supernatural power, but he is remote from the people and is not approached in rituals, an example of an otiose god. He is contacted through the intermediaries, the *orisha*.

There are a large number of *orisha*. Some are acknowledged throughout the Yoruba region; others are associated with a particular region, village, or even family group. The *orisha* are anthropomorphic and display human emotions. They are not inherently good or evil, but manifest complex behaviors and can act in a good or evil way, depending on the situation and the context. The *orisha* make themselves known through possessing a devotee, who then moves in a characteristic manner associated with the god. The person will also wear special clothing and hold certain objects. Worship of particular deities is associated with shrines and altars that contain objects that are placed there to please the gods and to show one's devotion. The *orisha* are examples of attribute gods. Each is approached in ritual because of a particular problem. Table 9.2 lists the best known of the *orisha*.

The Gods of the Ifugao

The Ifugao are a mountain-dwelling people living in the western mountains of Luzon in the Philippines (Southeast Asia culture area). They were studied by R. F. Barton in the early part of the twentieth century.⁹ The Ifugao are well known as a culture with one of the largest known pantheons. Barton listed 1,240 deities but believed that there were as many as 1,500. These deities are grouped into forty classes, although the classification is quite inconsistent. Yet the Ifugao have no supreme or creator deity. Like most supernatural beings, Ifugao deities are immortal; they are often invisible; they are able to change their shape; and they can transport themselves instantly through space. Although the deities can be grouped by their characteristics and powers, each does have its own specific place in the pantheon. Just as in the world of humans, the best way to get along with the gods is to bribe them. A prayer without a sacrifice is useless because the sacrifice is treated as a payment.

As an example, one of the classes is translated as the "Paybackables." The name is derived from a word used for a payment in an economic exchange. The Ifugao believe that they used to have trading relations with these deities in the past and have received from the deities a great deal of their culture. This is the largest of the classes and includes a rather broad range of deities,

TABLE 9.2 Some of the Yoruba Orisha

Orisha	Domain	Characteristics	Symbolic Representation
Esu-Elegba	"Guardian of the Threshold," first god to be addressed in ritual; intermediary between people, their ancestors, and the gods	Unpredictable, trickster	Hooked beaded stick; red and black
Obatala	King of the <i>orisha</i>	Ethical, merciful, patient, composed	White sheet, white beaded cane; white
Ogun	Rules over metal, technology, and war	Aggressive, bold	Beaded machete, metal implements; green and dark blue
Orisa Oko	Agricultural deity, judges antisocial behavior, disease, and poverty, interprets Ifa divination		Iron beaded staffs, flutes
Osanyin	Forest deity and god of herbalistic medicine		Represented as a puppet with a squeaky voice, iron staff topped with birds; colors of the forest
Osoosi	Hunter god	Quick, strong, aggressive, intellectual	Hunter's hat, powder horns, bow and arrow; green and blue
Osun	Goddess of freshwater streams; sustains life	Youngest <i>orisha</i> , beautiful and vain, deceitful	Round fan, crown and beaded apron; crystal yellow gold to opaque chartreuse
Sango	God of thunder and lightning	Proud, aggressive, quick tempered	Double-bladed axe, gourd rattle, zigzag motif representing lightning
Yemoja	Ruler of the river Ogun, mother of many <i>orisha</i> , symbol of motherhood	Calm, serious, dignified	Round fan, crown; crystal white and crystal blue or green

including nature gods, deified heroes and ancestors, and technological gods. An important god in this class is Lidum, a deity who taught the Ifugao many of their rituals.

Barton lists 168 "Paybackables." An example is the deities that are involved with the activity of weaving. They include "Separator of Seeds from Cotton," "Separator of Defective, Lumped Fibers," "Fluffer," "Spinner," "Draw Out of Thread on Spindle Bob," "Black Dyer," "Red Dyer," "Yellow Dyer," "Winder into Ball," "Weaver's First Helper Who Receives the Ball and Passes It Back and Forth," "Second Helper Who Passes Ball around the End Stick," "Scrutinizer (who sees that the job of setting up the loom is done right)," and—well, you get the general idea.

A rather interesting class of deities is the "Convincers." These gods bend a person's will to that of the person who invokes them. This process is called by English-speaking Ifugao

convincing. To fulfill religious obligations, an Ifugao must borrow things to sacrifice. The loan is usually very difficult to get repaid, and the Ifugao have developed many behaviors, including bullying and bluffing, to get the loan repaid. For example, if a debtor has publicly refused to pay a debt and therefore cannot pay it without losing face, the one to whom the debt is owed will call on the god Amobok, who will weaken the debtor's resolve and get him to pay back the debt in secret, thereby saving face.

There are many other important classes of deities. These include gods of reproduction, messenger deities, gods associated with various illnesses, gods associated with death, divination deities, gods of war, guardians of property, and many, many more.

Goddesses

Goddesses have been important figures in many religious systems. Some scholars believe that early human religions centered on fertility, a lunar cycle as opposed to a solar one, and the worship of a goddess. This is largely speculative and based on findings of small carvings of female figures with exaggerated characteristics thought to be connected to fertility (Figure 9.2).

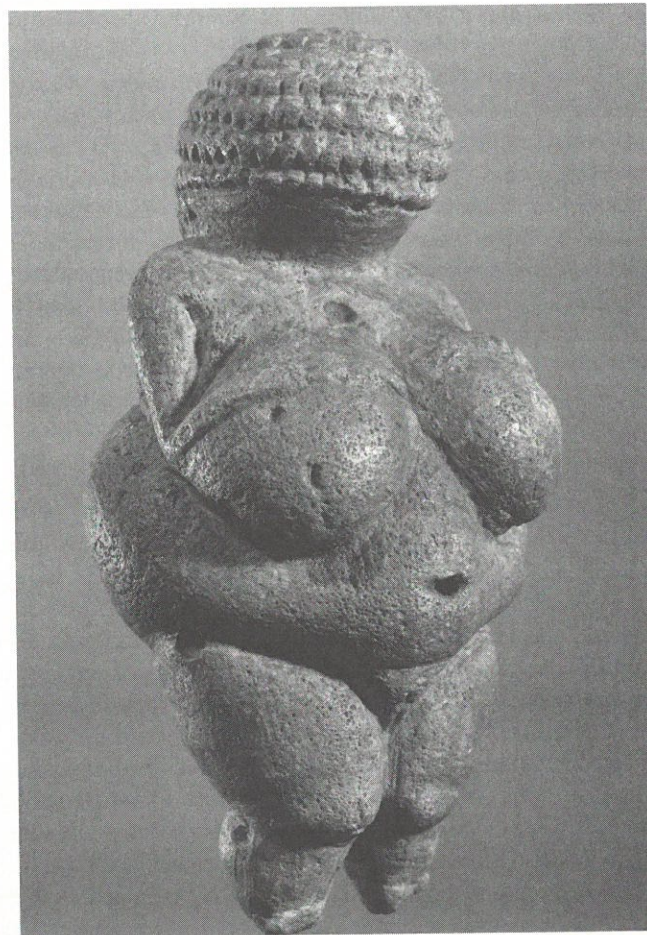


FIGURE 9.2 *Venus of Willendorf*. A prehistoric female fertility figure from an archaeological site near the town of Willendorf, Austria.

Although matriarchy, or rule by women, may never have existed in the past, the role of women in these prehistoric foraging societies was almost certainly greater than that in contemporary agricultural and industrial societies.

Some believe that goddess worship continued in Europe until a few thousand years before the Common Era. At this time the Indo-Europeans invaded from the East and brought with them a belief in male gods and the exploitation of nature. Some argue that goddess worship and the new god worship gradually combined to produce the polytheistic pagan religions of the Romans, Greeks, and Celts.

With the development of the monotheistic religions, discussed later in the chapter, the goddess was further suppressed, as these latter religions conceived of god in largely male terms. Although all three of the monotheistic religions contained some egalitarian sentiments in their origins and texts, all have also been interpreted at one time or another in very misogynistic terms.

Three important goddesses are Ishtar of the ancient Near East, Isis of ancient Egypt, and Kali in Hinduism. We will also discuss the Virgin Mary in Catholicism, although her classification as a goddess is certainly debatable and comes entirely from an etic perspective. Goddess worship has also seen a resurgence with the growth of the Wiccan religion, which will be discussed in Chapter 11.

ISHTAR (ANCIENT NEAR EAST). The goddess Ishtar was worshipped for thousands of years in Mesopotamia. Seen as both invincible in battle and a source of fertility, Ishtar was one of the paramount national deities.

In the natural environment of Mesopotamia, winds, rain, drought, and flood were all common. This contributed to a worldview in which these inconsistencies in nature were seen as being a reflection of violent conflicts among the gods; both the environment and the gods were seen as being unpredictable. The only way to ensure adequate food, victory in warfare, health, and so on was proper performance of rituals and sacrifices for the gods and goddesses.

Among the gods and goddesses in the pantheon, Ishtar is supreme in her power over fate, as recounted in the Epic of Gilgamesh. In this story Ishtar made sexual advances toward King Gilgamesh, which he rejected. In response, Ishtar asked the supreme god, An, to send the bull of heaven to destroy Gilgamesh and his city, Uruk. Ishtar threatened that if she did not get her way, she would release the dead from the netherworld. In her role as a fertility goddess, she also promised that she would ensure that there would be enough food to eat after the bull's destruction.

Sexuality was an important aspect of Ishtar, as seen in the sacred marriage rites. The rites took place between the king and an *avatar* of Ishtar, probably her high priestess. Unlike the Egyptian pharaohs, who were themselves seen as divine, this king was seen as a mortal who was the intermediary between the community and the gods. His relationship with Ishtar was seen as the source of his power and the guarantee of his success. This union was explicitly sexual, although it resulted not in offspring, but in the fertility of the land and success in battle.

ISIS (ANCIENT EGYPT). Women occupied a relatively favorable position in ancient Egyptian society. The pharaoh was seen as the son of the sun god, and his queen was not only consort to the divine king but the mother of the divine prince. Women were also important in the religious realm, the pantheon containing a number of prominent goddesses.

Isis was probably the most important deity of the Egyptian pantheon for the average Egyptian. She was called the "Great Mother" and the "Queen of Heaven" and was associated

with family. Her most common representation was as a mother, seated, suckling her son Horus on her lap. It is as the devoted wife and sister of Osiris and mother of Horus that she was best known.

Although Isis was originally closely associated with the royalty, she became associated with nature as her significance grew and became diversified. Her influence spread; she was present in Rome and Greece. Around 300 B.C.E. the religion of Isis had developed into a **mystery religion** that involved secret and sacred rites. One had to be initiated into the religion to gain the wisdom and salvation that the goddess could offer. The influence of Isis peaked during the third century C.E., when her popularity made her a serious competitor to the Christian church.

KALI (HINDUISM). The worship of a feminine aspect of the divine has a long history in India, probably dating back to pre-Vedic ancient peoples. (The Vedas are religious texts that are the foundation of much of modern Hinduism. They were written down by the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., although they had existed in oral form much earlier.) The goddess remains important today. She is often associated with creativity and nature, in particular great trees and rivers.

The goddess is worshipped in many forms, including Durga, associated with ultimate light and benevolent power, and Kali, who is the divine in its fierce form. Kali means the “Black One,” and she is depicted as dark skinned and naked, standing on a corpse, dripping with blood, and carrying a sword and a severed head. She wears a girdle of severed hands and a necklace of skulls (Figure 9.3). Kali is said to have an insatiable thirst for blood, and at her temples animals are beheaded as a sacrifice to her.

Despite this fierce appearance, Kali is not evil. Although she is a fearsome destroyer to those who do evil, she is the loving and compassionate mother to her devotees. In Hinduism the divine is seen as encompassing both creation and destruction. Death and birth are linked together in an endless cycle.

Kali symbolizes transformation. The sword that she carries is used to cut away impediments to the realization of truth. Her garland consists of fifty severed heads to represent the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. Thus the garland represents knowledge and wisdom. The hands are the principal means by which work is done and therefore symbolize the action of karma. The hands have been severed, showing that the binding effects of karma have been overcome. Kali blesses the devotee by cutting him or her free from the cycle of karma.

Kali is often depicted as dancing wildly with the god Shiva. Shiva is sometimes known as the Lord of the Dance and, like Kali, is known as destructive and horrific. Some stories describe their dancing as threatening to destroy the world with its savage power. Gradually, Kali became known as one of Shiva’s chief spouses. In art she is often shown standing or dancing on his naked and prostrate body. As she dances, her energy flows into him and brings him life. This image of Shiva and Kali shows Shiva as the passive potential of creation and Kali as his Shakti, or feminine creative principle.

MARY (ROMAN CATHOLIC). Christianity is a monotheistic religion and, as such, cannot be said from an emic perspective to have a goddess. However, throughout Christian history, Mary has played an important role, and devotion to her has developed in different ways.

The height of devotion to Mary occurred during the medieval and baroque periods in the modern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. Although Mary was never described as a goddess, she was held in such high esteem that she was certainly seen as more than merely a woman. She was



FIGURE 9.3 *The Hindu Goddess Kali.* A fierce goddess, Kali destroys those who do evil, but also brings wisdom and transformation to her devotees.

set above the saints and, as the mother of God’s son, was seen as only a little lower than God. She played an important role as an intermediary between people and God and Jesus. This was not true of the Protestant religions, which have tended to minimize the place of Mary. In fact, devotion to Mary was one of the major issues of the Protestant Reformation.

In the book of Revelation a passage that is interpreted as referring to Mary describes her as “a woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Revelation 12:1). This woman is also said to be stepping on a serpent, which is seen as symbolic of Mary overcoming the curse brought on humans by the first woman, Eve. In the language of Revelation, Mary is the “Queen of Heaven.”

The importance of Mary is shown in many different ways. First is the celebration, not only of the Annunciation when the Archangel Gabriel told Mary she would bear the Son of God, but also of Mary’s birth and death. She is shown in countless works of art, and many churches have been dedicated in her name. Shrines and pilgrimage sites associated with Mary were found not only in medieval Christianity, but in modern times. Examples are pilgrimage sites at Lourdes in France, Guadalupe in Mexico, and Fatima in Portugal, at each of which an apparition of Mary occurred.

Similarities between Mary and some of the Near Eastern pagan goddesses have also been noted. (For example, Isis is also referred to as “Great Mother” and “Queen of Heaven” and is depicted seated and holding her son.) Mary fits nicely into the role of these goddesses as protectors and sustainers. Some researchers think that devotion to Mary is actually derived from earlier worship of the Mother Goddess. Despite the fact that technically, all Mary can do is offer intercession for the protection of God, she is often directly addressed for protection. If not a goddess, Mary certainly plays an important role in the Christian understanding of God.

Monotheism: Conceptions of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Most of the religions that we have discussed and most religions that have existed in the world have been **polytheistic**; that is, they recognize many deities. However, most people in the United States are more familiar with the **monotheistic** (a belief in one god) religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These three religions share some of the same history in addition to the concept of a single God. All three have also had to struggle with the philosophical issues inherent in a belief in only one God, particularly one that is seen as **omnipotent** (all-powerful), **omniscient** (all-knowing), and **omnibenevolent** (all-good). These include the problem of reconciling an omniscient God with human free will and reconciling an all-good and omnipotent god with the existence of evil. We will now examine a little of the history of these three religions and how they have conceived of the nature of God.¹⁰

JUDAISM. The ultimate theme of Judaism is monotheism. Judaism believes that the Jews have been chosen by God to enter into a special relationship with Him, much like that of child to parent. However, many scholars argue that we should not assume that the earliest Jews—for example, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—were in fact monotheists.

The patriarchs appear to have shared many of the religious beliefs of their pagan neighbors in Canaan and might not have even shared the same god among themselves. Many different names are used for God in the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh). Some scholars argue that these were actually names of different gods. For example, the god of Abraham might have been El, the high god of Canaan. The name *Yahweh* is also used, and he is called the “God of our Fathers” by the Israelites. However, Yahweh might have been a different God from El.

When Moses made the covenant with God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites agreed to worship Yahweh alone. The covenant did not say that Yahweh is the only god who exists, although that concept developed later. Even the Ten Commandments take the existence of other gods for granted, such as in the commandment that “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

Worship of a single god while ignoring the others was an unusual step in a polytheistic world, in which it was dangerous to ignore possible sources of supernatural power and the Israelites were often reluctant to make this move, despite the covenant. It appears that Yahweh had been a warrior god and was very helpful in such matters, but He was not seen as a specialist in other areas, such as fertility. When the Israelites settled in Canaan, they turned to the cult of Baal, the Canaanite fertility god, for such matters. It was difficult for the masculine Yahweh to replace goddesses such as Ishtar and Asherah, who still had a great following among the Israelites, especially among the women.

The Tanakh tells that the people had become so corrupt and idolatrous that God permitted the King of Assyria to successfully invade the country. Later, Jerusalem was captured, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people were taken to exile in Babylonia. This was an important turning point in Jewish history as they came to realize that they could practice their

religion away from the Temple. From this grew the idea of a more pure monotheism, that Yahweh is the only God. In many ways the monotheism of the Jews was different from the pagan religions around it. The other gods of the ancient Middle East, such as Baal and Marduk, were not involved in the everyday lives of the people. The God of Israel, however, was an important power in human lives and was intimately involved in the ongoing history of the Jewish people. The pagan religions were generally tribal, limited to a specific people and a specific place. The God of Israel promised that he would protect Jacob and his people when they left Canaan and traveled to a strange new land. This conception of God was very pragmatic.

The way in which God is characterized changes over time in the Tanakh. In the story of Abraham, God, described in a very anthropomorphic way, visited Abraham in his tent and shared a meal with him. Later in time, God appeared to Moses in the much more dramatic form of a burning bush and insisted on distance. Later prophets were visited by angelic messengers, or sometimes they heard a divine inner voice. In the later rabbinic tradition God was presented as even more transcendent and even less anthropomorphic.

The early stories of God depict Him as a very partisan tribal deity, often cruel and violent. He demanded the sacrifice of Abraham’s son Isaac, and He visited horrific plagues on the Egyptians. Later He was transformed into a symbol of transcendence and compassion, and in all three of the monotheistic religions discussed in this section, God became an inspiration for social justice.

In the years after the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., the rabbis described God as an essentially subjective experience. To this day, Judaism considers theological ideas about God to be a private matter for the individual, for any official doctrine would limit the essential mystery of God. The rabbis also began the important tradition of interpretation and commentaries on religious texts. Thus there is a fair amount of room in Judaism for individual opinions on such important matters as the nature of God.

CHRISTIANITY. Out of Judaism came the new religion of Christianity. Jews at the time of Jesus, under Roman rule, were expecting a Messiah. However, as now passionate monotheists, they expected this Messiah to be human, a descendant of King David, not divine. The term *son of God* had been used previously in Jewish stories and expressed intimacy with God; it was not to be taken literally. Although few Jews of the time accepted Jesus as the Messiah, many other people ultimately would.

The story of Christianity is essentially the story of Jesus. The Gospel of John describes Jesus as the eternal Son of God and the word of God made flesh. Jesus himself never claimed to be divine, and it was only after his death that his followers seem to have come to this conclusion. This did not happen immediately. It was not until the fourth century C.E. that the doctrine that Jesus had been God in human form (the Incarnation) was established.

For Christians Jesus became the mediator between humans and God. They believed that the reason God had become human, in the form of Jesus, was to lead people back to God. Salvation had been won for humans by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Therefore, salvation was to be found through faith in Jesus. Through this faith, Christians believed that they would be cleansed of their sins, made righteous, and that they would be sanctified and glorified by God in the life to come.

Ultimately, an understanding of the Christian conception of God requires an understanding of the Trinity. The Trinity begins with God, the Father, who is the creator of heaven and earth. God became immanent in Jesus, who is God, the Son, the divine in human form. The Son is an incarnation of the Father, who returned after his physical death on earth to live with the Father,

although he remains fully present in and to his believers. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to his followers after his death. The Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost, is the spirit of God, guiding and sustaining the faithful.

The concept of the Trinity caused many problems for the ostensibly monotheistic Christians. Under pressure from a hostile Roman world to explain how Christians could worship three divine beings but still consider themselves monotheistic, Christian apologists put forward several interpretations. In general, Christians settled on an interpretation of a single divine substance manifested in three personas. This view is expressed in the Athanasian Creed: "The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods, but one God." In Western Christianity, however, the three distinct personas have generally been stressed over the unifying substance.

ISLAM. The story of Islam begins with the story of Mohammad, a member of the Quraysh tribe, which in the seventh century C.E. had recently settled in Mecca after having previously lived as nomadic herdsmen on the Arabian steppes. This act of settling in one place drastically altered their lifestyle, and new values started replacing the old. Mecca was also the location of the Kaaba, an ancient and massive cube-shaped shrine. Most Arabs believed that the Kaaba was originally dedicated to al-Lah (Allah), the High God of the ancient Arabian pantheon.

Allah was believed to be identical to the God of the Jews and Christians. Although Judaism and Christianity are also monotheistic, both were seen as having strayed from the authentic monotheism of Abraham, which Islam would seek to restore. Abraham lived before God had sent either the Torah or the Gospel and was therefore seen as neither a Jew nor a Christian. In the story of Abraham he has a son, Ishmael, by his concubine Hagar. When Abraham's wife, Sarah, becomes pregnant with Isaac, she demands that Hagar and Ishmael leave. God consoles Abraham by telling him that both of his sons will be the fathers of great nations. Abraham and Ishmael are said to have together built the Kabah for God in Mecca.

Muslims believe that the original religion was monotheism but that it has occasionally decayed into polytheism. At these times God would send prophets, including Moses and Jesus, to renew the message of monotheism. Each prophet brought the message in a way that was appropriate to his particular time and place. The last prophet was Mohammad, and he received messages meant for all people and all times.

Mohammad was visited by an angel, who gave him the command to recite. The Word of God was revealed to Mohammad little by little over a period of twenty-three years and would be compiled into what is called the Qur'an. The power of the Qur'an is based partly on the extraordinary beauty of the language. Muslims believe that to hear the Qur'an recited is to experience the divine.

The early verses of the Qur'an encourage people to look for signs of God's goodness and power in the world and to realize how much they owe to God. Muslims believe that God is omniscient and has created everything for a divine purpose. The world is governed by fixed laws that ensure the harmonious working of all things. Humans can find peace by knowing and living by these laws. People must reproduce God's benevolence in their own society in order to be in touch with the true nature of things. To believe in this is to surrender totally to God. An essential act in Islam is bowing down in prayer (*salat*), a gesture of this surrender. In practice, these ideas mean that Muslims have a duty to create a society that is just and equitable, in which the poor and vulnerable are treated well.

The God of Islam is more impersonal than the God of Judaism. Muslims believe that God can only be glimpsed in the signs of nature and is so transcendent that He can be talked about only in parables. In contrast to Christianity there are no obligatory doctrines about God. Theological speculation is dismissed as self-indulgent guesses. No one could possibly know or prove the nature of God.

Atheism

Just as the statement "I believe in God" has meaning only in context, so does the concept of **atheism**. For example, early Christians and Muslims were considered atheists by the larger society in which they lived for refusing to recognize the existing pantheon of gods. In the Qur'an an unbeliever is somebody who is ungrateful to God and refuses to honor Him. Atheism has historically meant not accepting the current conception of God.

In Europe it was only at the end of the sixteenth century that the term *atheist* began to be widely used. It was the time of great conflicts between Protestants and Catholics and the proliferation of many Christian sects. Rumors abounded of people—atheists—who denied the existence of God. These were much like the rumors of witchcraft, which we will discuss in Chapter 10.

In reality atheism, as we conceive of it today, was highly unlikely—perhaps even impossible—for people of the time. In sixteenth-century life, religion and the Church were ubiquitous. They dominated life and were part of nearly every activity. In these conditions it is hard to imagine someone gaining enough of an outsider perspective to question God and religion. Even if someone had managed to do so, this person would have found no support for this perspective in the science or philosophy of the time. The term *atheist* was used as an insult, to describe someone who did not agree with you about the nature of God. No one would actually use the term to describe himself or herself. It would not be until the end of the eighteenth century that a few Europeans would find it possible to deny the existence of God.

The scientific developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were important to the development of atheism. By the start of the seventeenth century, leading theologians argued the existence of God on entirely rational grounds. When these arguments did not hold up well under the new science, the existence of God began to be questioned. In large part it was the way in which people conceived of the nature of God that made Him vulnerable to this attack. God was seen as a fact of life that could be examined in much the same way that the natural world was.

Another issue was a new emphasis on a literal understanding of the Bible in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. Again, these literal interpretations made the texts vulnerable to questioning from the new scientific perspective. The heliocentric theory of Copernicus and Galileo was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church not because the theory endangered belief in God, but because it contradicted the scriptures. Many years later, the discoveries of Lyell and Darwin would call into question the biblical account of creation.

With the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment came new ideas of science and progress. Enlightenment was seen as achievable by people on their own, without relying on the traditions of the Church or revelation from God. However, most of the philosophers of the Enlightenment did not reject the idea of God outright, just the conceptions of a cruel God who threatens people with eternal damnation. They believed in a god, but not the God of the Bible. However, a few people truly were beginning the trend away from God, and by the end of the century there were philosophers who were proud to call themselves atheists. There was also an idea that science, which was the foundation for questioning God, would ultimately replace religion.

Science has not been the only factor in the growth of atheism. The challenge of horrific historical events such as the Holocaust has also played a role. Some people believe that growing atheism is just the natural result of living in a more secular society.

Just as there are different kinds of beliefs in god, there are different kinds of atheists. Some distinguish between weak atheism (disbelief in any god) and strong atheism (denial of the existence of any god). Another approach is **agnosticism**, which is the idea that the question of the existence of a god is unsolvable, unprovable.

While the numbers of people with no belief in a god have grown dramatically in Europe over the years, it is interesting to note that the same phenomenon has not occurred in the United States. Although church attendance and membership in traditional religious denominations have fallen, the vast majority of people in the United States still say that they believe in God, whatever they mean by that.

CONCLUSION

The functioning of the human mind leads us into seeing the world as being the result of the actions of various types of beings. Our world is populated with actors who we see as responsible for the events in our lives, especially those that cause us pain and misery. Some of these actors are humans with supernatural powers—magicians and witches, for example. Others are not human, but are anthropomorphic supernatural beings—spirits and gods. The actions of these supernatural beings explain the operation of our world. They provide us with an explanation for what befalls us and provide the basis of action to counter such negative events through ritual activity.

The similarity between gods and people is striking. Gods resemble us in appearance, thoughts, and actions. They have human emotions and display the best and worst of human behavior. The structure of human society is a model for that of the gods in ways that are both simple and complex. Of course, the powers possessed by supernatural beings go far beyond those of humans. Gods are creators and destroyers. As such, gods are part of the explanatory system for how the world works. The existence of gods answers many of the big questions in life: How did the world begin? Why are we here? The existence of spirit beings answers many of the smaller ones: Why do we get sick? What goes bump in the night?

Summary

Gods and spirits are supernatural beings that generally do not have human origins. The distinction between gods and spirits is to some degree arbitrary. Spirits are less powerful than gods, are more localized, and are frequently collections of nonindividualized supernatural beings that are not given specific names and identities. Examples include the leprechauns of Ireland, the jinn of the Middle East, and the angels and demons of the monotheistic religions. Spirits include guardian spirits, ancestral spirits, and shamans' spirit helpers. Spirits live in the human world, interacting with humans. They may provide protection, success, and luck but also are blamed for minor mishaps. Spirits often reside in natural and human-made objects. Places of special beauty or unusual character may be inhabited by spirits.

Gods are more powerful than spirits. They control major forces of nature, such as the wind,

rain, and fertility. Gods are anthropomorphic, with names, origins, and specific attributes. They are born, marry, and sometimes die; they love and lust; they are wise and dull, loving and hateful, generous and miserly; some are sympathetic to human beings, others are hostile. A hierarchy of gods makes up a pantheon, usually with a supreme god at the top. Many types of gods can be recognized, including creator gods, otiose gods, trickster gods, and attribute gods.

Theorists have proposed that the nature of the gods in a society mirrors important cultural elements, such as that group's social structure. Horton proposed that the importance of a high god in African religions was related to increased contact with the outside world and the importance of achieved status over ascribed status. Swanson tested the functionalist ideas of Durkheim and found that religious hierarchy was more likely to be found in a society that also

had a decision-making hierarchy that contained at least three different levels. He also found that the number of attribute gods related to amount of specialization. Psychosocial anthropologists believe that humans project qualities of important figures such as parents onto the gods.

Some scholars believe that the earliest human religions centered on fertility, a lunar cycle as opposed to a solar one, and the worship of a goddess. Examples of goddesses are Ishtar of the ancient Near East, Isis of ancient Egypt, and Kali from Hinduism. From an etic viewpoint, the role of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism has some characteristics of a goddess. With the development of the monotheistic religions the goddess was suppressed, as these religions conceived of god in largely male terms.

Suggested Readings

Michael Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

[A look at exorcism, largely Christian evangelical, in the United States.]

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

[Dawkins presents his arguments for atheism.]

Felicita D. Goodman, *How about Demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[A look at possession in different cultures, including a discussion of the role of altered states of consciousness.]

Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in the Age of Science* (New York: Freeman, 2000).

Polytheistic religions recognize many deities. The more familiar monotheistic religions believe in a single omnipotent and omniscient God. Judaism believes that the Jews have been chosen to enter into a special relationship with God. Out of Judaism came Christianity. The story of Christianity is essentially the story of Jesus—God who became human to lead people back to God. In Islam, Allah was believed to be identical to the God of the Jews and Christians, religions that were seen as having strayed from the authentic monotheism of Abraham, which Islam would seek to restore.

Atheism has historically meant not accepting the conception of the divine that is found in a particular society at a particular time. It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that atheism took on its present meaning of denying the existence of God.

[A look at reasons why people say they believe in God.]

Fiction

Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

[A story of murder and conspiracy that focuses on the importance of the feminine divine.]

Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

[Old gods battle new ones for control in America.]

Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).

[Set in South Carolina in the 1960s, a young girl's life is influenced by three beekeeping sisters and a Black Madonna.]

Suggested Websites

<http://godchecker.com>

A database of all known gods.

www.atheists.org

The website of the American Atheists.

www.amnh.org/exhibitions/meeting_god/index.html

Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion from the American Museum of Natural History.

www.religioustolerance.org/god_devel.htm

Various ideas about God from Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance.

www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm

Catholic beliefs about God.

<http://www.marypages.com/>

Apparitions of the Virgin Mary.

Study Questions

1. The world is full of examples of supernatural beings. We can categorize many of them as gods and spirits. What are the definitions of gods and spirits given in this chapter? Is this always an easy distinction to make? Why or why not? What does this tell us about systems of classification?
2. As we learned in Chapter 1, the functional approach to the study of religion looks at the role that religious practices play in the functioning of a society. Apply this approach to zar possession in the northern Sudan.
3. Gods are supernatural anthropomorphic beings. What exactly does this mean?
4. In what ways does the concept of a monotheistic God appear in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?
5. The terms *atheism* and *agnosticism* are often used in U.S. culture. What exactly do these terms mean? Why do you think it is more common for people in Europe to say that they are atheists than people in the United States?

Endnotes

1. D. J. Hayward, *Vernacular Christianity among the Mulia Dani* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997).
2. J. Boddy, "Spirits and Selves in Northern Sudan: The Cultural Therapeutics of Possession and Trance," *American Ethnologist*, 15 (1988), pp. 4–27.
3. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life/U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, <http://religions.pewforum.org>.
4. S. D. Gill, *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982), pp. 28–29.
5. É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912); reprint edition (New York: Free Press, 1995).
6. R. Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
7. G. E. Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods: The Origin of Primitive Beliefs* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960).
8. S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927); reissue edition (New York: Norton, 1989).
9. R. F. Barton, "The Religion of the Ifugao," *American Anthropological Association Memoirs*, no. 65, (1946), pp. 1–244.
10. The following discussion is based on the work of Karen Armstrong in *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).

Witchcraft

One of the most interesting topics in the anthropology of religion is **witchcraft**. However, witchcraft is not a single, unified concept. When anthropologists speak of witchcraft, they generally refer to individuals who have an innate ability to do evil. A witch does not depend on ritual to achieve his or her evil ends but simply wills misfortune to occur. In this sense witchcraft is clearly different from sorcery. (Of course, there is nothing to prevent a witch from using magic, but this would lie outside the definition of witchcraft.) In some cultures witchcraft can be unconscious and unintentional; one can be a witch and not even know it.

Although in our culture we tend to think of witches as females, traditionally both sexes have been accused of witchcraft. Witchcraft accusations reflect underlying social tensions in a society. Individuals who exhibit antisocial behavior and people in relationships characterized by conflict are likely targets. Along these lines, cultures in which witches are considered primarily to be women will tend to exhibit tension between the sexes.

The concept of individuals with such propensities for evil is found in a wide variety of areas, including New Guinea, Southeast Asia, the Americas, and Europe. However, the best-developed discussions of witchcraft in the anthropological literature describing witchcraft in small-scale societies are those of witchcraft in African societies. In these societies witchcraft is a very common belief and refers to the ability of a person to cause harm by means of a personal power that resides within the body of the witch.

The term *witchcraft*, however, is also used to refer to other religious phenomena. Witchcraft, encompassing many of the features found in African witchcraft, was found in peasant communities in Europe from medieval to early modern times. Because the people in these communities believed that only God could heal, individuals who practiced healing arts and midwifery were often stigmatized and thought of as being witches. When witchcraft became of interest to various Christian churches, the idea of witchcraft changed to reflect an association with Satan. This led to the famous witchcraft executions in Europe and colonial America. We should also mention that Wicca uses the term *witch* in a vastly different way. The Wiccan religion will be discussed in the next chapter.