

THIRD EDITION

WINFRIED
CORDUAN

NEIGHBORING FAITHS

A CHRISTIAN
INTRODUCTION
TO WORLD
RELIGIONS



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RELIGION

Study and Practice

World Population: 8 billion¹
Professing Christians: 2.4 billion
Religious Non-Christians: 3.7 billion

SPENCER AND GILLEN



Figure 1.1. W. Baldwin Spencer



Figure 1.2. Frank J. Gillen

In 1899 two Australian explorers, W. Baldwin Spencer and Frank J. Gillen, published a book about their encounter with the Arrernte, a tribe in Australia, whose culture they considered to be so underdeveloped that they did not even have a religion.² Many scholars were delighted to hear of their alleged discovery. They used it as evidence for the idea that religion is one of many aspects of human culture that evolved alongside material and intellectual growth. In order to evaluate Spencer and Gillen's supposed discovery, we must first be clear on what we mean by *religion*.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

This introductory chapter will explore the meaning of religion in general and certain common aspects of religion. It raises the question of how religion originated by looking at two broad options: (1) religion as a part of human culture that evolved from the belief in ghosts and spirits and (2) religion based on the belief in one God who created the world and revealed himself. It will also identify a few attributes that seem to recur in many religious societies.

We can picture a Friday afternoon prayer service in a mosque—the house of worship of Islam. The men of the community have assembled and are sitting in loose rows on the rug-covered floor in front of a pulpit from which an imam preaches instructions on how to live a life that is pleasing to God. A number of women, though fewer than men, are sitting on a balcony, out of view of the men. At the end of the sermon all believers stand up, forming exact rows that face the niche at the front of the hall that points in the direction of Mecca. In unison they go through the prescribed postures of standing, bowing, and prostrating themselves as they recite their prayer of devotion. This picture confirms the common notion that religion focuses on the worship of God.

Now let us picture a Japanese Zen master addressing a group of American college students on a field trip. “Look beyond words and ideas,” he tells them. “Lay aside what you think you know about God; it can only mislead you. Accept life as it is. When it rains, I get wet. When I am hungry, I eat.” Is this religion?

Mary, an American college student, is not affiliated with any organized religion; in fact, she blames religion for much of what is wrong with the world today. But she is full of high ideals and has committed her life to

the service of humanity. After graduation she plans to spend a few years in the Peace Corps and then reside in a poverty-stricken area of America where she can assist disadvantaged people in learning to lead a better life. In order to carry out this task to its fullest, Mary is already limiting her own personal belongings and is not planning to get married or raise a family. Could it be that, despite her assertion to the contrary, she is really practicing a religion?

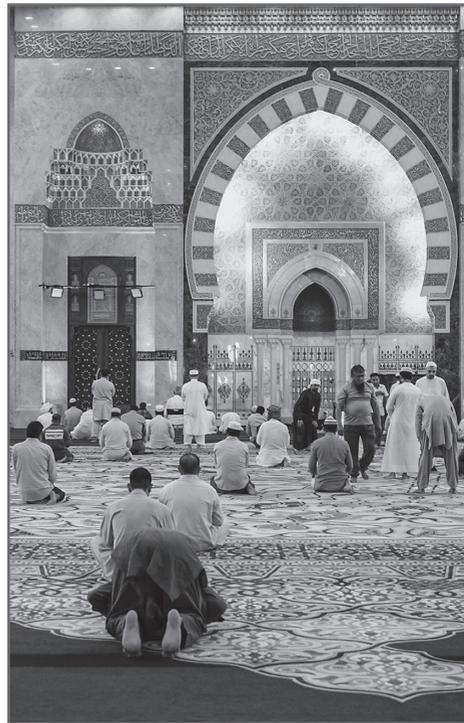


Figure 1.3. Muslim prayer is directed to one God, a straightforward understanding of religion

You don't have to be able to give a precise definition for a word to use it correctly and make yourself understood. Dictionaries typically provide several numbered meanings for a term, and *religion* is no exception. This fact does not mean that we do not have a fairly good idea of what

people mean when they use the word “religion.” Our minds may immediately turn to ideas such as worship, gods, rituals, or ethics. It is extremely unlikely that anyone would associate *religion* with baseball, roast beef, or the classification of insects. However, in a case such as this one, when the very application of the term is disputed, it becomes necessary to delineate some boundaries to its meaning.

For example, a definition focusing on gods, spirits, and the supernatural may be too narrow. There are forms of Buddhism and Jainism (chapters ten and eleven, respectively) whose scriptures are downright hostile to the idea of a Creator God. Yet are we prepared to deny that Buddhism is a religion? I think not. One simple reason is that most people who call themselves Buddhists do, in fact, engage in activities that we would call “worship” or “veneration,” regardless of what the more abstractly inclined leadership may say. And even Zen, although it ultimately wants to go beyond gods and spirits, accepts them as populating the world from which we must liberate ourselves (see the section on Zen in chapter ten). What we call a religion in those cases is a large framework of beliefs that gives a person’s life meaning and purpose. Both Buddhism and Jainism, regardless of the relevance of spirit beings in their practice, still promote a certain view of the world and the human person’s place in it. So, a tentative definition could be, *A religion is a set of core values or beliefs that provides meaning and coherence to a person’s life.*

But is it legitimate to turn this assessment around and say that whenever people are committed to a set of core values that give their life meaning, they are practicing a religion? If so, then Mary, the woman who is

devoting her life to the service of others, could conceivably be considered as an example of someone practicing a humanistic religion. However, a member of an organized crime group may also follow some values, albeit very different ones: money, domination, power, and so forth. Surely, we don’t want to call observing the standards of organized crime a “religion.” It does not follow from the fact that religion supplies core values that wherever there are core values, there must be a religion.

In order to qualify as religious, the core values may not just be a part of everyday life, such as accumulating a lot of money, even if they are an important part of someone’s life. I consider it to be important that I brush my teeth every day, but that fact does not make me an adherent of a tooth-brushing religion. Someone may focus his entire life on the pursuit of wealth, but metaphors notwithstanding, that fact does not imply that earning a lot of money is his religion; in fact, it would be rejected by many people as contrary to religion. Whatever the core values of everyday life may be, they cannot give meaning to life if they are just a part of life itself. In order to qualify as religious, the values originate beyond the details of ordinary life.

The feature of religion that directs us beyond the mundane is called *transcendence*. Transcendence can come to us in many different ways, through supernatural agencies or through metaphysical principles (for example, the “greatest good” or the “first cause”), an ideal, a place, or an awareness, to mention just some of the possibilities. Thus, the definition could become, *A religion is a system of beliefs that directs a person toward transcendence and, thus, provides meaning and coherence to a person’s life.*



And yet, this definition may still need refining. Let us return to Mary, our idealistic person, who is dedicating her life to the service of humanity. By her own statement, she does not want to be classified as religious, though, in the way that people talk today, she might be willing to accept the notion that, even though she is not religious, she exhibits a certain amount of “spirituality.”

Not too long ago, one would have been hard pressed to try to make such a distinction plausible. Doesn't one have to be religious in order to be spiritual? How can it be possible to have faith without belonging to one of the traditional faiths? But those questions are no longer irrelevant, let alone meaningless. At least in a Western, English-speaking context, this distinction has become important. I remember not too long ago seeing an interview with a well-known actress on television, in which she declared that she was not religious, but that she believed in a deep spirituality, which became especially apparent to her as she gazed into the eyes of animals. (This book will not try to make sense out of such observations.)

So, to become a little bit more technical, what could be the difference between religion and “spirituality”? The answer is that

religion also involves some external features, no matter how small, which have meaning only for the sake of the religious belief and would be unnecessary in other contexts. This factor is called the *cultus* of the religion. For example, contemporary Protestant Christianity in the United States is associated with a specific cultus. In general, believers gather on Sunday morning in especially designated buildings, sit on chairs or benches (rather than kneel), sing special songs either out of hymnals or as projected on a screen, pray with their eyes closed, and listen to a professional minister speak about a passage in their holy book, the Bible. These items are not meant to be obligatory or an exhaustive description, but they are typical for the American Protestant Christian cultus. The point is that religion comes with a cultus, whereas spirituality, as used today, is a purely personal and private matter that need not show up in any external manner.

This suggests one more amendment to a definition of religion: *A religion is a system of beliefs that by practicing its cultus directs a person toward transcendence and, thus, provides meaning and coherence to a person's life.*

This definition surmounts the difficulties pointed out above. Needless to say, it is still very vague, but that is the nature of religion.

SPECULATIONS ON THE ORIGIN OF RELIGIONS

Certain figures, in particular Sir James G. Frazer and E. B. Tylor in England and Augustus Morgan in the United States, provided some basic patterns of what they believed to have been the origin of religion. They and a number of other people mentioned below based their theories on what they thought *must have happened*, not on direct observation. The observers, subscribing to their theories, then looked for

their instantiations as they met with tribal people. It is common practice by non-Christian anthropologists and scholars of religion to dismiss the observations of Christian observers as obviously skewed by their religious prejudice. The fact of the matter is that the non-Christian explorers definitely had an agenda on behalf of the theoreticians to whom they were paying homage, and that, on the whole, they were



motivated by a desire to discredit religion in all of its phases—not just the tribal animistic forms, but also including supposedly higher ones, such as Christianity.

E. E. Evan-Pritchard, a well-known scholar in his own right, actually stated that this ideological goal had been present right from the beginning in this field of study and was still continuing, not excluding himself.

We should, I think, realize what was the intention of many of these scholars if we are to understand their theoretical constructions. They sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way. . . . Whether they were right or wrong is beside the point which is that the impassioned rationalism of the time has colored their assessment of primitive religions and has given their writings, as we read them today, a flavor of smugness which one may find either irritating or risible.³

It is important for us to know the theories that dominated the discussion at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some of the most influential scholars defending a theory on the origin of religion were E. B. Tylor, J. G. Frazer, Herbert Spencer, L. H. Morgan, and John Lubbock Lord Avebury, as well as Andrew Lang before he changed his mind. What they had in common was that they saw religion merely as an aspect of human culture that evolved from a so-called primitive view

toward the high enscripturated religions such as Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity.

Even if it is not accepted anymore as such, the idea that religions developed from very simple beginnings and developed from there to higher levels is a basic underlying presupposition of contemporary scholarship.

Frazer and magic. J. G. Frazer, in his book *The Golden Bough*, depicts how allegedly prehistorical human beings started to practice magic.⁴ Magic is considered to be a tool used by human beings to change various objects or events in the world. It presupposes a kind of spiritual force that is intrinsic to the world and can be manipulated to achieve various ends. There are rituals associated with magic, and in many societies only a select few people are designated to be experts in it.

Going beyond Frazer, scholars wanted to give this magical force a name, so they called it *mana*, the term used for it by Melanesians, which became its standard label among religion scholars. It has its counterpart in other places of the world. For example, some Native American tribes use the term *wakan*. For Frazer and others who followed this direction, the most important point to understand was that, according to their view, this force was impersonal.⁵ One could compare it in some ways to electricity. A current may flow through a wire and, if you know how to connect it properly, you can use its energy for your purposes. As a matter of fact, in Thai Buddhist temples, you can see strings attached to a statue of the Buddha, which are intended to convey the Buddha's spiritual power to other deities or parts of the temple, similar to an electric cord. However, Buddhism would not be considered as representative of primal culture by Frazer and his followers.





Figure 1.4. The power of this Thai Buddha statue is conducted to other objects via strings

In cultures with a strong sense of mana, the goal is for people to make use of this power for their welfare, frequently at the direction of an expert. The key for making it work lies in the technique being used. If someone should try to make use of mana, and the end result does not turn out to be as he had hoped, the fault lies entirely with the human being. If only he had prepared himself properly and carried out the rituals correctly, the desired result would have come about. Mana has no will of its own.

Mana or its equivalent can be more concentrated in some places than in others. It may have a stronger presence in certain objects. That means that those objects will be treated with great care and protected as much as possible. This phenomenon is visible in Native American cultures, where observers encounter sacred “bundles.” A bundle may belong to an individual person, a family, clan, or the entire tribe. What objects are contained within the bundle may differ from tribe to tribe; sometimes it is something that a youth found on his vision quest to gain a name (see chapter eight). The point is that in those groups there are

objects that have a large amount of power; they are called “fetishes,” and fetishes can be used as tools in applying magic. For example, a fetish may lead a person to a future spouse.

In short, in a general description, magic is something performed by human beings. An unseen force can be recognized and implemented by someone who has learned how to harness it.

However, if mana or some similar magic force is considered to be an intrinsic part of the world in which we live, it is not transcendent, and, thus, people whose worldview centers entirely around mana and magic were considered to be pre-religious by Frazer and others. Mana is a natural force, not a supernatural one. A German scholar, K. Th. Preuß, at one time endorsed this view, and, according to his account, the early humans who thought that they could manipulate the world with magic were suffering from a condition he called “primitive stupidity” (*Urdummheit*).⁶ Once they realized that it didn’t work, they turned to religion with its greater supernatural power. For Frazer a culture that did not worship supernatural beings was not religious.

Tylor and Animism. E. B. Tylor disagreed with Frazer insofar as he asserted that a culture that recognized spirits and paid attention to them was already religious. He put forward the idea that religion began with the form called *animism* and that all further developments are merely expansions of this view.⁷ Animism sees the entire world as populated by spirits. These spirits are personal beings; they can be pictured as human beings without bodies. Paradoxically, when they appear to people, they not only look as though they had bodies but also wear clothes.⁸

What Tylor and his followers advocated was that in an animistic setting, spirits are said to inhabit the entire world. There are nature spirits that may live in trees, rivers, mountains, rocks, and other attention-getting places. Or, better, those places are where they may have a stronger or larger presence, but it is not really ever possible to leave them entirely behind.

There are so-called ancestor spirits, the souls of the living/dead. The common term, *ancestors*, is not necessarily the most accurate one. Technically, in order to be an ancestor, one must have left progeny, but that's not really a requirement to belong to this group. An unmarried aunt or uncle may still receive the same treatment as one's grandmother. The important point is that after death the soul of a person does not disappear but stays around a family or village. Among the various kinds of spirits, ancestors are some of the most demanding. They want to remain a part of the family, the clan, or the village. Thus, they wish to have their presence recognized, and frequently they need to be included in family matters. In those cases, they may need to be fed and perhaps even given other objects that will help them succeed in whatever world they occupy now. Spirits often get angry and cause trouble if the people in charge do not perform their duties. In quite a few animistic societies, spirits get particularly annoyed if they are not informed of important events in a person's life. If you are getting married, you had better tell your deceased grandfather and, to do it really right, invite him to the wedding. Do not take on a new job without the blessings of your late grandmother.

There are household spirits that may live in the threshold of the entrance to a dwelling.

It is fairly common to recognize spirits in the cooking area or, in more sophisticated settings, the kitchen. Successful agriculture depends on the cooperation of the spirits of the field. In short, spirits are everywhere and require various services as developed by their home culture.



Figure 1.5. Thai Buddhist spirit house in Bangkok, Thailand

However, these spirits should not be confused with gods. They are not superior, let alone supreme, beings. The main difference between spirits and living human beings is that they are not encumbered by bodies and, therefore, cannot be seen and can go into places we cannot access. As mentioned above, they often require food and drink, information, and other comforts. They depend on information from living people. Some spirits may be downright evil, while others may be extremely good and kind. For the most part, though, speaking in general terms, spirits are like human beings: happy when they are treated properly and unhappy when they do not receive their due. People respect them and revere them; sometimes they fear

them; but they do not worship them. In order to say that someone worships, the object of worship must be considered to be greater in their attributes than human beings; spirits—according to this classification—are not greater than us, just different.



Figure 1.6. Chinese woman consulting a street-side fortune teller

This description of animism fits many cultures. However, in the hands of E. B. Tylor

there is an additional idea to consider, namely, the idea that animism is the first stage in the evolution of religion. Or is it actually the only form of religion? It certainly looks as though there are religions that seem to have surpassed animism. However, Tylor argued that this is not the case. Gods, in his view, are spirits that have been ballooned into much bigger and better spirits, but that is all there is to them.

Thus, in Tylor's view, it may be the case that an animistic culture particularly values the ancestor spirit of a famous chief, and as people talk about him, the accounts endow him with increasingly greater powers, so that he is described with exceptional qualities and receives worship as a god. At the same time, similar honorifics are applied to other spirits and polytheism develops.

THE EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

What unites the people mentioned so far is that they bought into the larger scheme of the evolution of religion. For them, religion is something with a purely human origin, which developed from an extremely simplistic beginning to more sophisticated beliefs and practices.

There are three theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying this judgment.

First, religion is an aspect of human culture, which must be understandable without reference to actual supernatural powers. There is no question that the advocates of some of these views would protest vehemently that they were not out to undermine religious traditions, but that they were only applying scientific methodology to their investigation. However, such a protest would be hollow because scientific

methodology in their view demanded the exclusion of the reality of any spiritual powers. We saw this above in the quotation by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, where he disclosed that an antisupernatural bent was a part of their presuppositions.

Second, religion began on a very primitive and childlike level from which it evolved to greater and greater levels of complexity. It cannot be overemphasized sufficiently that the intellectual world from the early nineteenth century on was philosophically committed to a belief in biological and cultural evolution. Charles Darwin's contribution was significant insofar as he provided an apparently factual basis for this intellectual belief. However, to mention a specific example, the sociologist Herbert Spencer had already coined the phrase "survival of the fittest" as a part

of a theory of evolution that he invented prior to Darwin. The drawback to the theories of people like H. Spencer was that they lacked the biological instantiations which Darwin was able to accumulate thanks to his travels. A dogmatic conviction that human beings and their culture were evolving was accepted already. In many circles, particularly in England, the only question was what the sequence of the evolution of religious stages looked like and what the mechanism was that made it possible.

Third, religion as practiced among the least developed cultures in the world today must be closest to the religion of early human beings. This assumption appears to be rather tentative. Wouldn't it be just as likely that particular human cultures have oscillated between highly developed and less-developed stages? But actually, despite its initially questionable appearance, the assumption has a fairly high degree of plausibility. There is little or no evidence for widespread regression of physical human cultures. For example, there don't seem to be any cultures that went from having pottery to abandoning it except when under duress, or that discarded flint arrowheads in favor of going back to sharpened sticks, again unless they were forced to do so after they had attained a more sophisticated level. Therefore, it is not an unreasonable assumption that materially lower cultures should also reflect a lower range of intellectual culture. As we shall see below, this assumption actually wound up working against theories of the evolution of religion.

Given these presuppositions, a sequence of stages emerged in the writings of the religious evolutionists. What I am

presenting here is a generalized version abstracted from numerous particular theories. But the basic pattern—that people believed in spirits before they believed in gods or that monotheism was preceded by polytheism—was shared by all advocates of an evolution of religion. Furthermore, even though it is unfashionable today to subscribe to a formal theory of the evolution of religion, the basic assumption that religion began with an animistic-like awareness before it grew into more complex forms has remained as a tacit assumption in anthropology and religious studies.

Keep in mind that these forms of religion indisputably exist in various cultures around the world and throughout most of human history. The distinctiveness of the evolutionary approach is that it categorizes them according to a strict developmental theory. So, a critique of the evolutionary model includes neither the fact that there are various kinds of religions, nor the assumption that the materially least developed cultures give evidence of what the earliest human beings may have believed or practiced. The point of any debate is whether there is a mandatory set of stages through which a religion must pass in its historical development, beginning with magic or animism. Figure 1.7 shows the supposed stages of religions.

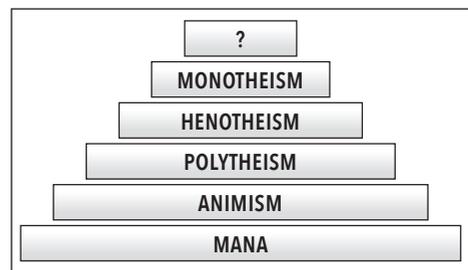


Figure 1.7. Hypothetical stages in the evolution of religion

Mana and animism. In the discussion of *animism* and *magic*, there is one more important consideration. Moving up on this hypothetical pyramid, belief in finite spirits and magic is not abandoned. Even strongly monotheistic religions, such as Islam and Christianity, maintain the reality of angels and demons, though they discourage their worship.

Magic is also found in so-called higher forms of religion when people try to manipulate spiritual powers for their benefit. A corollary to this practice is the idea that people who did not perform the correct technique may very likely miss out on certain benefits or blessings. Occasionally there arise certain fashionable practices even within Christendom based on the notion that if you make a pilgrimage to a certain place or if you regularly repeat a scripted prayer, you will receive certain blessings from God that would otherwise not be yours. In keeping with the technical definition as used by scholars of religion, these fads are properly considered to be magic (and not based on any biblical injunction).

Polytheism. Still continuing with describing the evolutionary scheme, at some point in the history of human culture, a transition was made from venerating finite spirits to worshipping gods. The distinction is primarily a qualitative one. Whereas spirits are at best only somewhat more capable than human beings, gods are vastly superior. They have quite a bit more power and knowledge than any human being, sometimes verging on being infinite in their capabilities. Since this stage recognizes many gods, it is referred to as *poly* (many) *theism* (gods).

In the evolutionary model, the transition from animism to polytheism may occur in



Figure 1.8. The Chinese god of good fortune is one member of the large Daoist pantheon

at least three different ways: (1) promoting an exalted ancestor spirit to divine status, (2) promoting nature and household spirits to divine status, and (3) personifying abstract principles.

As already mentioned, spirits who had a particularly high standing in life may retain their superior status after death. Usually, ancestor veneration is limited to the family of the departed and does not extend beyond a few generations. However, to mention one example, a powerful and popular chieftain may be adored by his whole tribe for a far longer time and recognized as having superior powers in the process, thus becoming a god. Also, a person who possessed superior powers in life may be venerated after death by people outside of the family as they tap into the figure's spiritual legacy.

A Chinese legend tells us about a little girl named Lin Moniang, the daughter of a sea-faring merchant, whose two sons frequently accompanied him. From an early age on, she manifested strong spiritual powers, which she put to use several times when her father and brothers' boat was about to sink due to heavy storms. She projected her soul to them and carried them back to shore over the raging sea. Clearly, she was filled with a great amount of "life force" called *qi* (*chi* or sometimes *xi*). When she died, still young and pure, her spirit still answered prayers, particularly those that came from sailors in distress. She became known as Mazu, which can be translated in various ways to express the idea of "exalted grandmother," that is, a female ancestor of high spiritual standing. Her fame grew quickly and she came to be worshiped as Tian-hau, the "Queen of Heaven."



Figure 1.9. The goddess Mazu, as depicted in this statue from Matsu Islands, Taiwan, is said to protect sailors and fishermen

Animists see various natural phenomena as harboring spirits. Such nature spirits may grow into nature gods. Greater objects are sometimes considered to be inhabited by more powerful spirits. For example, an imposing mountain may be the home of a fearsome god, or weather may be controlled by particularly powerful deities. Since fertility is crucial to survival in agricultural cultures, a goddess of fertility is frequently held responsible for agricultural successes or failures. Similarly, the spirit inhabiting a kitchen may be so important to the life of a family that it becomes transformed into a kitchen god. Thus, the personal spirits of the animistic phase grow into the personal gods of polytheism.

As societies grow more complex, people may have paid increasing attention to

abstract principles like justice and love, which may become identified with a particular god or goddess. In a crisis, the people of that culture might appeal to the divine personage. Other principles could also be personified by divine beings, with or without physical representations.

The set of gods and goddesses within a particular religion is referred to as its "pantheon." For example, we can speak of the ancient Greek pantheon (Zeus, Hera, Athena, etc.) or the contemporary Hindu pantheon (Vishnu, Shiva, Kali, etc.). Relationships within a pantheon are frequently characterized by some order that usually includes family relationships (e.g., Zeus is married to Hera) and function (e.g., Indra is an ancient Hindu god of rain and Agni is the god of fire). However, it would be a mistake ever to

expect a pantheon to be completely consistent. In many instances, the relationships between the various deities are pretty fluid. Several gods may have similar offices or conflicting relationships. Such a phenomenon occurs frequently when two cultures exist in close communication with each other, and the previous two pantheons are merged into one. In such a situation, a god of one pantheon may become roughly identified with his counterpart in another, but his believers in the original culture may continue their traditional depiction and mythology. A highly visible example of such adaptations is found in South India. As those people incorporated the gods of North India, they maintained many of their South Indian features (see chapter nine).

Such confusion is consistent with the evolutionary hypothesis, but not uniquely so. No one denies that religions do undergo change. The evolutionary view imposes a strict sequence of mandatory stages, which, when it comes right down to it, is not even replicated in the changes with which we are familiar.

A special type of god encountered in many pantheons is called a “trickster.” A trickster is not evil, but hypersensitive to how he’s being treated, and he can be malicious if he is offended. He will most likely be nice if he gets his due; if he is in a good mood, he may even mediate between human beings and the other gods. Treat him badly or ignore him, however, and you may have a bad day as he makes sure that he gets your attention.

Since gods are more powerful and more knowledgeable than spirits, human beings need to acknowledge their superiority and submit to them. These gods are not as easily manipulated as mana or the various kinds of spirits. People may petition them for their

favor, but the outcome rests with the will of the gods as well as the technique of the petitioner. Thus, belief in gods ideally replaces magic with worship, which can be defined as recognizing divine beings as superior, submitting to them, and entreating their favor.

There remains, however, plenty of room for magic for those who are inclined in that direction. Apparent acts of worship take on magical significance when the worshipers believe that following the correct worship practices releases the god’s favor. Yet the gods have their own agendas, and in the end all that the people may be able to do is to submit to them.



Figure 1.10. This cardboard man with flowers will be ritually burned so as to make someone’s afterlife more beautiful

Henotheism. It would be easy to move directly from polytheism to monotheism, but usually an evolutionary scheme inserts a stage between the two. In this stage people recognize many different gods as real, but one god or goddess sticks out as distinctly higher and more important. Henotheism

does not deny the existence of many gods, but the cultus focuses primarily on one of them. Henotheistic worship may have a social basis. For instance, a particular tribe, family or profession may be specifically attached to one god, whereas a similar group may be devoted to a different one. Henotheistic worship may also have a geographical basis: one god is thought to have exclusive domain over one specific region, whereas a different one is thought to rule over another area. Finally, individuals may choose to devote themselves to the worship exclusively to one god among various options.



Figure 1.11. The Hindu goddess Parvati, covered with flower dust, ready to assist her husband Shiva and his devotees

During the time of the Old Testament, henotheism was a very common view among the pagan neighbors of Israel. The Bible does not promote that point of view since it teaches monotheism. However, the Bible

reports that many people held to a henotheistic understanding. People largely believed that each particular nation and the territory that they inhabited belonged to their god, and the god would have more power to protect them within their homeland. One example of henotheism appears in the Bible in the speech of the Assyrian field commander, reported in Isaiah 37. He interpreted the conflict between the Israelites and the Assyrians as a conflict between their gods and claimed that the god of the Assyrians had already defeated the gods of other nations and would also defeat Yahweh, the God of Israel (he was wrong—see Isaiah 37:36). Another poignant example of henotheism is narrated in 2 Kings 5. After the Aramean commander Naaman was healed of leprosy, he resolved to worship only Yahweh. In order to do so properly once he had returned to his home country, he packed two mule-loads of soil from Israel to take back with him so that Yahweh would feel at home on the ground of his own country.

Monotheism. The evolutionary model usually views monotheism as the highest step of development. People have finally come to realize that there is only one God. The Italian scholar Rafael Pettazzoni declared that it is impossible to have monotheism unless it has been preceded by polytheism. According to this arbitrary definition, cultures that worship a single god without prior polytheism cannot be labeled as monotheistic, a rather artificial revision of language to serve his purposes.

According to another, fairly well-known hypothesis, monotheism was first attempted by the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV), who tried to substitute the exclusive worship of Aten for the previously held polytheism. This deity was first thought of as the



Figure 1.12. Akhenaten and Nefertiti under the rays of Aten

disk of the sun, but then became transformed by him into a purely spiritual supreme being.⁹ However, this popular idea rests on a misunderstanding of how Egyptian religion worked and what Akhenaten's goals were. He did not encourage the people of Egypt to worship Aten. This god was his god alone. Akhenaten saw himself as the representative of Aten and, in keeping with Egyptian tradition, intended the people to worship him, the pharaoh. So, he did not so much endorse monotheism as attempt to add weight to Pharaohism.¹⁰

CRITIQUE OF THE EVOLUTIONARY MODEL

The biggest problem with the evolutionary model of religion is that the kind of development it describes has never been observed. Certainly, there is a lot of change in the religious life of many cultures. But the changes may occur anywhere along the line and can proceed in either direction. Scholars have no record of any culture moving precisely from a mana-like beginning to a monotheistic culmination, incorporating all stages in

The core of monotheism is the notion that there is only one God, usually described as the Creator of the world and as vastly superior in all respects to any creature. The God of monotheism is the author of moral directives for creation. God alone is God, and God alone is worthy of worship.

As I pointed out above, a monotheistic religion does not exclude belief in the reality of lesser spiritual beings. It is not surprising, then, that in a culture in which an authentic monotheism is the dominant form of religion, there will be members of the society who occupy themselves with these lesser powers, such as angels, saints, ancestors, and so forth, possibly even more than with the worship of the Supreme God. These practices are often defended on the basis of a semantic distinction: people *worship* God and only *venerate* the lesser beings. This difference may seem arbitrary when one observes the extent to which veneration and worship entail identical actions. From the perspective of someone defending an evolutionary view of religion, these quasi-animistic practices would constitute a remnant of earlier religious stages. However, as this next section will show, they are best explained as a degeneration from the fundamentally monotheistic character of the host religion.

proper sequence, or anything even close to it, and the same thing is true for any of the variations of the evolutionary model. In fact, there is no region in the world where such a sequence is demonstrated by successive and different cultures. The only place it shows up is as a presupposition that scholars continue to bring to the study of a particular religion (even if they do not assent to an evolutionary pattern in general) when they just assume

that a supposedly lower stage must have preceded an allegedly higher stage. I stated above that one cannot demonstrate *widespread* regressions in the material culture of a people, but there are many examples of cultures moving backward or forward to a certain degree in their spiritual development. Just consider these facts: Japan is a modern, highly industrialized country, but its religion, Shinto, is for the most part animistic, at best polytheistic in nature. On the other hand, a Bedouin in the Syrian desert, living in a tent as he keeps his camels, may be a strong monotheist. There definitely is no universal, let alone normative, pattern of *upward* development in any culture. The best that can be claimed is that the evolutionary model is an ideal that development should

follow—because an evolutionary theory demands it—but never has.

The idea of mana and magic as the original precursors to religions has no evidence to support it. Wherever we see mana, it is in the context of a culture that also recognizes personal spirits.¹¹ Furthermore, evolutionary theory expects cultures at the supposed first two stages (mana and animism) to be free of any notion of gods. In point of fact, this is not the case. Even strongly animistic cultures (by which I mean cultures whose religious practices focus primarily on the spirits) frequently have gods or, to be more specific, a tradition concerning one Creator God. And this observation brings us to the competing model of the origin of religion—the idea of an original monotheism.

ORIGINAL MONOTHEISM

As opposed to the previous naturalistic models of religion, original monotheism locates the beginnings of religion in God. This approach finds a home within the religious context itself. Someone who believes in the Bible or the Qur'an, for example, would hold that the reality of God preceded human awareness of God. People responded to God's self-disclosure, and religion came into existence. Any changes in religion consist of either a closer approach to or a deviation from the divine disclosure.

Is there evidence, other than religious scriptures, that religion may have originated in this way? What could even count as evidence? As Robert Brow has pointed out, archaeology has been of little help here.¹² The altars would have been made of uncut stones, and once an altar was no longer in use, the stones would no longer be discernible as an altar. Presumably, some charcoal would remain, but that would not

necessarily indicate the stone's use in worship. So, by its very nature, an early monotheism of the type described could not leave much physical evidence.

However, there are two other sources that can provide evidence for an original monotheism: early scriptures of religions with roots in the ancient world and the anthropological method, the very means by which scholars had attempted to demonstrate an evolution of religion. Virtually every religious culture carries a vestige of monotheism that can be identified as a variation of the eight-point description. And the tribes that are least developed in terms of their overall material culture provide some of the strongest support for original monotheism.

We see here a fundamental irony with the anthropological method as it had been used by the advocates of an evolution of religion. Such scholars may have been right

What did such an original monotheism look like? Genesis 4:26 refers to the origins of religion when it says, "At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD." This verse occurs right after it is mentioned that Adam and Eve had another son, Seth, and that Seth had a son of his own, called Enosh. What can be pieced together about this first form of religion from the first chapters of Genesis?

1. There is one God who has personhood (as opposed to being an impersonal force). Personhood is displayed by the use of a personal pronoun in referring to him.
2. God apparently lives in the sky (heaven).
3. God has great knowledge and power.
4. God created the world.
5. God is the author of standards for good and evil.
6. Human beings are God's creatures and are expected to abide by God's standards.
7. Human beings have become alienated from God by disobeying God's standards.
8. God has provided a method of overcoming the alienation. Originally this reconciliation involved sacrificing animals on an altar of uncut stone.

in assuming that the least developed cultures have the least developed religions; however, they did not recognize that simple belief in a Creator God may be precisely such a religion with minimal development. Instead, they assumed that such a religion must be what they called "primitive," that is, simplistic, childlike, and superstitious. In reality, the cultures to which they pointed as religiously undeveloped are often quite complex, involving elaborate theories of the afterlife, convoluted relationships among the spiritual powers, multiple social distinctions (such as totemism and grades of shamanism) and elaborate rituals. The idea that a materially undeveloped culture could worship a Creator God in heaven was intrinsically implausible to them because they had already designated monotheism as an advanced form of belief, of which

so-called primitive people were incapable. Where there seemed to be evidence for it, it was either considered to be an anticipation of a future development or the result of some influence from an advanced monotheistic religion, such as Christianity or Islam, even if neither alternative could be demonstrated.¹³

In many cultures that are primarily animistic in practice but also vaguely recognize a supreme god, the mythologies frequently refer to a time when the relationship between the high god and human beings was closer than it is today, so that the notion of the anticipation of a future development does not fit at all. The alleged influence of Christianity or Islam on tribal cultures became a mantra of last resort for evolutionists in the sense that there must have been such an influence even if it cannot be proven.

E. B. Tylor asserted in the first edition of his *Primitive Culture* (1871), concerning the idea that tribal cultures with an apparent monotheism learned about God from Christian or Islamic missionaries, "This view can hardly bear examination. . . . It can hardly be judged that a divine being whose characteristics are often so unlike what European intercourse would have suggested, and who is heard of by such early explorers among such distant tribes, could be a deity of foreign origin."¹⁴ However, in the second edition he didn't mention this argument against missionary influence and hints at a change of mind. Then in a later article, he repeated the same argument *for* missionary influence that he had argued *against* earlier without responding to his own criticisms of it.¹⁵

It is customary in scholarly circles to credit the anthropologist (or better, linguist or ethnologist) Wilhelm Schmidt with the theory of original monotheism. Of course, Schmidt was not the first person to believe that religion originated with God. Many people held that belief long before Schmidt, just as people knew about falling objects long before Isaac Newton. Wilhelm Schmidt's contribution lay in the scholarly documentation he provided concerning an original monotheism.



Figure 1.13. Wilhelm Schmidt

As reported above, toward the end of the nineteenth century, an evolutionary pattern had become the standard assumption in the academic world, particularly in Great Britain. This theory was defended forcefully by E. B. Tylor and his disciples, such as Andrew Lang. However, as Lang was surveying the many reports about local cultures, specifically those coming out of Australia, he realized that while there were many tribes that lived on an animistic level, there were some who held a belief in a single god, which could not have evolved out of animism.¹⁶ Thus he stipulated that there could be two ways in which religion could originate, either with animism, in line with Tylor's theory, or, as he had just discovered, directly with monotheism. Lang conceded that he could not judge which of these two possibilities might have occurred earlier in time. He was able to show that the monotheism of these cultures was not the result of influence from, say, Christian or Muslim missionaries, and that it was intrinsic to the cultures, but he could not demonstrate that it was the starting point for all of religion.

It was at this point that Wilhelm Schmidt put the theory of original monotheism on

sound footing. He began using what is called the “culture-historical” method in his research. The intent of this method was to identify a chronological sequence among prehistorical cultures (that is to say, cultures without written records), truly an ambitious undertaking, but not an impossible one. This book cannot provide the details of Schmidt’s work. The full-blown description of his method alone is a book of almost four hundred pages, and its application to cultures around the world resulted in twelve large volumes.¹⁷ However, it is not all that hard to take the mystery out of the process by looking at some simplified examples.

Example 1. The first illustration is essentially a thought experiment. Let us begin by assuming that there are four adjoining cultures, each of which tells a slightly different version of a story. Let us label them A through D. Table 1.1 gives us the four variants of the simple story.

All other things being equal, which culture is most likely to have originated that myth? A possible answer is found by looking for the culture that has the most in common with the other three, and that, therefore, is most likely the one that has the fewest innovations. We notice that each of the versions differs by exactly one detail, but there is one that has all of the details that are dispersed over the others, namely B. Thus, it makes sense to infer that

B is the original, and that A, C, and D represent variations on B. Assuming one culture of origin and a direct link between it and the receptor cultures, if any of the other three cultures were the source, the transmission would have had to undergo two modifications in two of them, one of which would have been the identical change, occurring independently. This is not impossible, but the probabilities against it are much higher.

Example 2. Schmidt’s method began with the indisputable observation that the history of human people is a long story of innumerable migrations. So, let us imagine a geographical area occupied by two different tribes, call them A and B, and that a part of the territory occupied by tribe A bisects the territory of tribe B, as shown in figure 1.14.

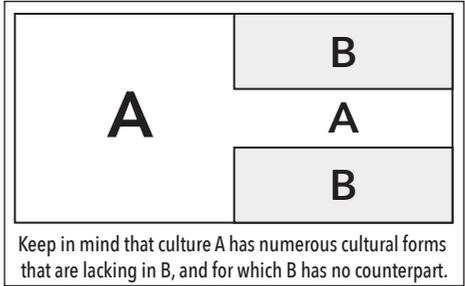


Figure 1.14. Geographical layout of two hypothetical cultures

It is a safe assumption that one tribe migrated into the area ahead of the other one.¹⁸ If A arrived earlier, then B would presumably have appeared as a unified tribe, but then

Table 1.1. Four variations of a simple story

Variant	Story	Elements
A	The farmer went to town to sell his pigs.	farmer, town, pigs
B	The farmer went to town sell his cows.	farmer, town, cows
C	The farmer went to market to sell his cows.	farmer, market, cows
D	The rancher went to town to sell his cows.	rancher, town, cows

split up and settled on the two sides of A's unusually narrow extension. The previously unencumbered existence of this extension would be rather unusual since B's settlement demonstrates that both adjoining sides are capable of sustaining life. On the other hand, if B had settled there earlier, it would have existed as a geographically unified tribe for a time until it was divided by A's invasion, a far more common occurrence. Already it would appear that the latter option is more likely, but let us propose some further data to support the conclusion.

Suppose that culture A has many more cultural forms than culture B. By *forms* Schmidt meant aspects of objects that do not contribute directly to their pure function, such as decorations on pottery, curved ends of hunting bows, or special designs on clothes. In this theoretical example, we stipulate that these and other similar items are found in A, but not in B. Also, let us assume that the language in A could have been derived from an ancestor language of B, but not the other way around.

Does this sound complicated to you? Just think of your own neighborhood (or town, city, state, province). Without knowing directly, can you find signs of which families have lived there for quite a while by the way they talk and act and by their possessions, the stuff they have, as opposed to who evidently must have moved to the area more recently?

So let us suppose for a moment what would be entailed if A had been there first. B would have needed to subdue A in A's former territory, and we should expect to find residual forms of A's culture (technically called *survivals*) in B's area, but we stipulated that certain popular forms in A are not present in B's territory.

All other things being equal, it seems pretty clear that the people of tribe A came later into this territory than those of B, and that A brought cultural innovations that B is lacking. Most probably, then, B is the older culture.

Please remember that I am giving these two examples only as simplified illustrations of how the ethnological method of Schmidt and his colleagues worked. By the use of this method, Schmidt was able to demonstrate the relative age of various cultures, even if they were in close geographic proximity to each other, and therefore, ultimately which were the oldest, manifesting the fewest cultural accretions. These cultures were, in fact, not only the materially least developed cultures, but also precisely the ones that fell in line with the originally monotheistic cultures, as stipulated already by Lang.¹⁹

Furthermore, Schmidt showed that, as cultures improved their material standing, they also moved away from this original monotheism, but they were likely to show a vestige of the monotheism that they had once held before they departed into one of the supposedly earlier stages according to the evolutionary theory.

Wilhelm Schmidt was a Roman Catholic priest and a member of the Order of the Divine Heart, and he believed that his conclusions not only paralleled the biblical narrative but verified it from a scientific standpoint as well.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, many of those who disagreed with him claimed that he was influenced by his Christian presuppositions. Of course, he was—just as all other scholars would be influenced by their presuppositions, as we saw with Spencer and Gillen. Presuppositionless scholarship is impossible. Whether or not Schmidt's



presuppositions caused him to distort his data is another question altogether. The answer can be verified by working through his written legacy, and then it becomes pretty clear that, in contrast to the scholars who accepted the theories of S. Freud (see chapter seven), L. H. Morgan, or J. G. Frazer, he did not let his theory dictate his conclusions. Consequently, we can conclude that there is good anthropological reason to believe in the thesis of original monotheism.

Needless to say, if religion did originate with monotheism, much of it moved away from that starting point. The fact of change is a given. To repeat: all of the phases described by the evolutionary model are found in reality, and there is constant change in all directions, but there are no evolutionary mandated sequences, only a picture of degeneration and renewal. Under the model of original monotheism, we can draw three basic inferences.

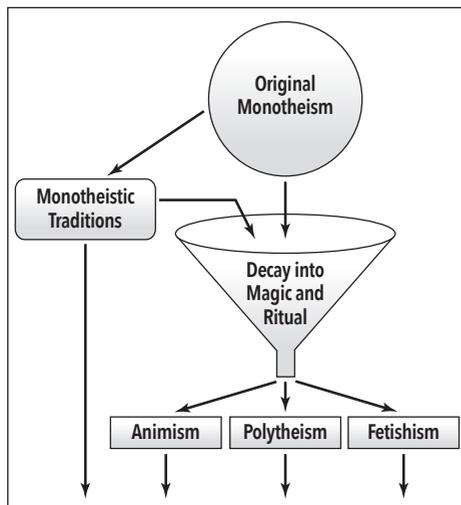


Figure 1.15. The move away from monotheism

First, there is one decisive change—the move away from monotheism. This change has to be seen as a falling away, perhaps best understood as decay or corruption. Human

beings turn away from God to something else: other gods, spirits, nature, even themselves. Apparently, the God of the sky seemed too remote. In times of personal crises—a sick child, crop failure, marital problems—people believed that they needed more immediate help. Invoking the aid of fetishes or spirits seemed more potent. Thus, God receded behind other spiritual powers. In biblical terms people worshiped the “created things rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:25).

Second, there is no clear pattern in which this departure typically takes place. Monotheism could turn into henotheism, polytheism, or animism. But one thing is certain: as monotheism was left behind, ritual and magic increased. This is not to say these elements could not occur within a fairly stable monotheistic context (of course they can!). However, once human beings abandon faith in one almighty, all-knowing God, the role that they play in attempting to find their own way in a world that is apparently dominated by spiritual forces becomes far more central, and they must try to rely on their own piety and religious manipulations.

Third, once monotheism is abandoned, change continues to occur. Again, there is no mandatory sequence in which “stages” rearrange themselves, but religions are unlikely to stop changing once they have stepped away from monotheism. Magic and ritual abound, and since they ultimately cannot deliver on their promises, their practice will increase in quantity and complexity.

Every once in a while throughout history, reform movements have called a culture back to a renewed awareness of God. The beginnings of Zoroastrianism and Islam are clear examples of such events. When they happen, even though there may be initial

enthusiasm, chances are that there will also be an increase in conflict between the idealists who are promoting the return to monotheism and those who do not feel free to give up their traditional faiths. This phenomenon may also open a gap between the ideal version of the religion and how its adherents actually practice it (they usually cling to rituals and veneration of spirits). In contrast to the neat pyramid associated with the evolutionary view (fig. 1.7), monotheism

carries the liability of a tendency toward magic and ritual (fig. 1.15).

This tendency toward magic and ritual is almost prevalent enough to be elevated to the level of a law analogous to the second law of thermodynamics, according to which randomness increases within any closed physical system: A religious culture, left without strong guidance, will tend toward increased ritual and magic.²¹

THE NATURE OF RITUAL

Ritual and magic—in the technical sense—are very similar. Both attempt to manipulate the spiritual world and, thereby, the physical world as well. What distinguishes ritual is that it consists of actions that are repeated over and over again. When a ritual has become fully integrated into a culture or a religion, it frequently is considered to be effective by itself, regardless of the state of mind of the person performing it.

Rituals. Many actions performed in a religious context involve some sort of ritual. There are two sides to the performance of rituals, both individually and institutionally. On the one hand, for many people rituals are comforting and reassuring. They provide a familiar setting with words and actions that they have known since childhood. No matter how upside-down your life might be, religious rituals provide the message that not everything has descended into chaos.

Furthermore, rituals (or “rites” in a Christian context) can be reminders of a person’s core beliefs. Whether you offer incense to the spirits, perform a sacred dance, or come to the altar to receive Communion, whatever a person’s obligations may be, they retell the story of one’s relationship to the spiritual world. For example, reciting a

creed regularly as a part of a Christian worship service should serve to maintain our focus on the central points of why we are Christians at all. There are many reasons to perform rituals as a part of a religion’s cultus, and perhaps even more meanings for each person participating in them.

On the other hand, there can also be a negative side to rituals. Many times, a ritual bears the burden of relieving someone from some form of anxiety. Of course, many people who participate in a ritual (perhaps a worship ceremony, a funeral service, or an initiation rite) do not feel anxiety at all. But such an assurance may ignore the feelings that may have gone into the construction of the ritual to begin with. How would some of these people feel if suddenly they could no longer attend or perform the ritual? Sometimes rituals are carried out in order to achieve some result, which may be as nebulous as “a blessing from God” or as specific as “a successful business deal.” Receiving the desired result would depend on executing the ritual properly. If the result does not come about, something about the ritual must be incorrect. An improperly performed ritual may even backfire, causing harm instead of benefit.

Let me illustrate this point with a highly oversimplified example, keeping in mind, though, that the basic human tendency is to increase ritual. Also, don't forget that the theory of original monotheism recognizes that religions change and develop. There must be a reason for such a development.

Say that you live in a hunting economy, and you set out to hunt. You ask your god to give you success, and then you make a suitable kill. A few days later you set out to hunt again but get nothing. What do you do? Obviously, you compare the two days. Suddenly you remember that you had not prayed to your god the second day! Are you ever going to set out on a hunt again without praying? Not likely! The risks of failure are too great for you to leave out anything that may promote success. In my observations, it does not take many instances of failure or success for people to associate the outcome with specific practices.

Now imagine that on the third day you pray to your god but still come up with nothing. One option would be for you to conclude that apparently praying to the god and a successful hunt were coincidental. Therefore, prayer seemed useless. But it appears that people do not usually react in this way. They are far more likely to look to themselves for a reason behind their lack of success—they must not have prayed correctly, or they must have violated some other condition in dealing with the god. So, you bring your actions in line with what you now think the expectations are. Maybe you will kneel when you pray instead of standing.

You will continue to refine your technique—and your life—as you experience failure or success. The crucial motivation lies in your anxiety over the hunt and the sustenance it provides. Eventually you have

burdened yourself with an extremely complex set of requirements in your attempt to cope with the vicissitudes of hunting. For example, before any hunt you may light a sacred fire, sacrifice a bit of meat left over from the last hunt, perform a lengthy chant or prayer to the god, hold your weapon to the sky or ask your ancestors to go with you. And you always perform the ritual in exactly the same way. This example is obviously oversimplified, but it illustrates that life can be precarious, and thus, complex rituals and ceremonies can arise in response.

Rites of passage. Most religious cultures celebrate the stages of life as people pass through them. In almost all cultures there are ceremonies connected to birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Various cultures may add others. A true rite of passage does not just celebrate a person's accomplishments but actually brings them about. For example, in American culture one is not married until the officiant declares, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." Chapter seven, "Traditional Religions: Introduction and African Religions," will discuss the nature of rites of passage in greater depth, though the chapters beforehand will also mention them.

The development of a priesthood. Of course, all this accumulation of ritual plays itself out in a community context. Individuals consult with other members of the community in an attempt to help each other refine their techniques. Successes and failures, as well as the methods that lead to them, are shared.

Eventually a group of experts on ritual emerges, and the focus moves away from the worship of God to the rituals they perform and their superior knowledge of

the spiritual world. Their role may be to consult and assist, working cooperatively with their clients. This is the role traditionally played by a “medicine man,” or ritual expert in a traditional context. He or she advises the client and directs the ritual, but it remains a joint effort.

In many cultures, though, the pattern goes several steps further. The experts become the sole proprietors of the ritual. They constitute a priesthood that performs the ritual on behalf of the other members of the community (for a price). A priest is usually a professional who derives a livelihood from facilitating the spiritual observances of the lay people. Joining this elite group often requires extensive training, by virtue of which the ritual domain becomes the prerogative of the priest. No one who has not completed the training can possibly perform the ritual properly, and any attempt to do so is strictly forbidden.

The laity may be quite content to leave all rituals in the priesthood’s hands. The priests are supposed to be the experts; they alone need to know what to do, why to do it, and how to do it. As long as they are in charge, there is no need for the laity to get involved unnecessarily. This attitude is not unlike the one that we might have in cases of mechanical problems, such as when my air conditioner at home breaks down. I call in the experts to fix it and generally trust their skill and judgment even if I do not understand what they are doing (but I will have to pay the bill). In the same way, the laypersons in our hypothetical community abandon themselves to the expertise of the priesthood, trusting the skill and judgment of the professionals. I have visited many a temple where the priests are performing a ritual on behalf of a client who is simply standing there

without understanding the words spoken by the priest or showing a great amount of interest—sometimes even talking on their cell phones at that very moment.

The emergence of folk religion. At the same time further developments may take place. Although the laity has conceded the performance of major rituals to the priesthood, it may not have given up its fundamental religious consciousness. People continue to relate to the supernatural in ways that are still open to them and continue to create new rituals. Thus, the growth of ritual is a never-ending process. A religious culture may split off from its original form. On the one hand, there may be a religion of the experts with its inside knowledge of its mythology and ritual, which codify into a set of sacred writings that can only be read and understood by people with expert training. On the other hand, the religion of the common people may try to find its way apart from the intensive priestly training in practice and scripture. This is how a folk religion develops.

Folk religion consists of the lived, everyday practice of religion by common laypersons. Keep in mind, of course, that this distinction is imposed on people’s religious practices by outside scholars. The participants would not have a notion that they are practicing a folk religion. For that matter, the dividing line between the officially sanctioned religion and its folk version cannot always be drawn with precision. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that there can also be a vast difference between the theoretical-historical side of a religion and its counterpart in the lives of its common adherents.

Take the case of Christianity, for example. In the introduction to this book, I summarized Christianity in terms of a belief



system—a set of doctrines having to do primarily with sin and salvation. However, many people who consider themselves Christians would be unable to give such a summary and would not, even if they could, define their Christianity in such a way. There is a folk Christianity that defines the nature of Christianity in cultural terms that are far removed from the systematic theologies and histories of the church taught in seminaries.

There are many versions of folk Christianity, and it is impossible for me not to make reference to some stereotypes as I describe the folk Christianity practiced in rural Indiana, where I live. The core practice here is attending church on Sunday morning. To be considered valid, the Sunday service must be conducted in a building reserved for such a purpose, preferably one that has at least a small spire. The service should include hymns sung to organ or piano accompaniment. Further, there should be an offering and a sermon delivered by an ordained clergyman who basically repeats moral exhortations. From the point of view of the believer, attendance constitutes the crucial requirement. Additional participation in the life and function of the church is not nearly as crucial as simply being there on Sunday morning. When greater involvement is encouraged, service to the building (maintenance or improvement) and participation in social occasions (especially carry-in dinners) are considered of equal value with teaching a Sunday school class or working on a committee. The requirement for attendance is especially crucial on one of the three highest holy days—Christmas, Easter, and Mother’s Day.

This folk Christianity has developed a belief system all its own. At the heart of it is

the belief that God wants us to be “good” people. When asked, a believer may loosely define goodness in terms of keeping the Ten Commandments, without being able to name more than three or four of them. More practically, this goodness actually looks like the prevailing standards of decency and respectability of rural Indiana; a “good” Christian is essentially a pleasant friend and neighbor. The reward for at least occasional goodness is going to heaven. Those who achieve admission to the pearly gates become angels, complete with white gowns, wings, and harps.

Again, I regret the reference to such hackneyed stereotypes, but this caricature of folk religion in my own religion is not too far from the actual pattern and points up the evident discrepancy between a “theologically correct” understanding of Christianity and the understanding of it that is held by many laypersons who consider themselves Christians. As a Christian myself, I believe that many Christians need more accurate teaching of biblical Christianity. But how does an outsider to the faith decide which of the many presentations of Christianity is the correct one? A non-Christian can only describe the various versions of Christianity and say that they are all somehow part of the diverse group of people who call themselves Christians. Non-Christians only can (or should) leave internal questions of Christian truth to Christian theologians. And this caution applies to us as Christians as we learn about non-Christian religions.²²

Consequently, Christian readers of this book need to bear in mind that they are outsiders to the religions it discusses. They also need to be aware of the various levels of development within the religions. In addition

to the classical divisions that exist within religions—schools, branches, denominations, and so on—there may be a huge gap between the “official” description of a religion and what some of the common adherents actually believe and practice. For example, the content of Islam is usually described in terms of the five pillars (chapter three).²³ Your Muslim neighbor, however, may not even be able to remember what they are, but instead, he or she may be preoccupied with warding off evil spirits. Similarly, a description of Buddhism in terms of the search for Nirvana by means of the eightfold path (chapter ten) will at best be half the story. For many Buddhists, the heart of Buddhism is securing the blessings of Buddha and of various gods and spirits for a successful life.

Someone who has formally studied a religion’s history and scripture may have a better grasp of the more abstract aspects of the religion than some of its adherents. However, the perceptive scholar does not jump to the conclusion that, therefore, the adherent is wrong about his or her faith, or even that the scholar has a better understanding of the religion as a whole. Instead, he or she must always be aware that a

religion is composed of both the “expert” side and the “folk” side. For this reason, whenever we condense a religion into a set core of beliefs and practices, we recognize that we are engaging in abstractions that cannot possibly do justice to what the practitioner of the religion experiences. On the other hand, if we avoided all such abstractions, we would lack a paradigm against which we could contrast the popular face of the religion, and would, therefore, be less able to understand it.

It is impossible to predict what specific adherents believe and practice in the context of their religion. Be prepared for some ambiguity when you encounter people who call a particular religion their own. You may see or hear precisely what is described in this book. You may also see or hear something very different, since ultimately the experience of a living religion cannot be confined to authoritative sentences. That does not mean that what you read here is wrong; it may just be a different side of the religion. People change, cultures change, and religions change. And the life of the person within the religion changes—sometimes following a traditional pattern, sometimes working against it.

RETURNING TO SPENCER AND GILLEN

Of course, Spencer and Gillen had not done any such thing as discover a religionless culture. Their studies were detailed, but they had been filtered through the imaginations of various theoreticians, as they themselves acknowledge. Other Australian explorers (e.g., A. C. Howitt) also declared themselves to be the eyes and ears of prestigious writers whose ideas they accepted beforehand and then sought to instantiate with interpretations of the data on the basis of these theoretical constructions.²⁴ Crucially they knew that the Arrernte not only practiced magic but also believed in a world of spirits that influenced them and that could be influenced by



“medicine men.” These professional healers, whom the authors relegate as masters of sleight-of-hand, were supposedly able to keep malicious spirits from doing harm. A spirit called Twanyirika was particularly important, playing the role of trickster and being supposedly responsible for the sound of bull roarers.

If the brief summary above strikes you as religious in nature, you are not alone. Spencer and Gillen followed Frazer’s idea that true religion implies the worship of a superior (if not supreme) being, and their claim does fit in with such a criterion. However, surely it is cherry-picking to limit the definition of religion by an arbitrary standard that excludes animism, which is only possible by subscribing to an evolutionary view in which sacred forces and spirits are considered preludes to religion rather than part of a religious culture. The Arrernte were as religious as other tribes and traditional cultures.

Spencer and Gillen came across something called *Altjira*, a word that they allied to the word “dream” and thus coined the term “Dream Time,” by which they interpreted *Altjira* as an ideal time of the ancestors in the eternally remote past. Right then and there the standard stereotype of Australian religion was born. Spencer and Gillen’s translation of *Altjira* was challenged by the missionary Carl Friedrich Strehlow and his son T. G. J. Strehlow, both of whom spent much of their lives in the company of the Arrernte, not just as scientific observers looking for data to support a hypothesis. They believed that the word was actually a reference to God in his eternal nature.²⁵

That discussion is continuing today, more than a century later. It has become clear that *Altjira* and its recognized cognates in other Australian cultures are overladen with meanings. However, in this case, the debate is not nearly as important in making the case for original monotheism as it might sound. The Arrernte had a relatively advanced material culture compared to other Australian tribes, and thus were not members of the culture circle in which Lang and Schmidt discovered a functional monotheism. Consequently, if we follow the culture-historical method, we should not need to expect a lot of emphasis on the presence or absence of a Creator God among the Arrernte. If Strehlow was right, it would add to our knowledge of different cultures and the history of belief in God, but the defense of an original monotheism is based on cultures whose material development is on a far lower level.

As devoted as Spencer and Gillen may have been in their studies, their attitude toward their subjects was disdainful at times, manifesting more interest in the culture of the people than in the people themselves. As did other explorers of their time, they held to attitudes that would be considered unacceptable today, even by minimal standards.²⁶

SO YOU MEET A RELIGIOUS PERSON . . .

What can you expect? Who knows? The possibilities are endless. There are many religions, and religions themselves go through changes. Many religions have developed a distinctive folk version over the years, and any particular believer can have his or her own slant on the religion. So, when meeting a person who claims a particular religion, expect the unexpected. Many evangelical Christians try to understand other religions on the basis of quick formulas, but it is a serious mistake to impose simple schemes on the basis of what the person is supposed to believe. For example, many Hindus are not pantheists, many Buddhists do not want to escape into Nirvana and many Jews are not looking for a messiah. Sadly, many people who claim the title of “Christians” do not believe that they are saved by grace through faith in Christ!

Relating the gospel. For each of the religions I will discuss further on, I will provide some ideas on how the Christian gospel addresses people who are part of that religion and what we can do to help them see the gospel more clearly. Such advice is premised on the idea that the people of other religions need to hear the gospel and respond to it because the gospel is true. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

Communication. Most conversations that Christians have with non-Christians are not evangelistic. But when the opportunity arises, a Christian may wish to share the gospel with someone who has not yet come to faith in Christ. This book is not a study of evangelism per se. However, a study of non-Christian religions can suggest obstacles as well as points of contact in regard to sharing the gospel with the adherents of those religions. Needless to say, the details will vary from religion to religion as well as from person to person.

The Christian who wishes to share the gospel, particularly with someone who comes from a different culture, needs to be aware of the cultural package in which the encounter takes place. This is referred to as “contextualization.” Let us call the Christian who wishes to relate the gospel an “evangelist” without implying some kind of status as professional preacher or missionary. The non-Christian is the “receptor,” the one who receives the gospel message. Finally, let us assume that the evangelist and the receptor are at home in different cultures. Theoretically, the evangelist should convey the gospel message to the receptor without attaching her own culture. Practically, this is impossible. The strident voices insisting that missionaries entirely strip away their culture from the gospel message obviously belong to people who have never been missionaries. An evangelist understands the gospel message best as it is embodied in her own culture. And, for that matter, the gospel message in its original form is intertwined with a third culture, namely, the biblical one. Thus, any evangelistic activity involves the interplay of three cultures: the biblical culture, the evangelist’s home culture, and the receptor’s culture.

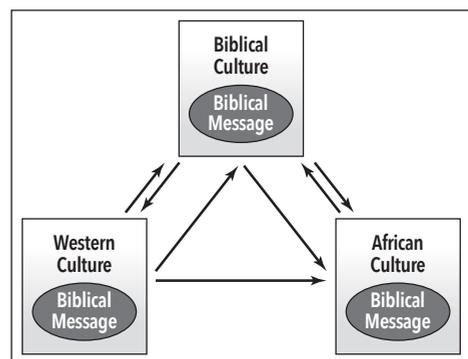


Figure 1.16. The complexities of contextualization

First of all, the evangelist must discern the gospel message in its biblical setting. Second, as far as is humanly possible, she must make sure that nothing in her culture obscures or supplants the gospel message. Third, the evangelist has to convey the message in such a way that the gospel is intelligible to the receptor in his culture and in such a way that the receptor can also trace his understanding of the gospel back to the biblical message itself. This is a difficult enterprise. Finding fault with those who attempt it imperfectly is far easier than carrying it out successfully.

Contextualization is the process by which the evangelist tries to situate her message in the receptor's culture. If the receptor is going to reject the message, it should at least not be for irrelevant reasons.

In order to gain a hearing from the receptor, the evangelist tries to adopt as much of the culture of the receptor as is possible without compromising the message itself. Contextualization can involve outward cultural forms such as dress, food, language, and manners. It can also include the concepts and images the evangelist uses to communicate the message. The apostle Paul epitomized contextualization when he reported, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

In short, evangelism necessitates some contextualization. The message that Christ provides salvation through faith in him must remain clear; the cultural setting for the message must be such that the receptor can hear the message and respond to it.

FOR REFLECTION, DISCUSSION, AND SHARING

1. Do you think that it is possible for a real person to be completely without religion—that is, to live without reference to anything transcendent?
2. Do you think that it is possible for a real person to be "spiritual" in the contemporary sense without engaging in a cultus (certain actions that nurture or demonstrate that person's "spirituality")?
3. In example 2 of Schmidt's method, I asked whether you can find evidence in your location (specific or broad) of who has lived there for a longer time and who is a relative newcomer without asking direct questions. Is it even possible to do so in your area? Share your thoughts and examples with your class.
4. Over the years I have received some friendly and gentle critiques of my description of how rituals arise out of anxiety. Do you consider my theory a) sufficient and adequate, b) sufficient in only some cases, or c) inadequate? I have added some positive benefits in this discussion. What are some other factors that could play a significant role in the development of rituals?
5. Contextualization of the gospel message is never perfect, but there are some things that we probably think are absolutely necessary to convey to our audience, even if they go against the grain of the culture's beliefs and practices (e.g., our sinfulness or the efficacy of Christ's atonement). There may also be aspects of cultures that would irritate us on our home turf but are not unbiblical. Can you think of and share what things may go into either category?



MASTERING THE MATERIAL

When you have finished studying this chapter, you should be able to

1. provide a working definition of religion and show the difficulties with such a definition;
2. identify the basis for an evolutionary theory of the origin of religion;
3. summarize the various phases of religion: mana, animism, polytheism, henotheism, monotheism;
4. distinguish between magic and worship;
5. point out the flaws in the evolutionary theory of religion;
6. describe the theory of original monotheism and the evidence adduced for it;
7. summarize the nature of ritual;
8. show how a priesthood develops out of the nature of ritual;
9. identify the difference between “expert” and “folk” religion.

TERM PAPER IDEAS

1. Trace the definitions of religion provided by various authors in comparative religion and philosophy.
2. Describe various types of magic as they have been classified by scholars from Frazer on.
3. Make an in-depth study of one type of spiritual being in the animistic phase (for example, ancestors in African religion or nature spirits in Australian aboriginal religion).
4. Compare and contrast the differing ways in which polytheism has come about in various cultures.
5. Chase down examples of henotheism in different cultures. You may want to explore the question whether henotheism ever existed as an independent form.
6. Pull together and address various theories of the origin of monotheism with a critical eye.
7. Summarize descriptions of sky gods from many cultures and compare and contrast some of the myths associated with them.
8. Do an in-depth study of Wilhelm Schmidt’s contribution and the reception his work has received in the scholarly world.
9. Explore the notion of decay in the history of religion from the point of view of religion, philosophy, psychology, or sociology.
10. Describe various theories on the nature of ritual. Defend the one that you find most suitable.
11. Write up a case study on the nature of folk religion.
12. Undertake a detailed description of the rites of passage in a specific culture. Identify components of the rites that are of clearly religious origin, those that are more likely derived from the culture *per se* and those that could be either.



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