
UNIVERSALS
AND VARIATION
IN RELIGIOUS BELIEF
AND PRACTICE

James G. Matlock

When Europeans began to explore the world in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they encountered ways of life more exotic than any they could have imagined. They saw no churches, no signs of the organized worship to which they were accustomed, and they concluded that the newly discovered peoples lacked religion. Because the Europeans didn't understand the cultures they confronted, the native rituals seemed pointless, and practices such as scalping, headhunting, and cannibalism seemed downright barbaric—further proof of the absence of religion among “primitive” peoples.

This early attitude has been replaced by an awareness of the richness of religious life in all human cultures. Absence of organized religion is no longer taken to indicate absence of religious sensibility, and an understanding of the diversity of beliefs about souls and spirits has led to an awareness that many of the actions of non-Western traditional peoples are guided by religious values. Rituals may serve as a means of contacting supernatural beings, including deceased ancestors of a community, on whom the smooth running of daily life is thought to depend.¹ Scalping and headhunting take on new meaning when it is realized that, for many peoples, the soul is located in the head.² Cannibalism, also, often finds its rationale in religious beliefs. The Aztecs, for instance, cut the hearts out of sacrificial victims and offered them as nourishment to the Sun God, then tossed the mutilated bodies down the pyramids to be picked up, cooked, and eaten in ceremonial banquets by their families and friends.³

But if it is true that all human societies have religion, it is also true that religious beliefs and practices vary tremendously. Religion's many attributes make it notoriously difficult to define, and each author must choose a definition that suits his or her purposes. I use “religion” to refer to beliefs in and practices related to unseen forces or beings that are thought to play instrumental roles in people's lives. These are the aspects of religion that are most salient in the traditional societies studied by cross-cultural researchers.

These studies may be divided broadly into those that are concerned with religious beliefs and those concerned with religious practices. Under the heading of religious practices I include practitioners (priests, shamans, witches, and so forth) and the altered states of consciousness in which many of them perform. My definition of religion subsumes many areas of magic—that is, actions intended to influence other people or the physical world by some nonmaterial means, and I will sometimes refer to magico-religious beliefs, practices, or practitioners.⁴

In writing about “traditional peoples,” “traditional societies,” and “traditional cultures,” I am following the usage of Alice and Irvin Child in their book *Religion and Magic in the Life of Traditional Peoples*. Traditional cultures are those that “have developed in the absence of writing and which have been perpetuated by oral and behavioral traditions alone.”⁵ Traditional societies include the tribal societies of Africa, Asia, Australia, and North and South America.

As we shall see, there are both universals and variations in the religious beliefs and practices of traditional peoples.⁶

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

In traditional societies, survival after death is conceived not as immortality but merely as continuing existence (in spirit form). There is variation in how important the surviving spirits are, what sort of character they have, and what role they play in the ongoing life of the community. Individual skepticism notwithstanding, however, almost all cultures of which we have knowledge hold some belief in survival.⁷

Many traditional cultures also include beliefs in reincarnation, although for them there is no necessary contradiction between continuing survival and reincarnation. This is because the soul is not conceived of as a unitary and indivisible thing. There may be a plurality of souls, each with a different destiny at death, or else the spirit of the deceased may split up, the resultant parts going different ways.⁸

Traditional societies also universally (or almost universally) believe in a host of other supernatural beings, such as nature spirits, demons, and gods.⁹ About half of such societies seem to have high gods of the sort found in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.¹⁰

Ancestor Spirits

Ancestor spirits are the spirits of deceased members of a community, or more specifically, of a particular family group or clan. In some societies, ancestor spirits play important roles, whereas in

others they are neglected and soon forgotten. What makes for such variation?

Guy Swanson, who believes that religious beliefs reflect the social order, suggests that we look at the number of sovereign kinship groups present in a society to explain the importance of ancestor spirits. A sovereign group is a group that has jurisdiction over some sphere of social life. Nuclear families are always sovereign groups, but there may be larger kinship groups (lineages, clans) or territorially-based groups (villages, chiefdoms, states). Swanson reasoned that because ancestor spirits as a rule are contacted by and have influence over their living kin, they would be found in societies where sovereign kinship groups larger than the nuclear family are based on kinship principles. Swanson regarded the nuclear family itself as too ephemeral to provide the long-term structure necessary for ancestor spirits to become meaningful. Indeed, he found that when he ruled out the nuclear family, the more sovereign kinship groups there were in a society, the more active the ancestral spirits were.¹¹

High Gods and Monotheism

Many societies have a plurality of gods, with no one more important than the rest. In other societies, one god stands out. And in yet other societies there is only one god, as there is in most of the religions in our own society.

Swanson investigated this variation, using his concept of sovereign groups. High gods have primary jurisdiction over all events in the world, whether or not they created it. If gods reflect the social order (as Swanson believes they do), we might expect to find a high god whenever a sovereign group is concerned with creating diverse events or bringing order to them. These conditions are best satisfied when a society is relatively complex—that is, when there is more than one sovereign group.

Swanson found high gods present where there were three or more sovereign groups, but absent where there were fewer than three sovereign groups.¹² This finding has been qualified by other studies, however. Swanson was concerned with political variables alone, but a series of studies have shown that economic variables must be taken into account also. In particular, a society's subsistence practices (the ways it goes about getting or rais-

ing food) predict the presence of high gods at least as well as the number of sovereign groups.¹³

The Malevolence and Benevolence of Supernatural Beings

Ghost Fear As noted, belief in the survival of the dead is nearly universal, if not universal, in human societies. Ghosts are variously conceived as the surviving spirit of the dead, as only a portion of that spirit, or as the spirit in the first few days after death before it has begun its journey to the land of the dead.

In many places, ghosts are feared because they are thought to bring illness or death. The Navaho are famous for their fears of the dead. When a Navaho dies, his or her body is carried out of the house through a hole knocked in the south wall (the direction of evil). The house may be abandoned or even torn down, to prevent the ghost from finding its way back home.¹⁴ In other societies there is no such fear, or the fear is not as pronounced. The Navaho's Hopi neighbors, for example, think that in the first four days after death the spirit of the deceased hangs around the house. Then, after the appropriate rituals have been performed, the spirit travels on to the land of the dead and there is no need to worry any longer.¹⁵

How are we to explain these variations? Why do people in some societies have a great fear of the dead, whereas in other societies they have little or no fear?

As it turns out, the beliefs are related to childrearing practices. "Love-oriented" (noncorporeal) techniques of punishment, as opposed to physical punishment, and relative neglect of infants predict ghost fear. In the first instance, this may be because love-oriented techniques inhibit aggression, whereas physical punishment leads to outwardly directed aggression. The more a society favors love-oriented punishment, the more ambivalent the feelings toward the parents, and thus the greater the fear of the dead.¹⁶ Societies that are relatively neglectful of infants may have greater fear of the dead because during the period in which the infant lies unattended it begins to develop an active fantasy life, which is reinforced when the caregiver finally appears.¹⁷

A different sort of study found that in societies with ghost

fear, surviving spouses were particularly likely to remarry. The researchers speculate that ghost fear motivates the survivors to engage in ceremonial acts and thought processes that free them from their ties to the deceased. In other words, the greater fear leads the bereaved to do things that help them work through their sense of loss and move on with their lives.¹⁸

Attitudes about Other Supernatural Beings Ghosts are only one of the types of supernatural being recognized by traditional societies. Unlike ghosts, however, which are thought to be either neutral or evil in their attitudes and influences, these other supernaturals may be benevolently inclined toward the living. They may help out by keeping people out of harm's way, by ensuring that crops will grow, that the hunt will be successful, and so on.

In many if not most societies, the same supernatural beings may be either malevolent or benevolent, depending on circumstance, but societies may nevertheless be contrasted in terms of which aspect receives more emphasis. Again, these differences have been shown to be related to childrearing.

Malevolent gods appear in societies with punitive childrearing practices, whereas benevolent gods appear in societies with nurturant childrearing practices.¹⁹ Similarly, in societies in which there is parental acceptance during childhood, the gods are benevolent, whereas in societies in which there is rejection, the gods are malevolent.²⁰ Presumably this is because the gods, as supernatural protectors, perform the same role as the parents, and the feelings toward the parents (love, respect, fear) are projected onto the character of the god.

Reincarnation

Roughly half of the world's traditional societies have, or are reported to have had, reincarnation beliefs.²¹ These beliefs are strongest and most prevalent today in West Africa and northwestern North America.²² But the reincarnation beliefs of traditional societies are very different from those we are accustomed to hearing about from Hindus and Buddhists.

One of the biggest differences between traditional reincarnation beliefs and those of the great Eastern religions is the former's lack of concern with karma. The law of karma holds that one's actions in one's present and previous lives help to condition the

circumstances of one's future lives. A murderer, for instance, might be reborn a pauper or, worse, a subhuman animal. Traditional societies are not concerned with such moral problems, and stipulate only a connection of spirit between lives.²³

Another major difference is whether or not humans can be reborn as animals. There is no question in the Eastern religions that they can, but this belief is absent in the majority of traditional societies with reincarnation beliefs. Moreover, when both beliefs appear in traditional societies, they are rarely joined together in a single cycle. People may be reborn as animals, but this does not mean that after the animal life they will be reincarnated as humans.²⁴

The Tlingit Indians of Alaska, who trace kinship through the mother's line, expect to be reborn to a female relative. They sometimes decide before they die which relative they want to return to, and tell that person to expect them. Like many traditional peoples, the Tlingit have a variety of ways of identifying which relative is reborn in a baby. Pregnant women, their husbands, or other close relatives may dream of the incoming spirit, and newborn babies are routinely checked for birthmarks or other physical marks that may act as clues. Barring various signs, a baby may be taken to a shaman or other sensitive for identification. When the identification has been made, the baby may be given the name of the person it is supposed to have been.²⁵

For traditional peoples like the Tlingit, being reborn as human allows one to reenter the social order in a way one cannot do as an animal. Children are often named after the people of whom they are supposed to be the reincarnations. Since names typically are the property of clans, it is no surprise that reincarnation is in the clan as well. Furthermore, reincarnation is related to inheritance in the clan and to hereditary succession to the office of community headman.²⁶ One interpretation of these findings is that inheritance and succession rules are arranged so that a person can have in a future life possessions and status enjoyed in the present life.²⁷

RELIGIOUS PRACTITIONERS AND PRACTICES

By *religious practices* I mean activities humans engage in that relate to unseen forces and beings. Such activities include healing and divination, witchcraft and sorcery, and the propitiation or

worship of ancestors. Religious practitioners are specialists in these practices, though they do not necessarily engage in them full time or for financial reward.

Closely related to religious practice are altered states of consciousness, and I review the research on this topic first. Then I take up magico-religious practitioners, sorcery and witchcraft, and finally, ancestor worship.

Altered States of Consciousness

Much that we know about altered states of consciousness (ASCs) cross-culturally derives from classic studies conducted by Erika Bourguignon and her students. Bourguignon is concerned with ASCs that are institutionalized and culturally patterned. These almost always express sacred values and are given a variety of supernatural explanations. She has found that as many as 90 percent of the world's societies employ some sort of institutionalized ASC.²⁸

Bourguignon draws a distinction between trance and possession trance. Trance refers to an ASC that does not entail loss of memory or the displacement of personality, whereas possession trance refers to an ASC in which the normal personality is replaced by a spirit entity.²⁹ The !Kung, who live in the Kalahari Desert in South Africa, enter ecstatic trance, which may facilitate the work of healers. However, the healers are not considered possessed. On the other hand, the Ashanti of Ghana, in West Africa, believe in a variety of gods who possess shamans and mediums and through them transmit their wishes to the society.³⁰

Possession trance is represented in about 75 percent of societies with institutionalized ASCs, but the distribution of trance and possession trance is not random. Trance is found most often in the simplest societies and possession trance in more complex societies.³¹ A study of possession trance in sub-Saharan Africa found it present especially in societies with stratified social classes and a high degree of social differentiation.³²

Thus, there may be a cultural evolutionary association with trance types, possession trance appearing later than trance. This suggestion is borne out in another study, which found possession trance to be more likely in complex societies that practice agriculture, and trance (without possession) more likely in simpler soci-

eties without agriculture. Societies with both forms of trance fell somewhere in the middle on complexity and subsistence variables.³³

Magico-Religious Practitioners

Michael Winkelman has used cross-cultural comparisons to identify types of magico-religious practitioners. Like Bourguignon, he has worked out an evolutionary model that relates practitioners and trance types to societal complexity and subsistence variables. His model is consistent with Bourguignon's, though it is a good deal more complex.

Winkelman identifies six different practitioner types that cluster into three groups—Shamans, Healers, and Mediums; Priests; and Sorcerers and Witches. The terms are capitalized to signal that they refer to formally described types of practitioner.

Shamans go into trance and call upon animal spirit allies to aid them. Shamans are found in hunting and gathering societies with, at best, only local political integration. Healers control supernatural power, but do not go into trance. They generally are found in sedentary agricultural societies that are politically well integrated. Mediums differ from Shamans and Healers in that they become possessed by spirits rather than simply making contact with them through ASCs. They are also predominantly women, whereas the other types are mostly men. Like Healers, Mediums are found in sedentary agricultural societies that are politically well integrated.

Winkelman's second group is composed of Priests. The Priest's role is to provide protection and purification. Priests receive their power from superior spirits or gods, but they do not go into trance and have no direct control over the spirit world. They are found in sedentary agricultural societies, and are invariably male. Sorcerers and Witches, which form the third major category, are found in sedentary agricultural societies with some social stratification. They may be either male or female.³⁴

Many of the more complex societies have more than one type of practitioner. Nevertheless, the patterns of association between practitioners and the societies in which they are found suggest a general evolutionary development. The original Shaman's role becomes differentiated as nomadic and egalitarian hunting and gathering societies undergo sociocultural evolution to become politically integrated and socially stratified sedentary agricultural

societies. But Winkelman goes further than this. He relates the practitioner types to ASCs, and ASCs to social structure.

Winkelman's data suggest that all societies have some ASC training for magico-religious practitioners. However, some practitioners make more use of ASCs than others. Shamans and Mediums employ trance induction procedures, as do many Healers and Priests. But with rare exceptions (for instance, the Aztec Priest), the use of trance by these last two figures is minor. Moreover, as political integration increases, the tendency for the Priest to have an involvement in ASCs decreases. Overall, the extent of use of ASC induction decreases as societies become more complex and better integrated politically. There is also a shift in induction methods, from hallucinogenic plants in small-scale hunting and gathering societies, to alcohol in more complex, politically integrated societies.³⁵

Although Winkelman has done the most work on magico-religious practitioners, he is not alone. Another study sought to explain why women are so often excluded from religious roles, especially as shamans and priests, and as participants in religious activities. Of the competing theories tested, only one was supported. The amount of resources produced and controlled by a marginalized group (like women) turned out to determine the social position of the group. In other words, where women were in charge of farming or contributed most of the food, they were the most likely to be religious specialists or to participate in religious rituals.³⁶

Sorcery and Witchcraft

It is difficult to distinguish between sorcery and witchcraft. Societies like the Azande of eastern Africa, which do make the distinction, are rare. For the Azande, sorcerers consciously direct magical acts to evil ends, whereas witches do so only unconsciously.³⁷ Most societies do not make such clear distinctions, and cross-cultural researchers have usually treated sorcery and witchcraft as a single category (sometimes calling it sorcery and sometimes witchcraft). The key element is the use of either magic or supernatural spirit helpers to bring about desired ends, often with ulterior motives.

Like other religious beliefs and practices, sorcery and witch-

craft vary in prominence. How can this variation be explained? One idea is that sorcery and witchcraft function to control behavior in societies which lack central authority. Where there is no government to make laws and enforce them, retaliation is the primary means of maintaining customary law and order, and retaliation takes the form of either direct physical violence or sorcery. This is the case, for instance, in Paiute Indian society, where social control is administered by the extended family.³⁸ On the other hand, where central authority is more developed, we can expect to find less concern with sorcery and witchcraft.

In the absence of a germ theory of illness, many traditional societies evoke sorcery and witchcraft to explain why people become sick. If sorcery and witchcraft are related to social control along the lines just described, then explanations of illness in terms of sorcery and witchcraft should be most prevalent in societies which lack central authority to settle disputes and punish offenses. In fact, this is what one study found.³⁹

Other studies have sought different ways of explaining variations in the prevalence of sorcery and witchcraft. One study predicted that sorcery and witchcraft accusations would be more prominent in societies in which co-wives in polygynous families (where a man has several wives) lived close to one another than in societies in which they lived farther apart. Co-wives living closer together could be expected to be more jealous of each other. The prediction was confirmed.⁴⁰

Sorcery has also been examined from a psychoanalytic perspective, looking once again at childrearing practices. John Whiting and Irvin Child found a strong relationship between the belief that sorcerers could cause illness and the severity of the punishment for aggression in childhood. They also found support for Freud's explanation of paranoia as a defense against sexual anxiety, fear of sorcery and sorcerers standing in for paranoia.⁴¹

Whiting returned to the problem in a later study, looking for other factors that predicted belief in sorcery. He found one in the postpartum sex taboo, which bars sexual intercourse between husband and wife for a period of time (commonly for a year or more) after the birth of a child. Previous studies had linked the length of the postpartum sex taboo to the amount of time mothers spent sleeping alone (without their husbands present) with their infants. According to the theory, male children were unconsciously seduced by their mothers, increasing their sexual anxiety and thus their paranoia. Sorcery beliefs could reflect this paranoia.⁴²

Ancestor Worship

In many societies, the spirits of dead relatives (ancestors) are propitiated in some way. Although called “ancestor worship,” practices of this sort are not strictly worship at all. Propitiation involves things like offering food and carrying out rituals to keep the spirits happy. The idea is that as long as they are content, the ancestors will help look out for home and community, but if they become annoyed at the way they have been treated, they can show their displeasure by bringing on illnesses, accidents, or bad weather. This is a two-way street, however, and the spirits may be scolded if they do not live up to their part of the bargain.⁴³

So-called ancestor worship is especially well developed in equatorial Africa, where ancestors are fed and tended at shrines. For the Onitsha Igbo of Nigeria, these shrines take the form of ancestral houses, built around open-air interior courtyards. Each village (which is ideally also a patrilineage) has its own ancestral house. Inside is a throne, on which the lineage head sits each morning. At his feet are placed objects representing the ancestor spirits, personal gods, and other supernaturals, to which he appeals on behalf of himself and his family.⁴⁴

In some societies people propitiate their own ancestors only. In other societies, many persons propitiate the ancestors of a descent line not their own in the belief that these spirits, also, have power over their lives. Ancestor worship of both types is found most prominently in societies where kinship is traced exclusively through either the father or the mother, but not both (as in our society).⁴⁵ Ancestor worship involving so-called superior ancestors, on the other hand, occurs most frequently in societies in which villages are bound together in a political federation under a common chief. In this case, it is the ancestors in the chief’s descent line that are propitiated.⁴⁶

SUMMARY

Can we conclude anything general from the diversity of cross-cultural studies of religion? Attentive readers may have noticed a recurrent pattern: the tendency for religious beliefs and practices to

change with growing complexity in social organization and subsistence strategy.

Small-scale nomadic hunting-gathering societies are characterized by relative disinterest in ancestor spirits and reincarnation. They are likely to have a single magico-religious practitioner, the Shaman, who enters trance (but not possession trance) through the use of hallucinogenic plants.

Societies with more pronounced lineages, which organize people according to whether they are descended from a common ancestor through the mother or the father, are likely to have stronger beliefs in ancestor spirits and reincarnation. Where ancestors are propitiated, however, these tend to be ancestors of one's own lineage.

With agriculture and increasing social and political complexity come increasing specialization among magico-religious practitioners, the use of possession trance by some practitioners, and the use of alcohol as opposed to hallucinogens in trance induction. Where ancestors are propitiated, these may include not only one's own lineage ancestors but also the ancestors of the chief who presides over several villages. There is more likely to be belief in a high god than in less well developed societies.

Does this mean that religious beliefs and practices have evolved in an orderly way? Maybe, but many anthropologists reject the idea of sociocultural evolution. Like Swanson, these scholars hold that religious beliefs reflect social organization. They recognize different types of social organization, but believe these are responses to particular environmental situations and cannot be ordered in an evolutionary way—that is, there is no necessary progression from hunting and gathering to agriculture, from a nomadic existence to a sedentary one, and so on.⁴⁷ The possibility of a common social and cultural base from which all societies evolved is not addressed.⁴⁸

How do religious beliefs arise? Or, to phrase the question in evolutionary terms, how did religious beliefs arise in the first place? For Swanson, religious beliefs are reflections of the social order.⁴⁹ For Whiting, they spring from childrearing practices. Another point of view is represented by a study called "Alliance and Ritual Ecstasy: Human Responses to Resource Stress." The authors argue that interband alliances between hunting and gathering groups, formed at times of stress in subsistence resources, fostered ecstatic trance. They depict ecstatic trance as an intense emotional bond that works to maintain alliances at the same time

as it leads to apprehensions of spirits and deities. Given the historically early existence of hunting and gathering groups, this would imply that beliefs in spirits and deities have been a part of human culture for many millennia.⁵⁰

We have also seen that some religious beliefs and practices relate to childrearing practices. Childrearing is implicated in the attitudes toward ghosts and other supernatural beings, predicting whether ghosts are feared and whether other gods and spirits are perceived as benevolent or malevolent. Punitive childrearing practices also predict beliefs in sorcery. In all cases, the more punitive or restrictive childrearing practices are related to the darker beliefs.

These two major themes are nicely summarized in a study called “Religiousness Related to Cultural Complexity and Pressures to Obey Cultural Norms.” This study found that both beliefs in high gods (using Swanson’s definition) and religious practices (such as rituals) were correlated with measures of cultural complexity. The more complex the society, the more likely it was to have high gods and rituals. Moreover, high gods and rituals were related to pressures on children to conform to the norms of their culture. The more pressure there was to conform, the more likely a society was to have these beliefs and practices.⁵¹ But what does all this mean? We know that much about religion is linked to sociocultural complexity⁵² and to childrearing, but we do not yet know how to explain these connections.

Do childrearing practices change with increasing complexity in political organization and subsistence strategy, perhaps because the requirements of adulthood have changed? Will we ultimately be able to link variations in all religious beliefs and practices to variation in childrearing? If so, how might this relate to the hypothesis that religious beliefs originated in ecstatic trance and other experiential events? These are questions for which we do not have answers.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Sergei Kan, *Symbolic Immortality: The Tlingit Potlatch of the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), p. 3.
2. See, for example, Michael Harner, *The Jivaro: People of the Sacred*

- Waterfalls* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Natural History Press, 1972), p. 144.
3. Murdock, George Peter, "The Aztecs of Mexico," in *Our Primitive Contemporaries* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), pp. 359–402.
 4. Magic, like religion, has been given many definitions, and not all definitions of religion would include magic in the sense it is used here. See Alice B. Child and Irvin L. Child, *Religion and Magic in the Life of Traditional Peoples* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 3–4.
 5. Child and Child, *Religion and Magic in the Life of Traditional Peoples*, p. 1.
 6. For other reviews of cross-cultural research on religion, see Carol R. Ember and David Levinson, "The Substantive Contributions of Worldwide Cross-Cultural Studies Using Secondary Data," *Behavior Science Research* 25 (1991): 79–140; and David Levinson and Martin J. Malone, *Toward Explaining Human Culture* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1980), pp. 141–152.
 7. Absence of belief in survival has been reported from so few cultures that we may wish to question whether it occurs at all. See Child and Child, *Religion and Magic in the Life of Traditional Peoples*, p. 168.
 8. James G. Matlock, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Reincarnation and Its Social Correlates* (M.A. thesis, Hunter College, City University of New York, 1993), pp. 60–62.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
 10. Guy Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 65.
 11. Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods*, p. 104. Swanson's finding was supported by William D. Davis, *Societal Complexity and the Nature of Primitive Man's Conception of the Supernatural* (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1971; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms), in a statistical sense, but the distribution of cases was different. Whereas Swanson found a direct relationship between number of sovereign groups and the likelihood of ancestral spirits being present, Davis found a curvilinear relationship between them. Ancestor spirits were most likely to appear where there were two or more sovereign groups but relatively less likely where there was only one or where there were three or more. Relatively active ancestral spirits are also found where there is hereditary succession to the office of community headman, the segregation of adolescent boys from the rest of their community, high gods, and reincarnation, according to Semra Somersan, *Death Symbolism: A Cross-Cultural Study* (Ph.D.

- diss., Ohio State University, 1981; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms).
12. Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods*, p. 65.
 13. Ralph Underhill, "Economic and Political Antecedents of Monotheism: A Cross-Societal Study," *American Journal of Sociology* 80 (1975): 841–861; Guy Swanson, "Monotheism, Materialism, and Collective Purpose: An Analysis of Underhill's Correlations," *American Journal of Sociology* 80 (1975): 862–869; John H. Simpson, "Sovereign Groups, Subsistence Activities, and the Presence of a High God in Primitive Societies," in Robert Wuthnow, ed., *The Religious Dimension* (New York: Academic Press, 1979): 299–310; John H. Simpson, "High Gods and the Means of Subsistence," *Sociological Analysis* 45 (1984): 213–222.
 14. Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946; revised edition, Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Natural History Press, 1962), p. 89.
 15. Leo W. Simmons, ed., *Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), pp. 256–257.
 16. David Lester, "Antecedents of the Fear of the Dead," *Psychological Reports* 19 (1966): 741–742. Confusingly, however, in another study Lester found love-oriented techniques of punishment related to fear of death, though not to fear of the dead. See David Lester, "The Fear of Death in Primitive Societies," *Behavior Science Research* 3 (1975): 229–232.
 17. John W. M. Whiting, "Sorcery, Sin, and the Superego: A Cross-Cultural Study of Some Mechanisms of Social Control," in Clellan S. Ford, ed., *Cross-Cultural Approaches* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1967), pp. 147–167.
 18. Paul C. Rosenblatt, R. Patricia Walsh, and Douglas A. Jackson, *Grief and Mourning in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New Haven, CT: HRAF Press, 1976), pp. 61–63.
 19. William W. Lambert, Leigh Minturn Triandis, and Margery Wolf, "Some Correlates of Beliefs in the Malevolence and Benevolence of Supernatural Beings: A Cross-Societal Study," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58 (1959): 162–169; Melford Spiro and Roy D'Andrade, "A Cross-Cultural Study of Some Supernatural Beliefs," in Clellan S. Ford, ed., *Cross-Cultural Approaches* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1967), pp. 196–206.
 20. Ronald P. Rohner, *They Love Me, They Love Me Not: A Worldwide Study of the Effects of Parental Acceptance and Rejection* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1975), p. 108.
 21. Matlock, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Reincarnation and Its Social Correlates*, p. 180.

22. As of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reincarnation beliefs were very prevalent among the Aborigines of central and north central Australia. See W. Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1899); and W. Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1904), *passim*.
23. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Rebirth Eschatology and Its Transformations," in Wendy D. O'Flaherty, ed., *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 137–164. Obeyesekere seems to imply that traditional peoples lack ethics, a point Antonia Mills has contested. It is not that ethics are absent, but that they are different—based "on the premise of the equality of human consciousness with that of other species of animals, fish and fowl." Antonia Mills, "Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit: Context, Distribution, and Variation," in Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin, eds., *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 15–37 (see p. 17).
24. Matlock, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Reincarnation and Its Social Correlates*, p. 181.
25. Frederica De Laguna, *Under Mount Saint Elias: Culture and History of the Yakutat Tlingit* (Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, no. 7, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1973). See also James G. Matlock, "Of Names and Signs: Reincarnation, Inheritance, and Social Structure on the Northwest Coast," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 1, nos. 3–4 (1990): 9–18.
26. Matlock, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Reincarnation and Its Social Correlates*, pp. 149, 156, 160; Somersan, *Death Symbolism*, p. 71.
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 36. Michael R. Welch, "Female Exclusion from Religious Roles: A Cross-Cultural Test of Competing Explanations," *Social Forces* 61 (1982): 79–98. For another perspective on women in religious roles, see Patrick Gray, "The Universality of the Female Witch," *International Journal of Women's Studies* 3 (1979): 541–550.
 37. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (abridged ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), pp. 227–228.
 38. Beatrice Blythe Whiting, *Paiute Sorcery* (New York: Viking Fund, 1950), p. 82.
 39. Whiting, *Paiute Sorcery*, p. 87.
 40. Robert A. LeVine, "Witchcraft and Co-Wife Proximity in Southwestern Kenya," *Ethnology* 1 (1962): 39–45.
 41. John Whiting and Irvin Child, *Child Training and Personality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 276, 272.

42. Whiting, "Sorcery, Sin, and the Superego."
43. See, for example, Victor C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 102. Similar actions may be carried out with regard to deities and other supernaturals. Aztec sacrifices are an example. Here the stakes were particularly high—unless the sun god was fed with human blood, he would not renew the world for its next cycle of existence; see Murdock, "The Aztecs of Mexico." The Chinese and Japanese, however, practice proper ancestor worship. They believe that ancestor spirits inhabit special tablets that are kept in shrine rooms, and these are prayed to daily. William H. Newell, ed., *Ancestors* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).
44. Richard N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 166–169. One cross-cultural study with a small sample of thirteen found that cultures with benevolent gods had fewer, better defined, and more accessible but less visible shrines than cultures with gods who were primarily malevolent; see Evan A. Ferguson, "An Investigation of the Relationship between Physical Organization of Religious Shrines and the Perceived Malevolence or Benevolence of the Gods," *Behavior Science Research* 18 (1983): 185–195.
45. Dean Shiels, "Toward a Unified Theory of Ancestor Worship: A Cross-Cultural Study," *Social Forces* 54 (1975): 427–440.
46. Dean Shiels, "The Great Ancestors Are Watching: A Cross-Cultural Study of Superior Ancestral Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 41 (1980): 247–257.
47. For a particularly clear statement of this point of view and its relation to religion, see Roy Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). For the position in general, see Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979).
48. There are several different evolutionary models in anthropology. For reviews, see William C. Durham, "Applications of Evolutionary Culture Theory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 331–355; Robert C. Dunnell, "Evolutionary Theory and Archaeology," in Michael B. Schiffer, ed., *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, vol. 3 (New York: Academic Press, 1980), pp. 35–99.
49. Swanson's position is an elaboration of the one developed by Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

50. Brian Hayden, "Alliance and Ritual Ecstasy: Human Responses to Resource Stress," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (1987): 81–91. A similar point of view was taken more than a century ago by Edward Tylor, who argued that beliefs and souls and spirits derived from the apparent perception of apparitions and the experience of dreams, trances, and what today we call out-of-body and near-death experiences. Edward B. Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), Chapter 11.
51. David Zern, "Religiousness Related to Cultural Complexity and Pressures to Obey Cultural Norms," *Genetic Psychology Monographs* 110 (1984): 207–227.
52. Yet there is no straightforward relationship between religious beliefs and societal complexity. I have emphasized studies that produced significant results. In general, these studies support one another. However, several of Swanson's tests of religious beliefs in relation to a number of sovereign groups were not replicated by Davis. These include tests of polytheistic beliefs, reincarnation, and witchcraft. See Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods*; and Davis, *Societal Complexity and the Nature of Primitive Man's Conception of the Supernatural*. See also, Swanson, *The Birth of the Gods*, p. 65.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Child, Alice B., and Irvin L. Child. *Religion and Magic in the Life of Traditional Peoples*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993. Rather than treating religion and magic as domains separate from the rest of social life, the Childs view them as having integral roles to play in traditional societies. Although not a formal cross-cultural study, this book draws heavily on cross-cultural research.
- Lienhardt, Godfrey. *Divinity and Experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961. This classic description of the religion of the Dinka, an African people, reveals clearly the integral part religion plays in the lives of traditional peoples.
- Mills, Antonia, and Richard Slobodin, eds. *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. Reincarnation beliefs were and are important to many Native American peoples, as this book shows. The first volume of its kind, it provides a valuable introduction to reincarnation in traditional societies.

Stephen, Michele, ed. *Sorcerer and Witch in Melanesia*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987. The papers in this volume show how witchcraft and sorcery are involved in law, health, and education in seven traditional societies in Papua New Guinea. Aspects of witchcraft and sorcery as social control mechanisms are well illuminated.

Cross-Cultural TOC