



## PART I

# Basic Religions

**B**asic religions are oral traditions. Their systems of knowledge and behavior are inscribed upon human memory, not in some form of writing. At one time in history, religions may have shared certain characteristics no longer visible in contemporary religions. Through an examination of archaeological and anthropological evidence, the student of religions may be able to gain insight into what the earliest religions may have been. At the same time, by studying the characteristics of these so-called basic religions of the past and present, the student will also learn more about the bases on which such major contemporary religions as Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam rest. We will also come to see that religious concepts and modes of behavior long seen as being central to basic religions can also be found in contemporary formulations of world religions.

### **NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIONS—BASIC TEACHINGS**

#### **Native American religions are very diverse.**

There are hundreds of Native American religions. It is difficult, if not impossible, to generalize about them. Native American cultures are equally diverse, ranging historically from small bands of hunter-gatherers to large-scale states and empires. Today most Native Americans are Christians, though in many cases they retain elements of traditional beliefs and practices.

#### **Many Native American religions emphasize geographic space and the natural environment.**

Plants, animals, and some geographic and geological features are understood as living beings with whom humans can establish relationships. This has often brought native people into conflict with Euro-American communities.

#### **There are many taboos concerning the dead.**

In some cases—including the Navajo of Arizona and New Mexico—the dead are greatly feared. Even their clothing and other possessions are avoided. Many Native Americans are greatly concerned by the fact that the skeletal remains of their ancestors have been disinterred and are stored in museums.

#### **Native Americans suffered greatly at the hands of white settlers.**

There have been many wars and massacres, some of which rose to the level of genocide. Native peoples were often driven off their lands and forced to relocate in less-productive areas. In many

instances, children were taken from their families and placed in boarding schools, where they were forbidden to conduct traditional ceremonies or even to speak native languages.

### **Today there are religious movements that cross traditional tribal boundaries.**

One of the first of these was the Ghost Dance. It began among the Paiute of Nevada and spread rapidly across the Great Plains. It foretold the end of white settlers and the return of the buffalo, which were almost extinct at the time. Some believed that wearing “ghost shirts” would protect them from the U.S. Army's weapons. A more recent movement is the Native American Church, which combines elements of Native American religion with Christianity. It also uses the hallucinogenic peyote cactus in ceremonial ways.

## **AFRICAN RELIGIONS—BASIC TEACHINGS**

### **Like those of Native Americans, African religions are extremely diverse.**

African cultures are also extremely diverse, ranging historically from small bands of hunter-gatherers to states and empires. Today, most Africans are either Christians or Muslims, though in many cases they retain elements of traditional beliefs and practices.

### **The High God is an important figure in many traditional African religions.**

The belief in a High God who created the world but is no longer actively involved in it is very common. In these religions, lesser spirits who were part of his creation are more important than the High God in daily life. The Earth is often understood to be a goddess and is associated with fertility.

### **Ancestor veneration is an important element of many traditional African religions.**

Ancestors often communicate with the living through dreams. They can be either helpful or harmful, depending on how they are treated. They are offered sacrifices to promote human health, well-being, and prosperity. They are also believed to enforce moral codes by punishing those who violate them.

### **In some African societies, kings and queens are thought to be divine.**

They are the means through which relationships with the spirits and ancestors are maintained. They are the objects of many taboos. In some cases, kings and queens are killed or commit suicide when they become ill or infirm.

### **In some African religions, it is believed that illness is often caused by witchcraft.**

Spiritual healers are employed to counter the effects of witchcraft. A specific person is often identified as the witch. These accusations present difficulties for African governments because people often demand that officials take action against those accused of witchcraft, and modern legal systems make that impossible. There are also cases of revenge killings, especially in countries like South Africa that have witnessed political turmoil.

# Basic Religions and World Religions

## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

### IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL:

- Learn some of the features that basic religions share with world religions.
- Become acquainted with theoretical approaches to the academic study of religion.

## A TIMELINE OF BASIC RELIGIONS

• <b>Unknownable B.C.E.</b>	Origins of religion
• <b>Thousands of years</b>	Oral transmission of myth and ritual
• <b>7000–3000 B.C.E.</b>	Neolithic period
• <b>1492 C.E.</b>	European discovery of the Americas
• <b>16th century–present</b>	Conquest and conversion of indigenous peoples of Central and South America and Mexico to Christianity
• <b>17th century–present</b>	Conquest and conversion of indigenous peoples of North America to Christianity
• <b>19th century–present</b>	Conversion of tribal peoples of Asia and the Pacific to Christianity
• <b>19th century–present</b>	Conversion of Africans to Christianity and Islam
• <b>20th century–present</b>	Emergence of new forms of Christianity in Africa and Asia

## KEY TERMS

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Animism

Taboo

Mythology

Magic

Totemism

Rites of Passage

Divination

Ancestor Veneration

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It is impossible to say when people began to be religious. Early theories of culture and religion assumed that there were parallels between cultural and biological evolution. Typically, the religions and total cultures of prehistoric people and the current practices in pretechnological societies were referred to as *primitive*. The word *primitive* carries with it connotations of being backward, simple, even childlike. To the extent that this view persists, the Christian or Muslim or Jew may tend to look down on these religions as being superstitious, uncivilized, or even savage. In studying the religions of the world, we can assume no evolutionary scale that moves from basic religions to Zen Buddhism or any other highly developed religion of the so-called civilized world. An alternative was, and is, to romanticize these religions and to describe them as objects of beauty and simplicity. Both of these views are incorrect. The indigenous religions of Australia, Asia, Africa, and the Americas are as fully intricate in their rituals and mythologies and as satisfying to their adherents as those of High Church Episcopalians, Muslims, or Buddhists. There is satisfaction and beauty in all religions; there also is ugliness and violence in all.

Of all of the world's religions, we know least about these basic religions, simply because they spring from prehistory or are practiced in remote places. However, elements of the basic religions are found to some degree in all religions. It is therefore important to study these religions to understand these elements and how they operate. It is also important to study basic religions because they represent the majority of the total religious experience of humankind. With the spread of missionary religions, especially Christianity and Islam, the number of adherents of basic religions has declined dramatically in the last century.

## Sources of Information Concerning Basic Religions

Humans have been active on planet Earth for a million or more years, but we know only a tiny fraction of human history. Only within the past 5,000 to 6,000 years has *Homo sapiens* used writing. Although non-written sources (such as cave paintings,

burial sites, religious statuary, and archaeological remains) indicate human culture and religious experiences, our strongest source of knowledge is the written record. Of the total period of time during which people have been on Earth, we have written records chronicling perhaps less than one-half of 1 percent. From these records, we know a great deal about different cultures and religious experiences, but there is an enormous amount we do not and cannot know.

There are two primary sources of information about basic religions. The first is contemporary basic religions. The anthropologist or other scholar of religion visits a contemporary basic culture and studies its religious beliefs and practices. From this study, she or he may infer that many or all basic and prehistoric religions have had similar attitudes and religious practices. Thus, Bishop Codrington studied the Melanesian people during the nineteenth century and reported their awareness of the unseen force called *mana*. Others found a similar phenomenon in different cultures. Therefore, Codrington came to believe that an awareness of such a force as *mana* might have been humankind's original religious impetus.

However interesting the study of contemporary basic religions may be, it obviously leaves much to be desired as a source for knowledge of prehistoric basic religion. The Melanesians of the nineteenth century were probably very different from earlier Melanesians. The Melanesians' religious awareness and practices might have changed within the nineteenth century itself. They might have adopted the belief in *mana* only recently, or they could have been affected by previous visits of missionaries or traders or even by the visit of the anthropologist. All contemporary societies, even the most technologically simple, have long and complex histories. They have developed and evolved over thousands of years in response to ecological and social environments and have built upon the wisdom of many generations. None can be considered really "primitive" or representative of the earliest stages of human development. As anthropological fieldwork has increased our understanding of the diversity of basic religions, it has become more, not less, difficult to use contemporary data to speculate about the origins and earliest forms of religion. The student of religion, like the student of language, must accept the fact that there are some aspects of the origins of the subject that, in all likelihood, we cannot know.

A second source of information is archaeology. Although humans have always been interested in their past and have doubtless always attempted to investigate the physical remains of that past, the scientific examination of those remains is less than two centuries old. In fact, most serious archaeological work was achieved in the twentieth century. Archaeologists meticulously attempt to uncover the physical remains of past civilizations and to reconstruct the life and history of their cultures. In an archaeological examination of relatively recent cultures, such as the Roman or Mayan, the task is simplified because of the wealth of buildings, burial sites, coinage, and other elaborate artifacts these civilizations left. Archaeologists gain considerable information from scrolls, clay tablets, and inscriptional materials from literate cultures.

In studying prehistoric, or technologically less sophisticated, cultures, the task is more difficult. The main sources of information are likely burial sites, weapons, and tools. Whether the culture is distant or recent, archaeological results depend on the interpretations of the investigator. What one archaeologist calls a temple, another may call a stable; controversy and mistakes within this field are too numerous to list. Therefore, we must be careful to give archaeological investigation its due and no more. Some archaeologists may assure us that Neanderthal people worshiped bears because bear skulls have been found in burial sites. This may or may not have been the case. Perhaps bear skulls were buried with these people as trophies of the

hunt. They might also have been the totems of the deceased. With our present limited knowledge about Neanderthals, we cannot be certain about their religion.

## Prehistoric Beginnings of Basic Religions

### Neanderthal Religion

The earliest hominid for whom much evidence of religion remains is the so-called Neanderthal. It is believed that Neanderthals lived from approximately 125,000 to 30,000 B.C.E. and inhabited Europe, the Middle East, and western and central Asia. Although they were anatomically similar to modern *Homo sapiens*, Neanderthal skeletons reveal that these people were somewhat shorter and more muscular. Their brains were as large as those of contemporary humans. Greater than 100 sites of Neanderthal life have been excavated. These sites reveal that these people were clever workers, using tools made of stone, bone, and wood. They also show that the Neanderthals buried their dead. It is in the circumstances of these burials that one finds clues to Neanderthal religion. In these burials are the remains of animal bones and stone tools, which may indicate that the dead were buried with food, tools, and weapons, perhaps as offerings to gods or as necessary accompaniments into the world of the dead. In addition, archaeologists have found bear skulls, apparently carefully arranged, in Neanderthal burials, which may suggest a worshipful attitude toward the bear.

### Cro-Magnon Religion

The Cro-Magnon, the forerunner of modern *Homo sapiens*, replaced the Neanderthal approximately 30,000 years ago. Like the Neanderthals, the Cro-Magnon people left no written records. Again, our only information about their lives comes from the work of archaeologists. Like the Neanderthals, the Cro-Magnons apparently buried tools and weapons with their dead. Graves also have yielded ornaments with which the dead were buried. In addition, some Cro-Magnon graves contain bones painted red. Archaeologists have interpreted these factors as indicative of a concern for life beyond the grave. Sometimes the burials show the corpse was left curled up in a fetal position. To some, this might indicate that the dead were seeking rebirth in the next life.

The most outstanding artifacts associated with the Cro-Magnon are the famous paintings and engravings on the walls and ceilings of caves in France and Spain. These pictures, located in dark recesses far from the entrances, were identified as Cro-Magnon and apparently had been placed in such inaccessible places to keep out the uninitiated. Their location had inadvertently protected them from damage for thousands of years. A few of these paintings depict animals being killed during a hunt. The animals—bison, horses, wild boar, and bears—are shown with arrows and spears



Cave art from Dordogne Valley, Lascaux, France. Typical of prehistoric religious art, this painting may be an example of imitative magic through which a hunter sought to ensure success in a hunt.

(Peter Buckley/Pearson Education/PH College)

entering their bodies at critical points. Although the animals are very lifelike, the humans hunting them are depicted by mere stick figures. The most common understanding of these paintings is that they were placed on the hidden walls of the caves by priests or magicians before the hunt. It is believed that by painting the animals being killed or by retracing the paintings, the priests were hoping to predict the events of a successful hunt. Similar practices are followed by shamans of contemporary basic religions, either in the form of graphic art or a drama in which members of the tribe play the part of animals being killed during a hunt.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the cave paintings, the Cro-Magnons left figurines carved from stone, ivory, and bone. One of the best known of these is the so-called Venus of Willendorf, a figurine depicting a human female form. Although the figure has no face, its breasts, hips, and abdomen are greatly exaggerated.<sup>2</sup> Similar figurines from historic cultures often indicate worship of a fertility goddess.

### Neolithic Religion

Because Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon societies primarily used stone tools and weapons, their cultures are identified archaeologically as the Stone Age. The eras that followed the Cro-Magnon period also featured stone weapons and implements, but they were much advanced in other ways. The Neolithic or late Stone Age ran from approximately 7000 to 3000 B.C.E. and was characterized by many new developments in civilization.

One of the advances that greatly influenced the evolution of religion was the development of agriculture as a way of life. When people found they could make their living by planting seeds, harvesting their crops, and storing them against future hunger, their lives changed enormously. For the first time, people did not have to move constantly from place to place in search of game; they could settle and live in one place as long as the soil remained fertile. They now needed more permanent dwellings and could live in larger groups. Agricultural surplus and the ability to store food supplies led to population growth and the development of cities.

In Egypt, agriculture led to land ownership. The sciences of surveying and mathematics were developed to establish ownership of the fields after the annual flood of the Nile Delta. Above all, the development of agriculture gave some people more leisure time than they had ever known. They could, in effect, afford to sit back and allow the soil to provide them with nourishment. For the first time, certain people in the community were free to devote all of their time to the mysteries of religion. In addition, agricultural society first became dependent on the fertility of nature. People grew aware that one year might bring a great harvest, whereas the next might lead to a drought. They became aware of the regularity of the seasons, the tides, the phases of the moon, and the movements of the stars. These factors caused Neolithic people to develop religions based on the fertility of the soil, humans, and animals, as well as mythologies in which deities became personifications of the sun, moon, stars, and seasons.

Archaeological remains from the Neolithic period give some indication of the religious attitudes of the time. Large burials from this era contain the bones of men, women, and animals, along with tools, weapons, and ornaments. This suggests to some that Neolithic people may have buried the chieftain with his wives, servants, and favorite animals, so that they might serve him in the next life.

It also appears that Neolithic societies erected monuments of huge stones called megaliths in many parts of the world. The two best examples of this practice are the great stone monuments raised at Stonehenge in England and the greater than

2,000 megaliths set up in the fields of Brittany in France. Apparently, these massive stones, sometimes weighing as much as 300 tons, were quarried at a distance and transported with great effort to their present sites.<sup>3</sup> Because Neolithic societies left no written records about these stones, no one knows exactly why these people went to such great lengths to set them up or why the practice was so widespread. It is generally assumed that the megaliths had something to do with religion. One of the most common theories is that they were connected to a cult of the dead and to ancestor veneration.<sup>4</sup>

## Common Features of Basic Religions

The following features appear to be common to many basic religions that still exist or existed in some form in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when anthropologists began to study them. These features have also appeared in the historical religions of which we are aware, and many of them are evident in one form or another in the so-called advanced or developed religions. Sacrifice, for example, appears in the earliest form of nearly every extant religion. Finally, some of the features not currently part of religions may be found subliminally in modern cultures. For instance, although few followers of the developed religions would admit that magic is part of their theology, belief in the lucky coin, the unlucky day, the avoidance of the number thirteen, spiritual or magical healing, and so on is widely found, even in the most advanced societies of the twenty-first century.

### Animism

Sir Edward Tylor theorized that people originally envisioned the world as being alive with souls or spirits and, on the basis of this understanding of nature, developed religions.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the belief that nature is alive with spirits that have feelings and can be communicated with is one of the most common to human religious experience. In many basic religions, people believe that they are not the only spirits—that animals, trees, stones, rivers, mountains, the heavenly bodies, the seas, and the Earth itself have *anima* (spirit). It is also believed that these spirits communicate, can be flattered or offended, and can either help or hurt humans. These spirits are therefore believed to be personal. The development of technology and the spread of historical religions have not eliminated these beliefs. Many Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists believe that spirits have the ability to bless or curse human beings.

On the basis of an animistic understanding of life, basic religions and many advanced religions have revered or openly worshiped nearly everything in nature. Almost any animal one can think of has at some time or another been worshiped; stones have been worshiped or have been the sites where gods have spoken to people or received the blood of their sacrifices; mountains have frequently been the objects of worship or the places of revelation; the seas and the



The Venus of Laussel. The exaggerated breasts, hips, and abdomen indicate that this was an image connected with fertility worship.

(Image 329316, American Museum of Natural History, Library)



creatures in them have been objects of veneration; trees have frequently been the objects of religious cults; the heavenly bodies—the sun, moon, and stars—play a part in nearly every religion; and fire, water, and the Earth itself have become objects of worship or important elements in worship. The list of animistic expressions is almost endless.

Modern people place historic stones at the corners of their new buildings; they build expensive, elaborate, useless fireplaces. Christians bring evergreen trees into their homes to celebrate Christmas, even though there is no connection between an evergreen tree and the birth of Jesus; Muslims walk around the sacred black stone and kiss it during their pilgrimage to Mecca; Hindus bathe in the sacred river Ganges; Parsis bring gifts of sandalwood to be burned in the sacred fire temple; Christian and even secular Americans go on pilgrimages to the graves of presidents and rock stars; and on and on. The animistic understanding of life is one of the most pervasive and influential of all of the impulses of mankind—religious and non-religious.

### Magic

When modern people speak of magic, they often think in terms of sleight-of-hand tricks or illusions performed by a professional whose job is to deceive and amuse them. In basic religions, the term *magic* takes on a far more serious meaning.

Magicians in basic societies attempt to control nature for either the benefit of their people or the detriment of their enemies. Magicians perceive the world as being controlled by forces that can be manipulated. They know that if they perform their formulas, dances, or incantations correctly, they will in fact be able to control nature; they can make rain, cause crops to be bountiful, create conditions for a successful hunt, or kill their enemies.

According to one theory, the line between religion and magic is drawn by the intent of the practitioner. Magicians believe that by performing rituals they can force nature to act as they desire, whereas the practitioners of religion seek only to implore the gods on their behalf. The magician knows that his or her fiat will be done, but the priest hopes that the gods will act favorably. Actually, the distinction between religion and magic is never absolutely clear, and elements of magic appear in religion, just as elements of religion appear in magic. Sir James Frazer believed that magic was a phase through which humankind passed on its way to religion and ultimately to science.<sup>6</sup>

Probably the most common form of magic among basic societies is sympathetic or imitative magic. In this form of magic, one attempts to coerce nature into some act by performing that act oneself, but on a smaller scale. An example is the so-called voodoo doll through which the magician seeks to do evil to enemies. The doll is created in the rough image of the enemy and may contain personal elements of the enemy such as bits of hair or nail parings. Practitioners believe that because the doll looks like the victim, whatever is done to the doll will happen to the victim. If the doll is pierced with a needle through the leg, the victim will be injured in the leg; if the doll is pierced through the heart, the victim will be killed or will at least have severe chest pains. In some societies, many of the rain ceremonies and preliminary hunting rituals are based on imitative magic.

Another aspect of magic frequently found in basic religions is the fetish. A fetish is any object used to control nature in a magical fashion. In modern society, such objects are called good-luck charms. For the possessor, the fetish is used to bring good fortune and ward off evil. In basic societies, the fetish may be almost anything: a wooden stick, a stone or a collection of stones, a bone, a feather, even



Stonehenge, located on the Salisbury Plain of southern England. It is believed that these massive stones were erected in the second millennium B.C.E. Their exact purpose is open to speculation, but it is believed that the arrangement of the stones was somehow connected to religious ritual.

(John Evans, 2009/Shutterstock)

a special weapon. Fetishes may be held singly or collectively, or they may be used as an ornamentation of some kind. Fetishism is never very far from even the most advanced human society. In any group of people, one is likely to encounter a large collection of lucky coins, rabbits' feet, religious medallions, and so on. The value that most twenty-first-century people place on their fetishes probably varies considerably from that which prehistoric people placed on theirs. Nevertheless, the existence of fetishes and other elements of basic religion in advanced and scientific societies speaks of their enduring appeal to the human race.

In recent decades there has been an animist revival in North America and Western Europe. Many of the so-called "New Age" religions have deep roots in animistic thinking. The Deep Ecology movement, for example, straddles the border between environmentalism and animism. For many supporters of Deep Ecology, the Earth is a spiritual consciousness as well as a planet. The environment is seen as a self-regulating system, all elements of which are to be valued equally. Change or evolution is directed by a spiritual force. Other "New Age" faiths maintain that particular places are vortexes at which a variety of types of spiritual power may be acquired.

## Divination

The prediction of the future through **divination** is an important function in basic societies. Usually, this is the work of priests or people who have been specially prepared for the task, and it is accomplished by various means. Frequently, divination is accomplished through the examination of the entrails of a sacrificed animal. Sometimes, it is achieved by observing the flights of birds or by casting sacred dice. In ancient China,



Megaliths are still erected in conjunction with mortuary rituals by the Toraja of Indonesia.

(Mark R. Woodward)

a tortoise shell was heated until it cracked, and the pattern of the cracks was interpreted as a prediction of the future. This approach was later refined into the practice of casting yarrow stalks, and these patterns were interpreted in a book called the *I Ching*. Among the ancient Greeks, the future was predicted when a priestess sat on a tripod and breathed in fumes that escaped from the ground at Delphi. What she said after breathing in the fumes was interpreted by a priest as being the message from the gods regarding the future.

Frequently, societies sought knowledge of the future from a member of the group believed to have been possessed by the spirits. Among the peoples of Siberia, this person was called a *shaman*. Although the word *shaman* often connotes an image of a “priest” or “magician,” the original meaning related to one who was possessed by the spirits and spoke their messages to the group.

Often, religious societies are served by those who are designated “prophets.” In the Hebrew Bible, the prophet revealed the message of God. Sometimes this message dealt with present events; other times the prophet’s words concerned the future. Thus, the word *prophet* in modern English carries the connotation of being a “predictor” or “diviner.”

### Taboo

In the scheme of life in many basic societies, certain actions must be avoided, lest the spirit world release harmful effects on the person or group; these acts are known by the Polynesian word *tabu* or *tapu*. In basic societies, holy persons, places, and objects are generally considered **taboo** to the ordinary person. Chieftains, priests, sacred places, fetishes,

and so on are to be avoided by the unordained, except on special occasions or when there is special preparation. In basic societies, one does not touch the person of the chief, nor does one enter the sacred areas without great fear; great harm can come to someone who violates these tribal taboos. In the Hebrew Bible, we find occasions when people either knowingly or accidentally violate taboos. Second Kings 2:23–25 speaks of an occasion when boys mocked and taunted the prophet Elisha. As a result, the children were mauled by two bears. Second Samuel 6:1–7 tells of a man who merely touched the Ark of the Covenant to prevent its falling off a cart and as a result was struck dead by God. In many other cultures, the person of the king is so sacred that it is considered taboo to come into his presence without special invitation. Until fairly recent times, the Japanese thought it taboo to look upon the face of the emperor, even when he toured the city streets.

Other examples of taboos are numerous. In some basic societies, the birth of twins is considered taboo. Thus, when twins are born they are either killed or exiled, or they are treated as special sacred persons. The dead are often the object of taboos. In many cultures, those who handle the dead for burial are considered ritually unclean, at least for a certain period of time after the handling. One of the most universal taboos regards women during their menses. In some cultures, menstruating women are required to live in houses that are separate from the rest of the group. Some religions prohibit women from prayer during their periods.<sup>7</sup> Many cultures

have developed taboos regarding certain foods. Usually, the food set aside for the chieftain is forbidden to the rest of the community. Certain kinds of food, such as pork, beef, or shellfish, are thought of by particular groups as being ritually unclean, and thus taboo. Such beliefs are not restricted to basic societies. Muslims and Jews consider pork unclean. Most Hindus do not eat beef, not because the cow is unclean, but rather because it is viewed as being sacred. Until recently, all forms of meat were taboo for Roman Catholics on Fridays.

## Totems

Another practice in some, but by no means all, basic religions is **totemism**. Totemism was first identified by white settlers in the eighteenth century when they discovered the practice among Native Americans. It was later recognized within basic societies in other parts of the world. The word *totem* is a corruption of the Ojibwa word *ototeman*.

Totemism is apparently based on the feeling of kinship that humans have for other creatures or objects in nature. As such, it is an extension and expression of *animism*. Generally, it involves some form of identification between a tribe or clan and an animal, although totems in some parts of the world have been identified as plants or even as the sun, moon, or stars. For example, a clan may believe it is basically related to the bear. The bear may be the ancestor of the clan; the clan may possess the characteristics of the bear (strength, ferocity, or size); or clan members may believe that when they die they will take the form of the bear. If the bear is the totem of the clan, members may not eat or kill this animal except in self-defense or on sacred occasions, when they may eat its flesh in a ceremonial meal that binds the clan closer together. Members of another neighboring clan, whose totem is the deer, may hunt and eat the bear, whereas members of the first clan may hunt and eat the deer.

Highly developed societies, although they do not clearly and religiously adhere to totemism, still retain vestiges of this practice. Nations are symbolized by animals, such as the eagle, bear, or lion, and schools choose mascots to symbolize the spirit of their athletic teams.

## Sacrifice

One of the most common practices in all of the religions of the world is sacrifice. Throughout history, people have offered sacrifices of nearly every imaginable material to the gods, spirits, and demons, or for **ancestor veneration**. Most often, the sacrifices are animals, which are slaughtered and then burned or cooked and eaten before the gods. However, the sacrifice of nearly every other item of value can be found. People have sacrificed grain, wine, milk, water, wood, tools, weapons, and jewelry to the gods. Occasionally, religions call for the sacrifice of a human, but in most religions this is a relatively rare practice. Usually the human who is sacrificed is an enemy taken prisoner in battle; infrequently, it is a beloved child or young person chosen especially for the altar.<sup>8</sup> When human sacrifice is mentioned in religious literature, it usually is considered an extreme but effective method of persuading the gods.<sup>9</sup>

Among the Oche of ancient Peru and the Aztec of pre-Columbian Mexico, human sacrifice was both routine and extremely important. Headhunting, which was thought to ensure the fertility of the land, was practiced by many of the tribal peoples of Southeast Asia well into the twentieth century. There are unconfirmed reports that the practice continues in remote areas.

The act of sacrifice has various meanings. Originally, it probably was considered a means of feeding the residents of the spirit world. How does one feed the spirits?

One may pour water, wine, and milk on the ground and believe that as the fluid is soaked up, the spirits are drinking it. One may leave food in a sacred place and assume that when the food has disappeared, the gods have been fed. One may burn meat or grain, and the gods may inhale the smoke of the offerings. Thus, the spirit world is sustained by the human world and acts favorably toward it.

At other times, the sacrifice is understood simply as being a gift of some sort to the spirit world. Gifts of tools, weapons, ornaments, money, incense, or even tobacco may be left in sacred places for the spirits by a person who wishes the favor of the spirits or simply wants to avoid offending them.

Sacrifice in some basic religions also implies the establishment of a communal bond between spirits and human beings. The worshiper brings food to the sacred place, burns a portion of it for the gods, and then eats a portion of it or shares it with the clan. Thus, the spirits and the living share a meal together, and their bond is renewed and strengthened.

### Myth

One of the most common characteristics of all religions, basic and advanced, is **mythology**. In modern parlance, the word *myth* connotes a lie or false belief. We speak of the myth of Aryan supremacy or the myth of historical objectivity, and we mean that these concepts are out-and-out fabrications with little or no basis in truth. In the study of religions, the word *myth* is used in another sense. Almost every religion has its stories about the dealings of the gods with humans. We call these stories myths, or poetic ways of telling great truths. Myths are a way of thinking in pictures rather than abstract concepts. Very few people today might believe that the story of Prometheus is a factual account of a great hero of the past; perhaps no one ever did. But the story of Prometheus reveals the truth of the sacrificial love of one divine figure for humanity. In preliterate societies, especially, a religion is sustained and explained by the transmission of its myths from one generation to the next.

Religious myths often are used to explain the whys and hows of the world; they may explain the origin of a people by tracing it back to the beginning of creation. In the Greek myth of Prometheus, for example, there is an explanation for the creation of the world and the origin of fire and civilization. Myths also may explain the power of certain religious functionaries. The Japanese myth of the sun goddess Amaterasu gives background to the belief that the emperor is a divine figure. Often, myths are attached to and explain why the worshiping community keeps certain religious holy days.

### Rituals

Every religion has its rituals. These rites or ceremonies may be simple or complex, or so brief that the laity may perform them several times a day, every day. Mealtime prayers or libations to African ancestors are examples of these simpler rites. In other



A Mombasa healer in traditional costume in Uganda, East Africa.

(Friedrich Stark/Alamy)

cases, community rituals may be so complicated that specific groups of people are set aside as priests to learn, perform, and teach them to others.

Often, religious rituals reenact mythologies. Priests and/or laity take part, wearing the costumes and speaking the lines of the figures from the myth. The historian of religion Mircea Eliade has suggested that the ritual repetition of creation myths is particularly important. Sculptures from the Roman-era religion of Mithraism show members of the order wearing the costumes of lions and ravens, animals that played a part in the cult's myth. They also are shown sitting at a meal of bread and wine in memory of the mythic occasion when Mithras and Sol Invictus ate the flesh of the sacred bull and drank its blood. By acting out the myths, the devotees of the religion identify with the divine characters and their actions.

### Rites of Passage

Another universal practice among basic societies is the establishment of certain rituals at key transitional points in the life of the individual. These rituals are called *rites of passage*. The key points of life usually recognized are birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Rituals carried out at these critical periods recall the myths of the culture and symbolize separation from the former status, transition to the new, and incorporation. Often, these rituals involve a dramatic reenactment of a sacred story.

Ceremonies at birth are important. The rites surrounding birth identify the child as a member of the community. In Judaism, male children are circumcised. In many branches of Christianity, there is the ritual of baptism, a ceremony that names the infant and makes him or her a member of the Christian religion.

Basic societies often give their greatest attention to rituals regarding the passage from childhood into adulthood. The rites of passage at puberty are preceded by a period of instruction in the basic knowledge of the society, as well as in such arts as survival, hunting, agriculture, and fire making. At puberty, the child may undergo an ordeal of some kind. Among some Native Americans, children are expected to live apart from their families for a certain period of time, to fast and to seek a vision from the spirits. In other basic societies, children may be painted white or given some other highly visible mark and then sent away to live alone until the paint or the mark disappears. During this time, they are expected to fend entirely for themselves. Some children are not lucky or skillful enough to survive during this period. Those who do survive and return are then initiated into full adulthood. The individual may also be circumcised or given some other mark of identity, such as a facial scar. During these ceremonies, young people are more fully instructed in the religious traditions, secrets, and lore of the society and thereafter may take their place as fully matured members of the group.<sup>10</sup> Modern counterparts to the puberty rites of passage are confirmation for some Christian youths and the Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah for young Jews.<sup>11</sup>

Other key points at which religious rituals and symbols are important are marriage and death. Marriage is frequently celebrated with fertility rituals and the full attention of religious functionaries. The passage at death is likewise given the attention of religious rituals, both at the time of death and at the burial.

### Ancestor Veneration

One final characteristic of basic religions is the veneration or worship of deceased members of the family. Some students of the origin of religion have theorized that because prehistoric people dreamed of their recent dead, they came to believe the dead were not truly gone but lived on in another form or on another planet.

According to Spencer, this phenomenon led to ancestor worship and became the first step in the development of religion. Then the ancestors, living in another realm and appearing in dreams, became the gods of early religion. Whether dreams are the means by which ancestors are believed to continue to live is a matter of speculation. From what is known of basic religions, however, these people recognize that the dead live on in some form, at least for a time, and can either help or hurt the living.

Those who believe in the continued life of the ancestors greatly fear the evil the dead might do and frequently take great pains to prevent the dead from returning from their graves to harm the living. Bodies are buried beneath large stones or with stakes implanted in their chests, apparently to prevent them from roaming. Among some basic societies, the names of the dead are dropped from common usage for a time, and the houses in which they died are burned to discourage their return.

At the same time, people of basic societies also seem to feel the dead can benefit the living. Therefore, steps are taken to please the dead. Possessions such as tools, weapons, favorite foods, ornaments, and sometimes even wives and servants are sent to the grave with the dead. Graves and tombs (such as the vast tombs of the Egyptian rulers) are decorated and elaborately tended so the dead might be comfortable. Among the ancient Chinese, grave mounds were rebuilt each year and offerings of food, drink, flowers, and even blankets were left for the comfort of the deceased. Perhaps no people made such a great effort to placate the deceased as the ancient Chinese. Their special concern was to keep alive the memory of their ancestors by memorizing their names and biographies and passing this information on to future generations. Ancestor veneration remains a very important part of traditional Chinese religion, especially among Chinese in places like Taiwan and Singapore where “superstitious” beliefs were not affected by Communist rule. Even some Chinese Christians engage in ancestor veneration to some degree. Saint Andrew’s Anglican Cathedral in Singapore, with a congregation that is largely Chinese holds prayer services in cemeteries on the Saturday before Easter to prepare the ancestors for resurrection.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

✓• [Study and Review on [myreligionlab.com](http://myreligionlab.com)

1. Why do we speak of “basic” rather than “primitive” religions?
2. What are the two primary sources of information about basic religions?  
How trustworthy are these sources?
3. What do we believe was the purpose of the Cro-Magnon cave paintings?
4. Define *animism*, and give several examples of surviving animism in modern life.
5. Distinguish *magic* from *religion*.
6. Name some taboos in modern life. How are they like those in basic societies?  
How are they different?
7. In your culture, what are the rites of passage?
8. Name some examples of the ways in which basic religions resemble world religions.
9. What are examples of the basic types of religious violence in the contemporary world?

## SUGGESTED READING

 Read the Document on [myreligionlab.com](https://myreligionlab.com)

Some of the following readings are available in MyReligionLibrary found in MyReligionLab.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*. New York: Viking, 1970.

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