

# Magic, Science and Religion

SPRING 2017  
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## Basic Concepts

- ▶ Religion
  - ▶ Social institution involving beliefs and practices based on a conception of the sacred
  - ▶ Ritual-formal, ceremonial behavior
    - ▶ Daily prayer
    - ▶ Communion
    - ▶ Haj / Pilgrimage

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## What Does Religion Do?

- ▶ Social cohesion
  - ▶ Religion unites people through shared symbolism, values and norms of behavior.
  - ▶ Every society uses religious ideas to promote conformity & uniformity
  - ▶ Provides meaning and purpose
    - ▶ Religious belief offers comforting sense that our brief lives serve some greater purpose

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## Constructing the Sacred

- ▶ Rituals
  - ▶ Daily prayer
  - ▶ Religious observances
    - ▶ Easter
    - ▶ Passover
    - ▶ Ramadan
  - ▶ Peter Berger
    - ▶ Placing our fallible brief lives within some "...cosmic frame of reference..." gives us "...the semblance of ultimate security and permanence."



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## Basic Concepts

- ▶ French sociologist Emile Durkheim
  - ▶ Religion = "Things that surpass the limits of our knowledge..."
  - ▶ *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*
    - ▶ looked at collective representations that hold people together
      - ▶ Sacred and profane
      - ▶ Religious ritual was acting of the society itself
  - ▶ Society has an existence and power of its own beyond the life of any individual



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## Religion: Addressing Questions

- ▶ Why are we here?
- ▶ What is the purpose of our life?
- ▶ Where do we go when we die?
- ▶ The etymology of Religion:
  - ▶ The Latin word religio (consciousness, piety)
  - ▶ The Greek term religare (to tie, fasten that holds)



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## Basic Concepts

- ▶ Profane
  - ▶ That which people define as an ordinary element of everyday life
- ▶ Sacred
  - ▶ That which people set apart as extraordinary, inspiring a sense of awe and reverence
  - ▶ denotes reverence and respect
- ▶ Supernatural:
  - ▶ "above the natural"

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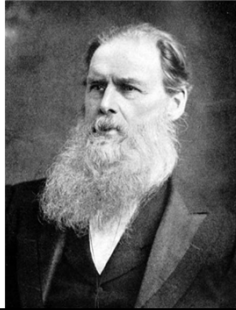
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## What Religion Entails

- ▶ Edward Tylor
  - ▶ "belief in spiritual beings"
  - ▶ 1873
  - ▶ Supernatural/sacred
    - ▶ Culture-specific
  - ▶ Gods, spirits, ghosts, etc.



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## What Religion Entails

- ▶ All cultures have patterned rituals to get through life cycle:
  - ▶ Birth
  - ▶ coming of age
  - ▶ Marriage
  - ▶ death
  - ▶ change of seasons:
    - ▶ Spring
    - ▶ Summer
    - ▶ Fall
    - ▶ Winter

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## Problems of Translation

- ▶ Diversity of cultural meanings
  - ▶ "Belief" is a result in the cross-cultural perspective
    - ▶ Americans:
      - ▶ May believe in God, channeling, spiritualism
    - ▶ Zuni:
      - ▶ This is not a concept that makes sense
    - ▶ Religion is the doing/ practice

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## Problems of Translation

- ▶ Diversity of cultural meanings
  - ▶ "Supernatural" comes from Medieval Christian theology
    - ▶ now dependent upon current scientific evidence
  - ▶ The Western understanding of supernatural has become dependent on the understanding of "nature" (or science).
  - ▶ We have to remember, we use very culture-specific terms when talking about these ideas

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## Theoretical Analysis of Religion

- ▶ Functions of Religion
  - ▶ Totem
    - ▶ Object in the natural (physical) world collectively defined as sacred
    - ▶ Perhaps an animal or elaborate work of art
    - ▶ Centerpiece of ritual
    - ▶ Symbolizes the power of collective life over any individual

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### The Origin of Religion

- ▶ Religion is a universal cultural phenomenon
- ▶ Is there a unifying theory?
- ▶ Early anthropologists worked to find general principles of religion:
  - ▶ James Frazer (The Golden Bough) – pan-cultural context of religion
  - ▶ focuses on societal (collective) or social role of religion

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### The Psychological Theory of Religion

- ▶ People rely on three sources of information in daily lives:
  - ▶ Science
  - ▶ Magic
  - ▶ Religion

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### The Psychological Theory of Religion

- ▶ Bronislaw Malinowski:
  - ▶ Argonauts of the Western Pacific
    - ▶ A psychological explanation of religion
  - ▶ All cultures rely heavily, but not exclusively, on science to accomplish their goals



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### The Psychological Theory of Religion

- ▶ Bronislaw Malinowski:
- ▶ People will use their scientific technology as far as it will extend and then will resort to magic or religion to reduce anxiety
- ▶ Examples:
  - ▶ Baseball Magic by George Gmelch
  - ▶ "No atheists in foxholes."



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### Science, Magic, and Religion

- ▶ Science
- ▶ Instrumental (does things), based on rational understanding and empirical knowledge

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### Science, Magic, and Religion

- ▶ Magic
- ▶ Instrumental
  - ▶ but invokes the supernatural power through words or acts
  - ▶ Spells
- ▶ It is coercive,
- ▶ based on faith/belief

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Science, Magic,  
and Religion

- ▶ Religion
  - ▶ Based on belief/faith
  - ▶ works through the beseeching of the supernatural
  - ▶ prayer

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Science, Magic,  
and Religion

- ▶ These are 'ideal types'.
- ▶ Problems.
  - ▶ Some cultures **DO NOT**
  - ▶ separate natural/supernatural
  - ▶ distinguish between coercion and beseeching

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Magic

- ▶ Law of Contagion
  - ▶ Objects in contact with magic continue to have that essence
  - ▶ Heirlooms
- ▶ Law of Similarity
- ▶ Law of Opposites

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Magic

- ▶ Law of Contagion
- ▶ Law of Similarity
  - ▶ Similar acts/things have similar effects
  - ▶ Bloodroot increases health of blood
- ▶ Law of Opposites

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Magic

- ▶ Law of Contagion
- ▶ Law of Similarity
- ▶ Law of Opposites
  - ▶ One object has the opposite effect on another
  - ▶ Right hand and left hand

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Science

▶ *By definition, science seeks naturalistic explanations for physical phenomena. It does not study the supernatural.*

Edward J. Larson

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### Types of Religion

- ▶ Personal spiritual forces, supernatural being, with special abilities and characteristics, invisible

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### Types of Religion

- ▶ Animism (Edward Tylor)
  - ▶ Associated with Indigenous cultures
  - ▶ a belief in spirit beings thought to fill nature with vital spiritual powers

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### Types of Religion

- ▶ Ancestor worship
  - ▶ Japanese and other Asian Cultures
  - ▶ Native Americans
  - ▶ Mexican Traditions

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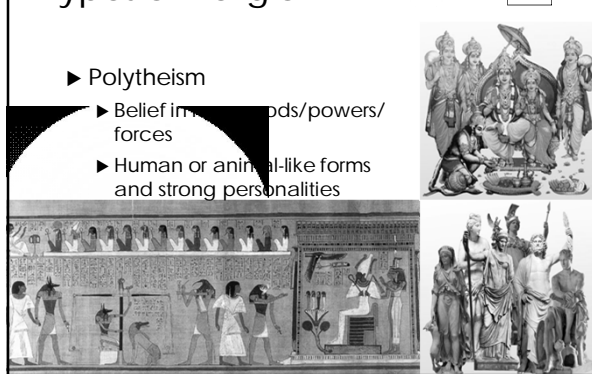
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### Types of Religion

- ▶ Polytheism
  - ▶ Belief in multiple gods/powers/forces
  - ▶ Human or animal-like forms and strong personalities



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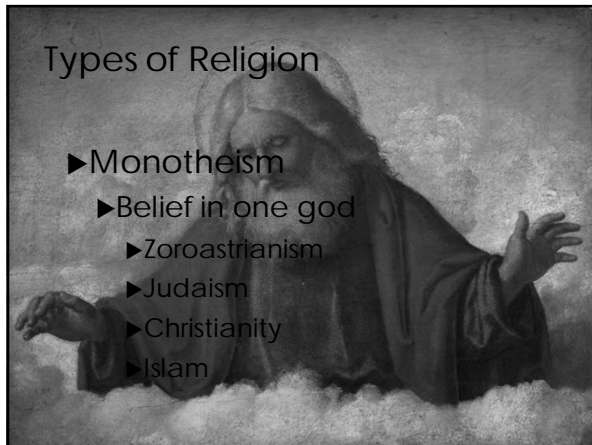
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### Types of Religion

- ▶ Monotheism
  - ▶ Belief in one god
    - ▶ Zoroastrianism
    - ▶ Judaism
    - ▶ Christianity
    - ▶ Islam



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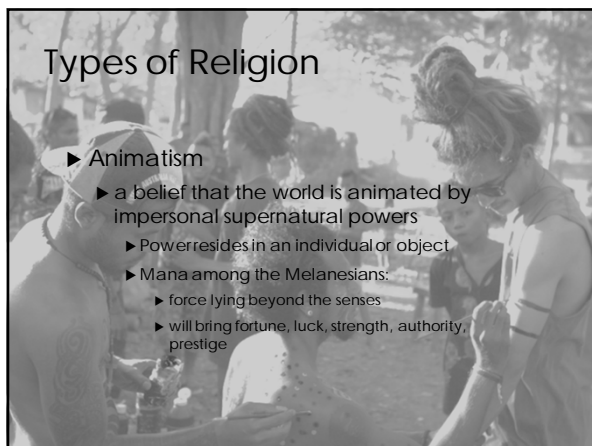
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### Types of Religion

- ▶ Animatism
  - ▶ a belief that the world is animated by impersonal supernatural powers
    - ▶ Power resides in an individual or object
    - ▶ Mana among the Melanesians:
      - ▶ force lying beyond the senses
      - ▶ will bring fortune, luck, strength, authority, prestige



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## The Notion of Spirit

- ▶ Vital essence or spiritual power
- ▶ All or most cultures have this idea in varying degrees
- ▶ Examples:
  - ▶ Malays (semangat)
  - ▶ Dani (edai egen)
  - ▶ Yanomamo (moamo, noresh)
  - ▶ Christianity (soul)
  - ▶ Zuni (Blona)
  - ▶ Hinduism and Buddhism (soul is reembodied after death --- reincarnation)

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## Mana and Taboo

- ▶ Mana:
  - ▶ impersonal natural forces (animatism) exists in universe; resides in people, animals, plants, objects
  - ▶ Luck, misfortune, personal prowess can be acquired by anyone through chance or certain actions (Melanesia)
  - ▶ Derived power of important or noble person (Polynesia)
    - ▶ Actively dangerous to lower status people
  - ▶ Like electricity: useful if handled properly, but dangerous and even fatal if misused

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## Mana and Taboo

- ▶ Taboo
  - ▶ The dangerousness of mana
  - ▶ Now widely used for *whatever* in the name of supernatural power

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### Religious Specialists

- ▶ Magicians, sorcerers, witches, spirit mediums, medicine men, shamans
  - ▶ Both men and women
  - ▶ Facilitate communication between human beings and the supernatural world
  - ▶ For good and sometimes for evil
  - ▶ Skill acquired through study, apprenticeship, or inheritance

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### Religious Specialists

- ▶ Shamans
  - ▶ using power for good



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### Religious Specialists

- ▶ Witchcraft: using spiritual power
  - ▶ Sorcerers and witches
  - ▶ Found in many cultures
    - ▶ Sorcerer:
      - ▶ Learns magic rituals
    - ▶ Witches:
      - ▶ have psychic powers

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## Religious Specialists

- ▶ Witchcraft: using the power for evil
  - ▶ Some cultures have witchcraft without witches
    - ▶ Named as witches because of evil actions attributed to them
    - ▶ Witchcraft often used to explain misfortune and bad luck
    - ▶ There are no actual witches, however there are accusations of witchcraft
  - ▶ Strangers are often thought to be witches
  - ▶ Many times, certain women are thought to be witches
    - ▶ Why is there such widespread belief in people with supernatural powers used to hurt?
    - ▶ Accusations function as a leveling device: social control to explain the inexplicable

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## Divination

- ▶ Use of sacred power to find answers to basic questions
  - ▶ Tarot cards, channeling and so on
  - ▶ Scapulamancy
    - ▶ Holding shoulder blade bone (scapula over hot coals to predict the future
    - ▶ May function within the ecological system
    - ▶ Used when hunting knowledge faded
    - ▶ Randomizes hunting patterns
  - ▶ Bird watching in Borneo
    - ▶ Read the flights and songs of birds to plant gardens
    - ▶ Randomization gives better chances for success

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## Myths and Rituals

- ▶ Myth
  - ▶ Textual aspect
    - ▶ Oral
    - ▶ Written
  - ▶ Bible
  - ▶ Homer
  - ▶ Vedic Traditions

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## Myths and Rituals

- ▶ Ritual
  - ▶ "religious phenomenon"
  - ▶ means by which the individual or the society at large relate to and communicate with the spiritual world
  - ▶ Two major types of rites
    - ▶ Rites of Passage
      - ▶ Stages in the life cycle of an individual
    - ▶ Rites of Intensification
      - ▶ Crises within the life of the group

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## Rite of Passage

- ▶ Formal similarities in those rituals which move a person from one status to another (van Gennep, 1908)
- ▶ Prototypical
  - ▶ boys' initiation ceremony
    - ▶ marks transition from boyhood to manhood
- ▶ Three phases
  - ▶ Rite of separation
    - ▶ removal from the group
  - ▶ Period of transition ("liminal period")
    - ▶ ritual reversals of ordinary life take place
    - ▶ Symbolic ambiguity of the social positions
  - ▶ Ritual of reincorporation
    - ▶ Welcomed back into the community in new role

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## Rite of Passage

- ▶ This structure applies in many cultures
  - ▶ But not all
    - ▶ Passage from childhood to adulthood not clearly defined in Saragwe, Yanomamo
    - ▶ Several rites take place for the Balinese
  - ▶ Americans have no real coming of age ceremonies
    - ▶ Do have graduations, initiations into clubs, hazing, et
    - ▶ Some communities do observe traditional rites
      - ▶ Imported from their culture's homeland
    - ▶ Period of transition marked by strange behavior

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## Rites of Intensification

- ▶ Ceremonies dramatize and reaffirm the social network
  - ▶ Prototypical ceremony is funeral
- ▶ Releasing the Spirits (A Balinese Cremation)
  - ▶ Funerals in Bali are elaborate
  - ▶ Deceased had previously been buried now to be cremated as a group
  - ▶ Involved in major upcoming religious ceremony
  - ▶ Unfinished ritual business

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