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

What Does Religion Do?

- Social cohesion
  - Religion brings people together 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 have some greater purpose
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..."

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

Religion: Addressing Questions

- Why are we here?
- What is the purpose of our life?
- Where do we go from here?

- The etymology of Religion:
  - The Latin word religio (consciousness, piety)
  - The Greek term religare (to tie, fasten that holds)
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"

What Religion Entails

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

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
Problems of Translation

- Diversity of cultural meanings
- "Belief" is difficult 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

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

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
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) – panchronological context of religion
  - focuses on societal (collective) or social role of religion

The Psychological Theory of Religion

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

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
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."

Science, Magic, and Religion

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

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

Religion

- Based on belief/faith
- Works through the beseeching of the supernatural
- Prayer

Science, Magic, and Religion

- These are ‘ideal types’.
- Problems:
  - Some cultures DO NOT
    - Separate natural/supernatural
    - Distinguish between coercion and beseeching

Magic

- Law of Contagion
  - Objects that come in contact with magic continue to hold that essence
- Heirlooms
- Law of Similarity
- Law of Opposites
Magic

- Law of Contagion
- Law of Similarity
  - Similar actions have similar effects
  - Bloodroot increases health of blood
- Law of Opposites

Science

- By definition, science seeks naturalistic explanations for physical phenomena. It does not study the supernatural.
  
  Edward J. Larson
Types of Religion

- Personal spiritual forces, supernatural being, with special powers and characteristics.

Types of Religion

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

Types of Religion

- Ancestor worship
  - Japanese and other Asian Cultures
  - Native Americans
  - Mexican Traditions
Types of Religion

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

Types of Religion

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

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
The Notion of Spirit

- Vital essence or spiritual power
- All or most cultures have this idea in varying degrees
- Examples:
  - Malays (semangat)
  - Dani (eda iegen)
  - Yanomamo (moamo, noeshi)
  - Christianity (soul)
  - Zuni (Bilona)
  - Hinduism and Buddhism (soul is reembodied after death — reincarnation)

Mana and Taboo

- Mana:
  - Impersonal supernatural 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

Mana and Taboo

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

- Magicians, sorcerers, witches, spirit mediums, and other religious specialists
  - 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

Religious Specialists

- Shamans
  - Using power for good

Religious Specialists

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

Divination

- Use of sacred powers 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 is needed
- Randomization in hunting patterns
- Bird watching in Borneo
  - Read the flight of birds to plant gardens
  - Randomization gives better chances for success

Myths and Rituals

- Myth
- Textual aspect
  - Oral
  - Written
- Bible
- Homer
- Vedic Traditions
Myths and Rituals

Ritual

- "religion in action"
- means by which the individual or the society at large relate 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

Rite of Passage

- Formal similarities in those rituals which move a person from one status to another (van Gennep, 1908)
- Prototypical type
  - boys' initiation ceremony
    - marks transition from childhood 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
  - Rite of reincorporation
    - welcomed back into the community in new role

Rite of Passage

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

Magic, Science and Religion

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