

A belief in all-pervading spiritual agencies seems to be universal.

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Overview

Our species, *Homo sapiens*, has existed for about 150,000 years. For most of that time, they lived as hunters and gatherers.

- Archaeological evidence suggests that early hunters had an intimate knowledge of the animals they ate and the animals that might eat them.
- Some scholars say that this sensitivity to animals led early humans to *animism* – the tendency to think of everything that moves as alive.
- In addition to their sensitivity to animals, early humans were sensitive to other human agents, who also might benefit them or harm them.
- According to some scholars, that sensitivity to human agents naturally led to *anthropomorphism* – the tendency of humans to think of other things as like humans.
- Animism and anthropomorphism help explain the development of religion, because beings like us tend to perceive events in nature, such as thunderstorms, as the actions of agents. And so early humans might have believed in agents other than living human beings, such as spirits, ghosts, and gods.
- Thinking of natural events as coming from agents allowed early humans to feel that they could influence

Prehistoric Religions?

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The Neolithic Revolution and the Rise of Historic Religions

Conclusion



such natural forces as the rain and the sun, sickness and health. They could do this by persuading these agents to help them, as by sacrificing something of value.

- In the Upper Paleolithic period (10,000–35,000 years ago), we find considerable archaeological evidence of activities that can be called religious. Most of them involved death, hunting, or fertility, all major concerns of early human beings.
- Early death rituals indicate a belief that humans survive death and need food and tools in the next life.
- There is evidence of the concern of early humans with fertility in about 200 figurines made between 20,000 and 27,000 years ago. They have large breasts, wide hips and prominent vulvas. Some scholars say that they served as “fertility goddesses.”
- The concern of early humans with prey animals and with predators shows up in several European caves where between 11,000 and 30,000 years ago early artists drew detailed images of bison, bulls, and other animals.
- A few images from caves seem to represent figures that are part animal and part human, something like the shamans in various religions later on.
- The animism and anthropomorphism of oral tribal cultures today may be similar to the thinking of early humans.

About 12,000 BCE, some human groups made the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture and herding. This is called the **Neolithic Revolution**.

- In the new agricultural way of life, the control of land became important, and so men’s ability to fight did too. From land ownership and war, some scholars say, came empires, slavery, and men’s domination of women.
- From the time of the earliest empires and states, government and religion have been linked.

While several features of early human cultures, like features of oral tribal cultures today, seem similar to what we now call “religion,” those cultures seem to lack some basic distinctions that are made by religions. Those include the distinctions between natural and supernatural, sacred and profane世俗, and religious/non-religious.

There is a traditional Gospel song called “Old-Time Religion.” The first verse is “Give me that old-time religion. Give me that old-time religion. Give me that old-time religion. It’s good enough for me.” The kind of religion referred to is Evangelical Protestantism, which goes back almost three centuries. But what if we wanted to find really old-time religion?

Our species, *Homo sapiens*, has been around for 150,000 years. But the oldest institutionalized religions we have today, Hinduism and Judaism, were created only three to six thousand years ago. According to the Jewish calendar, 2011 CE is year 5771, and the Hindu calendar puts it at 5112, but that leaves about 97% of human history unaccounted for. However, many scholars of religion – especially essentialists such as Otto and Eliade (see Chapter 4) – believe that religion is an “essential” aspect of human life. If this is the case, then it should be evident even in the earliest societies. So they look at evidence of earlier human activity that might be called religious. They look at objects and images that early humans made, and figure out if they might have had religious significance.



PART II USING THE TOOLS: SURVEYING WORLD RELIGIONS



Calendars

Many ethnic groups have traditions that explain the origins of their world and their group. Many also date their history from this beginning point. Many peoples' calendars have fallen into disuse and been lost to history. But there are still more than 40 calendars in use worldwide.

The Christian calendar begins with the birth of Jesus, and is known as *anno domini* (AD), "year of the Lord." It uses "BC" to refer to the time before Jesus was born. ("BC" refers to "before Christ.") Since the Christian calendar is the most widely used calendar today, its dates are often referred to by scholars as "common era" dates (CE).

Prehistoric Religions?

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, some of our earliest evidence of human beings seems to depict what modern Western observers identify as religious ritual. About 17,000 years ago, for example, our distant ancestors created images such as those in Figure 5.2 in caves in Lascaux, France. There are over 2,000 images on the walls in these caves: 600 are drawn or painted, and 1,500 are engraved into walls. To make some of the images on the ceilings, archaeologists say, the painters must have climbed up on scaffolding. Of the figures represented, the most common are horses – 364 of them, and stags – 90 of them. There is only one representation of a human. The most famous figures are four huge bulls, one 17 feet long.

What can we say about images like these? One thing they show is that early humans knew well the shape of some animals. They were familiar with their muscles, horns, and other body features. This suggests that they often looked at animals up close, studied their features, and watched them move. This makes sense since at this time our ancestors lived not by farming, but by hunting and gathering food. To be successful at killing prey, they had to know what different species looked like and how they moved, where their most vulnerable points were, and how they defended themselves. Hunters would track animals, sometimes for days, figuring out their movements from clues such as footprints and odors. And when they closed in for the kill, they had to attune their movements to the animal's, to prevent it from escaping. With large prey, such as bull and bison, they had to respond quickly to the animal's aggressive movements or they would be gored or trampled. To do all this, they had to be sensitive to the animal's every move.

Another reason that early humans had to be sensitive to animals is that the animals also hunted them. Imagine what it was like for early humans living on the East African grasslands to sleep on the ground at night, surrounded by lions, leopards, and hyenas. They had to be alert to every rustle in the grass and every sound that might be coming from a predator's throat. Quieter, smaller threats from poisonous snakes and spiders were common, too. Our first ancestors, in short, had to pay close attention to what they might kill, and to what might kill them.

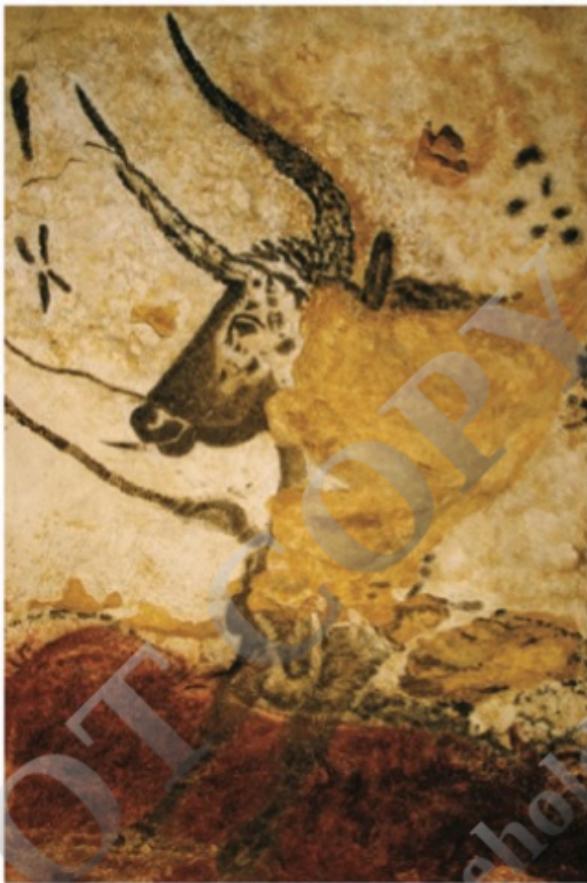


FIGURE 5.2 Caves in Lascaux, France. © Photononstop/SuperStock.

Animism and Anthropomorphism

This sensitivity to animals, some scholars say, led early humans to *animism*, which, as we saw in Chapter 3 in our discussion of E.B. Tylor, is the tendency to see everything that moves as somehow alive. *Animé* is Greek for “soul”; it is the term that gives us our words “animate” and “animal.” Animism was a survival strategy for the first humans. Understandably, under the circumstances it was safest to assume that, if something moves, it is either a predator or prey, unless you know otherwise. Treat all movements as coming from “agents” – living things that see you and can hurt you or benefit you. People who thought this way were perhaps a little paranoid, but, with dangerous animals all around, paranoia could be a good survival strategy.

Adding to early humans’ sensitivity to animals was their sensitivity to other people – who also could hurt them or help them. Until a few thousand years ago, everybody lived in tribes, as many people still do. Human babies then, as now, were utterly helpless and completely dependent on other people to survive – first their mother, then their family,



then the wider social group. So they quickly learned to distinguish their mother's face, and voice, from everyone else's. As they grew, they learned which faces were in their tribe and which were not, and which were friendly and which dangerous.

A large part of the right brain of humans – the part of the brain that deals primarily with visual, audio, and spatial recognition and manipulation – is devoted to identifying faces. In fact, because we are so attuned to faces, we tend to see them everywhere – not just on people. In Figure 5.3 is a rock formation on Mars in which people have “seen” a human face.

This hypersensitivity to other humans led to another *ism*, *anthropomorphism* – the tendency to see things as human. The word is from the Greek *anthropos*, human being, and *morphe*, shape. The roots of anthropomorphism probably go back long before our ancestors were *Homo sapiens*. Three million years ago in southern Africa, pre-human members of the group *Australopithecus* weighed only about fifty pounds as adults, and had brains about one-quarter the size of ours. Archaeologists discovered in one of their camps a small reddish-brown jasper stone (Figure 5.5) that was from an area several miles away. Apparently, an *Australopithecus* had picked up this stone and carried it to a camp miles away. We cannot say for sure what they were thinking, but it seems plausible that they brought it home because it looked as if it had a face.

What, if anything, do animism and anthropomorphism have to do with religion? Contemporary psychologist Pascal Boyer, confirming some of the theories of early anthropologists such as Tylor and Frazer, claims that early humans had a highly sensitive *agency-detection system* in their brains. They naturally tended to perceive any movement as the action of a living thing – this is the animism. And they tended to think of anything alive as like themselves – this is the anthropomorphism. If tree branches moved suddenly, or something rustled the grass, or the ground rumbled, they became alert and observed carefully. Their muscles might have tensed as they went into a fight-or-flight mode. They got ready to confront whatever it was, or to run away from it. Anyone who has slept alone in a creaky old house during a storm, with the wind making weird noises and lightning casting strange shadows on the walls and ceiling, may well have experienced their own agency-detection system at work. They probably tended to interpret all these movements and sounds as the actions of an animal or person. If that interpretation was right and a rat or a burglar was coming toward them, then their animism and anthropomorphism paid off, since they were better prepared to deal with the threat. If, on the other hand, the disturbance was only a branch brushing against the window, then all they wasted was a little adrenaline and anxiety.

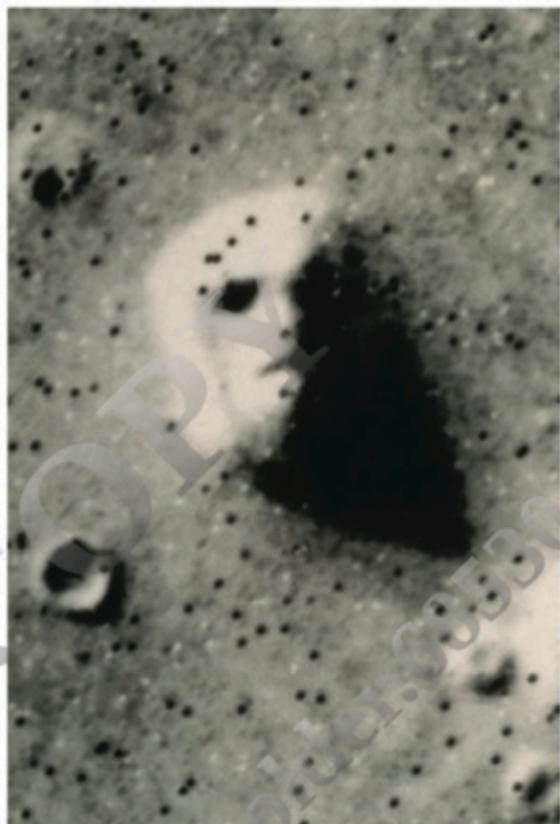


FIGURE 5.3 Face in rock – Mars. © 1989 Roger Ressmeyer/NASA/Corbis.



The Nun Bun



FIGURE 5.4 Nun Bun, Tennessee 1996.

AP Photo/Nashville Tennessean/Bill Steber.

In 1996 in Nashville, Tennessee, a customer in the Bongo Java Coffee Shop noticed that the bun pictured above looked like Mother Teresa. Within a week, photos of the "Nun Bun" were appearing in news media around the world. Bob Bernstein, owner of the shop, had the bun coated with shellac and put in a glass case. In 2005, someone broke into the shop and stole the bun.



FIGURE 5.5 The Makapansgat cobble/pebble.

© The Natural History Museum, London.

Employing aspects of Darwin's theory of natural selection (see Chapter 3), thinkers such as Boyer believe that those early humans who were ultra-sensitive to possible agents around them survived longer and produced more offspring than those who were less sensitive. So over tens of thousands of years of evolution, our species ended up with a hypersensitive agency-detection system. This is why we might easily mistake a rock for a bear, but we are much less likely to mistake a bear for a rock.

This hypersensitive agency-detection system in early humans naturally led them to look for an agent whenever anything happened, especially something important. If someone died suddenly, and no animal or person had attacked them, early humans might think that some special kind of agent was at work. That agent might be a jealous mate who used some special power to kill them. It might be the ghost (see Chapter 2) of an angry relative. It might be some cosmic or supernatural payback for some offense.





The First Work of Art?



FIGURE 5.6 Rock person, MOROCCO. Robert G. Bednarik.

In 1999 the rock pictured above was found in Morocco. Its original shape was somewhat human, and 400,000 years ago, before *Homo sapiens* evolved, someone carved grooves into it to better define this shape. They also added ochre, a dark red coloring, to it. Anthropologists speculate that whoever reshaped and colored this rock did so because they saw it as like themselves.

This tendency to attribute bad events to an agent – natural or supernatural, mundane or cosmic – is still found today in traditional religions. “Traditional religions” is what scholars call religious traditions that are indigenous to particular areas, continue to be transmitted orally from one generation to the next, and have not spread beyond their native areas. (There are many traditional religions in Africa and Australia, for example. We shall look at one example of Native American traditional religions in Chapter 9.) It is common in traditional religions to treat death as a result of agency. When someone dies, people say that some agent must have killed them. If no one stabbed or poisoned them, then it may have been someone with extraordinary power – a **witch** casting an evil spell, or a spirit getting revenge, or a god or cosmic force administering justice. Even if their community knows that the person died from pneumonia or cancer, they still ask who killed them – killed them by giving them pneumonia or cancer.

EARLY TRADITIONS



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Sacrifice

The first book of the Hebrew Bible tells the story of the first two children: Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve. The Qur'an, Islamic sacred scripture, tells the story as well. The two decide to offer sacrifices to God. Cain gathers some of his best grain and burns it on an altar. Abel slaughters a perfect lamb and burns it for God. The smoke from his offering goes straight up, while the smoke from Cain's offering drifts sideways. Taking it as a sign that God has rejected his offering, Cain becomes jealous of Abel and kills him. Whether or not offering sacrifices to please a god is a universal phenomenon, it certainly is a part of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition. Scholars have generalized from this example that offering sacrifices to gods is a major feature of religions.

Traditional religions in today's world are not identical to the first religions of the human race, of course, but some anthropologists believe they show a basic way of thinking that may have contributed to the development of religion. If this approach is correct, then perhaps religions grew out of the natural human tendency to interpret events as actions, and to understand actions as motivated by something, just as human actions are motivated by something. When a volcano rumbled, when lightning struck, when the rain came, our distant ancestors saw this as someone doing something. And when the volcano went quiet, the storm stopped, or the rain failed to come as expected, they interpreted this as someone's refraining from acting.

This way of thinking not only allowed early humans to explain the world around them, but also made them feel they had a way to influence it, maybe even control it. As Freud speculated in his book *The Future of an Illusion* (see Chapter 3), human beings early on became skilled in dealing with other people. As they faced problems with the natural world, they tried to use the same techniques. If the volcano or the rain was someone's action, then they could ask that someone to stop the volcano or start the rain. They could do something to please the one who was performing the actions so that this agent would do what was asked. And if the request was granted, they could thank the agent. If the agent did not grant the wishes or answer the prayers, it might have been because they had failed to please the agent or had offended the agent somehow. The next step might be to offer other gifts or **sacrifices**, or to apologize and ask for forgiveness. By seeing events around them as the actions of persons, they could deal with the natural world in all the social ways they dealt with other people.

Death Rituals

Those who offer these suggestions about the origins of what we understand as religion would be much happier if they could find archaeological evidence for their claims, but, unfortunately, there is almost no archaeological record of what religions may have been like between 2.5 million years ago, when the earliest members of our genus, *Homo*, evolved, and 35,000



years ago, the Upper Paleolithic period. All we have from this long period are some animal bones arranged in special patterns in human encampments, and some remnants of ochres (common colors found in the earth) that early humans may have used to decorate their skin.

When we get to the Upper Paleolithic period of 35,000 to 10,000 years ago, however, we find more archaeological evidence of activities that can be interpreted as religious. Most of these concerned death, hunting, and human fertility – all major concerns of human beings trying to survive in a scary and unpredictable world. As we saw in Chapter 2, dealing with basic concerns is an important part of what religions do for people.

The oldest evidence of actions performed systematically for no obvious practical reason but with some kind of symbolic significance – what we call rituals – comes not from *Homo sapiens*, our species, but from *Homo neanderthalensis*, or Neandertals, cousins of ours who lived from about 200,000 years ago to about 30,000 years ago. Evidence from caves suggests that Neandertals had rituals for disposing of dead bodies, some of which were curled up in a fetal position. One commonly cited Neandertal burial is Shanidar 4, known as “Old Man,” in a cave in Iraq. Soil samples show significant amounts of pollen from a wide range of wildflowers, some having medicinal value. Before he died, he was blind and partially crippled, and so he would have needed to be cared for. The suggestion is that his group took care of him in life, and then covered his body with flowers when he died. Just what did these people believe about death and what did they think their rituals would accomplish? We do not know for sure, but it is possible that they thought of the dead person as still existing in some way.

The evidence for funeral rituals gets stronger with our species, *Homo sapiens*, about 20,000 years ago. There are almost 100 examples from Europe and Asia of people being buried in caves and open-air sites, often with “grave goods” – things for them to use after death – such as stone or bone tools, shells, beads, animal bones, and red ochre. One male buried in Arena Candide, Italy, was nicknamed the “Young Prince.” His body was dusted with red ochre and decorated with pendants carved from mammoth ivory, shells, and a 9-inch flint blade placed in his left hand. Some burial sites had several bodies, perhaps families buried together.

Fertility Goddesses

Another intriguing set of artifacts made between 20,000 and 27,000 years ago consists of hundreds of nude female figurines found across the ancient world. Ranging from 1.57 inches to 10 inches in height, they typically have large breasts, wide hips, and prominent vulvas. The most famous, in Figure 5.7, is called “Venus of Willendorf” – after Venus, the Roman goddess of love, and the town in Austria near where the figure was found in 1908.

When these figurines were made, food was not abundant. A long winter or a few disappointing hunting expeditions could

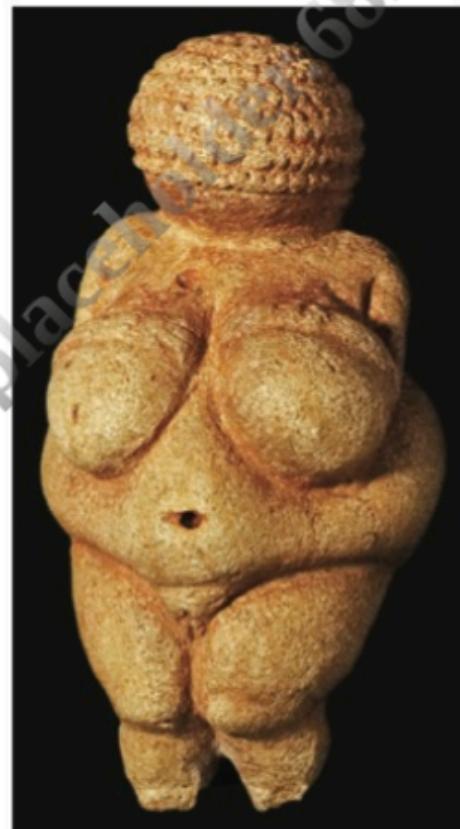


FIGURE 5.7 Venus of Willendorf.
Caro/Alamy.

mean starvation for some or all of the group. So a woman who was as plump as this Venus would have been rare indeed. Rather than representing an actual woman, these statues seem to represent an ideal type – the fertile, probably pregnant, female with a wide pelvis, large breasts, and plenty of stored body fat. This is the perfect body for bearing and nursing children. The fact that there are so many of these figures spread over a wide area suggests that they were made not occasionally and randomly, but often and for a definite purpose. The most likely purpose would have been in rituals to ensure fertility for women in the group.

Hunting Rituals

In the Magdalenian period, 11,000 to 17,000 years ago, we find evidence of rituals associated with hunting. This is the period when the paintings of bulls and bison were done on cave walls. Some of the animals in the paintings appear to have arrows stuck in them. In several caves in Europe, too, bear skulls have been placed in special locations, often along with bones. Some scholars say that these hunting peoples had bear cults that today might be called religious. Considering the size of the bears of that time, it is easy to see how early humans, armed only with primitive spears and arrows, would find them awesome and perhaps even worship them. Archaeologists tell us these animals were twice as tall as today's bears, and weighed more than half a ton.

Shamans

Not only are there indications that early hunters had rituals associated with animals, but there are intriguing images on cave walls of characters who are part animal and part human. In Figure 5.8 is a touched-up image from a cave in Ariège, France, of a man/stag, painted and engraved about 13,000 BCE.

This figure has antlers like a stag, eyes like an owl, ears like a wolf, paws like a bear, a tail like a horse, and human feet and penis. There is no evidence that people lived in this cave, or that it was used on a daily basis, so this image does not appear to have been just a part of some cave dweller's decor. The cave seems to have been a special place used only on special occasions, like a synagogue, mosque, church, or temple today. Many scholars call this image "The Sorcerer," interpreting it as a shaman. As we saw in Chapter 2, shamans (or priests) – those recognized for their skill in influencing agents who have power over people but over whom we have no direct control – appear to be the first authority figures recognized in human society. Shamans performed rituals to insure success in hunting and to initiate young men into the fellowship of adult hunters.

There are still shamans today. They typically wear special dress and go into altered mental states. In these special states, they are believed to be able to learn things – such as where the good hunting is – and to get power from spirits to help members of their group. In Figure 5.9 is a shaman from a Native American tribe in Alaska in the early 20th century performing a ritual to cure a sick boy.

The roles and duties of shamans – if not their supernatural powers – are similar to those of religious authorities who conduct systematic, symbolic activities in modern religions, even today.

