



FIGURE 5.8 Image from a cave in Ariège, France, of a man/stag, painted and engraved about 13,000 BCE. World History Archive/Alamy.

Ancient Traditions, Oral Traditions, and Religion

Do the similarities between some of the elements of prehistoric societies just discussed and what we call religion today justify the claim that they are early forms of religion? As we have seen, scholars who hold an evolutionary view of religion believe so. They think that what we recognize as religious activities arose in bands or tribes of hunter-gatherers long before the development of writing. These ancient ancestors of ours were concerned with the animals they hunted for food, and with the predators that hunted them. They were concerned with death and sometimes marked it with rituals. They were also concerned with birth because it replenished their numbers, so the fertility of their women was important. They tended to think animistically and anthropomorphically: that is, they thought of moving things as alive and like themselves.

If we look at the people today who are the most similar to humans in the Upper Paleolithic age, we can see all these features in their cultures. There are still hunter-gatherer



FIGURE 5.9 Photo of shaman. Library of Congress.

tribes living in South America, Australia, and Africa. Like humans before agriculture, their lives depend on killing prey, and on not being killed by predators. So rituals connected with hunting and avoiding predators are prominent. Human death is a major concern, so they mark it with rituals. Like early human groups, too, these tribes are small, and so the fertility of their women is essential. They think animistically and anthropomorphically, too, describing rivers and volcanoes, for example, as living things, and attributing human thoughts and motives to animals. While today's oral hunter-gatherer cultures cannot be assumed to have all the same features as the first tribal cultures had, they may help us understand some of the ways that early humans thought and acted.



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Common Features of Oral Cultures

- The survival of the tribe is the main value.
- Human fertility is important.
- Animals and plants are central.
- Rites of passage mark life-transitions – birth, puberty, marriage, death.
- Thinking tends toward animism and anthropomorphism.
- They have no word or concept “religion.”
- There is no distinction between religion and politics.
- The leader may be religious, political, and medical.
- Each tradition is local; there is no expectation that other groups will share their beliefs and rituals.
- There is no distinction between literal uses of language, on the one hand, and metaphors and other non-literal uses of language.
- There is no doctrine.
- There is no distinction between natural and supernatural.
- Knowledge is stored in proverbs – easy to remember sayings.
- Dreams and visions are considered sources of knowledge.

For example, the absence of writing in non-literate societies today means that there are no birth certificates, marriage licenses, or other records of life-events. So in order to have people remember important events, those events are marked by public rituals. Memorable ceremonies announce to the tribe that a baby has joined the group, that a child has become an adult, that two people have married, and that someone has died. Scholars call these transitions from one life-stage to another **rites of passage**. It is reasonable to assume that early humans would also have developed rites of passage as a way of acknowledging and remembering important events in people’s lives.

Another feature of oral tribal traditions today is that they are local. There are no traditions for the whole world. No one expects the tribe on the other side of the river to tell the same stories and perform the same rituals as they do. Conversely, everyone who is in the tribe is “in the tradition.” There are no “non-believers;” to not participate in the rituals would be to leave the community. Without writing, there are also no official teachings and so no orthodox beliefs, or heretical beliefs; there is simply belonging to the community or not belonging to it. (As we saw in Chapter 3, pioneer sociologist Emile Durkheim focused on community as the most important factor in religions, both ancient and modern.) All these features of oral tribal traditions today may well have characterized our early ancestors. But does either set of traditions represent religion?

Why not just describe both sets of traditions simply as typical of oral cultures? Literature scholar Walter Ong's groundbreaking book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (2002) outlines the characteristics of oral societies. They include a number of characteristics we have seen in these ancient traditions, such as the tendency to think practically rather than abstractly – to view things in terms of their use rather than some intellectual category; to view life as a seamless whole rather than in distinct segments such as “political,” “economic,” or religious; and to store and transmit knowledge in proverbs.

Whether “religious” or simply “oral,” the relative simplicity of early hunter-gatherer cultures would change drastically when humans settled down to an agricultural way of life. And many of those changes are reflected in the traditions we identify as religious.

The Neolithic Revolution and the Rise of Historic Religions

Around 12,000 BCE, some humans figured out how to produce crops year after year in the same place, rather than having to wander around looking for food. This first happened in Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris River and the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. The first plants grown as crops were grains: barley, then wheat, rye, and rice. From being nomadic hunter-gatherers, people settled in places suitable for farming and herding animals. This change is called the Neolithic (“New Stone”) Revolution.

With crops planted in the same fields each year, people had to control access to this land and protect it from invaders. They claimed ownership rights to specific plots of land and, because there were frequent disputes about who had the rights to which property, men’s fighting skills became more important than they had been in the hunter-gatherer economy of Paleolithic (“Old Stone”) times. While hunter-gatherers had lived in tribes of twenty to thirty, agriculture made possible villages of hundreds and then cities of thousands. The chief of a hunter-gatherer tribe was not elevated far above his relatives, but a king ruling over cities was. And the king was usually the man who had led warriors successfully in maintaining control of their group’s territories. His leadership was linked not just to his military skills but to his ownership of land and stores of food, since these were what induced people to be loyal to him.

Those who lost battles often became slaves of the winners. These slaves included not just the losing warriors, but their women and children, too. So now aggressive men owned not only land, but people. And they often took female captives as their concubines (slaves with whom they had sex and whose offspring they could claim as their rightful heirs) or wives. From there it was an easy step to thinking that a man owns not only his land but his wife and children, along with his slaves. Thus, according to many scholars, **patriarchy** – rule by strong father-figures – became a common pattern.

As patriarchy became part of societies after the Neolithic Revolution, it also characterized what would come to be called religions. Instead of venerating fertility goddesses and wild



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animals, as Paleolithic peoples had done, Neolithic peoples came to picture their supernatural guardians as being like their leaders – strong male warriors and kings. And just as the strongest fortresses were located on high ground where it is possible to see what your enemies are doing, so the gods were thought to live at the highest level of all – in the sky, “the heavens.” The goddesses associated with fertility receded in importance. A new kind of fertility became important – fertility of the land – and new gods emerged representing that fertility. And both kinds of fertility deity were perceived as subservient to the dominant warrior gods.

The transitions in the stature of gods and goddesses sometimes were described in dramatic terms. For example, in Greek mythology, Zeus was the king of the gods, the ruler of Mount Olympus, and the god of the sky whose weapon was lightning. But he was not always so powerful. Zeus was the youngest child of the Titans, Cronus and Rhea, both children of the earth, Gaea. But Cronus, the king of the Titans, had been told that he would be overthrown by his son, just as he had overthrown his own father. In order to prevent this, he swallowed each of his children as they were born. Rhea became tired of losing her children this way, so before the last one was born she wrapped up a rock and handed this to Cronus, pretending it was the baby. Cronus swallowed it and Zeus was saved. When he grew up, Zeus forced his father to vomit up his siblings. His brothers were so grateful that they let him have control of the sky and the thunderbolt. The siblings then did battle with the Titans, banishing them to the underworld – except for Atlas, who was punished for fighting Zeus by having to hold up the sky. Then Zeus and



Social Revolutions Reflected in Myth: Cain and Hephaestus as Villains

Above we saw the story of Cain and Abel as an example of sacrifices being accepted or rejected by gods. Scholars also see in the story of Cain and Abel a reflection of the conflict between herders and farmers. When people claim plots of land so that they can raise crops, shepherds find their grazing lands reduced and their livelihood threatened. In the biblical/Qur'anic story, Cain's offering was grain; he was a farmer. Abel's offering was an animal; he was a shepherd. Cain is depicted as the evil one. He became so angry that he killed his brother – showing that the story is told from the viewpoint of the nomadic shepherds, which, of course, the ancient Hebrews were. This was an ancient range war – like those between the farmers and cattlemen in the Old West of the United States. Negative depictions of blacksmith gods – such as Hephaestus, who fashioned Zeus's punishments – may also reflect the viewpoint of a nomadic culture in conflict with farmers, since it was settled societies that developed smithing and metalwork.

his brothers Poseidon and Hades drew lots for the rest of the world – Poseidon got the waters and Hades got control of the underworld. Zeus then set about marrying his sisters, putting them under his control. But one of them refused him. There are many versions of Greek mythology, but according to one popular version, Hera conceived a son all by herself, just to spite Zeus. Zeus was so angry that when the child was born, he threw him into the sea from the top of Mount Olympus, crippling him. There (or on an island, according to some versions) the son, Hephaestus, became a master blacksmith and submissive servant of Zeus. Later, when Zeus was outraged by men (this was before there were women) because they had collaborated with the Titan Prometheus, he commissioned Hephaestus to fashion the worst possible punishment: a box that when opened, released Pandora, described as “woman, that curse from which men would never escape.”

The characterization of women as treacherous, devious, and conniving is common in traditions after the Neolithic revolution. Often, in fact, we find the character of goddesses transformed, from benignly powerful to jealous and spiteful – and powerful. That is what happened to Hera, the sister and wife of Zeus who defied him. The Indian goddess Kali (as we shall see in Chapter 7) is another example – often depicted with blood and corpses or body parts around her, she is associated with death and destruction, unpredictable and to be feared. The unreliability of females, then, leaves the field clear for males to dominate. Indeed, the idea of dominating became central in many ancient traditions. In the Hebrew Bible, for instance, Yahweh is described as “Lord of Hosts (Armies),” and as a super-king ruling over the whole world.

In ancient Mesopotamia, the most powerful warriors and the priests were at the top of society. The farmers, craftspeople, and slaves were at the bottom. The king’s authority was legitimated by the priests, who confirmed that he spoke with the authority of the gods. To allow the leaders to rise even closer to the gods, step-pyramids called *ziggurats* were built. Scholars believe rituals were performed at shrines at the top of these monuments.

Not far west and south of Mesopotamia was Egypt, and it also developed a patriarchal culture after the Neolithic Revolution, along the Nile River. Ancient Egypt had about 700 gods and goddesses, but – as is typical for Neolithic societies – the gods dominated. The Egyptian leaders went further than Mesopotamian rulers, declaring that the Pharaoh – the king – was a god. He was associated with Horus, the son of the sun god Ra.

As a god himself, of course, the pharaoh wielded great power. A later Egyptian tradition even said that at death the Pharaoh became Osiris, a god who was in charge of life after death. Obviously, this would be someone to stay on good terms with. Egyptian ideas about the afterlife changed over time, but constant was the belief that the body had to be preserved for the person to live after death. This is why the Egyptians developed the art of turning corpses into mummies. The pharaoh’s mummy was shown further respect by being entombed in a pyramid.

Mesopotamia and Egypt were not the only places where civilizations developed after the Neolithic Revolution. The Indus River Valley in southwest Asia and the Yellow River Valley in China were two more. In the next three chapters we shall see how seven religious traditions developed in these places – the seven commonly called “world religions” by scholars. From the ancient Middle East came Judaism, Christianity, and



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The Divine Right of Kings – an Early Version



FIGURE 5.10 Wall carving from the Temple of Horus at Edfu in Egypt. © Luke Daniek/Stockphoto.

The idea that rulers get their power from gods is an ancient one. In this wall carving from the Temple of Horus at Edfu in Egypt, two goddesses crown the pharaoh with a new crown made by combining their individual crowns. The temple was built between 237 and 57 BCE during the Ptolemaic period.

Islam. From the Indus River area came Hinduism, out of which evolved Buddhism. And from China came Confucianism and Taoism.

Conclusion

We have seen that some Religious Studies scholars try to find examples of religion in prehistoric cultures. Like non-literate tribes today, prehistoric peoples seem to have been concerned with animals and human fertility, no doubt in order to assure the group's survival. They may well have anthropomorphized animals and other natural forces, seeing them as what would later be called supernatural powers or gods. They may also have believed it possible to communicate with and encourage such powers to help their group, by offering gifts (sacrifices) and compliments (worship) and then making requests (praying). They may have recognized certain individuals as more adept at this kind of thing

than others. They may even have believed that some individuals can channel the supernatural power and so perform extraordinary feats such as healing. In other words, they may have had priests or shamans. As well, they seem to have marked life-transitions, especially the death of members of the group.

However, we have no evidence that our prehistoric ancestors recognized a fundamental distinction between what we call the supernatural and the natural. Nor do we find evidence that they distinguished sharply between various spheres of daily tribal life such as political, economic, public, and private – much less religious and non-religious.

What we call “religion” today seems to be more specific and more complex than either what the first humans did or what oral tribes today do. Religion seems – at the very least – to distinguish between parts of life that are within its realm and parts of life that are outside its realm. To use the language of many of the thinkers in Part I, religion seems to distinguish between the sacred and the profane, or the sacred and the secular parts of life. (“Secular” refers to the things of everyday life, the things that exist “in time,” as distinguished from the timeless or “eternal” realm of divinity.) In the next chapter we shall survey the traditions in which that distinction emerged: the Western monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you see evidence of animism and anthropomorphism in modern life? Think about how we name ships and hurricanes, for example.
2. Do you believe in ghosts? If you do, and you also belong to a religion, is your belief in ghosts compatible with this religion?
3. Among early human beings, death rituals seem to have involved the belief that dying is going to another world that is much like this one. What would the religions that you know say about that idea?
4. After the Neolithic Revolution, many scholars think, the control of land became important, and so there was an emphasis on war and conquest. Do you see any evidence of this in the religions that you know?
5. After war and conquest became important for group survival, warriors – typically male – became dominant in many societies. Do you see a correlation between the importance of war and the secondary status of women?
6. Do you think that the dominant status of males is inevitable in society?
7. Unlike early humans, few of us are hunters. But animals still seem important in our lives and in our thought. Can you think of examples? Are there any examples of things that are part animal/part human in modern thought?

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EARLY TRADITIONS



THE FAMILY OF WESTERN MONOTHEISMS

Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Traditions



"I'm calling it 'Genesis.' It's part of a five-book contract."

FIGURE 6.1 Mort Gerberg 1998/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com.

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