Spirituality, Religion & the Supernatural

Professor Janaki Natalie Parikh
jnparikh@verizon.net
Functions of Religion

• Spirituality: concerned w/ the sacred realm
• Religion is an institutn that formalizes spirituality
• Karl Marx’s view: relig. as an opiate of the ppl
• Meaning that it does what?
  • Like opium, subdues us into complacence, blinds us to our continued exploitatn
• Functionalist view: relig. Fulfills(functns) purposes in our society
• What sorts of purposes does it serve?
Religion

• Relig. Helps us to deal w/ the supernat’l
• Supernatural: $\neq$ empirical, extraordinary realm outside the observable wrld, but has an impact on the observ. wrld
• Relig. Is a cult’l universal: how it plays out varies
• Tylor: remember unilinear soc. Evolutn?
• Put forth a hierarchy of “types” of religions
• Rank ordering relig.
• Prob’s w/ classificatn of relig: ex. Hinduism

- Monotheism
- Polytheism
- Animism
Religion & spirituality

• Tylor also put forth that as science became more advanced it would replace relig.
• Animism: belief in spiritual beings &/or forces that animate the world
• Animatism: belief in an impersonal spiritual power or supernatural potency
• Not mutually exclusive, oft. found in the same cult’l context, ex. Melanesia
• Mana: a specific sacred force, a sacred current
Analysis of Tylor

• Over 100 yrs later, Tylor’s prediction, has it come true?
• Sacred: held in esteem, to be revered
• Secular: ordinary, commonplace
• Overlapping nature of those concepts
• Wallace’s categorization of religion (chart in text)
• Less ethnocentric, but still problematic
• M. Harris: relig. is not necessarily irrational, oft. facilitates a grp’s successful adaptattn
• Role of an animal held sacred in India?
• Cow: West. don’t understand, oft. ask, why not feed the hungry w/ the cows?
Religion

• Turns out cow is more valuable alive than butchered in this context
• Venus figurines: evidence of goddess traditions
• Early religions having a focus on fertility
• Goddess worship in Eur. Until Indo-Europ. Invasions bringing belief in gods
• W/ the rise of the monotheism, the goddess further suppressed, & prevalence of misogynistic (characterized by hatred of women) aspects (though some egalitarian features also present)
• Concept of god became primarily in male terms
Atheism & agnosticism

- Atheism: disbelief/denial of the existence of God(s)
- A term that varies greatly w/ the context it’s applied towards, has historically meant not accepting the current conceptn of the divine
- Some distinguish btwn weak atheism (disbelief in any specific god) & strong atheism (denial of the existence of any god whatsoever)
- Many who claim to believe in a god live their life as if there was none
- Agnosticism: belief that the nature of the supernatrl is unknowable, impossible to prove or disprove
Magic

- Religion: organized syst. of beliefs & practices regarding spiritual realm & supernat’l
- Spirituality: concerned w/ sacred, distinguished from material matters
- Magic: supernat’l techniques intended to accomplish specific aims
- Benevolent (good) & malevolent (harmful) magic
- Magic serves a particular functn as well?
- Harry Potter: what do we know about him?
- What does magic do for him?
Magic

• Serves to ease anxiety, uncertainty & stress
• Provides explanation of events
• But do Americans actually believe in magic?
• Absolutely. Recent Gallup poll shows that 75% of Americans believe in the paranorm., including telepathy, witches, divination, etc.
• Imitative (sympathetic) magic: based on princ. that like produces like
• Contagious magic: materials once in contact w/ a person have influence even after contact is broken
Magic

- Ex.: hair, fingernails, blood, import’t possessns
- SE Asia, Burma: a person experiencing unrequited love may have a magician make an image of his/her love to encourage love
- S. Africa, Lesotho: ppl carefully hide teeth that have fallen out since they can be used in magic
- Our own magical beliefs about teeth, what do we do w/ them?
- Hide them under our pillow for another (magical) figure to take
Haitian Voodoo

- Haitian voodoo, what type?
- Both, & contrary to pop. misconceptn,
- Typically benevolent, used for healing has cultural roots in W. Africa where it was used
- For conflict resolution
  - http://people.howstuffworks.com/voodoo.htm
Witchcraft

- Navajo: highly developed concept of witchcraft
- Kluckhohn: N. w.craft serves to channel anxieties, tensions & frustration caused by pressures from dealing w/ Euroamericans
- Witch hunts, witch crazes of Europe & America, beg. ~1200, lasted hundreds of yrs
- Purpose? Who was typically accused? (specifics)
- Divorced or widowed, socially threatening
- Levelling mechanism: reminds society of norms as well as consequences of not heeding them
Rights of passage

• Rites of passage: rituals that mark important stages in life cycle, ease transition
• Liminality: ambiguous social position, in between
• Stages of rites of passage: separation, transition, reincorporation
• Do we have any rights of passage?
• Ex.: bachelor parties
• Revitalization movements: calls for radical cultural reform in response to widespread social disruption &/or despair
  • Initiation or manhood rites or taboo link rites of manhood
• [External website link]
Revitalization movements

- Belief: wise alien beings would bring spiritual awareness to Earth
- Revit. movements oft. (not all) operate law, referred to in common terms as?
- Cults: pop. demographic for recruits?
- Typically young adults (15-25), why?
- Melanesia: cargo cults, rxn to western Capitalism, natives employed @ docks/airports, rarely a living wage
Revitalization movements cont’d

- Promise of resurrection of deceased relatives, destruction/enslavement of white foreigners & magical arrival of utopian riches
- Wicca: a neo-pagan tradition that is a revitalization movement
- Neo-pagan: pre-Christian traditions revived in the current day
syncretism

- Syncretism: fusion/blending of elem’ts from 2 difft cultures, found in religion, art or medicine
- Heterodox tradition: a traditn that results from relig. syncretism, ex: Sikhism
- Sikhism: heterodox traditn that incorporates elemnts of Islam & Hinduism
- Other examples of syncretism: Jainism, Buddhism, Voodoo & Santeria, many more
shamanism

• Shamans: traditional medical/relig. Specialist, gen. a part time practitioner
• Shamanism: roots in Siberia, today, most oft. employed by soc. Scientists to describe Native Amer. Traditns, truly cross cult’l
• Role of altered states of consciousness
• May involve drug usage, but doesn’t require it
• Altered states help bring about unitary state: humans were once one w/ the supernat’l but we’ve become separated

• http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/series/taboo#tab-Videos/05915_00
• shaman