

Religion, ritual, and creating and maintaining belief

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- Kottak on religion
 - Table just to give you an idea of the variety and size of major religions
 - you don't have to memorize the details
 - **Revitalization movement:**
 - also called **millenary movement** or **millennial movement**
 - social and religious movement that
 - occurs at times of crisis, decline, or oppression
 - intends to change or revitalize society
 - or predicts a cosmic change, like the end of the world or the return of a prophet
 - sometimes back to a remembered better past
 - sometimes to something new and better
 - like the second coming of Christ, “end times”, etc.
 - typically led by a charismatic prophet, teacher, etc.
 - examples:
 - Handsome Lake religion
 - Iroquois (Native Americans of Upstate New York)
 - started around 1800, led by Handsome Lake
 - in response to
 - mistreatment by US after aiding the British
 - resettlement onto reservations
 - alcoholism problems
 - promoted adoption of European ways of farming and residence
 - ending matrilineal organization and inheritance of land
 - shifting from communal longhouses to individual, patrilineal nuclear families
 - Ghost Dance movement
 - many Native American tribes
 - started in 1889 by a Paiute visionary named Wovoka
 - believed that if enough people participated in the Ghost Dance, the ancestors would return and the Native Americans would be restored to their place in the old world
 - most famously adopted by the Lakota Sioux, leading to the massacre at Wounded Knee
 - Some religions that are well-established now may have started as revitalization or millennial movements
 - Christianity (arguably)
 - Protestant Christianity, starting with Martin Luther
 - Church of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) (arguably)
 - **Cargo cult:** especially in Melanesia and Polynesia
 - General features:
 - Appeared after abrupt contact with modern soldiers, explorers, miners, missionaries, colonial government officials, etc.

- who had lots of goods (“cargo”) but did not apparently have to work to get them
- and did many strange, useless things
 - marching in formation
 - saluting flags
 - using radios
- various prophets interpreted these odd behaviors as magic that got their ancestors to provide the cargo
 - they would convince others to join them in trying to duplicate the magic
 - marching, saluting, talking into “radios”, etc.
 - hoping that this would cause the ancestors to bring great amounts of wealth (cargo)
 - and drive off the lazy, greedy foreigners who were exploiting them
 - this was magical technology to bring about a specific end
- numerous different cargo cults, each led by a charismatic leader proposing some different magical practice
 - sometimes the same person who led a previous attempt that didn’t work
- often drew followers from distant regions
 - often including people who had tried other cargo cults and given up when they didn’t work
- cargo cults mostly faded away by the late 1930s
 - but at least one, the “John Frum” cult, continues on the Fijian island of Vanuatu
- one explanation is based on Melanesian beliefs about prosperity and ancestors
 - many Melanesians believed that material prosperity was a gift from their ancestors, in a literal and immediate way
 - this works fine to explain things in a slash-and-burn, big-man society
 - also believed in magical practices to control otherwise unpredictable forces
 - so when they encountered well-equipped 20th-century soldiers, missionaries, and administrators who came by boat or ship
 - they assumed that these foreigners had somehow figured out how to get extraordinary amounts of goods (cargo) from the ancestors
 - so they guessed about what was causing the ancestors to shower such wealth on the foreigners, and tried to do the same things to get the same result
 - many cargo cults involved the idea that the ancestors would switch back to the side of the locals and kill or drive away the foreigners
- Kottak suggests an interpretation based on the meanings of reciprocity in big man systems
 - big men accumulated wealth only to give it away
 - in the moka ceremonies that we looked at earlier
 - in contrast, the foreigners made locals work and were very wealthy by mysterious means, but never gave the wealth away
 - eventually, there would have to be a supernatural sanction for this immoral behavior
 - the practices of cargo cults were to call on ancestors or gods to hasten this return to justice
- Kottak and other anthropologists suggest that cargo cults did pay off in the end
 - by creating networks of followers of different cargo cults

- created the connections and regional consciousness that eventually led to successful political action and representation
- maybe the John Frum cult is working by bringing in tourism
- Nanda and Warms point out that some American beliefs are quite similar to cargo cults
 - “Prosperity theology” or “the prosperity gospel”: attending certain churches, and especially giving large donations to them, will cause God to make you rich
 - especially some Charismatic and Pentecostal Christian churches
 - Oral Roberts was an early promoter of prosperity theology
 - the better Christian you are, the better car you will drive...
- Point: Cargo cults may initially seem senseless to us, but actually do make sense given the beliefs that the people already had
 - understanding them is an exercise in cultural relativism
 - that normal, adult, intelligent humans could believe in cargo cults suggests how extremely constructed beliefs can be
 - and should cause us to wonder which of our own beliefs might look as baseless to someone from a different culture
 - like “prosperity theology”
 - or others that seem perfectly reasonable to us
- Robbins: creating and maintaining belief
 - beliefs are cultural constructs
 - which are constructed in people’s minds through social interactions and learning
 - Ritual is one means of constructing belief
 - creates an emotional impact
 - it is a special event, outside of daily activities
 - social, with others expressing the same ideas
 - uses symbolism to bring seemingly disparate aspects of life into a satisfying relationship
 - involves music
 - visual pageantry (clothing, props, choreography, etc.)
 - sometimes mystifying phenomena or trickery
 - people associate the emotions produced by the ritual with the referents of the symbols of the ritual (the beliefs that the ritual communicates with the symbols)
 - the emotion caused by the ritual suggests that the beliefs it refers to are real and powerful
 - if you have a moving experience while praying during a church ritual, it is easy to think that what you felt was due to God
 - example: an Anglican choral mass in a British gothic cathedral
 - example: a mountaintop ritual to Pachamama
 - example: attending church services due to social obligations or for social contact, but eventually being swept up by the ritual
 - secular example: the ritual of raising the American flag and hearing the national anthem
 - inspires emotion
 - that you associate with the country
 - because that is the referent of the flag and symbols in the anthem

- effect: reinforces your patriotism
- similar effect with the ritual, flag, and playing of taps at a military funeral
- Point: the emotion created by the ritual is attributed to the referent of the symbolism, suggesting that the referent is real and powerful
- **Interpretive drift** (Tanya Luhmann)
 - changing belief due to involvement with a new activity
 - a shift in interpretation of events, or adoption of a new theory
 - For one reason or another, you start talking with believers, or reading, or attending rituals
 - You hear lots of people using and believing in the ideas
 - through simple repetition and exposure, the ideas start seeming less outlandish, and more plausible
 - You are trying to understand the new ideas, so you are looking for examples and applications to your own life, try the ideas on for size
 - when a few coincidences fit the ideas, it can seem like validation of the ideas
 - you pay attention to things you would previously not even have noticed, or would have ignored as coincidence
 - but now that you have the new ideas in mind, you notice things because they seem to fit the new ideas
 - example: while Luhmann was studying magic, a bicycle battery melted while she was imagining energy; her watch stopped during a ritual
 - previously, she would not have even considered that these things were connected
 - but now these events fit the new ideas, so the events seemed significant
 - after a few such events, one starts looking for more, and may find them
 - every fit seems to be an explanation, a discovery
 - the failures to fit are easy to ignore
 - you start thinking there is something to these new ideas...
 - the perception is not so much that one's beliefs have changed...
 - but rather that one has discovered something true
 - examples:
 - coming to believe in a conspiracy theory
 - becoming a fervent Tea Party member
 - adopting Marxist views, Republican views, etc.
 - starting to feel better about starting archaeological projects if you have made an offering to Pachamama...
 - starting to think like an anthropologist...
- both ritual and the process of interpretive drift involve practice and repetition
 - you don't accept the belief and then start doing the rituals
 - rather, you start doing the rituals and gradually drift into the belief
 - Hence the claim:
 - you don't do the ritual or practices because you believe...
 - you believe because you do the ritual or practices
 - or, in more familiar terms
 - you don't go to church because you believe in God;

- you believe in God because you go to church
- which in turn suggests how important cultural or social norms of behavior are
 - by shaping what we do, they shape what we believe
- once a belief is accepted, a person will try to defend it against contradictory evidence
 - in order to avoid the psychological discomfort of **cognitive dissonance** (clash of contradicting ideas)
 - between the belief that is held to be true
 - and the evidence that seems to show that it is not
 - solution: find a way to discount, ignore, or suppress the contradicting evidence
 - eliminating the disturbing dissonance
 - **rationalization: secondary elaboration** of the belief in order to let it explain seemingly contradictory evidence
 - like the epicycles added to the geocentric (earth-centered) model of the universe
 - adding more features to make the belief fit the observed motions of the planets
 - rather than discarding the belief in favor of a different one
 - like a heliocentric (sun-centered) model
 - among the Azande, if the poison oracle is wrong, people explain the failure by saying
 - there was a technical problem with the poison
 - a witch interfered
 - the dead interfered
 - the diviner was incompetent, etc.
 - they salvage the belief with these additional theories
 - rather than discarding the belief as incorrect
 - **selective perception**: focus on what fits
 - emphasize supporting evidence
 - **suppress evidence**: find reasons to discard contradictory evidence
 - reject contradictory evidence as biased or unreliable
 - explain it away somehow
 - or just ignore it
 - **appeal to authority**: the Bible or Qur'an; Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, etc.
 - **appeal to faith**: “it is just a mystery” “I just feel that it is true”
 - **alternative standards of truth**: it is a beautiful idea; it is no more unprovable than other unprovable ideas; it may not be empirically true, but it is an effective myth; etc.- people use these defenses to maintain any kind of belief, not just religious beliefs
 - stereotypes about people by social race, ethnicity, etc.
 - political views, etc.
- And finally... Anthropologists often suggest that religious and cosmological beliefs tend to reflect the society that hold them
 - this is an outsider's, etic view of religion, not an emic one that a believer would propose
 - Elman Service (in Robbins): religion is a model of society, and for society
 - when we were pastoral nomads, God was our shepherd...
 - Ludwig Feuerbach: “Man created God in his image”

- Emil Durkheim: a society's **cosmology** (ideas about how the supernatural and natural world are arranged) reflects and represents that society's arrangements
 - So religion serves to legitimize the society's organization
 - by teaching that the world, heavens, and gods are organized that way
 - "Religion is society worshipping itself"
 - kind of a radical idea, but think about it...