

Anthropology of Religion
Chapter 4 Lecture Notes

Religious Myths and Symbols

Religion is a realm of symbolism.

I. Multi-Layered symbolism

Most religious symbols have multiple layers of meaning.

Christian Baptism

II. Recurrent Symbolism

A religion's most important meanings are conveyed by recurrent symbolic expressions.

Mormon Creation Story

Freedom of choice becomes a recurring element.

Aztec Religion

The effemerality of existence, interplay of life and death symbolism.

Nezahualcoyotl's Poem

III. Cosmology

Anthropomorphic beings and powers and their relation to humans

Yanomamo

South American. The creation story.

Gnostic Godhead

The effemerality of existence, interplay of life and death symbolism.

The cosmology of many societies share common elements.

Relating to basic human concerns and conflicts such as economic, biological, social and sexual needs.

Foraging Societies

Use animal deities such as Shoshone Coyote

Agricultural Societies

Use fertility deities such as European Ceres and Persephone

IV. Myths

Malinowski: A sacred character that codifies belief. Leviticus: "God is holy, be thou also holy."

Mythic symbols play an important role in interpreting myths.

Star Trek

Bones is like the Id. Spock is the Superego. Kirk is the Ego.

Quetzalcoatl

Structural Meaning vs. Storyline.

Star Trek

Quest into the unknown, discovery of paradise, the god has feet of clay, Kirk overcomes the god, and the quest continues.

Mythemes

Units of meaning conveyed by repetitive symbolism.

Legends

Larger-than-life heroes who embody the values that society should emulate (and their opposites).

V. Limits of Variability

Supreme Being

Makes sense when there is political supremacy.

Polytheism

Specialization in social life.

Ancestral Spirits

When group is descended in a family line from ancestors who controlled the same means of livelihood.

Reincarnation

Identity based on membership in small, continuing local groups

Personal Soul

Versus "great spirit"

Gods who sanction morality

Sorcery and witchcraft

Navajo witchcraft

VI. Artifacts as Symbols

Cathedrals and Temples

Holy Water

Keris Knives

Clerical Collars

Southwest Indian Katchinas

Balanes Masks

Barong (Lord of the Forest) versus Rangda (Queen of Death)