

Chapter 2.02 Natural, Popular, and Local Common Religion

“Natural” religion is not any particular real religion. It is an idealized religious capacity. Natural religion is what people have abilities to believe from having biologically evolved, such as the propensity to believe in spirits. It is part of evolved folk physics-biology-psychology. I list some of the characteristics of natural religion in a section below and list some of the abilities of evolved folk physics-biology-psychology in another section further below.

Natural religion does not have much intrinsic content, such as “we must thank the spirit of the oak” or “there is one and only one supreme God”. It has general categories into which we put specific content. We fill in specifics according to how we earn a living, raise a family, our environment, technology, culture, society, and history. For example, all people have the ability to believe in spirits but only some people in some societies believe in the particular spirits of trees, deer, cars, or football. Only some people believe in angels or devils. Only some people believe in one supreme omniscient omnipotent God, and do so only under certain conditions of culture, society, and history.

Natural religion and natural morality go together and support each other, so that, for example, common moral precepts such as “do not steal” get religious backing while people also expect that the gods will not be mostly honest. I do not go into this relation much here.

Different societies fill up the contents of natural religion in different ways. All the various particular real religions could claim to be “natural religion” but it is not very useful to think of religion that way. Instead, it is more useful to create an abstract natural religion, and then to look at some of the patterns of how natural religion gets filled up into particular religions.

During nearly all of the time humans evolved, we made a living as hunters and gatherers (or gatherers and hunters, or foragers). Natural religion evolved in that kind of life. So, in a sense, natural religion is the natural religion of hunters and gatherers. Yet various hunters and gatherers differ enough in their particular religions so that even with them it is worthwhile paying attention to the characteristics of religion in particular hunter and gatherer societies, and not taking any one hunter and gatherer society as typical of all natural religion. It is worthwhile making the distinction between the natural capacity for religion that all people share and which is similar in all people versus the realization of the capacity in any particular society, even a hunter gatherer society. So I reserve the idea of natural religion to the general capacity that is similar in all people, and I treat any particular religion as that particular religion, even the religion of hunters and gatherers who live much as humans lived while we evolved.

On the other hand, because conditions influence the content of natural religion, societies with similar conditions have similar contents of religion even if not exactly. People that hunt and gather have similarities in religion regardless of their own culture, society, or history. The same is so of people who raise grains (millet, wheat, rice, and maize) in large state societies such as in Egypt, Babylon, China, India, or the Yucatan. Judaism and Christianity developed in agrarian societies where people were peasants living by farming or fishing, and paid taxes to the military elite in a city, so this chapter describes

some basics of their religious type. This chapter also describes some basics of religion in modern states where people get a salary by working for a large institution, and pay taxes to the elite in a large city.

Because Judaism and Christianity developed in agrarian states, the ideas behind the terms “popular religion” and “common religion” are useful mostly to understand religion in states, including modern states.

For convenience, we can call “popular” religion the religion that is widespread in a society and that most people believe without consideration of official church doctrine. Where there is no official church in a society, popular religion is simply the widespread religion of the people in that society. Popular religion is natural religion as shaped by particular situations without considering any official religion. The popular religion of most Native Americans before the Europeans came was just the common religion of any particular group, such as the religion of the Navaho or Shoshone. In Thailand, China, and Korea, there is at least one “official” religion (Buddhism) so there is a difference between the official religion and the popular religion. The popular religion of Thai, Chinese, and Koreans is based on ideas about fortune, spirits, fortune tellers, amulets, potions, and ways to improve fortune. In China, the popular religion is largely a variation of “magical” Taoism. In the United States, popular religion includes nature worship and worship of organized activities such as business, politics, and sports such as football. There can be more than one popular religion in a large society. Most major subgroups in a large society have their own popular religion or have a major variant of a dominant popular religion. That is too much detail to go into here. Popular religion can coincide with official doctrine or not; the point is not that they clash; the point is that popular religion is not a direct reflection of church doctrine.

When modern people think of “natural” religion, they mistakenly think of popular religion of a particular circumstance, such as among particular Native Americans of the central plains. Modern people make up romanticized features of this religion and then attribute the romanticized features to all people as natural, such as the “Great Spirit” or “trickster”. If you are inclined to do that, you have to practice not doing it. “Common” religion is usually a mixture of popular religion with some doctrines of official “church” religion. Common religion consists of ideas that roughly accord with the doctrines of the official church but not entirely. Usually people give their own “spin” to ideas of the church, leave out ideas of the church, and add ideas. Common religion usually is the version of official religion that most people share. Common Christianity is not the same as official dogmatic Christianity, especially in venerating saints (Francis) and heroes (Martin Luther, John Calvin, various Popes).

Common religion can be fairly similar in different state societies even though the states have different official religions. People in states need a kindly deity to trust and to get help from. Many Christians trust Mary, and seek help from her, more than Jesus or God. Mary is in official Christianity but is not supposed to be central. Westerners and Hindus have similarities of common religion because they both developed in agricultural state societies; they differ in common religion due to history. Instead of Mary, Hindus might trust a version of female Kali, the consort of male Siva. In China, Korea, and Thailand, people worship Lord Mother Kwan Yin (Kuan Im). In ancient Greece, Hera was the wife of the supreme God Zeus, powerful herself; with a large devoted following; her name means “protector”. In Thailand, common religion is a variation of Buddhism that stresses accumulating spiritual “brownie points” (“merit” or “boon”) through relations with monks and temples.

Popular religion, common religion, and official religion can conflict. Then, popular religion and common religion usually defeat official religion, as with Mary worship. Many Christians believe in guardian angels and the direct intervention of saints even though those ideas are not in official religion. Christians believe in animal spirit companions, and those are not any part of official Christianity. Some Christians even believe a little bit in vampires, as the movie series "Twilight" showed. Every year some strict Christians try to ban Halloween and fail.

Philosophers and priests think of popular religion and local common religion as "superstition". They fight them, dismiss them, or tolerate them. Unless we can definitely say some belief is false, or causes more harm than good, there is no intrinsic universal standard by which to dismiss some beliefs as mere superstition and extol others as high reasonable religion. All are human beliefs, even atheism. Even so, we can apply some standards and come to some conclusions. We can assess beliefs according to whether they do more good and harm, by consistency, and by evidence. It is reasonable to think there can be only one highest god who is pretty moral rather than many small competing gods with dubious morality. I find little evidence of animal spirit companions. Belief in witches leads to persecution.

This chapter explains as much of natural, popular, and common religion as we need for background. A fuller treatment is found in the anthropology of religion and in religious studies. Natural, popular, and common religions all show some of the mistakes described in the previous chapter. That is not a concern here.

The fact that much of religion can be reduced to the ideas of this chapter does not mean all religions are the same or all religions are false. Just because we can see bits of The Force in Christianity or Taoism does not mean Christianity or Taoism are the same or are false. Physics can reduce the flight of a baseball and the roll of a billiard ball to the same natural laws. That does not mean there are no baseballs or billiard balls, baseballs are the same as billiard balls, or the different games are really the same game. We cannot reduce various religions to "nothing but". That error was exposed in the previous chapter. After we understand the ideas that make up religions, we have to decide what is distinct, true, and important.

Natural Religion.

I do not say too much about this topic because I trust intuition to supply the gist of the matter. For most people most of the time, much of the world is alive.

Most living things have not only a physical presence but a spirit. Animals, trees, fish, insects, and even some plants have spirits.

Various natural things that we modern industrial people might not call alive are alive and/or have spirits. Mountains, houses, places, the wind, and water not only are, they also are spirits and they might be alive.

Not only do individual living things have a spirit, such as the spirit of Fido the dog, but types of living things have spirits, such as the spirit of dogs or of wolves. The relation between the spirit of a particular

thing and of the type is not always clear, and might vary between kinds. The relation between Fido and Dogs might not be the same as between Gertrude and Cats.

Most living things and nearly all spirits do things on their own such as walk and fly, have wants, and have intentions.

Living things and spirits can enter into relations with themselves and with us. We can have a relation with our next door neighbor, her dog, the spirit of dogs, the spirit of Mount Hood, or the spirit of Mobile Bay.

Relations can include mutual trust and support. We want to establish a good relation with spirits when we can. We want to avoid bad relations. We want to protect ourselves in case of a bad relation.

Some spirits are superior to us just as some people are superior to us.

Part of relations is giving back and forth. The technical term for giving back and forth is "reciprocity" but I do not use that technical term for a while so you can get used to the idea rather than the technical term. Part of giving back and forth is giving and receiving different kinds of gifts in case of differences in status. We give a different gift to the spirit of the whole forest than we do to the spirits of one kind of tree or one particular tree. We expect different gifts in return from them.

Sometimes the spirits just do things with no apparent reason. That is what it means to be alive and to be self-actuating. The spirits are not always friendly and they do not always care about human beings. Sometimes we can placate them and get them to be considerate through giving back and forth. Some people have greater access to spirits than other people. It is well to seek their advice and take their advice. It is well not to anger them.

Apparent coincidence often has some sort of hidden cause. Sally did not hit that pothole and blow her tire completely by accident. Sometimes the hidden cause lies in the spirit world. Sometimes the hidden cause lies in somebody using the spirit world to affect us. Sometimes it is for good and sometimes for evil.

It is not entirely clear why sometimes the spirits help us and sometimes they do not.

We try hard to avoid conflicts with other people and with spirits but sometimes conflicts happen. Sometimes we can enlist the aid of the spirits in conflicts. It is not always clear why the spirits might help us or the other person, but the relation of giving-back-and-forth might be relevant. We might be able to expect help from a spirit with which we routinely gave back and forth.

We sense the identity of our group, especially in contrast to the identity of other groups. Our group can have a spirit too. Any group can have a spirit.

Sometimes conflicts happen between our group and other groups. We also try to get the help of the spirits in these conflicts. Again, the outcome probably depends on the quality of giving-back-and-forth.

Whether or not we are successful in our dealings with the spirits depends on our own condition. If we are in a condition that the spirits do not like, they are not likely to help us even if we are generous in our giving back and forth. For example, the spirits generally approve of moral behavior and disapprove of immoral behavior even if they are not always moral by our standards. So if we have done something bad, they are not likely to help us unless we atone. On the other hand, if we are morally pure, they are more likely to help us.

Just as there is an “us and them” between different groups, people and spirits tend to respond better to people that are like them. We can think of being morally pure as being more like the spirits, so they respond to us if we are more like them in that way. The same might be true of other ways. If the spirits like the color red, for example, and we dress in red, they might be more likely to respond to us than if we dress in blue. We have to think of what the spirits are like so that we can be more like them so that we can have a better relation with them. If a spirit is warlike, we have to approach that spirit with a warlike demeanor or with an attitude of supplication.

People relate to the spirits not only as individuals but also as part of a group. A Packer's football fan relates to the spirit of Packers' football (or the spirit of Vince Lombardi) not only as an individual but also as a member of Packers' nation.

Groups have symbols of their spirit and their identity as a group. Sports teams have mascots such as eagles, bears, tigers, and lions. When people think of the spirit and identity of a group, they think in terms of the symbol. They relate to the symbol. They give back and forth with the symbol. Having a religion in common is one of the strongest forces that make a group a group and that keep a group a group. Denying the religion of the group is the same as denying membership. People form a group to act toward the spirits together, as when they conduct rituals, pray, and give gifts. People tend to use religion for group welfare as much as for individual welfare. The symbol of the group and the religion of the group tend to merge.

Morality is seen not mostly as an individual, philosophical, logical, or abstract code of conduct but as something that comes from the group, is above the individual, and is about the welfare of the group. Morality leads both to individual benefit and to group benefit.

Being cut off from the group can be a disaster. Being cut off group can be expressed through bad relations to the spirit of the group and/or the symbol of the group. When a fan is expelled from the current fans of a sports team, he-she should no longer wear clothes with the team colors and team symbol.

Group level effects arose from individual action in the course of biological evolution. Individual action can change the course of group level effects. I do not explain what happened in human evolution or how that continues to happen in ongoing societies.

Rituals, prayers, sacrifices, and ceremonies in general are a common and natural part of religion. I do not explain how they arose or how they work. People can carry them out as individuals but more often people carry them out as groups.

Knowing things like this is part of what makes a person an expert in spirits and religion.

People evolved as hunter gatherers. The ideas of this section are most “cleanly” seen among hunter gatherers and some tribal people. We can take the ideas here as typical of hunter gatherers and typical of people unchanged by later ways of making a living and making society such as agricultural people. Later religious ideas in tribal and agricultural societies can be understood as elaborations and modifications of these basic ideas. Even so, do not reduce to “nothing but” because modifications can be important. For example, from basic ideas in hunter-gatherer societies, in later societies later we get levels of spirits, priests, sacrifices, and hierarchy. We get the basic ideas of Christianity, Taoism, Hinduism, etc.

The Force.

“The Force” as portrayed in the Star Wars movies is more typical of an agrarian society such as feudal Japan or a mercantile society such as modern California than it is of hunter-gatherer society, but it is close enough to get a basic idea across. The Force from the Star Wars movie is a particular artistic version of an idea that is common among humans. Just as a force is associated with a strong arm, a big rock, a big tree, the wind, or a pregnancy, so the action of spirits can be understood in terms of a mysterious force. Trees grow because of a mysterious force (“the force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives me”, “of which virtue engendered is the flower”). Tree spirits embody the force, partake of it, use it to grow trees, and use it for various purposes other than growing trees such as beguiling forest wanderers.

There seems to be one big force common to a lot of important things such as trees, stars, hurricanes, and lightning. This one big force might be the only true force in the world, so that all other particular forces are merely variations on this one big force (much like there is one God, or like physicists seek for the unification of the four basic forces of nature). The force can be available only to spirits, or it can be a general force that pervades all of creation. Not only people, but also many aspects of creation, might know of this force and share this force. What makes distinct aspects of creation distinct is how they manifest and use this force. The deer is the deer because it puts a deer spin on the force, and so also the bear, rose, and human. Mid-twentieth century philosophy and popular American religion called this force “process”. The force might normally be more available to spirits than people but it is also available to experts. Now, Americans call them shamans, Jedi, Sith, “professor”, or “doctor”. The force is available for good use and bad use. It can be used for special events like levitating star ships or it can be used as part of otherwise normal activities such as flowering, howling, shooting a bow, hunting a deer, or finding a mate. It plays a role in purity, holiness, and innocence, for which see below.

Natural Types, and “On the Borderline”.

People are born with a sense that various individual things of the world come in different types. We are not born with a large catalog of specific types such as for cats, dogs, lizards, roses, grasshoppers, etc. We have a few types, some of which are listed just below. Starting from them, we make other detailed types, such as “dog”, using experience and learning from people around us. We put the various individuals into those constructed secondary categories.

We are probably born with ideas of a few large category types, such as material objects, movement, rest, location, inside, outside, behind, plants, dumb animals (un-talking and not too smart) animals, smart

animals (potentially talking), intent, will, lying, persons, speech, a rule, kin, not kin, friends, neighbors, not friends, not neighbors, us, them, spirits, good, greater good, bad, right, wrong, force, purity, impurity, domestic, and not-domestic, same, different, similar, and type. We are born with general ideas (rules) about how types behave and interact. For example, we know animals can move themselves and that smart animals sometimes can guess what we want. We fill up the types with specifics from our way of making a living, society, culture, and history. For example, we later fill up the plant type with roses and dandelions, the animal type with dogs named “Rover” and cats named “Spot”, the schemers category with people from “Dallas” and “Gossip Girl”, the good category with ideals such as “love your neighbor”, and the bad category with people that compete for our mates and jobs.

We also create entities that are on borderlines and that have mixed traits, such as walking talking thinking trees (Ents), talking animals (many fairy tales), walking talking machines with a soul (Data and R2D2), people that fly (Superman and Neo), and people that do things to the physical world through will power (Ice Queen from Narnia and Lex Luthor). Entities on borderlines with mixed features often have religious importance, including having access to a lot of the Force.

Just being a strange entity on the borderline does not say how much Force the entity will have, especially in relation to other entities, whether the entity is good or bad, and whether we can relate to the entity. Being on the borderline does not say what attitude the entity has toward human groups. Those factors have to be worked out in the culture of particular groups.

Evolutionary biologists call the major innate categories “folk physics”, “folk biology”, and “folk psychology”. I add “folk sociology”. Logically, natural religion is a result of being born with some basic types and the ability to later make other categories from them. Natural religion comes out of folk physics, biology, and psychology. Logically, natural religion should have come after folk, physics, biology, and psychology. I introduced natural religion first because people usually have a better intuitive sense of natural religion than of folk physics, biology, and psychology. Natural religion is a good example of folk physics, biology, and psychology that helps introduce them. I do not explain more here because the details are not clear even to scientists, and they argue. Even the terms are not clear. I get back to the subject later in the book. All we need to know for now is natural religion.

Religion and Social Organization.

Religion can be used to create, mirror, reinforce, change, dissolve, sustain, undermine, and reorder social organization. Religion both is created by social organization and helps create social organization. These relations are so complex and controversial that I do not go into them. I mention this topic because, if I do not, any social scientist who reads this book will throw a fit. If I live long enough, and have energy, I will write about these topics.

Purity, Holiness, Innocence, and Being Like God.

People purity and holiness, and sometimes link them to innocence too. People think the more pure a being is the more holy that being is, and vice versa. People think innocent beings are both more pure and more holy. Theistic religions often encourage people to “be like God” and to “imitate God”. One of the

most influential books in Christian history is "The Imitation of Christ". People keep purity and innocence, and imitate God, so they can be more holy and can be nearer to God.

Americans have trouble understanding these ideas because we do not have an explicit system of purity, holiness, innocence, and the imitation of God. Yet we do have an informal system. Americans say, "Cleanliness is next to godliness". Our idea of "clean" means more than "free of germs" because it is really about an idealization of purity. We strive for impossible sterility. Bob Dylan complained that Maggie "takes about sixteen baths a day". We wash our clothes long before they are dirty, and we do not allow any hint of body odor. We iron out every wrinkle. We scrape away hair and we use chemicals to stop sweat. We think that animals are clean, pure, and innocent and so more holy and closer to God. Anybody who ever worked with monkeys, baby seals, or koalas knows better. We believe children are innocent, pure, and holy despite massive commonsense evidence to the contrary. Because of their purity and innocence, children can see God, angels, and ghosts, and often have a heightened sense of justice, as in the movie "The Sixth Sense". If we wait too long to train children in the ways of the Force, so they have lost purity, they are likely to go over to the Dark Side. We know that a dead body is only a body but still we are squeamish. We feel we have to be careful around them. We have to dress the right way at a funeral. We should not socialize after a funeral except at a wake. We should wait a while after a funeral before resuming normal social activities such as going to a bar. We behave differently around babies. We talk to them in strange ways even though much of what we say is meaningless to them. We paint their rooms in particular colors which are meaningless to them as well. We fill their rooms with objects that symbolize their sexual identities, and symbolize what we hope will be their interests in life.

Some non-Americans, such as Polynesians, formalize their ideas of cleanliness, purity, and holiness, partly as a way to let people know what to do so people can stop worrying, relax, and get on with their lives. Polynesians clearly mark out men, women, adults, children, babies, dead, chiefs, commoners, and other relevant social categories. They know how to behave around each category. They know bad behavior is impure and will offend the gods. They know when people are clean or not clean, and therefore holy or not holy. They know when to go near people and when to avoid them. They know chiefs are nearer to the force of the gods because chiefs are purer and more holy. They can tell apart a dangerous force, such as from a ghost, from a good force that is under control such as from a happy ancestor. They know what to do to cure a problem, such as with a woman after she has had a baby.

Sometimes when people do not have a formal system of purity and holiness, people over-compensate, and they worry too much about cleanliness, purity, innocence, and holiness. That is one reason why Americans are among the cleanest people in the world.

The Jews strove to be holy, and to be like God. They thought that cleanliness, purity, and some kinds of innocence (such as virginity) were holier and more like God. They required a degree of cleanliness and purity before a person could participate in ceremonies, festivals, and sacrifices. They formalized their system with ways to clean the self so as to be pure and holy such as through ritual baths and through well-defined offerings like a dove or some grain. Their formalization actually set most people at ease. The Law defined who and what was clean, pure, holy, and like God, or who and what was the opposite. The Law told people what to seek and what to avoid. The Law told people what to do to restore purity in case they had erred or in case they had to deal with an impure situation such as a death in the family.

The formalization did open the door for some people to be compulsive about rules and for some people to abuse the system by making other people worry about purity, holiness, and errors; but those abuses were not typical of the Jewish Law as a whole and probably did not affect most normal people.

Peasant Society and Uprisings.

A “peasant” is a farmer who lived in a society before industrialization and capitalism. Those societies were run by military-religious elites that lived in cities. If you have never read about these societies, you can get a biased but fun picture of them from “sword and sorcery” movies such as “Scorpion King” and “Conan the Barbarian”.

The peasants usually had to pay about 30 percent to 60 percent of their income in taxes (not far off what modern people pay), and so they usually resented the military, the aristocracy, and the priests. At the same time, the peasants looked up to the elites, and the elites felt a sense of obligation to the peasants (“noblesse oblige”). The elites had the duty to make sure nobody attacked the kingdom, everybody paid his-her fair share, the weather was not too severe, and God liked the nation. The elites knew all about the stars, moon, and cycles, and knew how to perform the correct ceremonies. You can get a sense of the relation both for good and ill through the classic Errol Flynn movie “Robin Hood”, and the excellent remakes with Kevin Costner and Russell Crowe.

For reasons too much to go into here, peasants never felt as if they had enough land for all their family members, and always felt as if the lords took too much in taxes. Peasants felt there would be enough land if only the lords would go away. They told stories about a person rising from the land who would fight the lords so as to do away with the lords and to make justice prevail. When the native hero won, everybody would have enough land all the time and everybody would have a big successful family, as in the end of “Lord of the Rings” in the Shire. The native conqueror was often an emissary from God. I just mentioned Robin Hood. The “Dune” books give a good sense of this myth, as do the various movies about Aladdin.

Because peasant societies always included poor people without any land at all, they also included bandits. The bandits sometimes borrowed from the myths of a native hero to justify themselves. Sometimes the bandits even got popular support. The bandits would play off one region against another by robbing from all regions except their home base. At home, they were generous, so their “home boys” protected them. You can get a sense of relations between bandits and peasants from the classic movie “Seven Samurai” or its remake “Magnificent Seven”. The lordly elite never had much sympathy for bandits except when it could use them against the peasants or against other enemies. Bandits deprived the lords of their taxes and gave the peasants false hope that might cause trouble. Usually the elites hunted down the bandits. In truth, the bandits were usually horrible people.

Peasants were not the poorest people in agrarian societies. Some people had no land at all and had to work as tenant farmers or day laborers. Some people managed to learn a craft, such as carpenter, boat builder, metal worker, or leather worker. Some skilled labor could be fairly well off depending on the craft and times, but skilled laborers were always below the secure landholding peasants in status and wealth. Merchants sometimes came out of the class of skilled labor and sometimes contributed their extra

children back to that class. Merchants could be small-scale or large. Jesus probably came from the class of skilled labor.

Peasants were in chronic debt, and often lost their land or children through debt. Debt slavery is far from over, even in the modern world. Children still get sold from Mexico to the United States to pay for debt, or get sold into prostitution in Asia. Credit card debt in the United States is the modern version of debt slavery.

In America, we are used to saying that everybody is middle class whether they earn \$10,000 per year or \$300,000 per year. In an agrarian society, people were not all the same class and they knew it. Perhaps no more than 10% of the population was in the military-aristocratic-religious elite, often less than 1%. About 50% of people might have their own land, just enough land to raise a family. The other 45% of the population was divided between merchants, landless tenants, landless laborers, and craftspeople. When times were tough, the people that owned their own land might fall to 20% while the percentages of tenant farmers and landless laborers increased. This is the situation that prevailed when Jesus was born.

Magic and Religion.

The line between religion and magic is not always easy to draw but we can get a reasonable feel for it by being simple.

Religion is usually a public activity aimed at the public welfare. Whole societies practice a religion while individual people or small groups practice magic. Religion tends to stress relationship while magic tends to stress technique. Priests read from the Bible as part of a conversation with God while magicians use scripture verses, or other verses, for their intrinsic power to compel. Religion goes along with morality. Religion reinforces good behavior and punishes bad behavior. Magic is amoral and sometimes immoral. Religion is aimed at the public welfare. Magic is aimed at personal welfare regardless of the public welfare, even if getting your way hurts other people, even if getting your way hurts other people more than it helps you. Sometimes magic is all about hurting others even if you do not directly benefit. In religion, some things are proper for public welfare such as rain while others are not such as epidemics. In magic, you can get whatever you want regardless of the public welfare. You can get it any way you want if you follow the proper technique.

In religion, usually we cannot compel God. We ask. We can purify ourselves and make ourselves more holy so that God is more likely to help. We can perform the correct ceremonies so that God can be assured of our knowledge and intentions. But still God has to make up his-her mind. In magic, we can almost compel the spirits. If we use the right potions, say the right words, conduct the right ceremonies, give the right gifts, use the right procedures such as a correctly constructed "voodoo" doll, or believe the right things, then the spirits have to go along with what we ask, even if what we ask is bad.

People dislike magic because they fear being compelled and because magic can get in the way of the moral messages of religion.

Much of Christianity crosses the border from religion to magic even though it might not intend to. Christianity evolved among small groups of people in the context of other people not like them, so it tended to focus on techniques (baptism and other sacraments) and it tended to limit rewards to the in-group of believers. It tended to emphasize what particular people can get out of a relation with God, and to see that relation in terms of “if I do this then God will do that”. Even when Christianity later applied to whole groups and societies, it tended to emphasize mechanics. For instance: If you believe the right things, then God will save you and reward you. If you worship Jesus, then you will go to heaven. If you have a personal relation with Jesus, then Jesus will guide you, protect you, and reward you. If you believe enough in Jesus, he will protect you and your family from disease, bad events, and bad people. If you believe enough in Jesus, he will make you rich. The mere facts that Jesus was born a human, crucified, and resurrected automatically saves all the people that believe even though no theologian has ever explained how that can happen. If enough people in a society believe in Jesus, then that society automatically will become moral and prosperous, and will vanquish its enemies. If not enough people in a society believe in Jesus, then that society might prosper for a while but eventually it will decay morally, become poor, and lose to its enemies. Even the ideas about society are not about good for people but are about using techniques, including mind control, to achieve ends. I believe the magic in Christianity obscures Jesus’ teaching.

Demigods, Heroes, and Villains.

The following traits are more typical of agrarian state societies than of hunter-gatherers but all the major religions of the world developed out of agrarian societies so we need to take these traits into account: power differences between gods, some gods much more powerful than others, high gods and low gods, wars between gods, parties and factions among the gods, demons, half-human half-gods, great heroes, gods that sacrifice themselves for us, gods that listen to prayers and have mercy on us, and terrible villains.

Hebrew-Jewish religion began with two scenarios of multiple gods: Yahweh the most powerful storm god among other nature-and-military gods; and El, head of a council of gods much like their neighbors. Hebrew-Jewish religion gradually reduced the pluralities to one-and-one-only god.

The most important characters in typical agrarian religion for Christianity are the half-humans half-gods. Jewish religion did not have as many hybrids as their neighbors because of the Jewish stress on monotheism. Jewish religion probably borrowed some hybrids from their neighbors but transformed them into angels. Sometimes the hybrids resulted from the mating of angels and humans. In the book of Genesis in the Tanakh, some angels, the “watchers”, see human women as so desirable that they mate with the women. From the matings come giants and unusual humans.

In non-Jewish religions, heroes often started out as merely human with some outstanding attributes, gained more attributes and better attributes, gained super-human attributes, and then changed into hybrid half-gods. Sometimes they took the last step to become minor deities. Jewish religion took the first steps (heroes) but was careful not to stray into deification of the hero. Often the hero gained a pedigree as the offspring of a god, unacknowledged by the parent god at first, but later accepted as his-her exploits grew – see the “Percy and the Olympians” movie. In Greek myth, Herakles (Hercules), Achilles, Helen of Troy,

and the Twins Castor and Polydeuces all had one divine parent. Herakles and the Twins ended up in the heavens as deities themselves.

Heroes, especially divine heroes, need appropriate enemies. Heroes meet and vanquish other beings that might be semi-divine. Herakles was the son of the highest sky god, Zeus. The earth goddess was Gaea, from where comes "giant". Herakles had to pass one of her giant sons, tremendously strong. Herakles killed the giant, thereby finalizing the victory of male sky gods over female earth goddesses. The enemies often symbolized problems in life and thought. The enemies did not often symbolize evil as such except in areas that received strong influence from dualistic religions such as from Persia (Iran).

Moses, Samson, David, and Solomon all began as normal humans but gained attributes that other cultures would recognize as more-than-human. Samson's long hair was a thin disguise for the super-human strength of a hero. Even today Jews revere those heroes much as other cultures revere their demigods or minor gods. The mere names of Moses and David bring awe.

Jesus began as a normal human being, developed the ability to perform miracles and fight demons, was acknowledged as the offspring of God, conquered death (evil) by being resurrected, and ended up in heaven as fully God and as Judge. Jesus follows a progression typical of non-Jewish neighbors of the Jews but his progression went farther down the road than Jews could follow.

Heroes, especially semi-divine heroes, and maybe powerful evil villains, meet a need for people but it is hard to assess the needs and to assess how they are filled. Hunter-gatherers have the ability to make up many kinds of characters, including semi-divine heroes and powerful villains, but they do not seem to need the semi-divine heroes and evil villains as much as do people in agrarian societies, so we should be careful not to say that the need for semi-divine heroes and evil villains is a deep human need that has to be filled by religions. That explanation is too easy. On the other hand, the ability to make up such heroes and villains really is a part of human make-up. We do not yet understand the ability very well. Even if hunter-gatherers did not need semi-divine heroes and powerful villains, agrarian people apparently did. It is easy to speculate why peasants and other people in agrarian societies might have responded to semi-divine heroes and powerful villains much as modern people respond to Batman and the Joker, but it is not useful here to speculate. We need to understand how the ability to make up characters generates semi-divine heroes and powerful villains in agrarian societies but social scientists are not there yet.

American Popular Religion and Local common religion.

Popular religion among peasants and modern people is usually about getting a reward, first here on earth and then later in heaven too. In that sense, it relies heavily on magic such as giving to a TV evangelist now so as to become rich later. The TV evangelist acts as an intermediary between God and the donor. Popular religion tends to be similar across major religions of the world. Popular religion is really not so different in Iran, India, America, Europe, or even China.

In local common Christianity (popular variation on the official religion), most Christians believe they will go to heaven when they die, be with Jesus, and live as a spirit forever. According to official doctrine, they are wrong. Instead of being in heaven with Jesus forever, they will be resurrected. Official doctrine is not

clear about what happens after that. Most people believe that Jesus the Son is somehow subordinate to the Father, and that the Holy Spirit does not matter much – most people are de facto Arian heretics. Many people believe that God adopted Jesus as his son and turned him into God when John baptized Jesus - another heresy. People are usually surprised to learn that they do not believe in all points of official church doctrine, and that they believe in many ideas that their church holds to be false. The differences are not so great that I make a point about them here. That is a matter for priests, pastors, and theologians. The points here are just that popular religion and local common religion differ from official religion and that popular and local common religion often have more in common with each other than with official religion, often even across national boundaries and the boundaries of major faiths.

Both popular religion and local common religion tend to be about the self, and not to be interested in social action except in times of general social unrest, so both tend to be de facto social conservative. They are de facto social conservative because they rely on magic and not despite magic. Magic diverts people's minds from real issues and lets them think they can solve their problems on an individual basis. Established churches and states reach an accord with each other, and with popular religion and local common religion, so they all mutually support one another, so the public is tractable, and so that nobody asks too many questions.

Popular religion and local common religion are more important in daily lives than orthodox religion or than liberal alternatives.

Any large complex society always has more than one local common religion, usually as many versions as there are important subgroups within the society, and it often has varieties that correspond to different personality types. Quiet people have their version of Christianity while boisterous people have theirs. I like some versions of local common religion because they stress quietly following Jesus while I dislike others because they stress believing in God so as to get rich or to go to heaven. There are too many versions to describe here. In the example below, I ignore differences in local common religion. I return to them in later parts of the book.

Here are some points of popular and local common Christianity. These ideas are typical of the religion of many groups in modern societies. By changing "Jesus" to "El", "Allah", "Dharma", "karma", "Tao", "Force", or the "spirit of the universe", the ideas could apply to societies other than Christian America but I keep the word "Jesus" because I want to emphasize how parochial the ideas can be. I do not mean to mock. I do mean to show how natural, popular, and local common religion mix, and how magic plays a role. I intend to make clear that popular religion and local common religion can cause damage.

-God is important, but he is too austere for us to get near.

-Instead, we can approach Jesus.

-Jesus is sort of like God only not quite as much God as God is.

-Jesus loves us.

-Jesus will take care of us. Jesus will cure our illnesses, make sure we are fed, find houses for us, and find jobs for us. Jesus will make sure that our car does not need too much repair, and that our business succeeds.

-Just by being born, dying, and being resurrected, Jesus saved us from hell to go to heaven with him.

-All we need to be sure that Jesus takes care of us is devotion to Jesus. Jesus does want us to do some things, but it is not always clear specifically what we need to do. So what is most important is that we are devoted to him.

-We can show our devotion in specific ways as our religious leaders tell us. If they do not tell us to do anything specifically, then we only have to remain devoted.

-If we believe in Jesus, when we die, we go to heaven to be with Jesus forever.

-Whoever does not believe in Jesus will go to hell forever.

-Jesus will punish bad people.

-Jesus keeps track of the good and bad deeds of people, like in a book. Where people go after death depends on the ledger, and on Jesus' mercy or his wrath.

-We should try to do as many good deeds as we can.

-We can do good deeds and then give the reward to somebody else such as to our sick mother.

-We can make bargains. We can promise to give to the Church so that Jesus will heal our sick child.

-We can even help the dead with our promises and good deeds.

-If we cannot relate even to Jesus, we always have Mary and the saints. Mary is God's wife, and so she is like the mother of everybody. She surely understands.

-Jesus sometimes intervenes in this world to insure that justice prevails, the innocent go free, and the bad are punished.

-When our people (us) argue with another people (them), our people are always right. Since Jesus defends right, Jesus is on our side. In a war, Jesus is on our side. In an internal conflict such as between Conservatives and Liberals, Jesus is on our side.

-From time to time, bad nations or bad movements arise, such as communism, Islam, hippies, or terrorists. They are "them". Jesus allows those movements to flourish for a time, probably to teach good people what not to do. Then he punishes the bad people, and he makes sure the good people defeat the bad.

-Jesus makes sure that history will go the right way in the long run.

-In the past, God made some people rich and powerful such as Abraham. As his followers now, Jesus wants us to be happy like the lucky people of the past. So he is likely to make us rich and comfortable. We have to know how to ask him and how to cooperate with him when he tells us what to do.

-Because we are devoted to Jesus, and because people similar to us are devoted to Jesus, Jesus must like all the people like us. Jesus likes people of our ethnic group, religious sect, national group, gender, or political party. If we are poor and White, Jesus likes poor White people. If we are middle class and Black, Jesus likes middle class Black people. If we are Italian and Roman Catholic, Jesus likes Italian Roman Catholics. If we are Episcopalian and rich, Jesus likes rich Episcopalians. If we are working class, Jesus likes good hardworking people. If we are trendy avant-garde artists, then the spirit of the universe likes us.

-Jesus does not like the people that we do not like or that we fear. If we fear the working class, Jesus does not like them. If we fear the poor, Jesus does not like the poor. If we hate the rich, Jesus despises the rich.

-Whatever kind of family or social grouping we have, that is the natural way to live, and the way that Jesus wants people to live. If most of our people live in small nuclear families with no aged parents or out-of-work adult siblings, then that is the natural way to live, and Jesus wants us to live that way. People that live in other ways, even if they have to live in other ways to get by, live perverted unnatural lives and Jesus does not like them.

-Jesus rewards individuals and social groups with prosperity. Jesus rewards them because they are faithful to Jesus and Jesus likes them. People that are well off deserve to be well off.

-If our group is not well off, it only seems that way. Really we are well off because we are spiritually well off. Other people can appear to be materially well off but really are spiritually poor. Because we are so faithful, eventually we will be materially well off and the other people that do not love Jesus will sink into poverty.

-Just as Jesus rewards good people, Jesus punishes people that are not faithful enough or that are immoral.

-Therefore people that are poor have only themselves to blame. Jesus punishes them for lack of faith or for some immorality, such as living in the wrong kinds of families.

-Jesus is really busy, so sometimes he uses angels to watch over us. He also sends people to help us such as preachers.

-Jesus tests us.

-One test is giving. If we give enough to the right people, we get back much more than we gave. Jesus will make us rich and comfortable.

-There are some magical beings and magical agents in the world. The Old Testament had some magical things in it, such as the magical staff of Moses or the magical serpent of Moses. Some people now might be able to understand the magic of God and use it for us. This world might still have magical manna, or pieces of the true cross, or the bones of saints, or the shroud of Jesus. Some of the TV people might have been sent by Jesus to help us this way.

-There is a devil. The devil causes almost all the problems in the world. The devil is like a rich person or like a leader that rouses the poor. We can fight the devil when we see him, if we have enough power.

-Jesus sends people and angels to help us fight the devil. In "The Lord of the Rings", God sent Gandalf (an angel) and Frodo (a person) to help all the people of the world defeat Sauron.

-The people and groups that we dislike serve the devil. Sometimes they know it and sometimes they do not.

-In the end, Jesus will defeat the devil and will make this world into the paradise it should have been from the beginning.

Routinization.

The term comes from the great sociologist Max Weber, who flourished in the early 1900s.

Routinization is how the ideas and practices of a religious founder get turned into common religion and popular religion. The description here hits only the highlights.

In its early history, to attract adherents, a new religion has to be special and distinct in some ways. The pioneers of the religion might not call the religion a "religion" or think of it in the same terms as the old religion; they might call it a "way". The new religion has to appeal to at least some particular group in society if not to society as a whole. Sometimes what makes the new religion distinct and appealing also makes it hard for the society as a whole to accept, and can make life difficult for the group of pioneer adherents. Still, the benefits outweigh the costs for the pioneer adherents. Often the group of pioneer adherents leads a distinct lifestyle, and the religion validates that lifestyle. The pioneer adherents do not have to be bizarre, they only have to be distinct, such as cooperators in a society of self-sufficient people (Jesus), merchants in a society of camel herders (Mohammad), or aristocratic soldiers in a society of priests (the Buddha).

Then transformations happen. First, people join that do not want to face all the hardships and who follow a greater diversity of lifestyles. Usually the new people are not as radical as the pioneer founders. Newer believers find that they cannot live up to the original ideals. People that have been in the religion for a while want real rewards, not just promises. The believers in general begin to lead a lifestyle somewhat different than the founding pioneers and more like the lifestyle of people in general. Religious ideals and concepts change to validate the lifestyle of the new people. People substitute worshiping the founder(s) as divine beings or divine agents for following the message strictly. The religion begins to become "devotional", what the Hindus call "bhakti".

Second, the process snowballs. When people in society at large see they can gain the benefits of the religion without changing their old lifestyle too much, the religion gets even more adherents. It validates the lifestyle of a bigger group of adherents, so it validates the lifestyle of people in general. It finds a way to validate the lifestyle of the families that are normal for that society, culture, and technology such as the nuclear families of urban craftspeople. Whatever the new religion started out as, it becomes a religion of the family, the hearth, and social decency. The founders can become what the Romans called the gods of the hearth. Devotion increases to take the place of acts or understandings. People have a personal relation with the founders as gods. Usually the religion finds a way to validate power and wealth both within the church and within the society at large. It becomes the religion that validates the ruling class, the military, and the prevailing style of the state.

The religion does not jettison all the original beliefs and practices. But it begins to see the original beliefs and practices as something for people that are “really strict” or for specialists that are capable in ways that normal people are not. The old ideas and practices can even contradict the new comfortable religion in many ways as long as the believers in general do not think they have to conform to the old practices and as long as people do not make a point of the conflicts.

The founders become figures out of mythology rather than real people. They become gods, angels, or avatars. Comets, stars, and angels attend their birth. Demons try to kill them in their cradle. Even if they remain fully human, such as the Buddha or Mohammad, they gain superhuman abilities. The longer the process, the more powerful they become. They walk and talk at birth, defeat demons and dragons, heal with a touch, see what we cannot see, and know the future. In politics, Barry Obama becomes Saint Barack and Ronnie-the-actor Reagan becomes Saint Communicator.

It seems the more that followers let go the ideals and teachings of the founders, the more followers deify the founders and mystify the religion. The less that Taoists seek the middle way of Taoism the more likely they are to see Lao Tze as an immortal riding the winds and the more likely to seek the elixir of immortality. The less Muslims seek unity and peace the more likely they are to see Mohammad defeating the Devil and to anticipate the bliss of heaven.

Jesus and Christianity went through all this too, at least as much as other founders and religions. It began even before Jesus died. What we inherited as Christianity is the end result of routinization rather than the original teachings, personality, and situation of Jesus. Some of the features of the process are described in later parts of the book.

The wonder is not so much that any religion goes through routinization but that so much of the message of the founders is preserved despite the process. The core teachings of Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tze, the Buddha, Zen (Ch’an) masters, or the Upanishads have reached through the trappings of magic, local common religion, and routinization to improve the lives of their later followers.