Chapter Outline and Unit Summaries

I. Introduction: Questioning the Evolutionary Paradigm

A. The Sophistication of the Supposedly “Primitive”

B. Basic Religions Not Measured Against Other World Religions on an Evolutionary Scale

1. Beware of the Biased Distinction Between Civilized and Non-Civilized Because Elements of Basic Religions Found in All World Religions

2. Basic Religions Represent the Majority of the Total Religious Experience of Humankind and Hence Must be Respectfully Understood

II. Sources of Information Concerning Basic Religions

A. Contemporary Basic Religions

1. Anthropologists Visit and Study Peoples Who Still Practice Basic Religions

2. The Limits of Studying Contemporary Basic Religions

   a. Human Religiosity Represented by Contemporary Basic Religions Might be Different from Past
   b. The Origins and Developmental Turns Hidden
   c. Very Few Written Sources for Basic Religions

B. Archaeological Study of Basic Religions of the Past

1. Twentieth Century Archaeology Gives Some Clues about Basic Religions of the Past

   a. Written Artifacts: Scrolls, Tablets, Inscription Materials
   b. Non-Written Artifacts: Burial Sites, Weapons, Tools, Buildings, Coins

2. The Limited Usefulness of Archaeology: Artifacts Subject to Multiple Possible Interpretations
III. Prehistoric Beginnings of Basic Religions

A. Neanderthal Religion

1. Earliest Hominid (125,000 – 30,000 B.C.E.)

2. Neanderthal Burial Sites Contain Animal Bones, Tools, Weapons, Suggesting Offerings to the Gods or Necessary Accompaniments into the World of the Dead, and/or Worshipful Attitude Toward Animals (Bears)

B. Cro-Magnon Religion

1. Forerunner of Homo sapiens Emerge 30,000 Years Ago

2. Cro-Magnon Burial Sites, Wall Paintings, and Figurines
   a. Burial Sites Contain Not Only Tools and Weapons, but Red Painted Bones, Suggesting Concern with Life Beyond Death; Corpses Curled in Fetal Position, Suggesting Belief in Rebirth to Next Life
   b. Hidden Wall Paintings of Humans Hunting Animals Suggest Priests, Magicians, or Shaman Tried to Predict Events of Successful Hunt
   c. Numerous Figurines of Female Figures With Exaggerated Breast, Hips, Abdomen Might Suggest Worship of a Fertility Goddess

C. Neolithic Religion

1. Neolithic People Live from 7,000 to 3,000 B.C.E.

2. Development of Agriculture as Way of Life Allows for Development in Religious Outlook and Practice
   b. Neolithic Peoples Develop Mythological Religiosity Based on Fertility of Soil, Animals, Humans, as well as, Cycles of Seasons, Tides, Moon
   c. Neolithic Peoples Build Megaliths (Giant Stone Monuments), Possibly for Religious Purposes
IV. Common Features of Basic Religions

A. Animism

1. Belief that All of Nature is Alive with Spirit (Latin: *anima*) That Have Feelings and Can be Communicated With is Most Common Human Religious Experience

2. Basic Religions Tend to Worship Nature in Whole or Part
   a. Stones, Animals, Mountains, Seas, Trees (Almost Everything on Earth!) Can be Object of Worship
   b. Traces of Animistic Nature Worship Present in all World Religions Today
   c. Modern Deep Ecology Movement Quasi-Animistic

B. Magic

1. Attempt to Control Nature for the Benefit to Some and Detriment to Others
   a. Line Between Magical Coercion and Religious Persuasion of Nature is not Always Clear
   b. Magic Might Have Been Forerunner of Religion

2. Sympathetic / Imitative Magic Seeks to Coerce Nature by Performing Natural Acts on Smaller Scale (e.g. Voodoo)

3. Fetish Magic: An Object With Power to Ward Off Evil and Bring Good (e.g. Lucky Charm)

C. Divination

1. Religious Attempt to Predict the Future

2. Divination as Decoding Exercise: Reading Entrails of Sacrificed Animals, Observing Flight Patterns of Birds, Casting Dice or Stalks

3. Shamans and Prophets: Person Possessed by Spirits Capable of Speaking Their Messages to the Group
D. Taboo

1. Polynesian Word *tabu / tapu* for Acts to be Avoided Lest the Spirit World Release Harmful Effects

2. Holy Persons, Places, Objects Considered Off Limit (Taboo) for Ordinary Person

3. Other Common Taboo Items in Basic Religions: The Dead, Menstruating Women, Certain Foods

E. Totems

1. Objibwa Word *oototeman* Used to Refer to the Animistic Sense in Basic Religions that Humans Have a Kinship with Other Creatures and/or Objects in Nature

2. Tribe or Clan Identifies Itself with Characteristics of an Animal, Plant, Heavenly Body

3. Tribe or Clan Treats Its Totem Object with Special Devotion, Respect, Veneration

F. Sacrifice

1. Most Common Practice in all World Religions
   - a. Animal Sacrifice is Most Common
   - b. Human Sacrifice is Rare; Usually Enemies Sacrificed

2. Goals and Objects of Sacrifice Vary Greatly
   - a. Feeding the Spirits
   - b. Gift to the Spirit World
   - c. Establishing Bond Between Humans and Spirit World

G. Myth

1. Common Practice by Which Religions Attempt to Express Truth Non-Conceptually Through Stories of Human Interactions with Divine

2. Myths Seek to Explain Whys and Hows of the World, Humans, and the gods / spirits

3. Myths Account for a Community’s Religious Practices
H. Rituals

1. Rituals—Simple or Complex—Present in All Religions

2. Rituals Often Re-enact Mythologies to Give Devotees of a Religion the Opportunity to Identify with the Divine Characters and Their Actions

I. Rites of Passage

1. Specific Rituals Designed to Give Religious Meaning to Transitional Points of Life: Birth, Puberty, Marriage, Death

2. Greatest Attention in Basic Religions Given to Rites of Passage from Childhood to Adulthood
   a. Children Often Exiled from Parents and Group as a Rite of Passage into Adulthood
   b. Goal Seems to be to Initiate Children into Religious Traditions, Secrets, Lore of Society

J. Ancestor Veneration

1. Belief in the On-Going Existence of the Dead is Perhaps Root of all Religion

2. Ancestor Veneration Suggests Fear that the Dead Will Return to Do Harm to the Living
   a. Dead Often Placed Under Large Stones or Staked Down to Prevent Return
   b. Names of Dead Dropped from Use, Their Houses Burned, to Prevent Return

3. Ancestor Veneration Motivated Also by Belief the Dead Can Benefit the Living
   a. Placating and Pleasing Dead Ancestors as Means to Ensure Benefits
   b. Ancient Chinese Culture Had Highly Developed Ancestor Veneration for this Reason
**Key Names, Concepts, and Terms**

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