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Introduction

For as long as history has been with us, religion has been a feature of human life. There is no known culture for which we have an ethnographic or an archaeological record that does not have some form of religion. Even in the secular societies that have become more common in the past few centuries, there are people who consider themselves religious and aspire to practise the rituals of their religion. These religions vary in form, style and size from small cults numbering a few hundred people centred around a charismatic leader to worldwide organizations numbering tens, or even hundreds, of millions of adherents with representations in every country. Some, like Buddhism, take an individualistic stance (your salvation is entirely in your own hands), some like the older Abrahamic religions¹ view salvation as more of a collective activity through the performance of appropriate rituals, and a few (Judaism is one) have no formal concept of an afterlife. Some like Christianity and Islam believe in a single all-powerful God,² others like Hinduism and Shinto have a veritable pantheon of greater and lesser gods; a few do not believe in any kind of god at all, as is, formally at least, the case with Buddhism (notwithstanding the fact that most schools of Buddhism make concessions to the frailty

of mere mortals by allowing them to believe in semi-divine bodhisattvas).³

While many believe in living a moral life fully engaged with fellow citizens, others believe that salvation can only be achieved by abandoning even the trappings of everyday life, including the wearing of clothes – as is the case with some Hindu and Jain ascetics. In the Christian tradition, the Adamite sect in late Roman Egypt insisted on complete nakedness during their services.⁴ Others, like the Russian Skoptsy (literally, ‘castrates’) sect,⁵ took matters even further, advocating breast and genital mutilation in women and the removal of both penis and testes in men (all performed with red-hot irons) so as to restore their bodies to the original pre-Fall condition of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The variety is bewildering and seemingly incoherent, limited only by the inventiveness of the human imagination. To the outside observer, there seem to be few unifying themes.

Religion is not, of course, a modern phenomenon. Deeper into the past, there are clear hints that our ancestors believed in some form of afterlife. Burials accompanied by grave goods clearly intended for use after death become increasingly common from around 40,000 years ago. By far the most spectacular of these are at Sunghir on the upper reaches of the River Volga, just east of Moscow. They date to around 34,000 years ago. A handful of graves lie clustered together near a small hill fort on the riverbank. Two of these were children aged about ten and twelve, buried head to head in a double grave. As with many burials from this period in both Europe and Africa, the burials are extraordinarily rich and elaborate in a way that only makes sense if those who

buried them believed that they would continue to live in another world.

Like many burials of the time, the children's bones are heavily stained by red ochre which had been poured over their bodies. The ochre had been laboriously ground from haematite-bearing rocks – a task so arduous that no one would bother unless they thought it might play a seminal role in what happens to the body after death. In addition, they were each covered in around 5,000 pierced mammoth ivory beads, which would have required many thousands of hours of skilled work to shape and bore, never mind stitch on to the clothing in which the children had been buried. Each of the children had a circlet of about forty Arctic fox teeth around their foreheads that may have been part of a head-band, as well as ivory arm bands, and a bone pin at the throat where it probably secured a cloak. The older one (thought to be male) has 250 pierced fox teeth forming a belt around his waist. Lying beside them are sixteen carved ivory spears varying in length from eighteen inches to eight foot, a human thigh bone whose shaft had been filled with ochre, several deer antlers whose ends had holes drilled through them, several carved ivory discs, a carved pendant of an animal and a carving of a mammoth. In short, it seems that the children had been so deeply mourned that they were buried in sumptuous clothing accompanied by a rich array of grave goods that had taken thousands of hours to manufacture. It was a level of generosity that seems absurd for a people with few possessions – unless they believed that these things would be used by the children in their afterlife.

Although it is very hard to imagine that such a burial

could reflect anything other than a belief in an afterlife, the evidence is, of course, indirect. And it doesn't tell us anything about the community's religious practices. Did they believe in gods, or even an all-encompassing God ruling over a spirit world as well as the Earth? Did they hold services with priests who intoned prayers and genuflected before altars? We can only speculate as to what their religious rituals were like, since behaviour doesn't fossilize.

These ancient burials raise some deep questions about how we recognize religions when we find them. One problem is that our view of religions is heavily influenced by the half dozen or so doctrinal, or revealed, religions that have come to dominate the world in the last few thousand years – Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc. These are characterized by sophisticated theological doctrines with beliefs about the afterlife, complex rituals that involve prayer and, sometimes, sacrifice, and ceremonies defined by very specific cultural traditions. These religions are latecomers onto the world stage. Even though they are now numerically dominant, they date back only a few thousand years at most. Of all the modern world religions, Zoroastrianism (the religion of contemporary Parsis) is considered to be the oldest, having been founded by the Persian prophet Zoroaster, or Zarathustra, some time in the first (possibly second) millennium BC. It is also the most influential, having, one way or another, influenced many of the others. The problem with these religions is that they are far from representative of the wide range of religions that our species has practised, and in some cases still practise.

The definition of religion is probably the single most

fiercely debated topic in the study of religion. Indeed, some scholars have even gone so far as to argue that the very concept of a religion is the product of the particular mindset that has characterized Western Europe since the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, they argue, was dominated by a Christian dualist view that separates body and soul and draws a clear distinction between the earthly location where we humans live and the spiritual realm where God resides.⁶ In many small-scale ethnographic (or tribal) societies, the spiritual world is a part of our world, not a separate world: spirits are embedded in every aspect of the environment. They share our world and are as corporeally real as we are, notwithstanding their ability to pass through walls or influence what happens to us. We can study a particular culture's beliefs or ritual practices, so the argument goes, but that's as far as we can go: we cannot really say how one culture's religion relates to another culture's because each culture views the world differently. We are reduced to being cultural tourists, who can observe and comment and, maybe, admire, but never get beyond the production of casual travelogues.

This seems to me an unnecessarily pessimistic view. It thwarts the very possibility of exploring the phenomenon even before we start. And it's a view that, ultimately, leads inexorably to unproductive solipsism.⁷ Science, in contrast, enjoins us to take the world at face value. If we make mistakes of interpretation along the way, they will be corrected eventually by the acquisition of further knowledge – knowledge that can only be acquired by observation and the testing of our theories and beliefs against empirical facts. In short, it is one thing to say that many scholars have approached the subject

from the perspective of their own Abrahamic religions and so overlooked much of the richness of human religious experience, and quite another to say it is impossible even to begin to discuss the nature of religious experience.

In fact, like many real-world phenomena, religion is just a rather blurry thing. Philosophers refer to definitions of this rather vague kind as being ‘severally and jointly true’. In other words, some parts of the definition apply in all cases, but not necessarily the same parts in each case. It’s a good model to follow, because it avoids us getting trapped into long, turgid arguments about the minutiae of definitional detail. It’s as well to remember that we are trying to understand a real-world phenomenon, not a definition (something that exists only in our minds). So let’s take a generously broad view of what constitutes religion, and see how far it gets us.

It’s probably fair to say that there are two general views as to how religion has been defined. One, derived from Émile Durkheim, the great nineteenth-century founding father of sociology, asserts that a religion is a unified system of practices accepted by a moral community – a group of people who share a set of beliefs about the world. This takes an anthropological view and emphasizes the important practical role that rituals and other practices play in most religions: religion as something that people *do*. The other view takes a more philosophical or psychological approach: religion is a comprehensive worldview, a set of beliefs, that is accepted by a community as being true without need of evidence – religion as something that a group of people *believe*.

Although these seem like polar opposites, a more pragmatic view is to assume that both approaches are right and

that beliefs and rituals represent separate dimensions of religion. An individual religion can be high on both dimensions, high on one but low on the other, or low on both. It is not a matter of one definition being right and the other wrong: it is simply that the two definitions focus on different aspects of a multidimensional phenomenon.

In some respects, these two definitions reflect a distinction drawn by historians of religion between what were formerly referred to as ‘animist’ religions (the earliest, universal forms of religion whose origins disappear into the mists of deep time) and the doctrinal or world religions that emerged during the last few thousand years. In effect, it’s the distinction between ritual and belief – between action and thought. William James, the great nineteenth-century American psychologist, referred to these as ‘personal religion’ and ‘institutional religion’. What does unite both views, however, is the fact that most, if not all, religions have some conception of an unseen life force that influences the world we live in, and does so in a way that can affect our lives.

In the light of this, a minimalist definition of religion might be belief in some kind of transcendental world (that may or may not coincide with our observable physical world) inhabited by spirit beings or forces (that may or may not take an interest in and influence the physical world in which we live). That definition is wide enough to include all the world religions, including those like Buddhism that don’t formally believe in gods. It suits equally well for pseudo-religions like New Age movements that believe in some mysterious power that lies at the unseen centre of the universe and influences our lives. If it includes a few obscure movements that we

might decide later aren't actually religions, well that doesn't matter too much at this point. We'll figure that out once we've got to grips with the real thing.

Whatever else it may be, religion is a puzzle. And this raises two fundamental questions that are the focus of this book.

First, there is the issue of its seeming universality. There are very, very few cultures that do not have some recognizable form of religion, some sense of the transcendent. We live in an increasingly secular world, yet belief in religion persists. And it persists despite many attempts to suppress it. The French positivist philosophers of the nineteenth century (under the guidance of the polymath Pierre-Simon Laplace and the philosopher Auguste Comte) argued that religion was largely superstition and the result of lack of education; so they advocated universal education, especially in the sciences, in the expectation that religion would eventually disappear. A more drastic attempt was made to suppress religion and replace it with state atheism in post-revolutionary Russia. Church property was confiscated, believers harassed and religion ridiculed. Later, in Communist China, religion was outlawed, the possession of religious texts criminalized, mosques and historic Buddhist monasteries bulldozed, religious minorities harassed or forced into 're-education' centres, and their clergy imprisoned. Yet, despite these determined onslaughts, religious belief and religious institutions survived, often underground. As soon as the restrictions were lifted, religion bounced back. Why are people so predisposed to be religious?

The second puzzle about religion concerns the fact that there are so many of them when we might expect there to

be just one. This tendency for religions to fragment over time is especially evident in the rise of contemporary new religious movements, but all the established world religions have faced, and continue to face, the same process of fragmentation. Sometimes, the sects they spawn develop their own momentum and become established religions in their own right: Christianity and Islam as the offspring of Judaism are the two obvious examples, but Sikhism (a fifteenth-century development from the constellation of religions in north India) and the Bahá'í Faith (a nineteenth-century development out of Shia Islam) are two others. It is an odd fact that no one ever asks why religions should fragment so readily in this way; they merely observe that they do, and take this for granted. But if the true religion has been revealed to us, as many of the world religions believe, why do people keep disagreeing about just what has been revealed – disagreeing so fundamentally that the disagreements eventually give rise to distinct religions?

These are the two principal questions I shall try to answer in this book. Although they may seem to be very different questions – one about beliefs, the other about history – I shall argue that they turn out, on closer inspection, to be closely related. They both relate to the role, or function, that religion served in prehistoric societies, and in many ways still serves in contemporary populations. So let me briefly outline the way I will approach these two big questions. For convenience, sources for particular studies or claims are given in the notes and Further Reading; in addition, Further Reading includes some general sources outwith the references that relate to specific issues.

The first chapter provides a more historical perspective on religion, both in terms of the broad historical development of religions and the approaches that have been used to study religion. The next two chapters will establish what I consider the essential groundwork: why humans seem predisposed to religious belief and why, in very practical terms, such belief might actually be beneficial. I will take a somewhat unorthodox stance on both of these. First, I will make a case for what I call the ‘mystical stance’ – that aspect of human psychology that predisposes us to believe in a transcendent world. My claim is that herein lie the origins of religion as we know it. Second, in contrast to most evolutionarily minded commentators, I will argue that religious belief does have beneficial consequences for the individual. My claim, however, is that although religion can, and does, give rise to direct health benefits to the individual, the really substantive benefit lies at the societal level in terms of the ability to bond communities so that they function more effectively for the benefit of their individual members.

This will lead us into a more detailed examination in Chapter 4 of the nature of human communities and the fact that these are in reality very small scale. There is a natural limit to the sizes of the social groups that we can maintain, and these limits have implications for the size of religious congregations and communities. Chapter 5 provides the psychological explanation for this, and introduces the neurobiological mechanisms that underpin social bonding. Chapter 6 will explore how these neuropsychological mechanisms underpin the role that religious rituals play in the processes of community bonding.

With this providing a framework within which to understand a religious predisposition and its function, Chapter 7 brings us back to the more historical question of when a religious predisposition evolved in our evolutionary history. Given what we have discovered about the neuropsychology of the mystical stance, I suggest that we can now be a great deal more precise about this than has hitherto been possible. While these essentially shamanic religions were around for many hundreds of thousands of years, Chapter 8 argues that the arrival of the Neolithic some 10,000 years ago created a series of demographic shocks that led to the development of the doctrinal religions. I shall argue that these forms of religion were essential for people to be able to live together in large, spatially concentrated communities. Chapter 9 explores the more general phenomenon of cults and sects, and the role that charismatic leaders have played in the history of religion and the origin of sects. Finally, Chapter 10 brings us back to the question of why there are so many religions. The answer, I shall argue, lies in what we have learned in the earlier chapters about the role of religion in the processes of social bonding and the nature of charismatic leaders.

The approach I adopt here will be very different from traditional approaches to the topic of religion in a number of important ways. The traditional approaches have typically adopted either a theological focus (what does a particular religion believe?) or a historical focus (how did a particular religion arise? which early religions influenced its views?), but more recently there has been an increasing interest in the cognitive science and the neuropsychology of religious behaviour. I will dip into these areas from time to time, but they

will not be my major focus. I am conscious that I shall be ignoring whole fields that some might regard as central to any discussion of religion. My intention, as much as anything, is to explore issues that have largely been overlooked in the study of religion. I want to suggest that some of these dimensions might provide the basis for an overarching theory for why and how humans are religious, and so help to unify the myriad strands that currently populate this field.

How to Study Religion

Before we embark on a more detailed exploration of religion, it would be helpful to set the scene in two important respects. One is to summarize what we know of the history of religions, even if only briefly. This will allow us to see what it is we need to explain in terms of the grand sweep of how the religions we have come to be. The second is to summarize, again fairly briefly, the main approaches to the study of religion, and what they have to offer us. This is especially important because the perspective I shall be taking is very different from those adopted by most scholars of religion. My approach is an evolutionary one, and so will be firmly grounded in our current understanding of evolutionary theory. For this reason, I will end by providing a very short summary of what an evolutionary approach entails.

A Very Short History of Religion

There has been a longstanding view, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century, that the history of religion comprises two major phases: an early animist phase and a later doctrinal phase. The term ‘animism’ was coined in the mid-nineteenth century, but its use to describe the early phase of religion was really due to the British anthropologist Edward Tylor in his

1871 book *Primitive Culture*. The term derived from the recognition that many of the tribal peoples who had been encountered during the European explorations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries believed that other living organisms as well as springs, rivers, mountains and forests were all imbued with spirits (*anima* in Ancient Greek and Latin).

This conception of ‘primitive religion’ was much criticized in the twentieth century by anthropologists, many of whom came to see such labels as imperialist and racist. In fact, this criticism was a bit of a red herring for two reasons. First, what this criticism confused was a distinction between folk psychology and the way university-educated scholars think. Folk psychology is the way people naturally think about the world, partly as a result of their everyday experience of the world (some of which is, of course, culturally inherited from their forebears) and partly because of the way the human mind is designed. Second, we are all susceptible to these kinds of ‘primitive’ beliefs because many of them seem to form the natural default in the way the human mind, or ‘folk psychology’, has evolved. This is not a matter of ‘primitive’ versus ‘advanced’. Rather, it reflects the overlaying of education on an underlying platform of natural folk psychology.

In reality, the distinction is not between people who live in the West and those who live elsewhere, but rather simply between those who have been exposed to a heavy-duty science-based education and those who have not. Ironically, the nineteenth-century scholars may have been rather better informed about their subject matter than their later critics: they knew perfectly well from their own ethnographic research that these kinds of ‘animist’ views were not only

prevalent in historical Europe among the Celts and Germanic tribes, but continued to be widely believed among their own contemporary countryfolk well into the twentieth century. Indeed, many seem to be still with us. Wishing wells are one familiar example of this.

In the northern European tradition, sacred springs and wells have a long history dating back to Celtic and Germanic tribal times. Some springs or wells were thought to have healing powers; others had the property of being able to fulfil any wish made at them. The habit of throwing coins or treasured objects into wells or pools (and making a wish while doing so) is still with us, even if – sometimes but not always – our belief in the efficacy of this practice is tempered with a degree of scepticism. Wishing trees are another example: the habit of attaching votive offerings or messages to the trunk or branches of a special tree were widespread throughout the British Isles and other parts of northern Europe. In India, the banyan tree (a member of the fig family) that sits at the centre of almost every village is also known as the *kalpavriksha* (wish-fulfilling tree). These kinds of phenomena attest to a belief in an occult world that is deeply engrained in all our psyches.

Another example of a country rite, common well into the twentieth century, is the old English country tradition of ‘wassailing’ whereby a Wassail Queen (usually a young prepubertal girl) was lifted up into the branches of apple trees to leave an alcoholic drink for the tree spirits so as to ensure a good harvest. Jennifer Westwood and Sophia Kingshill’s *The Lore of Scotland* provides a lengthy summary of these kinds of country beliefs for just one small corner of the British Isles, most of it collected by enthusiastic folklorists

during the nineteenth century. The belief that spirits or fairy folk occupy particular sites – hill tops, caves, springs, rivers, trees – is as near universal in northern Europe as it is possible for anything to be, and it has never entirely gone away – modern education notwithstanding.

In reality, the idea that the world we see is peopled by spirits has continued to exist happily alongside the more conventional religious practices and beliefs associated with later doctrinal religions. Many of these ideas centre around the belief that spirits, and those who have access to the spirit world or have esoteric knowledge of such access (witches, sorcerers, witch doctors, shamans), are able to influence our world for both good and evil. The anthropologist John Dulin observed, during his field work in southern Ghana in the 2010s, that

a traditionalist priest consulted his god on my behalf, [and] the god instructed me to avoid food offered by strangers lest I be poisoned, or suffer the dangers of magic that would force me to do things against my will, like give money away. When an elderly traditionalist priestess invited me to eat at her home, my charismatic Christian friends urged me to refuse her food for fear that I might fall in love with her. My mind would become so clouded, they told me, I would not recognize my wife. The prospect that I might eat the wrong thing, then forget my wife, and fall in love with an 80-year-old woman only has a hint of plausibility if you see your mind as potentially not your own, if you see it as vulnerable to hostile invasion by an outside force.¹

Similar tales could be told from almost anywhere in the world. They are reminiscent of fears about the ‘evil eye’ (the ability that some people supposedly have to make you fall ill just by catching your eye) that were prevalent throughout much of Mediterranean Europe well into the twentieth century.

From our perspective, such beliefs might count as superstitions, but they are based on deeply held beliefs that influenced, and still surreptitiously influence, people’s actions. A well-known one that has persisted into the twenty-first century is that of throwing a pinch of spilt salt over your shoulder (to ward off the Devil). Salt superstitions appear in many guises. One rather unusual one is the ‘sin-eater’, a custom that was common in Wales and the Welsh Border counties as late as the early 1900s.² After a death, the body would be laid out in the front room and a plate of salt with some bread placed on its lap. The belief was that the corpse’s sins would be absorbed into the bread with the salt. Just before the corpse was removed for the funeral, the local sin-eater would come and eat the bread, thereby absorbing the dead person’s sins so that they could go to Judgement with a ‘clean’ soul. The plate would then be buried with the corpse.³ Sin-eaters were usually old, destitute men and women attracted to the role by the fact that they usually received beer and a fee in addition to the bread. They were often ostracized by the rest of the community because of a perceived association with witchcraft and the Devil. Similar practices occurred in other parts of Europe. Sometimes these practices lost their original purpose, but not their form and continued into the twentieth century as funeral rituals. In Bavaria, for example, a ‘corpse

cake' was traditionally placed on the breast of the dead and later eaten by the nearest relative. The Dutch traditionally prepared *doed-koecks* ('dead cakes') that were given to those attending the funeral. In the Balkans, a small bread image of the deceased was eaten by the assembled family.

The truth is that we may not fully believe in these superstitions, but at the same time we are not quite willing to let go of them completely – just in case they really are true. Witness the number of people that continue to consult their horoscopes. This tendency to continue to believe in folk myths occurs in many other areas of life. Despite the fact that physicists have developed complex mathematical descriptions of the universe, most of us actually operate with a much simpler version of 'folk physics' – the physics of everyday experience by which you and I live our lives, much of it derived from millennia-old folk beliefs and our own personal experience of the everyday world. Physics tells us that an object like a door really consists of a lot of empty space occupied by the occasional atom, but our everyday experience when we bump into one tells us that doors are very solid. The world of science and the world of everyday experience do not always connect especially well.⁴

The conventional view, then, was that the earliest forms of religion took the shape of a rather generalized belief in spirits or a form of being that sometimes occupied a transcendental world parallel to the physical one in which we live, but also might occupy the same physical space as we do. In some cases, these spirits had no particular interest in our world; in other cases, they were responsible for causing – or curing – the illnesses that we fall prey to. These beliefs are often (but,

of course, not always) associated with witchcraft, which in turn might be generalized into charms for luck, hunting, fertility or romance.

These older religions are religions of immersive experience, rather than religions of formal ritual with specialists who intercede on behalf of the laity. They are often (but not always) associated with trance states, usually induced by music and dance. In this, they share many underlying features with the mysticism that we find in all the doctrinal religions. By general consensus, mysticism involves direct ecstatic experience of the divine. It is a very personal form of 'religion of experience', a sense of immersion in the ineffable, the 'oneness of being' as the medieval Christian mystics described it. In its modern forms, these features tend to reflect the particular beliefs of the religion to which the mystic belongs. Mystics from the Christian, Sufi Islam and Sikh traditions will experience this as immersion in the oneness of God, whereas Buddhists experience it as immersion in the luminous universal mind (the *tathāgatagarbha*, or 'womb of the Buddha'). Sometimes these trance states (often described as 'visions') are spontaneous (as seems to have been the case with many historical Christian mystics like St Teresa of Ávila or the German Dominican friar Meister Eckhart); in other cases, trance may be brought on by group rituals, usually involving music (as in the trance dances of the San Bushmen) and sometimes assisted by plant-based psychotropic (or mind-altering) drugs (many South American tribes), or individually by meditative practices (as in the yogic tradition).

In some animistic religions, this phenomenon is associated with shamans as specialists who have the ability to enter

into trance. The term ‘shaman’ derives from eastern Mongolian cultures, where it is associated with individuals who serve a long apprenticeship to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to intervene on our behalf with the spirits that influence our world. In traditional Mongolian and Siberian cultures, their major function was a combination of divination, curing diseases, and ensuring the success of hunts and the avoidance of disaster. In healing ceremonies, the shaman acts as an intermediary between the patient and the spirit(s) that cause the disease. We might think of this definition as ‘shamanism *sensu stricto*’ (meaning in the strict, or narrow, sense). However, a looser sense of the term refers to a more general phenomenon whereby individuals enter trance to engage in travels in the spirit world, with no particular medical or divination purpose; this often requires no special training, and may be part of group rituals that are learned by observation and practice. This form is widespread, and we might think of it as ‘shamanism *sensu lato*’ (meaning in the broad sense). Because the use of trance in one form or another is so widespread in these animist forms of religions, I refer to them collectively as ‘shamanic religions’, or ‘immersive religions’.

At some point, there was a transition to a more formal kind of religion marked by regular places of worship, gods (who sometimes actively intervene in human affairs), religious specialists or priests (who intervene between the community and the gods, in some cases via trance-based rituals), more formal theologies, and moral codes that have divine origins – Moses receiving the tablets with the Ten Commandments directly from God on Mount Sinai, the Prophet Muhammed

receiving the dictation of the Koran from God, Joseph Smith receiving the golden plates of the Book of Mormon. Most of these doctrinal religions also have origin stories, often associated with the revelatory experiences of a specific individual as founder – Zoroaster in the case of the Zoroastrians of ancient Persia; Siddhārtha Gautama for the Buddhists; Jesus Christ for Christians; the Prophet Muhammed for Islam; Guru Nanak for Sikhism. Because these religions typically have quite explicit theological doctrines, they are often known as doctrinal religions. They are also known as world religions because most of them now have very large followings spread over most of the planet (notwithstanding the fact that this is actually a very recent phenomenon).

Most doctrinal religions are organized in a formal way, with priesthoods or committees (for example, a court of elders) responsible for overseeing the activities of the mosque or parish. In some cases, they have a hierarchical structure beyond the local level that is responsible for maintaining theological integrity or at least providing a pathway of theological justification descending from some authority figure (the bishops and archbishops of the Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican branches of Christianity). Sometimes these involve only informal allegiances (as in the case of Islam and Buddhism).

This partition into shamanic (or ‘primitive’) and doctrinal religions is not, of course, hard and fast. There are many tribal religions and even some contemporary cults that do not fit entirely comfortably into either slot. That, however, is what we might expect of any evolutionary process: evolutionary transitions are rarely absolute, even in the biological world. The problem is that humans are not especially good

at handling complexity, so we often divide phenomena into simple dichotomies for our convenience even when they are not strictly binary – short versus tall, black versus white, East versus West. However, simple dichotomies have the advantage of simplifying the phenomenon we want to explain, and so help to sharpen the contrast between what – in this case at least – is the beginning and the end of a long historical process.

The important point to emphasize is that this sequence is not necessarily a process of replacement of one kind of religion by another. It is, rather, one of accretion – one form of religion (a doctrinal phase) being bolted onto the earlier (shamanic or animist) form. Evidence for this is present in many of the great feasts that form so central a part of modern Christianity. The word Easter as used in the Roman (as opposed to Greek Orthodox) tradition, for example, derives from the Old English *Eostre*, the month dedicated to the Germanic goddess of that name – herself an ancient Indo-European goddess of dawn who, given the spring date associated with her, may well have been a fertility goddess. The date chosen for Christmas (25 December) conveniently coincided with the date of the winter solstice and the rather drunken Roman festivities of Saturnalia that celebrated the god Saturn at this point in the year.⁵ It seems that the early Christian Church adopted a number of existing pagan festivals for their major celebrations, perhaps to distract their new converts from their previous religious adherences. The point is – and this is something I shall come back to later – new forms of religion don't usually sweep away older forms, but rather are grafted onto them precisely because the older forms are so deeply engrained into people's psyche that they are difficult to erase.

In other words, beneath the surface veneer of doctrinal rectitude lurks an ancient foundation of pagan mystical religion. This is the core message of this book, and in the following chapters I shall argue that appreciating this has important consequences for our understanding of religions and their evolution.

Some Approaches to the Study of Religion

At least for the first century of its existence as a discipline, anthropology had an enduring interest in religion, especially its social functions. Indeed, it might even be said that religion was its single most important focus after kinship. This, as we saw earlier, had its origins during the nineteenth century in a growing interest in both European folklore and the ethnography of traditional small-scale societies. Seminal among the early influences were James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890) and Edward Tylor's 1871 book on *Primitive Culture*. Frazer's approach was to try to piece together the common principles and concepts of primitive religion from a study of (mainly European) folklore and traditional beliefs. Tylor's approach was based on comparative ethnography from tribal societies around the world, and explicitly sought to apply the new ideas of Darwin's theory of evolution to culture. He saw the human mind as universal (all humans have the same mind and mental abilities) and that religion had evolved historically in small-scale traditional societies as an attempt to explain and control the world within the context of local beliefs – beliefs adapted in a Darwinian sense to local conditions and experience.

Two later formative influences were William James's 1902

book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). Neither had ever studied tribal societies. James took a firmly psychological stance, whereas Durkheim's perspective was sociological. James drew an important distinction between the origin and value of religion, reminding us that the answer to either of these questions does not necessarily determine the answer to the other. (We'll see how crucial this point is in the next section.) He drew an important distinction between 'healthy-minded' and 'sick soul' religion – the one characteristic of those whose religion provides them with contentment and happiness, the other characteristic of those who are deeply troubled and experience religion in the form of what we would now call 'crisis conversion'. He viewed mysticism as being central to religious experience. At the heart of Durkheim's view was what he termed 'collective effervescence', the sense of emotional excitement and awe created by religious rituals. Although Durkheim saw religion as the basis on which society was constructed, later anthropologists reversed his causal logic to argue that the rituals and beliefs of traditional religions merely replicated or reinforced a society's social and political structures – in effect, the marriage of Church and state for political ends. Up to a point this is true, but it misses the central insight of Durkheim's view.

Later still, developments in the 1980s associated with the rise of cognitive anthropology (an attempt to understand the psychology underlying the way humans think about their world) gave rise to what has since become known as the cognitive science of religion, some (but not all) of whose advocates are strongly grounded in evolutionary psychology.⁶ By and