Religion and Human Society

- Basic questions:
  - What is religion?
  - Why is religion a universal phenomenon?
  - What are the common features of all religions?
  - What are the differences between religions?

Religion and Human Society

- What is religion?
  - Kottak uses Wallace’s definition which states:
    - religion is a “belief and ritual concerned for with supernatural beings, powers, and forces”

Religion and Human Society: The Supernatural

- The supernatural is the extraordinary realm outside (but is believed to impinge on) the observable world.
- It is nonempirical, mysterious, and inexplicable in ordinary terms.
- Belief in the supernatural is based on faith.
- Faith is fostered by myths.
Religion and Human Society: The Supernatural

- A belief in the supernatural can take many forms:
  - Belief in supernatural beings such as gods, demons, or spirits
  - Belief in supernatural forces such as mana, magic, or the “force”

Religion and Human Society: Myths

- Myths create belief in and explain the supernatural.
- Formally, myths are oral or written stories about the actions and deeds of supernatural powers.
- Commonly, myths relate the trials and tribulations of heroes who lived in the mythical past.

Religion and Human Society: Myths

- Myths are taught to children as part of enculturation
  - Anthropologists will invariably collect cultural myths after being in a society for a period of time
- Myths explain why things are the way they are
Religion and Human Society:
Myths

- A person’s world view, that is the way a person believes the world operates, is often shaped by the culture’s mythology.
- “By their fruits you shall know them.” (Matthew 7:16)
- Weber believed this statement lead to the Protestant work ethic.

Religion and Human Society:
Myths

- Final points about myths:
  - more than stories, they are the foundation for a person’s world view
  - therefore myths effect the way people act towards nature, and one another in all realms of society.

Religion and Human Society:
Rituals

- Ritual can be defined as behaviors intended to influence spiritual powers.
- Rituals are always highly stylized and repetitive.
- Rituals are invariant, thus are knowable and predictable.
Religion and Human Society: Rituals

- Rituals provide a link to the mythical past
- This link is created by the invariance of the ritual
- Rituals are performed for numerous reasons, but the main theme behind ritual acts is to mobilize supernatural powers for the benefit of a person or a group

Religion and Human Society: Rituals

- Intervention by supernatural powers can be for benevolent purposes:
  - Rain dance
  - Healing rituals
- Or the intervention can be done to cause harm to another person or group:
  - A curse
  - Causing illness in another

Religion and Human Society: Rituals

- All rituals have a symbolic component
- Often, they occur in sacred places or at sacred times
- Objects are commonly a part of a ritual
  - A holy cross
  - A sacred bowl
  - A totem
Religion and Human Society: Rituals

- Symbolic items are handled in ritualized behavior and with ritualized language
  - Christian wedding rituals involve:
    - A ring
    - Exchange of vows
    - A prayer
    - Specific actions

Religion and Human Society: Rituals

- Two broad classifications of rituals:
  - Conscious purpose of the ritual - the reasoning people give for performing the ritual
  - Examples:
    - Curing
    - Sorcery
    - Initiation

Religion and Human Society: Rituals

- The second classification is when the ritual occurs
  - If rituals are held at regular times, then they are called calendrical rituals
    - Sunday church services
    - Harvest rituals
If rituals are held to handle specific events at non-regular intervals they are called crisis rituals.

Examples:
- Curing ceremonies
- Confession
- Funerals

To summarize: All religions have three main components:
- Beliefs in the supernatural
- Mythologies about the historical deeds of those powers
- Rituals intended to mobilize supernatural powers for the use of the performers