

among mortals) also introduces divine legitimacy directly into contemporary ruler-ship. Authority, power, control, these form important aspects of the institution of religion for the rulers in a society. For the populace of a state society, religion may involve a mixture of local as well as official religious observances and foster a sense of community.

Suggested Internet links and further reading:
Social institution: Renfrew & Bahn 1994:358
Ghostshirt: <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/cas/ghost.htm>

2. Material evidence of past beliefs

→ Core text pp. 137-149

KEYPOINTS:

1. Challenges:
 - a. Understanding (where feasible, based on the accumulation of evidence) those beliefs. Highlights the importance of making our pre-conceptions explicit – don't take things as 'given'
 - b. Identifying material culture and symbols associated with past belief systems.
2. Avenues for study:
 - a. Documentary evidence – e.g. Egyptian 'Book of the Dead'
 - b. Iconography – e.g. images of gods, goddesses or saints, repetitive reinforcement of religious themes
 - c. Ethnographic analogy – not direct analogy, but a means to help furnish a range of possibilities.
 - d. Types of religion.
3. Renfrew & Bahns' list of archaeological indicators of ritual activity – these are very well suited for societies where there is a clear distinction between ritualistic and daily spheres of life, perhaps less so where there is not.

2.1 Understanding ritual activity

Any attempt to understand past beliefs, though, needs to balance two ideas. It must start from the assumption that there is a certain degree of uniformity in the way humans of the past make sense of the world and their place in it compared to people in the present. This must be weighed against acceptance of potentially vast diversity in human thought and systems of belief. Where it is available documentary evidence – such as the 'Egyptian Book of the Dead', which contains instructions for the deceased about the afterlife – can provide probably the most coherent picture of religious beliefs in the past. Beyond this evidence, the next most significant contribution to understanding ancient

beliefs comes from looking at the systems of symbolic representations that a culture used. The iconography of a religion forms a coherent 'language' using images whose significance is immediately recognisable to the people of the society concerned. A feature of religious rituals is their repetitive nature and religious iconography follows this, also often it carries a lot of redundancy (repetition). The same 'message' is being repeated over and over again in images. These images either represent something sacred (such as images of the Virgin Mary, in the Catholic faith), or are themselves perceived as sacred, as in the case of the ritual sand paintings created by the Navaho native Americans. In many cases the role of religious iconography is to reinforce beliefs, to bring them to the forefront of consciousness when one is in their presence.

For situations where there are no documentary records, another way of tackling the problem of understanding past religious beliefs comes through the careful use of ethnography. While it is accepted that ritual forms practised by modern communities cannot be taken as direct parallels in the interpretation of past cultures, ethnographic analogy can furnish us with a range of plausible possibilities from similar kinds of circumstances.

For the sake of convenience your text divides known religions into three categories: those founded in a relationship with deities, ancestral spirits and lastly, with nature spirits. Note, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive; a community may include elements from more than one of these categories.

Deities

Deities (gods and goddesses) often take the form of distant super-human-like beings (though still paralleling locally accepted values of social conduct), who control the forces of the universe and many (if not all) aspects of human life. Where a single god is acknowledged, this form of religion is called monotheism – prominent among modern world religions, belief in a single creator-deity (who was manifest in sunlight) was also advocated in Egypt of the second millennium BC by the pharaoh Akhenaten. Where there are many deities (often each concerned over a particular aspect of 'creation'), this is a polytheistic religion – the religions of ancient Greece or Rome are examples of this. Note that where states, such as Rome, grew through conquest it was not uncommon for local deities to become incorporated into the Roman pantheon (i.e. the collective term for all the gods and goddesses of a society).

Ancestral spirits

Where ancestral spirits hold a place of high esteem in people's beliefs the deceased retain an active participation in the daily affairs and ideals pursued by their descendants. Such a belief system accentuates social continuity. In